WALKING WITH FAMILIES Supporting families living with care

Supporting families living with care experienced children's challenging, violent or aggressive behaviour.

Al Coates MBE 2024 Churchill Fellow the CHURCHILL fellowship

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'If parents aren't ok, kids can't be ok'

Tania Eichler, Interwoven Connections, Ontario, Canada, 2024

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Introduction

How do other services in other countries, cultures and contexts support adoptive parents and foster or kinship carers who are parenting children with challenging and aggressive behaviour? This question is the start point of my Churchill Fellowship and it is a question that at first glance appears simple.

60% of adoptive parents experienced violent or aggressive behaviour from their child in 2023. Adoption UK

Even the phrase 'challenging behaviour' is mired in disagreement and debate within those communities but exploring that is not the function of this report. For the sake of simplicity if a carer or adoptive parent describes behaviour as 'challenging or aggressive' and is seeking help that then defines the need for support. There are of course many questions that need to be asked of any parent or carer to make sense of what is meant and what behaviour would constitute 'challenging' but that's not what this report is for. Similarly, the causes for challenging behaviour are always complex. Gallagher (2018) notes they can be distilled to the experiences of the child, their biology and the system, family in this case, that they live in. This is also not the question for my Fellowship report but it was raised in all the majority of conversations that I had.

How we support matters as kinship, adoptive and foster families experience higher levels of challenging behaviour than the general parenting population. The annual reports from Adoption UK and the charity Kinship highlight the scale of the challenge. I am an adoptive parent and managing challenging behaviour is part of my family's story and, more latterly, is a significant part of my work as a social worker and practitioner and that is what led me to this issue.

This report draws together the online conversations I had over the late summer and autumn of 2024 across seven countries with more than 25 practitioners. I will make clear recommendations for all services that face towards or connect with adoptive, foster or kinship families and interact with them as well as more focused and specific recommendations for services that support those families. The organisation that I draw most from is Interwoven Connections, formerly Adopt4Life, based in Ontario Canada and this is reflected in the recommendations and the findings.

12% of kinship carers were concerned they may have to stop caring for their kinship child. One of the most common reasons given for this were challenges managing children's emotional and behavioural needs. Kinship 2024

In this report I have compiled my Executive Summary, Recommendations and a brief summary of my findings. A more detailed account of my findings can be found in three podcast here. Additionally, in the Audio Appendix you can also find links to over 20 of the full interviews with those who I spoke to.



About the Author

Al Coates MBE

I am a parent through adoption and fostering. In 2013 I qualified as a Social Worker and have worked supporting fostering households since then. In 2015 I volunteered with the Department for Education as a member of the Expert Advisory Board on Adoption Support and was awarded an MBE for services to Adoption in 2018.

I have campaigned raising the issue of child to parent violence and aggression and have co-authored reports, written articles, undertaken media appearances, hosted podcasts and blogged on the issue of child to parent violence.



Credit- Al Coates M

I am a Non-Violent Resistance practitioner and work directly with parents and carers in a range of contexts, I have delivered keynote speeches, lectures and train professional on this this and related issues.

In 2016 I founded <u>The Adoption & Fostering Podcast</u> and co-host the weekly episodes considering the issues that families built through kinship, fostering and adoption face.

'The main challenge families living with CCVAB in the home encounter is seeking appropriate support.....the family's sense of failure is not directed at one service specifically or one professional

group specifically, rather it is the family's experience of being passed from

one service to another, lack of communication and their feelings being undervalued or ignored.'

Thorley & Coates 2022



Executive Summary & Recommendations

Families, irrespective of how they formed, that are caring for children with challenging, aggressive or violent behaviour live in the shadows of society. Shame, blame, guilt and isolation converge and parents and carers often feel unable or are unwilling to seek support unsure of the response they may receive or where to even look for help. This study focuses on families, parents and carers of children who have experienced a form of state care.

The study looked at specific services that focused on adopted children or those children in kinship or customary care arrangements and Interwoven Connections' model of support that it provides to adoptive and kinship families. However, the findings and summary were also informed by specific universal services that served the wider community as well as the one focused upon for this report.

All services should have relational practice at their heart, effective support is built on this foundation and, in of itself, is a support to those seeking help. Responses should be graduated from point of contact to direct one-to-one intervention. Families need to be walked through this process and feel 'held' by services up to and beyond specific interventions.

The specific recommendations are:

- 1. All professionals and practitioners that work or interact with kinship or adoptive families should understand the risks for challenging behaviour, models of intervention and routes to support.
- Adopters and kinship carers caring for children who are at a higher risk of displaying CCVAB should be given training in relation to the underlying causes of CCVAB, it's impact on all members of the family and knowledge of appropriate models of parenting.
- 3. Peer support groups to be developed and in place to offer regular, ongoing peer to peer support that reflect the nature and needs of the individual communities that they serve.
- 4. Peer mentors to be drawn from the community that they are facilitating peer to peer support group for. Peer mentors to be trained in peer support and to be able to offer low/medium level interventions to peers.
- 5. Peer support networks and peer mentors to liaise effectively with professional support practitioners and to refer families directly to them.
- 6. Interventions to be specific to the needs of the family both individually and as a family delivered by appropriately qualified and trained specialists.



Background

Why

The 'why' is routed firmly in my own family's experience.

We were a family formed through adoption and fostering with my children all having journeys that didn't include me or my wife at some pivotal moments prior to arrival with us. There are no good reasons to come into care. Even at its most benign the paths through the care system are fraught with adversity for many children. How that translates into the children's sense of self, of others and of the world they inhabit is influenced by a myriad of interwoven factors: age, personality, genes, biology, experience and the duration and nature of the adversity experienced.

So some children's behaviour is certainly outside what we would consider developmentally normal and with children struggling to regulate themselves or be regulated, being reactive or hyper-vigilant, hyper-sensitive or hyper-aroused. This behaviour, often wholly rational in the context of their experience and perception, is also challenging, aggressive or violent which is understandably distressing and overwhelming for parents and carers.

Children and young people from care-experienced backgrounds who are neurodivergent and/or have specialist educational needs appear to be more likely to be vulnerable to instigating this form of harm.

Coogan 2017

As this unfolded in our home we found ourselves outside of 'normal'. When we plucked up the courage to ask for help we were only offered 'normal' parenting solutions that were at best useless and at worst made things worse.

Over the following years we've experienced an array of interventions mainly directed at altering our children's behaviour. Support was something different, we interacted with dozens of professionals and we experienced at one extreme harmful interactions that reinforced the isolation, shame, blame and confusion and at the other end we also experienced compassion, empathy and insight that helped us to parent better.

In 2013 I qualified as a social worker and started to raise the issue through blogging and later podcasting. Other opportunities at the Department for Education then with Dr Wendy Thorley led to the CPV survey and and co authoring subsequent surveys and reports. Speaking opportunities and the <u>Adoption and Fostering Podcast</u> have further emersed me in this world with hundreds of conversations each year with parents, carers and adults struggling to care for and parent children who have navigated the care



system. Increasingly however, these conversations have also included parents and cares of children with SEND, experience of adversity and those that are neurodivergent.

Through my work I've been able to connect with parents and professionals from other countries and cultures. The Fellowship was an opportunity to follow the threads and to consider how families are supported and how that support is framed within systems that are in place for children that have been cared for by the state

How

The opportunity to be funded to travel seems too good to be true but after some consideration I decided to complete the learning using video calls. Mainly because I was unsure where I would find geographical concentrations of professionals to speak to.

The one firm lead I had was with Interwoven Connections within the province of Ontario, Canada. Unfamiliar with the geography I approached them prior to my application asking if I could visit. Graciously, they noted I could of course, but that the reality was they were almost exclusively an online service, this being informed by the size of the province as well as the challenges of getting out of the home that many families faced, limiting in-person meetings. Everything that they did could be seen from the UK. This led the decision to seriously consider not travelling.

On a personal level, the opportunity to undertake the study without having to travel made the proposition much more realistic. The challenges of identifying 'warm' leads in locations from a standing start felt a pressure that would distract. Of course, travel enhances many of the Fellows' learning but I wasn't sure that benefit would outweigh the challenge of fitting four weeks of travel into my own life with a 13-yearold child, a full time job and other personal commitments and care responsibilities. To not travel would make it possible and less stressful.

A clear remit of the Fellowship is to share the findings of the learnings in a way that suits the audience that the Fellow aims to reach. Inspired by the lack of constraint I decided to record my interviews and to create an audio report/podcast. There are enough reports and I've added to that pile here but I wanted to share my learning in a way that could be consumed differently. I wanted to be able give people the chance to hear the conversations I had the privilege to be part of. At the end of this report there are links to the interviews, either in part or full, that I was able to have. Their voices add a depth and texture to the learning I cannot capture in words.

It is worth describing how I identified persons to speak to. In short, I followed the breadcrumbs, starting with people I knew or other Fellows with overlapping themes. I cast my net across social media and asked for contacts or leads. One person knew someone who had a friend and the connections started to form, kind individuals made introductions and sent emails and interviews started to be scheduled.

Each interview informed the next interview, slowly highlighting old themes and new themes. Conversations with friends refined thoughts that further highlighted new lines



of questions. Late nights, time zones, unexpected guests, early mornings emails and messages. Over the 10 weeks from the middle of August to the end of October I interviewed over 25 individuals. All were generous in giving their time and sharing their experience and knowledge.

Thank you, especially to those who shared their resources and spoke without hesitation in terms of the work that you do. So many who spoke did so from personal experience and all spoke with passion and with a clear desire to help families, children and adults, without exception.

This research does not meet the requirements for academic submission, the method, the questions asked and frankly my lack of subjectivity mean that it is more a story of my learning and a reflection on 10 weeks across the summer of 2024 where I spoke to a group of remarkable people who help families, adults and children who were often at a point of crisis, isolated, blamed and ostracised within their community, culture and country.

Where

I started where I knew, through my work raising awareness I'd been contacted by the Adopt4Life team in Ontario, Canada in 2015 and have remained in touch with them ever since. They recently changed their name to Interwoven Connections and this is where my first leads were and first interviews.

I then pushed more doors: I knew of online Facebook support groups based in the USA and had spoken to professionals working with adoptive parents in the USA. One connection gave me a phone number and a name that led to Missouri USA, then to Mexico. Posts on LinkedIn led to New Zealand which led to Australia. One person in Australia emailed a raft of contacts that led to many conversations. An email to a contact in the UK led to literally 100s of emails leading to Europe and Israel and an old friend and a new friend led to The Republic of Ireland.

Though my Fellowship inspiration was firmly grounded in the experience of families caring for children who had been in state care and were no longer there the breadcrumbs led me further afield. This was in part by necessity but also curiosity, many of the underlying risks for challenging behaviour are not exclusive to children with experience of care and once out of care families seek support through universal services. Lessons from those professional have value for the community of adopters and carers that I sought to help.



Findings

From the outset of my Fellowship application the format for reporting was intended to be through a narrative/reflective podcast. This section offers a brief summary of each of the three podcasts that I created and released on through the Adoption & Fostering Podcast, they can be found here.

'What is understood need not be discussed'

Loren Adams/Van Halen (1993 'Jump')

From the outset I want to be clear that the podcasts and reports were created with an expectation that the reader has a basic knowledge of the subject matter. Prevalence, causes, risk factors for challenging and aggressive behaviour can be found elsewhere in academic research and reports. As can the impacts on carers and parents living with and caring for those children. It will be mentioned in passing but it's not the focus of my report.

The following is not a narrative account of the conversations but rather a drawing out of themes that began to immerge as the interviews progressed. Part 1 and Part 2 also reflect my focus on what was transferable to a UK context. Part 3 could be described as a look at a model that may not be applicable to the UK as is but perhaps in the future.

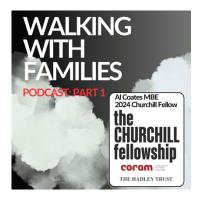
The majority of the interviews were not included in the podcasts. They were sacrificed to create podcasts that were clear, concise and made narrative sense. With more time I would could have given time to all the participants. The work they all do is worth a spotlight and focus that I could not give.

'When you find someone who can acknowledge your experience and affirm it, it is literally life changing.'

Cristin Winn Reyes Help One Child, California, USA



Walking with Families Part 1: Introduction and Peer Support



This episode draws on peer support specialists working directly with parents and carers living with children with challenging and aggressive behaviour. Focusing on Canada & the USA it considers different models of peer support including social media, virtual and in person. It then considers the role of peer mentors specifically in the Canadian organisation Interwoven Connections based across the province of Ontario that serves a large community through virtual means.

'The best way to help families is one at a time. What each individual family needs is so unique the only way to truly help families is by addressing each unique needs and concerns one at a time.'

Lillyth Quillin, Parents of Children with Conduct Disorter, California, USA

Walking with Families Part 2: Interventions and Recommendations



Developing the themes in Part 1 this podcast considers how parents and carers are supported by focused organisations. Rather than look at specific models of intervention, of which there are many, it considered how families interacted and accessed the interventions and specifically how they were delivered to the families. Again, drawing heavily from Interwoven Connections based in Ontario, Canada the interplay of parent/carer, peer supporter and clinical staff is highlighted.

'It's never about whether a parent is doing a great job. They're doing the very best they can with what they've got.'

Lillyth Quillin, Parents of Children with Conduct Disorter, California, USA



Walking with Families Part 3: Therapeutic Respite and Intervention



In this podcast I reflect on conversations with carers and practitioners that support parents and children in the context of respite arrangements. It is a model of practice rarely seen in the UK and not available from statutory support services. The model of intervention explored from two settings in North America raised questions about perceptions of family and how intervening to rebuild and reform families can be an affective solution for some.

'I came to the conclusion, if parents aren't ok then kids can't be ok.'

Tanya Eichler, Interwoven Connections Clinical Lead in the AFFCA Family Support Programme.



Glossary

CPV Child to Parent Violence

AFCCA Aggression towards Family/Caregiver in childhood and adolescence

CCVAB Childhood Challenging Violent and Aggressive Behaviour

CPVA Child to parent Violence and Abuse

APVA Adolescent to parent Violence and Abuse

AVITH Adolescent Violence in the Home **RAD** Reactive Attachment Disorder

Support This is a descriptor of not only specific named models of intervention but

how services interact with families. The frequency of any contact with professionals, the form and nature of that contact, the qualification of professionals and every aspect of the interaction with the services is

encompassed in 'support'.

Customary

Care In child welfare, the term customary care refers to the care and

supervision of a child or youth of Indigenous descent by somebody who is not the child's parent in accordance with the custom of the child's band

or native community.



Acknowledgements

To Paula, my fiercest critic but my greatest cheerleader, your willingness to tolerate my unending self amusement as I leave a Zoom call to a far-flung land and say 'I've just been to New Zealand' knows no bounds and for all of that and much more I love you.

To my children, Kirsty, Rebecca, Corey, Rhiannon, Rosa and Shania, literally without you this work and project would not exist. Your fortitude and stories are the seeds from which this study grows, you have taught me more about myself than I'd prefer to know and you challenge me to be better every day. You have taught me grace, perseverance and kindness. I love you all with equal measure.

To Dr Wendy Thorley, you taught me to ask 'why not' rather than 'why me', your honesty has taught me to be thick skinned and taught me to see the difference between who I am and what I produce.

To Pauline Hawkes, you have let me be me and created space and asked me the difficult questions.

To Elaine Nichols, our conversations have steered my thinking and your 'yes buts' can be seen throughout this report.

To Scott Casson-Rennie, you've done nothing. That's not true, you mock my earnestness and pseudo-intellectualism, you call me names, you tolerate my foolishness, you knock me down for my own good and are the wingman that I need.

To the Fellowship team and those at Coram. You've answered my emails, pointed me in the right direction, held my hand and humoured me. Thank you.

Lastly, I would like to thank the following who gave me their time, shared their insight, knowledge and experience, you were warm, engaging and made the experience an absolute pleasure:

Nancy Lockwood, Forrest Lien, Keri Williams, Lee Tempest, Shanelle Zieset, Cristin Winn Reyes, Dr Maude Champagne, Andrew Walker, Karalyn Davis, Shannon Parsons, Lillyth Quillin, Murray Coulter, Christen Shepherd, Leonhard Preiss, Larisa Freiverts, Lauri Cabral, Tania Hancock, Liza Katkova, Tanya Eichler, Michelle Valenzuela, Laura Dunleavy, Bronwen Maher, Bea Wood, Chye Toole-Anstey, Declan Coogan, Kylie Golden, Lauren Ornelas, Peter Jacob & Lynn Snow.



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Audio Appendix - Churchill Interview Log

On my Churchill Fellowship research I was fortunate enough to speak to some amazing professionals, parents and practitioners across a range of contexts, cultures and countries. They all were connected with the issue of supporting families and carers of children with complex, challenging and aggressive behaviour these conversations informed the findings.

Prior to me arranging interviews I sought permission from the interviewees to record part or all of our conversation to create an 'audio appendix' to my report to enable anyone who wanted to hear a more in depth conversation about the various topics to be able to do so.

It's worth noting that not all the interviews I undertook were recorded due to technology, time or other reasons but they were as equally valuable and the notes I took were as informative and thought provoking as the ones recorded. I also only recorded portions of our conversations to promote more candid discussions.

I hope you find them useful and you can find contact details of the interviewees below and links to the audio and website/books etc.

1. Nancy Lockwood - Canada

Consultant with A4L/Interwoven Connections

Discussion on the development of the service, importance of the AFCCA (Aggression towards Families and Caregivers from Children and Adolescents) definition, networking, development of professionals' knowledge of AFCCA, peer support and online services.

LinkedIn Nancy Lockwood

Listen to the full interview here

2. Forrest R. Lien, LCSW, ACSW. Colorado, USA

Discussion of the specific model for supporting families and children diagnosed with RAD with the use of therapeutic foster carers, intensive therapy for children and strengthening networks around families.

LinkedIn profile here

Listen to the full interview here

3. Keri Williams - North Carolina, USA

Discussion in relation to online support in terms of accessibility, immediacy and peer support. Specific issues of safeguarding and confidentiality.

Raising Devon Website here

Email keri@raisingdevon.com

Keri's Facebook Page here

You can order Keri's book's here



4. Lee Tempest, Child to Parent Violence and Abuse (CPVA) Coordinator at VisAble, New Zealand.

Discussion in relation to the specific context of New Zealand and the challenges that families face in relation to isolation and shame that inhibit seeking support. There is no adoption and a focus on families caring for children. Lee explained the lack of professional training or a formal response to families but some limited knowledge through individual communities parenting and caring for children with specific additional needs and disabilities that experience it.

LinkedIn - Lee Tempest

VisAble website here

Lee has recently authored a report looking specifically at CPVA for VisAble and that can be read <u>here</u>.

Listen to the full interview here

5. Shanelle Zeiset, Respite Carer, Missouri USA

Discussion in relation to the her role offering respite to families within the Mennonite community but also further afield. Families are often burned out and struggling to manage their children's behaviour. Shanelle works with therapists and counsellors to offer a therapeutic and structured environment while parents take time to rest and recoup.

The work of the Therapeutic Community can be seen <u>here</u>

Listen to the full interview here

6. Cristin Winn Reyes, Director of Education & Support Groups, Help One Child, California, USA

Discussion round the broader support that they offer adoptive parents in the community. Peer led support groups with training available to support families and different groups focusing on specific needs or members of the community. Discussion in relation to the challenges facilitators may face.

Help One Child website here.

Listen to the full interview here

7. Dr Maude Champagne, psychotherapist and Clinical lead for Interwoven Connections. Canada

Discussion in relation to the peer support network and how that functions. There are levels of support that all stem from the basic groups with there being peer mentors identifying needs, supporting with advocacy and 'buddying' up with other parent/carers. There is also the facility for specific training and interventions depending on the needs. That may be NVR or polyvagal support, community support, safety plans etc.

LinkedIn - here

Interwoven Connections website here



8. Lillyth Quillan - Founder of Parents of Children with Conduct Disorder Facebook Group, California, USA

Discussion around the benefits that peer support groups can bring to parents with similar and comparable experiences. The nature of the groups and often raw nature of the experiences and emotions expressed. Lillyth explains some of the issues that are faced by members, how aspects of the group works and reflects on broader issues impacting on parents. The language is frank and the conversation includes description and mention of physical violence and suicide.

Parents of Children with Conduct Disorder Facebook Page <u>here</u> Listen to the full interview <u>here</u>

9. Andrew Walker, Project Leader Barnados Post Adoption Service, Republic of Ireland

Discussion on the services the broader that they provided to families in Ireland from the adoption community. They create a relational based service from first contact that contrasts other services. Banardos provide support through facilitate focused peer support groups, training and interventions for children and families.

Barnardo's Ireland website <u>here</u> Listen to the full interview here

10. Shannon Parsons, AFCCA Family Supports Program, Canada

Discussion specifically about the peer support framework that is set up for families, how they access the service and the support that they get. Shannon explains who the 'IPC' workers are, their role, recruitment, induction process and support frameworks around them.

LinkedIn – <u>Shannon Parsons</u>
Interwoven Connections website <u>here</u>
Listen to the full interview here

11. Murray Coulter, Interwoven Connections, lived experience, Canada

Murray shares his family's experience of the Interwoven connections support. LinkedIn – Murray Coulter

Interwoven Connections website <u>here</u>
Listen to the full interview here

12. Christen Shepherd, Author + Interwoven Connections lived experience, Canada

Christen shared her experience of seeking support through conventional and universal services and it being primarily focused on the child. Interwoven Connections (previously Adopt4Life) peer and clinical support were accessed and were able to offer a range of help that offered a more holistic service and support to the family.

Christen's website <u>here</u>
Interwoven Connections website <u>here</u>
Listen to the full interview <u>here</u>



13. Leonhard Preiss PINA (Practice Innovation New Authority, Austria

Leonard works directly with families using the Non Violent Resistance framework to support them to see effective change in children's behaviour. He reflected on the isolation that parents feel and the stigma that is often present.

Website here www.pina.at

Listen to the full interview here

14. Larisa Freiverts, Team Leader & Senior Family Therapist, Anglicare Meridian Youth and Family Therapy Team, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Larisa is the team leader and we discuss the routes into the services and the specific programme that they undertake with the families that are directed to the service.

You can view the 'Breaking the Cycle' facilitator's manual <u>here</u> that Larisa kindly shared. I'd ask that if you do draw materials from it that you acknowledge where you took it from.

Anglicare Website here

Listen to the full interview here

15. Lauri Cabral, Past Chair & Strategic Advisory Committee National Consortium on Aggression Towards Family / Caregivers in Childhood & Adolescence (AFCCA)

Lauri was key in the establishment of the AFCCA service and explains some of the key steps that were made in terms of defining the issue, collaboration and setting up of the service.

Lauri's LinkedIn profile here

Listen to the full interview here

16. Tania Hancock, Manager Therapeutic Interventions, Quantum Support Services, Victoria, Australia

Tania discusses the trauma and connection focused work that they do through a 16 week programme for families, parents and children.

Quantum Support Services Website

Tania's LinkedIn profile here

Listen to the full interview here

17. Liza Katkova, Strengthening Connections program at Child and Family Services

Liza works with 12 to 17 year old children often where there has been violence in the home supporting parents children development of emotional regulation. They run a 20 week programme with the individual families.

You can read more of the work of CAFS here

Listen to the full interview here

18. Michelle Valenzuela, Chid psychologist Mexico and USA

Michelle works in private practice specifically with families formed through adoption and struggling to manage challenging behaviour. Michelle works with Shanelle Zieset and I spoke to them together at the beginning of my interviews.

The work of the Therapeutic Community can be seen here



19. Tanya Eichler, Interwoven Connections Clinical Lead in the AFFCA Family Support Programme.

Tania talks about the challenges that families face and specifically the work that she does with parents in relation to regulations and self-awareness using the polyvagal model to create fertile ground to grow other interventions from.

LinkedIn Tanya Duguay

Listen to the full interview here

20. Laura Dunleavy, Kinship Care Ireland- National Programme Coordinator

In this conversation we discuss the growing and fledgling work that Laura is coordinating in Ireland. She reflects on the experiences of children and their families and the response to their support needs. There are some responses for carers in relation to challenging behaviour available with the country but these are currently universal and carers often have significant barriers to accessing them.

Kinship Care Ireland website here

LinkedIn - Laura Dunleavy

Listen to the full interview here

21. Karalyn Davis, Senior Project Officer, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne, Australia -

Discussion in relation to the broader policy context of adolescent violence towards caregivers. The issues is positioned within the family violence and are referred in through police and this framework impacts broadly on how other services view violence and aggression from children and how they intervene.

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare website here

