

The Changing Face of Families

Conference Report

We launched Parents' Week 2009 with our annual conference on Monday 19th October at the Park Avenue Hotel, Belfast.

Almost 100 delegates attended the conference many travelling from across the province. Under the theme of "The Changing Face of Families" delegates heard presentations from a range of speakers covering topics as diverse as research, the impact of separation and divorce, ethnic minorities, regional information database and many more. Many of the presentations are available on the PAC website. A summary of the key speakers and their themes is listed below.

The Speakers

Alison Loughlin, Regional Manager, Parenting Forum of NI

Alison has worked in her present role for 7 years and throughout this period has witnessed many changes in the family structure in Northern Ireland. She spoke of the ripple effect emanating from changing birth rates, marriage and divorce, working parents and the increase in the ethnic and minority working population. Alison stressed change is now the norm, not the exception.

Dr Deborah Ghate, Director of the Centre for Effective Services

Dr Deborah Ghate is Director of the Centre for Effective Services in Dublin. From 1998 until 2007 she was founder and Director of the Policy Research Bureau, a leading independent research centre based in London, specialising in applied policy research on children, young people and their families. Deborah gave an overview of the Centre For Effective Services and spoke of the importance of quality in parenting support, the benefits of this for parents and better outcomes for children.

Tommy Doherty, Western Health and Social Services

Tommy Doherty works in the field of children's services information in the area covered by the legacy Western Health and Social Services Board. The work involves both establishing and maintaining information systems and reporting on a range of data to support needs assessment in respect of families and vulnerable children. Tommy spoke on the development of a regional information system which will be a resource for parents and professionals to readily access information on services available; assist with timely referrals; and be a resource to service planners helping identify areas of unmet need and avoid service duplication. The database will also provide information on

how well children and young people are doing, in relation to indicators linked to the children and young people's strategy outcomes

Nora Smith, Policy & Information Manager, Employers for Childcare

Employers for Childcare is both a charity and a social enterprise. The aim of the organisation is to "make it easier for parents with dependent children to get into work and to stay in work". Nora has recently taken up her position as Policy and Information Manager and gave an informative presentation on the programme of work and services provided by the organisation and the many issues faced by working parents. She also encouraged everyone present to register their opposition to Gordon Brown's proposal to abolish childcare vouchers.

John Duffy, Chairman of Eastern Childcare Partnership

John has Chaired the Eastern Childcare Partnership since 2007. He is the Children's Services Planner at the Eastern Office of the Health and Social Care Board with responsibility for developing and maintaining the mechanisms to plan and deliver services to children across agencies and disciplines.

Margaret Fawcett, Independent Social Worker, Therapist and Family Therapist in Training

Margaret is an independent Social Worker with a long-standing professional interest in the needs of children when parents separate. She has previously worked as a family mediator and as a counsellor with young people. In her current role she continues to undertake consultancy work in this area – writing, researching, and teaching – as well as practising in Belfast as an independent social worker/therapist/family therapist in training with children, young people and families dealing with separation and loss. Margaret spoke on the facts of parental separation, understanding the changing family and the risk factors and resilience associated with separation and divorce.

Marie Cavanagh, Director, Gingerbread Northern Ireland

Gingerbread Northern Ireland is the lead agency working with and for one parent families in NI. As Director, Marie has been instrumental in the development of a broad range of advice, information, training and childcare services delivered by Gingerbread to lone parents. Marie advised of the four main areas identified as requiring most attention presently; a realistic approach to childcare, training and employment, review of income levels and wrap around services.

Una Mc Aliskey, Development Manager, Mencap NI

In her role as Development Manager for Mencap NI, Una is responsible for managing all aspects of the change process necessary to bring about the future development of Segal House Nursery, including relocation to more suitable accommodation and creating an early childhood development centre which would be used by agencies providing play, care, education, therapies and family support. Una has worked with both children and adults with a learning disability. She spoke of the facts and effects of living with a family member who has a learning disability and introduced Marian Nicholas, a parent who related her personal story and the challenges faced when her child was born with a learning disability.

Bernadette Mc Aliskey, Co-ordinator, S.T.E.P (South Tyrone Empowerment Programme)

Since her time as an MP in the late '60s and early '70s, Bernadette has devoted herself to the building of a successful community infrastructure in her local area of South Tyrone. She has been a keen community activist on a number of subjects including equal opportunities, women's issues, discrimination and more recently racial equality. Bernadette gave an informative talk on the difficulties faced by ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland and also the similarities between families, regardless of country of origin.

Feedback from Participants

All participants were invited to complete and return an evaluation form before they left the venue. The following is a summary of the feedback received:

Rating Area	Poor	Just OK	Good	Very Good	Excellent	No Answer
Booking Procedure	0	0	4	21	18	2
Venue	0	1	10	19	15	0
Food	0	0	11	19	11	4
Length of Event	0	4	10	22	8	1
Cost	0	3	13	14	12	3
Overall level of Satisfaction	0	2	5	22	16	0

**Numbers in cells relate to the actual number of participants who expressed a preference*

What did you enjoy most/least about the day?

- **Most**

43 respondents listed something that they enjoyed about the conference. The most frequently mentioned areas were;

- All speakers were good, presentations thought provoking
- Diversity of speakers and themes
- The parent's personal experience

- **Least**

Fewer people mentioned aspects that they enjoyed least; a summary of what was mentioned is;

- A lot to take in. A full day conference may have been more appropriate
- A lot of statistics. Need practical steps to let us know what we can do to help
- Venue was too hot

Will you be able to use anything from today in your own work?

We received a very positive response to this question.

Answer:	Response:
Yes	39
No	0
Didn't Answer	6

Most of those respondents who said yes were specific about what they felt they would be able to use. This included;

- Learned how effective it is to hear from a parent
- It has opened my eyes to the issues that affect all parents
- Sharing of information on the effects of separation/divorce with colleagues
- The new regional database will be a useful tool
- Resources, research material and statistics used
- Models of change by Dr Ghaté
- Will consider how to support parents with varying needs
- The positive role of parenting

What would you like to see organised (if anything) as a follow-up to this event?

Some of these suggestions were;

- Q&A with local politicians pre-election / lobbying collectively
- A more comprehensive workshop on quality in parenting services
- A more in-depth talk from Bernadette McAliskey around ethnic minorities and entitlements
- Ongoing progress and training on the Regional Information database
- A follow up conference when changes begin to take place
- Confirmation of the valuable role of parents and support / encouragement for parents to remain at home with children

Any other comments or suggestions...

A selection of the responses we received were;

- The theme could have included gay and lesbian families and men's organisations more explicitly
- Certain areas of the topic on the effects of separation/divorce required more statistical information
- I don't feel the goal should be 2 parents working full time. Don't feel there is anything wrong with parents looking after their own children or working around them rather than leaving them in childcare. What about support for parents who want to stay at home to look after their children?
- It was lovely to see a speaker not in need of a PowerPoint presentation and just able to talk
- A really great talk on all topics
- Excellent. I look forward to the next conference
- Well organised, interesting and informative