

# about families



gathering evidence • informing action

## Project Report May 2013





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## 1. About the project

The About Families partnership sought to ensure that the changing needs of parents – including families affected by disability – are met by providing accessible and relevant evidence to inform services. Over three years (2010 – 2013), About Families identified and investigated four key parenting topics, produced clear language topic reports, and supported a range of organisations and services to use evidence, and consult with service users, to inform service development. The project also piloted an Evidence Bank, which produced concise evidence reviews in direct response to family and disability service-related research questions.

About Families considered how these parenting issues relate to families affected by disability as well as those not affected. It aimed to enable parenting professionals to provide services appropriate for all families, and to help those working in the disability field have a deeper understanding of parenting and family issues.

About Families was a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), Capability Scotland and Parenting across Scotland (a consortium of parenting and relationship organisations: Aberlour Childcare Trust, Capability Scotland, CHILDREN 1st, One Parent Families Scotland, Relationships Scotland, SMC, and Scottish Adoption).

It was funded by the National Lottery through the Big Lottery Fund.

This report:

- outlines the ‘evidence to action’ model devised by About Families to facilitate using evidence in practice;
- summarises key findings across the four topics explored;
- offers case studies of how About Families supported organisations and services to use evidence in practice and consult with service users;
- outlines the Evidence Bank; and
- shares learning arising from the project.

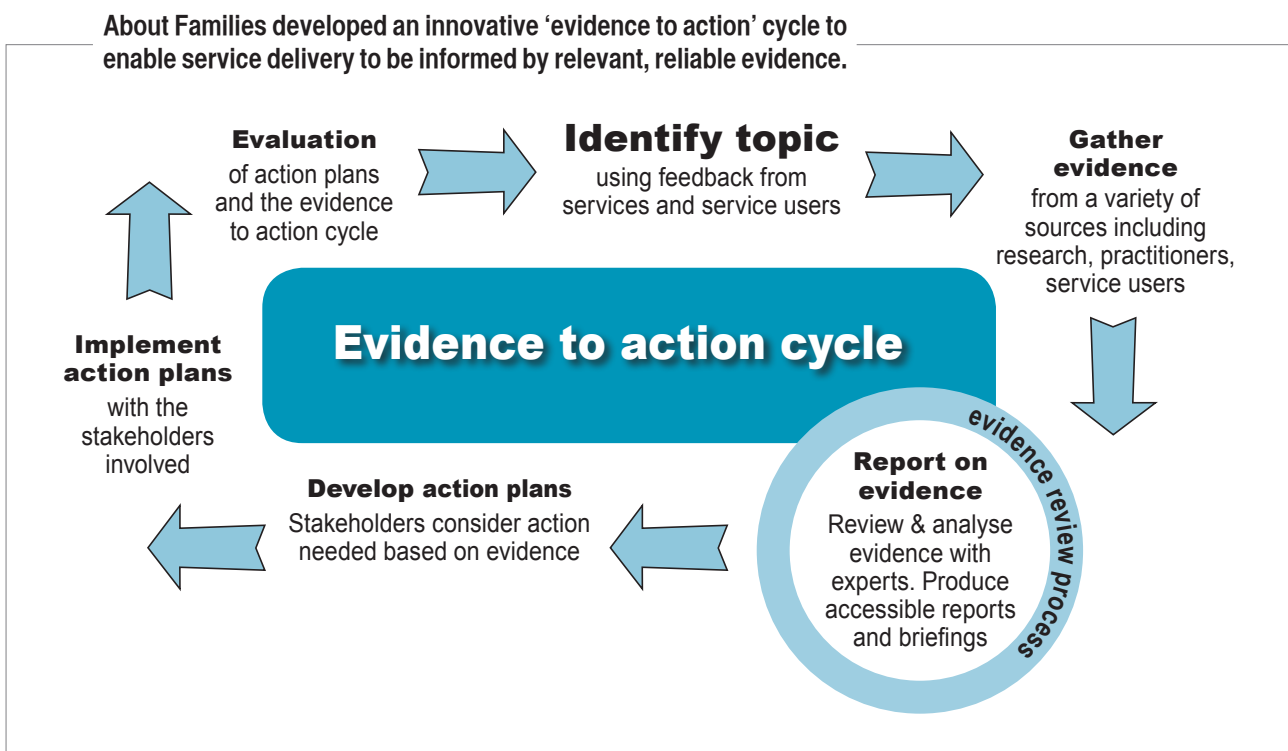
A more detailed exploration of learning arising can be found in *About Families: what have we learned about evidence to action?*

Full topic reports (with references) and briefings; Evidence Bank reports; case studies of action plans; action planning resources; and other publications produced by the project are available on the About Families website [www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk)

### Evidence to action

**“About Families has helped identify key research findings and put them across in an easy to understand manner. They have been keen to work alongside service users and help them understand often difficult and complex issues and make them feel involved in delivering change.”**

*Project evaluation survey respondent*



Topics for evidence review were selected with project partners in response to challenges facing the parents they work with, identified through service data and discussion. A range of evidence was then gathered and presented via accessible reports and briefings, which were explored with a range of stakeholders through participative events. All evidence reports were reviewed by academics and service professionals.

About Families also held additional events with organisations working with kinship carers and with families affected by disability to explore how the topics relate to the particular circumstances of the families they support.

**“Lots of new ideas... made me challenge my views”**

**“The findings will help debate and discussion about the services we provide”**

**‘Having a practice and research base makes complete sense’**

**‘the report ...will be useful in informing service change as it contains many areas of research in one single document’**

**Comments from event participants**

About Families worked with stakeholders to create and implement action plans to develop services based on the findings from the evidence reviews. Stakeholders were from both voluntary and statutory sectors, and included national family organisations, disability organisations and those delivering direct services to children and/or families. The evidence to action process used a range of planning and evaluation tools, and emphasised involving service users in service developments. A secondary aim was to increase organisations’ capacity to use evidence in practice effectively in the future. This includes both the formal research-base, and other data and evidence from their own monitoring and evaluation.

Organisations and services were supported in different ways, according to the needs they identified:

- to directly use evidence in service delivery
- to involve service users in how services are planned and delivered
- to assess the usefulness of their internal data about service users, and how this capacity can be improved

Some organisations used the About Families reports in their service development without any input from About Families.

For example, the Parenting Teenagers report was used by Parenting Across Scotland to revise its resources for parents, and by Parentline Scotland to inform training for their helpline volunteers.

### **Including evidence on disability**

There is little research on the experience of disabled parents generally, or approaches that see disabled parents as parents, rather than service users. Generally, research including families affected by disability tends to focus on the disability rather than parenting (in relation to both disabled adults and/or children). Research gaps around disability were highlighted in all topic reports. A compilation of all evidence relating to disability across all topics reports, and gaps in evidence, can be found in *About Families: exploring the evidence on disability*.

In response to this research gap, About Families commissioned a survey and interviews with disabled parents and/or parents of disabled children for each topic report. This was done on a small scale using Capability Scotland’s 1 in 4 Poll\* and other services to ask families about their experiences. Whilst not representative of the views of families affected by disability across Scotland, it does present some reflections to inform discussions and service development.

**“We have learned that there is less evidence out there than we originally thought – especially about disabled parents and their families. It’s been really helpful in identifying what is there, and where the gaps are.”**

**“Disability has been made more visible though the About Families research, which has shown how little research has been done on disabled parents and their families.”**

**Comments from project partners**

### **What About Families achieved**

The project enabled organisations and services which support families to:

- be more aware of the needs of parents and families,
- be aware of current research on key parenting topics,
- be better able to develop evidence-based services- using an action-planning approach,
- make better use of existing resources, and
- include parents and families in the design of service delivery and support them to articulate their needs

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\*Capability Scotland’s 1 in 4 Poll was established in 2000 and so-called because one in four households in Scotland lives with disability. 1 in 4 Poll panel members have personal experience of disability and respond to 3-4 surveys each year on issues that relate to disability equality.

Over three years, About Families:

- produced
  - o four topic reports,
  - o four topic briefings,
  - o six Evidence Bank response reports,
  - o one research briefing,
  - o a report on disability evidence,
  - o a report on research gaps, and
  - o a report on what we learned about evidence to action
- held 5 evidence to action events
- engaged 275 service providers, policy-makers, practitioners and experts
- supported 21 action plans
- supported the involvement of 135 service users in action plans

Full details of resources available are provided in the appendix.

## 2. Gathering evidence, informing action

**“Consolidation of evidence in one place – this is very useful for both academics and practitioners. It also helps to identify what the gaps are, which is very important – it points us in the right direction and identifies where further research needs to be done.”**

**“The evidence was excellent – having it all organised in one place provides a real value. Also that it’s embedded in an action-focused process.”**

**Comments from report expert reviewers**

The four topics explored were:

1. Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour
2. Together and Apart: supporting families through change
3. Parenting on a Low Income
4. Parenting and Support

A ‘mini-topic’ on kinship care was also devised to complement the other topics and to explore how they could relate specifically to kinship care families.

After each topic a forum event was held which enabled organisations to explore ideas for action from the evidence reviews. The section below outlines key findings from the topics and some case studies of actions developed by partner organisations.

### Topic 1: Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour

We know from calls to helplines that parents of teenagers often struggle and feel isolated, particularly around behaviour and relationship issues. About Families asked what research could tell us about these issues to help inform voluntary and public sector agencies in the development of services.

#### Key points from the topic report

**Conflict:** Conflict between parents and teens is not necessarily a bad thing and can play a useful role in teenagers’ development. It is important how often, with whom and why conflict happens, along with how parents manage their own behaviour.

**Communication:** Good communication in families can contribute to the development of social skills and positive outcomes for teenagers.

**Relationships:** The personalities of both parents and teenagers contribute to the quality of their relationship and are also linked to how much control the parent tries to impose on their teenager.

**Independence:** Parents are often anxious as teenagers become more independent. Parents cope better if they see increasing independence as an appropriate part of adolescent development, are able to maintain boundaries between their own feelings and their teenager’s, and feel comfortable with close relationships.

**Parental satisfaction:** How happy parents feel about their parenting is linked to how they view their teenager’s development. Adolescence can be a positive time when parents can reassess their teenager’s capabilities as they mature.

**Parenting together:** Parents agreeing about their approach to parenting is more important than who does what, or how much mothers and fathers are involved. Fathers are less likely to seek parenting support and usually look to their partner when they do. Both parents of disabled teenagers are likely to be involved in all areas of their teenager’s life.

**Monitoring behaviour:** There are differences between mothers and fathers in how they find out about their teenagers’ lives. Generally, parents think their teenagers should tell them more than teenagers think they should, and overestimate how much they are told. Ensuring that teenagers feel comfortable about sharing information about themselves can be more effective in deterring them from problem behaviour than trying to control their activities. Both teenagers and parents make judgments over what they feel teenagers should tell parents about, which links to the kind of areas they believe parents have some say in.

What do we know about parenting teens?: Research tends to focus on reducing social problems and not necessarily on issues of most concern to parents or teenagers. A view of the teenage years as problematic is over-represented and there is less research and guidance aimed at ordinary parents and teenagers with everyday problems. Most research is based on traditional heterosexual two-parent families. Research does not address the issues of families affected by disability. However, the issues arising around parenting teenagers are applicable to other types of families.

### Action plan case studies

For the Parenting Teenagers topic, four organisations developed actions, including:

#### Supporting Parents and Carers in Edinburgh (City of Edinburgh Council)

In partnership with NHS Lothian and voluntary organisations, the City of Edinburgh Council is working to build capacity within all sectors to provide co-ordinated universal support for parents and carers. This work is based on an early intervention approach which aims to ensure that parents can access the support they need, when they need it.

About Families helped the Supporting Parents and Carers in Edinburgh team to think through how to involve service users in the action planning process, to ensure that plans were informed by their needs and views. This support included helping them to develop their capacity to capture and use information to increase their internal evidence base.

In 2010 Supporting Parents and Carers Development Officers undertook a consultation exercise with parents to explore the challenges they face and the support they need. About Families worked with the team to analyse and report on these local findings, and supported the development workers to develop tools to evaluate the Parent Information Points (PIP) which provide information for parents.

**“There has been a recognised raised awareness of parenting issues and the ability of professionals to provide information and “a listening ear.”**

Helen Purves, Development Worker, City of Edinburgh Council

**“We are committed to carrying on using action planning methods [introduced by About Families] to evidence, plan our objectives and outcomes and develop methods for measuring quality indicators and outcomes. This has helped us plan our draft Action Plan to support the Parenting Framework.”**

Sue Cameron, Development Worker, City of Edinburgh Council

**“Our ability to analyse the data and present our findings in a clear, concise way has helped us demonstrate to partners the success of PIPs.”**

Steff Kaye, Development Worker, City of Edinburgh Council

### Topic 2: Together and Apart: supporting families through change

Since good relationships between parents are important for the well-being of both adults and children, About Families asked what research could tell us about sustaining healthy relationships and coping with relationship breakdown.

#### Key points from the topic report

**Conflict:** Conflict does not necessarily lead to unhappier relationships. How conflict happens and how it is dealt with is what matters.

**Pressures:** Many things put pressure on relationships and it is normal for relationship satisfaction to decline after the birth of a baby. Parents of disabled children face additional pressures which can continue into the child's adulthood.

**Coping:** Parents manage better when they can spend time together as a couple, communicate well, have trust and respect, have a supportive relationship and are happy with their roles and responsibilities. Access to short term breaks is key for families affected by disability.

**Attitudes:** Seeing relationships as flexible and able to change can help adults to deal with relationship issues.

**Impact:** Improving relationship satisfaction and preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) are important for the well-being of both adults and children. Stability is more important than family structure for children's well-being.

**Contact:** Arranging contact with children following separation is complex for both practical and emotional reasons but arrangements do not have to be conflict-free to be successful. Developing good couple communication skills may be more effective in facilitating contact than legal interventions.

**Finance:** Men and women face different financial pressures following separation. Single mothers are the worst off financially, while families affected by disability face additional financial disadvantage which can continue throughout their lives.

**Seeking support:** Parents face practical and emotional barriers to seeking support from relationship services. While the most common source of support is family and friends, this is not problem-free. People prefer support from skilled professionals when experiencing serious concerns.

**Families affected by disability:** Research tends to focus on the difficulties associated with living with disabilities or long-term conditions. This emphasises the strains and pressure having a disabled child puts on relationships and family life. Help for parents often aims to support them by providing help for the child. Recognising pressures and challenges for these families needs to be balanced with addressing social barriers (such as negative attitudes towards disability) and the capacity of families to manage well given the appropriate support.

**What do we know about supporting parents in relationships?:** Research does not always distinguish between different family forms, type of relationship, parents and other carers, or gender, and tends to be based on heterosexual families. However, many of the issues arising around relationship support are applicable to many types of families.

### Action plan case studies

For the Together and Apart topic, eight organisations developed actions, including:

#### Scottish Marriage Care and Relationship Scotland: promoting positive messages

Scottish Marriage Care and Relationship Scotland both provide counselling and mediation support to couples and families experiencing difficult relationships.

After both organisations participated in the *Together and Apart* forum event, About Families worked with them to develop a 'Promoting Positive Messages' project which subsequently secured funding. We worked with them to develop an online resource for parents and couples who are experiencing relationship difficulties. The resource will increase understanding around how to sustain healthy relationships and manage relationship difficulties as well as promote the message that it is OK to talk about relationships.

**“The reports have bridged the gap between academic research and practice. They are easy to read and have been really helpful... both the organisations reported that they were ‘convinced’ of the need to embed ‘evidence’ into any future project development plans... The ‘process’ set up by About Families really gave us an insight and a framework for taking forward future pieces of work.”**

**Gay Hickey, Head of Public Affairs, Relationships Scotland & Sally McElroy, Relationship Counsellor, Scottish Marriage Care**

#### Heart to Heart: supporting parents experiencing divorce or separation

Heart to Heart provide confidential support to men and women who have been affected by divorce or separation. About Families worked with them to help develop services which were more responsive to the needs of parents who have experienced relationship difficulties.

We worked on developing a toolkit for volunteers and staff to support parents. Together, we developed an online survey to gain more understanding about the views and experiences of parents (exploring what areas they want support with) and held a focus group with parents who had used Heart to Heart services. We took the key themes which came out of this work, issues such as anger, communication, forgiveness, anxiety and looking forward, to link them to the key findings from *Together and Apart: Supporting families through change*, within the toolkit.

Since the toolkit was developed, Heart to Heart has launched a new support project, H2H Parent, which has been specifically designed to support parents to cope better with divorce and separation.

As a result of working with About Families, in the future Heart to Heart will make:

**“time to discuss how the research evidence relates to services and to consider how services could be developed to incorporate what the evidence says as well as feedback from parents. For example, the research evidence informed the development of the survey and focus group discussions.”**

**Ruth Kennedy, Development Co-ordinator, Heart to Heart**

#### Capability Scotland: supporting relationships for families affected by disability

Capability Scotland campaigns with, and provides services for more than 1,000 disabled children and adults across Scotland. Capability Scotland recognised the importance of sharing the Together and Apart topic report with parents of disabled children, as well as providing support for parents experiencing family change.

During February 2012, About Families hosted discussion sessions with parents of disabled children in Stanmore House School and Corseford School. These discussion sessions explored the unique pressures on relationships experienced by families affected by disability. Along with the topic report, these discussions informed the development of an on-line

support resource for parents and families, now available on the Capability Scotland website. The resource will be monitored by Capability Scotland staff and regularly updated. Leaflets will be distributed to raise awareness of the resource.

**“It has given me a true insight into an area of family relationships that I was not aware of and now take into consideration when talking with parents... The parents feel like they were listened to and well represented ... [I’ve learnt] the need for new ways to engage parents, the importance of not moulding what parents have to say to fit a desired outcome and the benefits of partnership working.”**

**Sam Louden, Children’s Services Manager, Capability Scotland**

### Topic 3: Parenting on a Low Income

Given the negative effects of financial hardship, and the current economic climate, About Families asked what research could tell us about parenting on a low income.

#### Key points from the topic report

**Doing without:** Parents experiencing financial hardship ‘do without’ everyday necessities, social activities and holidays, all of which put a strain on parenting and family relationships. Families affected by disability can face additional costs and pressures.

**Living without:** Living on a low income can bring multiple stresses such as food and fuel poverty, debt, dispossession, homelessness and restricted social opportunities which can affect family relationships, health and well-being, and contribute to feelings of stigma, isolation and exclusion.

**Managing:** Parents use a range of creative and skilful strategies to manage resources. However, this can be stressful and time consuming and women are more likely to bear the responsibility.

**Debt:** Attempts to budget can be undermined by life events, benefit changes and employment conditions which can lead to debt.

**Support:** Parents in low-income areas tend to have low levels of social support and are least likely to access formal services. While support from family and friends is important, it can be variable, undermined by life events and lack of resources and is not always seen positively in terms of independence and ability to cope.

**Benefits system:** The benefits system is often a significant source of confusion and stress for families, including those affected by disability, and many families do not receive all the benefits to which they are entitled.

**Barriers to work:** Low-paid and part-time workers can shuttle in and out of work in a ‘low pay – no pay’ cycle and face a range of barriers to entering or remaining in paid employment. Parents in families affected by disability face particular barriers to employment including inflexible employers, discrimination and lack of affordable and appropriate childcare.

**Work/care balance:** Sustaining work and family care is difficult and stressful, and involves managing a variety of competing tensions, usually by women.

**Low-income neighbourhoods:** People on low incomes are increasingly likely to live alongside others who are materially disadvantaged. Deprived neighbourhoods have inadequate housing and a lack of basic amenities and services, all of which can contribute to stress. However, while levels of poverty are higher in deprived areas, there are more families on low incomes living outside these areas than in them meaning that localised policies alone will not tackle poverty.

**Recession:** The recent recession has generated additional burdens for some people already living on low incomes. This is combined with decreased income for charities and voluntary sector organisations which must attempt to meet increasing demand for services with fewer resources.

**What do we know about life on a low income?:** A wealth of available statistics on poverty can tell us who is most at risk of experiencing poverty and under what circumstances. However, we know much less about what life is like for people living on low incomes, how their experiences change over time, and how parents manage. We know little about differences in the impact of poverty on mothers and fathers or different types of families, including families affected by disability, step-families, minority ethnic families and those with kinship care arrangements.

#### Action plan case studies

For the Parenting on a Low Income topic, a community of practice approach was taken with 13 organisations to think through evidence to action, in addition to the forum event. Three organisations developed actions, including:

##### Scottish Book Trust: reaching vulnerable families

Scottish Book Trust delivers Bookbug, Scotland’s national book gifting programme, providing free, high quality books for every baby, toddler, three and five year old in Scotland. To support this, Bookbug provides training for staff in local authorities, health sector and voluntary organisations across Scotland to run Bookbug Sessions. These are free sessions of stories, songs and rhymes for birth to four year olds which encourage parents to sing, cuddle and read with their children.

Scottish Book Trust was rolling out a programme which aimed to reach vulnerable children and families and those living in the most deprived communities across Scotland. About Families worked with Scottish Book Trust and You First (a

Barnardo's project for young parents) to engage parents in developing training for practitioners who are working with these vulnerable families. This training aimed to build the capacity of professionals to support parents and children to spend time sharing books together and to attend Bookbug Sessions within their local communities.

Through this work and reading the topic report, Scottish Book Trust staff increased their understanding of the barriers which vulnerable parents and carers may experience when accessing library services and Scottish Book Trust Bookbug Sessions, and recognised the importance of hearing the views of young parents.

**“The reports have helped highlight the importance of the services we provide, by making us aware of how important free activities and resources are for families... by hearing the views of young parents on libraries and why they don't attend them, it has helped us to better understand why Bookbug Sessions aren't as well attended by target groups, as we would hope...In the future, we will aim to engage more regularly, through our Bookbug Coordinators, with parents”**

**Heather Stirton, Early Years Outreach Manager, Scottish Book Trust**

### **ASH Scotland: low income and debt advice**

ASH Scotland's vision is of a healthier Scotland, free from harm and inequality caused by tobacco and its campaigns for effective tobacco control legislation in Scotland. Now in its 40th year, the organisation has played a key role in raising awareness about tobacco use and its harmful effects contributing to the implementation of effective public health policies to help smokers to quit and to protect children from tobacco.

About Families worked with ASH Scotland and money advice services in Glasgow and Lanarkshire in 2012 to develop support for parents living on a low income. This pilot worked on recognising the costs of smoking and benefits of stopping smoking/tobacco use, and exploring whether money advice service professionals would help to raise the issue of tobacco use.

As a result of interviews with 39 money advice professionals and 12 service-users, ASH Scotland recognises that the links between tobacco use and finances are complex. For example, these research findings suggested that some service providers may have presumptions about client preferences which are not borne out in reality. ASH Scotland will further investigate these issues and share findings with key partners in Scotland to inform models of working between money advice and stop smoking services, and will contribute

to tobacco awareness-raising sessions with practitioners working to support parents and families.

**“The service user interviews were very informative and challenged professional money advice workers beliefs. The findings from the money advice user interviews and the money advice workers survey will be used to inform the direction of future work. The pilot has allowed us to consider what our next stage of involvement is and has been useful in terms of informing our inequalities agenda... The experience of involving service users to inform our work has been very beneficial and will be a part of future work with service delivery organisations.”**

**Tracey Rogers, Inequalities Manager and Linda Bates, Development Officer, ASH Scotland**

### **Parenting on a Low Income Community of Practice**

About Families facilitated a Community of Practice, comprising participants from a range of third sector organisations and local authorities, to consider how the Parenting on a Low Income evidence report could inform services supporting parents and families, including those with disabilities. The Community of Practice sought to:

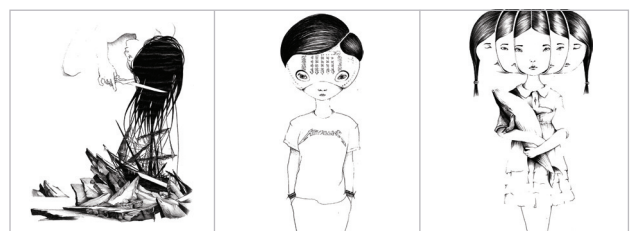
- capture, create and share knowledge;
- share experiences, reflect on common issues and identify opportunities to develop practice; and
- formalise and initiate projects as a result of identifying opportunities for collaborative working.

Over the summer of 2012, the Community of Practice identified four priority themes:

- Universal versus targeted support
- Community capacity building
- Working with the private sector
- Income maximisation

Four of the participating organisations (Save the Children, Scottish Book Trust, Plan B Partnership and One Parent Families Scotland) took a lead on exploring each of these themes.

Participants also reflected creatively on these priority themes with a community artist, who created images arising from discussions.



These images were shared with a group of parents living on a low income, through work with the Poverty Alliance and Fife Gingerbread and informed the priority themes. While there were many similarities in reflections from the Community of Practice participants and parents, there were also some differences, which highlighted the importance of involving service users in planning and designing service developments. For example, the Community of Practice reflected that parents may try to protect their children from the impact of living on a low income. However, the parents felt this was a 'naïve' and 'middle class' view as their children were very aware of the pressures of living on a low income.

**“the comments of the Fife Gingerbread participants who clearly thought that our illustration-readings and theirs were not aligned...[highlights] that parents’ views and experiences need to underpin all development work”**

Participant

Participants identified five key recommendations for how practitioners and policy makers can further develop services to support parents and families living on a low income:

1. **Impact of welfare reform** – services supporting parents and families must have a greater focus on the increasing challenges posed by current and forthcoming welfare reforms.
2. **Engaging parents** – in order to develop services which support parents living on a low income, those parents must be involved in practice and policy development and in determining what does and doesn't work.
3. **Access to support** – many parents and families do not know where or how to access available support services. Appropriate services must be delivered through a range of medium in order to reach and effectively support those most in need, including 1:1 engagement with families, community based services, and the internet.
4. **Networking/sharing** – effective partnership working provides opportunities to share resources. Organisations need to consider how evidence can inform services and pursue opportunities to reflect with, learn from, and work with other organisations in order to build capacity and develop support for families. Staff need time and space to 'explore' key issues.
5. **Applying learning** – organisations must apply learning, seek opportunities for linking services and policy, and apply evidence-based practice to ensure that services are innovative and continually developing in order to meet the changing needs of parents and families.

**“I honestly believe that my membership in the Community of Practice has given me new knowledge which has enhanced my thinking about low income, poverty, parenthood and children, a pervasive change in me which will influence all of the work that I undertake.”**

Participant

## Topic 4: Parenting and Support

Given the importance of support for parenting, About Families asked what research could tell us about how families seek, experience, and manage support from friends, family and formal services.

Support for parents comes from a variety of sources, often broadly grouped into:

**Informal:** from family, friends and neighbours, arising from parents' own pre-existing 'natural' networks;

**Formal:** organised services, often needs-led, and provided by the statutory sector alone or in partnership with the voluntary sector;

**Social support:** refers to social relationships with both individuals and organisations that have the potential to provide emotional and practical support, and is known to play a significant role in parenting.

### Key points from the topic report

**What support is for:** how families define their own problems or needs can be different from service providers' definitions. People weigh up the costs and benefits of seeking support, and using professional family support is sometimes felt or seen as failing by some parents.

**Social support:** having effective social support is essential for successful parenting, helping parents to deal with stresses and difficulties that arise within family or other areas of life. However, an absence of social support does not always predict problems.

**Networks of support:** parents in lower-income households, in social housing, or living in areas of high deprivation are less likely to have satisfactory networks and have lower levels of support.

**Family and friends:** parents see support from family and friends as the natural first port of call. However this can be variable and can bring its own problems. Not wanting to impose, considering grandparents too infirm to care for children, lack of money, negative attitudes from families, having complex support requirements, and life events such as separation are all important factors in the level of support available.

**Service delivery:** services and information are most effective for parents when they are joined-up, straightforward, responsive to different circumstances, abilities and backgrounds, build on what parents already know, and are delivered through trusting and supportive relationships.

**Barriers to using services:** families can face a range of practical, material, social and cultural barriers to accessing and engaging with services. Families affected by disability, those from minority ethnic communities, and fathers, can face particular barriers.

**Family context:** parents generally want to receive help if it is appropriate to their needs. Most barriers to engaging with services are not of parents' making; numerous factors, such as stress, poverty, ill-health, and social isolation, can combine to undermine parents' involvement in services.

**Formal support with a social element:** including a social aspect to services, like group-based support, can help to increase parents' levels of informal support and break down barriers to formal service use. However, combining social and formal support is complex, and not appropriate for all families.

**What do we know about supporting parents and families?:** Much of the existing research on engaging parents in formal services is from the perspective of service providers rather than those using services. Evaluations of services often assess attendance and completion rates rather than outcomes for parents and families. There is little research which explores the characteristics or perspectives of non-service users. It is not clear how social support can be best enhanced for those parents who need it. Most research relating to parenting and support focuses on white, non-disabled, women. Generally, different family forms are not referred to.

### Action plan case studies

For the Parenting and Support topic, two organisations developed three actions:

#### One Parent Families Scotland: supporting lone fathers

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) works to ensure that all families, particularly those headed by a lone parent, have the support, information and confidence needed to play a full part in Scotland's economic and social life. Two OPFS projects have been involved in About Families.

**The Supporting Scotland's Fathers and Their Children Project** supports fathers of children experiencing disadvantage, and those who take on a father's role, in Edinburgh. It offers fathers/male carers 1-to-1 support, personalised advocacy work, general signposting and small group work activities, including a programme of affordable and sustainable Saturday activities.

The About Families topic report, Parenting and Support, highlighted that parents can face practical barriers to

accessing parenting support services, such as location. These findings resonated with the fathers taking part in the project, and discussion with one of the dads led to the idea of extending the lone dads' project to other parts of Edinburgh.

About Families worked with OPFS to develop a drop-in and referral facility for lone dads at The Place2Be, a service based in schools which provides early intervention mental health support. One drop-in service is in development with nine others planned.

The OPFS project will have increased its capacity to include more dads across Edinburgh, and increase referrals through non-traditional routes, i.e. the education sector. The drop-in service means that 1-to-1 support will be available to dads who would not attend a group session. Extending the project to include different communities, including minority ethnic communities, will bring new experiences and ideas to the project.

**“It has been really good for the dads to share their ideas and views about how the project can be changed and how the project needed to reach a larger male audience to encourage more lone dads to access the service...[Developing the collaboration with The Place2Be] has made me more conscious that opportunities should be followed up and that we sometimes need to take risks.”**

**Tom Carroll, Dads Worker, One Parent Families Scotland, and Natalie Gibb Place2Be Coordinator**

#### The Edinburgh Lone Fathers Project (or Dad's Club)

provides the opportunity for lone and non-resident fathers and their young children (aged 0-4) to take part in activities and outings on Saturday mornings. It is non-supervised, with the dads support worker on hand to deal with any enquiries or issues. It is a joint venture between One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) and Gilmerton Child and Family Centre, with funding from Sure Start.

The About Families topic report, Parenting and Support, highlighted that fathers can find it difficult to access relevant parenting information in the way they want to. About Families worked with the OPFS dads' worker to examine the information support currently available to the participating dads and to explore, through a discussion session, what additional information they wanted.

The dads indicated a lack of confidence in their parenting and suggested they would like to attend a parenting education course to address this. With About Families support, the dads' worker attended the Raising Children with Confidence parenting course offered by City of Edinburgh Council and will develop accredited courses for the dads in the dad's club.

**“I will be able to talk to the dads more confidently about issues including managing their children’s behaviour and child development. The dads in the group have had their views taken on board. They know that they can make a difference to the project and input in to the wider policy arena. Staff recognise the need for the project to constantly adapt to meet the changing needs of the dads. These changes have to be informed by what the dads’ needs are.”**

Tom Carroll, Dads Worker, One Parent Families Scotland

### **Advice Service Capability Scotland: parenting information for disabled parents**

Advice Service Capability Scotland is a national provider of disability advice and information, providing a free and confidential service on a range of disability issues.

The About Families topic report, Parenting and Support, highlighted that disabled parents and parents of disabled children often find it difficult to know where to look for parenting information and that other parents are generally key sources of information and advice. Also, health and social service professionals, and voluntary sector organisations, often do not have relevant knowledge or accessible information or advice.

The Advice Team wanted to find out more about the information and support needs of disabled parents in Scotland, and produce a factsheet for local authorities and health practitioners to help them to better support disabled parents, and a factsheet for disabled parents. These factsheets will become one of Capability Scotland’s resources and as such will be regularly reviewed and updated.

About Families and the Advice Service developed research to further explore the views of disabled parents on their experiences of parenting. In January 2013, seven disabled parents took part in in-depth interviews (conducted by Scotinform, a research organisation) to discuss the different stages of parenting and the information/support available at each stage. The Advice Service also used the About Families Parenting and Support report to inform a report for Capability Scotland, which investigated issues around accessible Christmas attractions.

At the time of writing, the delivery of this action plan is in its early stages and will be continued by the Advice Team following the close of the About Families project. Currently, this work shows that there is not much information available for disabled parents, and indicated areas that the Advice Team were previously unaware of (for example, that the NHS was seen by as the main organisation that should provide parenting information to disabled parents).

As well as agreeing to comment on the draft factsheet, the disabled parents who participated in the interviews have agreed to carry out user testing for future factsheets and resources. This will help the Advice Team to accurately reflect the issues and concerns of disabled parents in their publications

Once disseminated, the factsheet is anticipated to generate more enquiries from parents and statutory services and highlight the need for disabled parents to have parenting information and support.

**“I found the process very helpful, it showed me that I could turn an idea into a practical task which I could then take forward. [This work] has increased my knowledge of disabled parents’ parenting experiences and informed me about the issues and concerns that disabled parents have.”**

Lorna Thompson, Advice Service Manager

### **Mini-topic: kinship care**

In partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland and Children 1st, About Families recognised that the findings from the Parenting Teenagers and Together and Apart topics could be used to inform how services support kinship carers. We therefore developed a ‘mini-topic’ on kinship care to complement the four core evidence to action cycles, and a factsheet on kinship care which distils some key information, trends and statistics.

About Families worked with three organisations to implement action plans based on kinship care issues arising from the Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour and Together and Apart topic reports.

### **Action plan case study**

#### **Mentor UK**

Mentor UK provides support to kinship carers through the Mentor UK kinship care guide and through support directly with families in Edinburgh and the Lothians. Mentor UK sought to develop the confidence and capacity of Mentor UK volunteers.

About Families worked with Mentor UK staff and volunteers followed by two focus group discussions with volunteers to find out more about how the evidence findings relate to kinship families and how those families might learn from the experiences of other kinship carers. A resource was produced which Mentor UK volunteers can use when supporting kinship carers.

**“These reports have been an excellent resource which has helped the family support workers and volunteers to think in more detail about the issues that parents/carers face...The findings have enabled the family support workers and carers to start putting together training programmes for carers individually and through group work.**

**This work will reinforce Mentor’s practice in ensuring that we continue to observe research and the thoughts, opinions and experiences of the people we work with to help shape the resources that we use in our daily work...and endeavour to use meetings rather than surveys, questionnaires to source information.”**

**(Heather McVeigh, Scotland Manager, Mentor UK)**

### 3. Piloting an Evidence Bank

About Families piloted and developed an Evidence Bank, which aimed to produce and share brief appraised summaries of evidence for the voluntary and public sectors, in direct response to their practice needs.

This service produced smaller scale evidence reviews than the topic reports in response to direct requests from practitioners over a specific area of practice or area of development.

All reports are shared in an online Evidence Bank:

- Extended adolescence: What UK and international research exists on extended adolescence?
- Supporting fathers: What difference does early intervention and support make to the children of resident and non-resident fathers
- Supporting new parents: Does providing relationship support to new parents provide better outcomes for children?
- Systemic Therapy: What difference does systemic therapy make to the outcomes for children and families?
- Relationship counselling: does relationship counselling improve the relationships of couples who are parents?
- Kinship Care Factsheet

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships is currently leading a partnership to develop the Evidence Bank model further.

**“We don’t have the resources to pull together external research which could inform our work – so have a service which can do this is invaluable”.**

**Third sector Service Manager**

### 4. What have we learned?

About Families pioneered approaches to closing the evidence to action gap which we hope will be of relevance more widely. In particular we have identified the following learning points:

#### What worked well?

**Relevant and reliable evidence:** identifying topics in direct response to challenges reported by service users and service delivery means that evidence sought is relevant and meaningful. Reliable research, independently reviewed, is valued by those developing service planning and funding bids, and strengthening services.

**Evidence to action cycle model:** supporting services by both raising awareness around evidence and its implications for service delivery, and by developing their capacity to utilise evidence to inform thinking and practice, is central to using evidence in service planning and delivery.

**Engaging with partners:** partnership working engages practitioners with evidence, and encourages links both within and between organisations.

#### Lessons learned

**Equalities:** About Families has identified a gap in addressing the needs of families affected by disability, in both research and practice. Inequitable access to mainstream services has also been highlighted for other types of families, including lone parents, minority ethnic families, fathers and families with kinship care arrangements. It is likely that this trend applies to other equality groups, such as LGBT families. Services whose remit is not explicitly equalities-based can find it challenging to commit resources to exploring addressing equalities issues.

**Quality of service-level data:** while some organisations collect data about service users, they can lack the capacity or expertise to use data to inform planning; or collect incomplete or limited data which undermines its usefulness. There is a need to improve services’ internal evidence base to inform service planning.

**Service-led development:** many services we worked with had little previous experience of involving service users in service planning. Service providers were invariably positive about the principle of involving service users in planning and valued the results, suggesting that this is an untapped and highly useful source of evidence.

A more detailed exploration of learning arising from About Families can be found in *About Families: what have we learned about evidence to action?*

## 5. Final words: About Families partners

**Sarah Morton, Co-director, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships**

“We set up the About Families project after exploring the potential for further research with voluntary sector partners. From those discussions, it seemed that accessing the existing research base was more important than creating new research. The About Families partnership has created a way of accessing research evidence and has explored ways of closing the evidence to action gap, which offers valuable learning for all of the knowledge exchange work we do at CRFR. Acting on the best available evidence in order to improve practice is not a straightforward process, and the learning about this will be valuable to many organisations grappling with the same issues.”

**Clare Simpson, Project Manager, Parenting across Scotland**

“When Parenting across Scotland first approached the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, we were looking at commissioning new research on parenting. Discussing the subjects that PAS partner organisations wanted evidence on, we quickly discovered that there was already a substantial body of evidence available on these topics. The problem for voluntary organisations was that they weren’t aware of the research, didn’t have access to academic databases, didn’t have time to locate and then trawl through masses of research to find the information they needed – and all too often, even if they did find a relevant article it could be completely impenetrable. But nonetheless voluntary organisations did want the evidence to improve their practice in working with families.

So what we came up with was a proposal that would provide an interface between the research and voluntary organisations (and others who wanted to use the research). It would provide clear easy to access evidence reviews for voluntary sector partners (with summaries that provided a quick route in), and would explore options for moving from evidence to action.

It’s been fantastic having About Families as a resource. It has improved the knowledge about evidence around families; organisations have used it for improving practice, developing resources, funding, policy – and perhaps things we aren’t even aware of. Having solid evidence to inform and back up our policy asks and consultation responses has been invaluable in the last few years; it would be pertinent at any time but with the National Parenting Strategy being devised and the Children and Young People’s Bill on the horizon it has been especially important.”

**Richard Hamer, Director of External Affairs, Capability Scotland**

“A quick search of the internet shows a wealth of research on disabled people, their impairments, rights and equalities. There’s precious little written about ‘normal’ aspects of everyday life, and how these differ for disabled people. As with the About Families research on parenting teenagers, research generally focuses on the problems relating to disability and what people can’t do or the help people need.

At Capability Scotland we wanted to know less about problems and more about how families evolve and adapt to a member of the family being, or becoming, disabled. The About Families concept seemed to be an ideal way of gathering this. Fundamentally, we believed that the project could give all organisations, not just disability ones, valuable insight into the lives of families affected by disability.

We learnt that there’s a need for a greater focus on the issues affecting disabled parents. All too often it seems that the basic care needs of a disabled parent are addressed but not the wider family needs arising from the impairment. We also saw evidence in the reports that emotional, as much as physical, support was required by the parents of disabled children. The knowledge is now available; it’s up to service providers, statutory authorities and the Scottish Government to use it to support disabled families better.”

## 6. Appendices

### Resources

All resources are available at [www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk)

#### Topic reports and briefings:

- Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour
- Together and Apart: supporting families through change
- Parenting on a Low Income
- Parenting and Support

#### Evidence Bank reports:

- Extended adolescence: What UK and international research exists on extended adolescence?
- Supporting fathers: What difference does early intervention and support make to the children of resident and non-resident fathers?
- Supporting new parents: Does providing relationship support to new parents provide better outcomes for children?
- Relationship counselling: Does relationship counselling improve the relationships of couples who are parents?
- Systemic therapy: What difference does systemic therapy make to the outcomes for children and families?
- Kinship Care factsheet

#### Other project reports

About Families: exploring the evidence on disability

About Families: what have we learned about evidence to action?

About Families topic reports: summary of gaps in research

CRFR research briefing: Parenting and Support

#### Action planning tools:

Phase 1 – Ideas for action

Phase 2 – Planning for action (including theory of change template)

Phase 3 – Implementing action: Creating Change

Phase 4 – Measuring what difference has been made

Phase 5 – Taking stock: reflections and conclusions

## Acknowledgements

### Evidence Review Panel

A panel of experts in the fields of families and disabilities advised at key stages of the evidence gathering process and peer reviewed draft reports:

- Sarah Cunningham-Burley: Professor of Medical and Family Sociology University of Edinburgh; non-executive director of CRFR
- Rosalind Edwards: Professor in Social Policy and Director of the Families & Social Capital Research Group, London South Bank University
- Dr Jeni Harden: Senior Lecturer, Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh; co-director of CRFR
- Lynn Jamieson: Professor of Sociology, University of Edinburgh; co-director of CRFR
- Adrian Sinfield: Emeritus Professor of Social Policy and University Fellow, University of Edinburgh
- Nick Watson: Professor of Disability Studies, University of Glasgow; Director of Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research

## Acknowledgements continued

### Professionals working within family and disability organisations also commented on draft topic reports:

- Jill Cook, Manager, ParentLine
- John Dickie, Head of Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland
- Susie Fitton, Senior Policy Adviser, Capability Scotland
- Stella Gibson, Chief Executive, Scottish Marriage Care
- Liz McMahon, Area Manager, Aberlour Child Care Trust
- Elspeth Maloney, Senior Policy and Consultancy Manager, Capability Scotland
- Satwat Rehman, Director, One Parent Families Scotland
- Clare Simpson, Project Manager, Parenting Across Scotland
- Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive, Relationships Scotland

### Evidence Bank reports were peer reviewed by:

- Siobhan Canavan and Bob Goupillot: Counselling and Psychotherapy, School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh
- Professor Sarah Cunningham-Burley: Professor of Medical and Family Sociology, Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh
- Professor Lynn Jamieson: Professor of Sociology, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh
- Dr Autumn Roesch-Marsh: School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh
- Clare Simpson: Project Manager, Parenting Across Scotland

### Action planning partners:

ASH Scotland	Keys to Inclusion
Broomhouse Health Strategy Group	Mentor UK
Capability Scotland	NHS Ayrshire & Arran
Children 1st	One Parent Families Scotland
Citizens Advice Scotland	Parenting Across Scotland
City of Edinburgh Council (Supporting Parents and Carers in Edinburgh)	Plan B Partnership
Dumfries and Galloway Council	Relationships Scotland
Edinburgh Cyrenians - Amber Mediation Service	Scottish Book Trust
Families Need Fathers Scotland	Scottish Marriage Care
Grandparents Apart UK	Shared Lives, Aberdeenshire Council
Heart to Heart	SWIIS Foster Care Scotland
Includem	ThePlace2Be

## Project team

### Project partners:

**The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships** aims to make research more accessible to practitioners and policymakers. Its research programmes encompass diverse themes and inform policy, practice and debate in Scotland, the UK and internationally.

**Capability Scotland** works with disabled people of all ages and their families and carers throughout Scotland.

**Parenting across Scotland** is a consortium of organisations that support thousands of parents and families in Scotland. They are Aberlour Childcare Trust, Capability Scotland, Children 1st, One Parent Families Scotland, Relationships Scotland, Scottish Marriage Care, Scottish Adoption, and Stepfamily Scotland.

### Project staff:

#### *Management Group:*

Sarah Morton, CRFR;  
Clare Simpson, Parenting Across Scotland;  
Richard Hamer, Capability Scotland

#### *Project Manager:*

Karen Mountney

#### *Development Officer:*

Katrina Reid; Alison Clancy (maternity cover)



