Hands-on parent support in positive guidance: Early childhood professionals as mentors

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THIS STUDY REPORTS FINDINGS from a follow-up study involving mothers and early childhood professionals who completed participation in a 12-week, hands-on parent education program in the United States. In this program, mothers learned about positive guidance in a weekly seminar, and additionally practised implementing positive guidance in an early childhood classroom with the support of an early childhood professional. After the program ended, 10 mothers and six early childhood professionals completed an online survey about their experiences of, and perspectives on, the role of the early childhood professional as a support resource for parents in positive guidance. Responses were analysed using the constant comparative method. Themes of 'guidance in action', 'home and classroom environment' and 'relationships' emerged from the data.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES is an essential aspect of being an early childhood professional because children's learning and development is situated in the cultural and social context of their communities and families, rather than simply the child (Christian, 2006; Neilson-Hewett & Coutts, 2009). Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecology Model suggests that multiple factors, such as the home, school and governments, work together with individual child characteristics, such as age and temperament, to influence how children develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Because families have a powerful influence on the development of a child, collaborative relationships between staff and families can be beneficial to all involved (Caplan, Hall, Lubin & Fleming, 1997). Not only can early childhood professionals gain knowledge about children from families; parents can gain knowledge from early childhood professionals on topics including child development, peer relationships and fostering development through play.

One thing that parents often struggle with is child discipline (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998; Holden, 1997). When early childhood professionals work together in supportive partnerships with parents, it is possible to develop effective guidance strategies to respond to individual children's behaviours (Gartrell,

2003). The aim of this study was to follow up with mothers and early childhood professionals who had previously participated in a hands-on parent education program focused on positive guidance (Saunders, McFarland-Piazza, Hazen-Swann, Burton, & Jacobvitz, 2012). Specifically, we were interested in gaining mothers' and early childhood professionals' experiences of, and perspectives on, the early childhood professional's role as a support to parents in the use of positive guidance.

A positive guidance approach to children's behaviour is a requirement of accredited early childhood settings in the United States (Copple & Bredekemp, 2009) and advocated in Australia through the new Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). Positive guidance includes non-punitive strategies such as logical consequences, redirection, conflict management, modelling, offering choices, and relationship building. Positive guidance also avoids the use of negative language, such as 'no' and 'don't', and focuses on what the child should be doing instead of what they shouldn't be doing (Gartrell, 1997).

A positive guidance approach aims to facilitate children's self-sufficiency, self-control and positive self-esteem. In contrast, traditional approaches to discipline, which often incorporate external rewards and punishment

(e.g. sticker charts, time-out), focus on short-term goals of immediate child compliance. It is theorised that punishment and rewards motivate children because of their desire to attain a reward or avoid punishment. Instead of externally reinforcing children with praise, positive guidance focuses on encouraging children through internal motivation, which supports children in assessing their own actions as well as the process and effort involved in their activities (Dreikers, 1964; Wolfgang, 2004).

Most early childhood professionals are exposed to positive guidance in their teacher education courses and many have the professional knowledge to work with parents to find effective guidance strategies for children. However, as Stonehouse (1994) warns, when professionals are a source of parenting advice, there is a potential for parents to lose confidence in themselves and feel they are not as knowledgeable as the 'expert'. Thus it is more desirable for early childhood professionals to avoid 'educating' parents, but rather empower them to have confidence in their parenting.

In addition to utilising early childhood professionals as a source of information about child guidance, parents can participate in education programs to change their parenting behaviours. While research into parent education is vast (Kaminski, Valle, Filene & Boyle, 2008; Lundahl, Risser & Lovejoy, 2006), there has been little empirical data gathered on programs that include non-clinical samples, incorporate positive guidance, and include hands-on practice with the support of an early childhood professional.

Behaviourally based interventions typically focus on rewards such as praise and punishments such as ignoring and time-outs (Clawson, Kuchinski & Bach, 2007; Ingersoll & Gergans, 2007). However, praise, time-out and rewards are not consistent with a positive guidance approach (Gartrell, 2002). Other parenting programs focus on social-emotional attachment interventions, such as Video Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting (VIPP) and Circle of Security, which attempt to enhance parents' awareness about their relationships with their children (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002; Velderman, 2005). However, VIPP and Circle of Security do not incorporate parental practice of specific positive guidance techniques coupled with feedback from a mentor.

The delivery of most parent education programs involves seminars or lectures (Drugli & Larsson, 2006; McIntyre, 2008). Programs such as these are related to increased social competence of high-risk primary school children (Reid, Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 2007) and reduced stress (Eisen, Raleigh & Neuhoff, 2008) and depression (Hayes, Matthews, Copley & Welsh, 2008) in parents. It is not clear, however, if parenting behaviours actually changed. Other parent education programs are more interactive and provide one-on-one interventions either through in-home training by professionals or video feedback (Phaneuf & McIntyre, 2007). While these programs can have positive effects, they tend to focus only on specific behaviours, such as increasing at-risk children's academic and behavioural functioning.

In contrast to other parent education programs, our own program aimed to help parents to learn and utilise positive guidance techniques through both parenting seminars and hands-on practice in an unbiased setting with the support and feedback of early childhood teachers. We found that the lecture combined with the hands-on aspect of the program was more effective in changing mothers' discipline strategies than just a lecture (Saunders, McFarland-Piazza, Hazen-Swann, Burton, & Jacobvitz, 2012). In this follow-up study, we explore the role of the early childhood professional more closely.

In order for early childhood professionals to support parents in child guidance, care must be taken to develop relationships with the families; this is an important part of their role. (Christian, 2006). Children's learning and development is situated in the cultural and social contexts of their particular community and family unit, thus collaborative relationships between educators and families are necessary (Caplan et al., 1997; NSW DoCS, 2002). However, many early childhood educators receive little preparation to work with parents (Nieto, 2004). Pre-service teachers are not typically provided with hands-on experience to build parent–teacher relationships (Christian, 2006). Early childhood educators report that they feel under-prepared for work with families (Bennett, Katz & Beneke, 2006), and pre-service teachers report that interacting with parents was one of the most challenging aspects of teaching (McFarland & Lord, 2008).

This study aims to benefit both parents and early childhood professionals by focusing on how the professionals can be better prepared for providing support. The specific research questions are:

- What are the benefits and challenges of early childhood professionals providing support to parents in the use of positive guidance with children?

- How can early childhood professionals most effectively support parents in the use of positive guidance with children?

- How can teacher education programs better prepare early childhood professionals to support parents in the use of positive guidance with children?

Participants

Participants were recruited to follow up a larger study. We contacted a sub-sample of 24 mothers and 16 early childhood professionals who were originally part of a longitudinal study assessing the effects of a hands-on parent education program in positive guidance, which was approved by the relevant Institutional Review Board. Ten mothers and six early childhood professionals consented to participate.

The original sample included 52 mother–child dyads from the Austin, Texas area in the United States, recruited from early childhood classroom waiting lists. The ethnic distribution of mothers was: Caucasian (75.0%), Latino (11.5%), Asian (11.5%), and African American (2.0%). At the start of the study, mothers' ages ranged from 26 to 43 years, with a mean age of 34 years. Children's ages ranged from two years three months to three years seven months, with a mean age of three years. Family income distribution was: $0–20,000 (5.8%), $20,001–40,000 (9.6%), $40,001–60,000 (11.5%), $60,001–80,000 (25.0%), and >$80,000 (48.1%). The distribution of mothers' education level was: some post high school (9.6%), finished college (57.7%), and graduate school (32.7%). Because of the anonymous nature of the online survey used in the present study, it is not known if the demographics of our sub-sample differed significantly from the original sample.

Procedure

The original 52 mother–child dyads participated in a 12-week parenting education program which focused on positive guidance. Children were enrolled in one of four early childhood classrooms, attending these classes two days per week for three hours each day. Once a week, all mothers attended a two-hour seminar. Mothers were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (1) the lecture-only condition, in which their child attended a preschool class and the mother attended the positive guidance seminar; and (2) the hands-on condition, in which mothers spent an additional three hours once a week observing a teacher role model and interacting with children in one of the toddler classes in which their own child was not enrolled. The hands-on group was instructed to implement what they had learned in the seminar under the supervision of experienced teachers who provided them with feedback.

Mothers on childcare waiting lists were mailed letters informing them about the opportunity to participate in this program. These mothers called research staff for an initial interview, at which time staff answered any questions, scheduled participants for classes and asked them to fill out consent forms, and health and safety information forms. Mothers were randomly assigned to either a Tuesday night or Thursday night seminar. Those in the Thursday night seminar also received hands-on positive guidance training in one of the toddler classrooms. These mothers practised using positive guidance under the supervision of the lead teacher, for three hours a week for 12 weeks. Half of the children in each classroom had mothers attending the Tuesday night seminar, and the other half had mothers attending the Thursday night seminar.

To staff the program, early childhood educators for the toddler classes, childcare providers for when parents attended seminars, and data collection researchers were needed. We recruited university research practicum students who had already been trained in positive guidance, had high university grades and excellent recommendations. We created a 12-week curriculum for the parent training seminars. Topics included:

- What is positive guidance?
- The use of positive language
- Praise versus encouragement, punishment versus guidance
- Fostering children's social competence
- Baumrind's parenting styles
- Specific guidance techniques
- Misbehaviour versus mistaken behaviour
- Children's moral development
- Spanking and time-outs
- Children's friendships, and
- Real-life guidance.

Mothers in the hands-on condition went through an extensive orientation regarding the guidelines and routines of working with children. Before entering the classroom to practise positive guidance, their role was explained and they learned the daily routine. They were required to talk with the lead teacher at the beginning and end of the class to go over their progress and discuss any questions they had about particular situations that had arisen.

For the present follow-up study, only mothers who were in the 'hands-on' condition, as well as the early childhood professionals who supervised them, were contacted by email informing them of the study. Included in the email was a link to an anonymous online survey. Participants were asked to avoid identifying other parents, teachers, children, or classrooms in the study. Our original study found that mothers in the hands-on group incorporated more positive guidance in their parenting compared to mothers in the seminar-only condition (Saunders, McFarland-Piazza, Hazen-Swann, Burton, & Jacobvitz, 2012).

Measures

Parent survey. The online parent survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and contained four open-ended questions: (1) In what ways did you get support from the early childhood teacher in the classroom? (2) What benefits did you gain by using the early childhood teacher as a support in your learning positive guidance? (3) Were there any negative aspects or challenges of utilising the early childhood teacher as a support in your learning positive guidance? If so, please explain, and (4) In general, do you see the early childhood teacher as having a role in supporting parents in the use of positive guidance? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

Early childhood professional survey. The intent of the online survey for the early childhood professionals was to gather information about their experiences of acting as a mentor in supporting parents in the use of positive guidance. The survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete, and contained seven open-ended questions: (1) In what ways did you support parents in the use of positive guidance in the classroom? (2) What benefits did you gain from providing support to parents in positive guidance? (3) What benefits do you think the parents gained from being supported by you in the use of positive guidance? (4) Were there any negative aspects or challenges that you experienced as you supported parents in their use of positive guidance? (5) In general, do you see the early childhood professional as having a role in supporting parents in the use of positive guidance? If so, in what ways? (6) What aspects of your undergraduate program prepared you for working with parents in the use of positive guidance? and (7) Can you think of anything that could have helped prepare you better for working with parents in the classroom?

Results

Data was analysed based on the idea of phenomenology, which holds that important knowledge can be gained through the understanding of others' experiences (McMillan & Wergin 2006). We wanted to understand more about the early childhood professional's role in supporting parents in the use of positive guidance, through the eyes of both early childhood professionals and parents. The data was analysed using Grounded Theory, whereby theory is generated inductively from the data (Punch, 2005), as the intention was to discover new constructs or theories related to our research focus. First, analytic induction was used to develop the themes and properties that emerged from the open-ended survey responses. Analytic induction is the 'systematic examination of similarities between cases to develop concepts or ideas' (Punch 2005, p. 196). The survey responses were coded using the principles of the Constant Comparative Method (see Bogdan & Biklen 1998; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1999).

Coding was done by the two lead researchers. A process of 'open coding' was used, which is 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data' (Strauss & Corbin, 1999, p. 61). Each researcher read the transcripts and took notes about themes that were prevalent in the responses of the early childhood professionals and the parents. The two researchers then met to discuss their initial notes and look for commonalities. Common aspects of the survey responses were categorised initially into lower-level properties. As these codes were checked and re-checked against the initial or early codes, the researchers were able to identify three major themes: 'guidance in action', 'home and classroom environment', and 'relationships'. Table 1 shows the themes and contributing properties.

Table 1. Themes and properties describing mothers' and early childhood professionals' experiences

Themes	Properties
Guidance in action	Modelling
	Feedback
	Support
Home and classroom environment	Linking
	Discontinuity
	Values
Relationships	Team approach
	Empowering

Guidance in action

Many of the parents and early childhood professionals indicated that the interactive nature of the guidance education program was beneficial for parents' learning of positive guidance techniques. The three properties of 'modelling', 'feedback' and 'support' are described along with some examples of supporting quotes.

Modelling. Many of the early childhood professionals said they modelled positive guidance within the classroom instead of using direct instruction. They found this to be an effective way of helping parents to understand the philosophy behind positive guidance, and see it work in action:

> My main focus was modelling the use of positive guidance.

> They could see guidance working with children and understand how to do it in a hands-on way.

Parents also indicated that watching the early childhood professional use positive guidance with the children was a significant factor in their own learning:

It really helps me to see how the teachers handle different situations.

Primarily by modelling positive guidance, they provided a good template to mirror.

Feedback. Many of the early childhood professionals stated that, in addition to modelling, answering parents' questions about guidance and giving them feedback were ways of helping parents learn the techniques:

I answered questions the parents had in the classroom, and I gave feedback to parents about their interactions with the children.

Parents asked questions about situations they had handled—whether I had advice for what to do that might be more successful.

Parents also stated that having the early childhood professional available to discuss guidance issues contributed to their learning:

It was helpful to not only watch the teacher during the class, but also have her to ask questions about specific situations.

Sometimes when you are in the middle of a certain situation it is really hard to see the different ways you could approach it. When you have a professional to talk to about it they can help you step back and see the different ways to handle different situations.

Support. Many of the early childhood professionals and parents mentioned that support through the parental learning process aided that learning.

They were supportive, they would answer your questions and seem to understand you were training and it was hard to get it right. (Parent)

Not only did the parent see the application of a positive guidance technique but I hope the parent felt a sense of support. (Early childhood professional)

Home and classroom environment

In their responses to the survey questions, many of the early childhood professionals and parents discussed the home and classroom environments. While there could be some continuity between the two environments in how positive guidance is implemented, there are also differences in the two. Continuity and discontinuity between positive guidance and parental values about discipline was also discussed. The three contributing properties—'linking', 'discontinuity' and 'values'—are discussed below.

Linking. It was frequently mentioned by both early childhood professionals and parents that a major benefit of the parenting program was that links between the home and classroom environments could be seen.

Through their work with the early childhood professional in the classroom, parents were able to see how they could implement positive guidance techniques when certain behavioural situations occurred at home.

The ecp [early childhood professional] shows how positive guidance works in the classroom and shows that it could be successful at home also. (Parent)

We often talked about how positive guidance might apply to their own relationships with their children. (Early childhood professional)

Discontinuity. While many of the parents recognised that the positive guidance techniques used in the classroom could also be used in situations at home, some described aspects of difference:

They seemed too trained, a little bit far from the real human, they did not seem very spontaneous and when we did the experiments where the teacher was not there, a few kids got too wild! It seems spontaneity is important to the kids and the atmosphere in the classes was somehow cold.

A classroom environment instead of a home environment also helped a lot—but I was sometimes frustrated that I can't make my home a 'classroom' environment—but I also now accept that it really shouldn't, and can't, be.

Home environment is very different than school/ childcare environment. I learned and observed in the childcare environment, but only used what I felt was appropriate for the home environment. The main difference being the 'Mommy playmate' vs 'Teacher', who directs self-play or social play with other classmates.

Values. It was recognised by some of the parents and early childhood professionals that, while positive guidance is the preferred discipline approach in many early childhood classrooms, parents often have different personal or cultural values related to discipline.

Some of the rules are very different from what society says you should do and it was hard to break from these rules (time out, over-praising, etc.). (Parent)

The more parents were philosophically in line with the ideas of positive guidance, the easier it was for them to learn and adopt the techniques. It was much harder to support parents whose ideas about discipline were more divergent. (Early childhood professional)

Some parents still felt that their children had behaviours that positive guidance just would not work on. (Early childhood professional)

The challenge is in remaining supportive of parents

even when they drastically differ in their approach to their children's behaviours. Rather than strive for the ideal for every family (i.e. all families use positive guidance all the time), it's important to consider family culture, how parents were raised, goals that families have for their children, etc. and offer strategies that will help parents meet their goals in ways that are developmentally appropriate for their children. (Early childhood professional)

Relationships

Parents and early childhood professionals both frequently mentioned that strengthening the parent–teacher relationship was an important feature of the parent education program. Taking a team approach to children's guidance issues was viewed as being beneficial to all involved. Also, several early childhood professionals discussed the need to empower parents to guide their children, as well as empower themselves by building confidence in their abilities to work with parents and children.

Team approach. Participants' responses indicated that they believed the early childhood professional could be a valuable resource for parents in the use of positive guidance. Working together as a team was considered particularly important.

I feel that when both the parents and the childcare professionals are on the 'same page', communication becomes clear and issues can be recognised, discussed and actions (if necessary) be taken in a less stressful manner. (Parent)

Early childhood professionals provide a second home for many children. And they are very much like surrogate parents; they spend heaps of time with the children and absolutely fall in love with them. There is such an opportunity for early childhood educators and parents to team on an individual they both hold dear. (Early childhood professional)

Empowering. Several of the early childhood professionals stated that working with parents so closely on guidance issues made them feel more confident and empowered as professionals:

Being a positive guidance role model keeps me fresh and on top of my game. I have to revisit the basics constantly and this causes my foundation in guidance to stay strong. By talking about guidance, it strengthens my own learning and understanding.

The need to empower parents and build their confidence in using positive guidance with their children was also mentioned by early childhood professionals as being important:

It's important to empower parents rather than lose parents—if we can help a parent who hits their child

to use time-out instead, great!—even though ideally we'd like them to use their child's behaviour as an opportunity to teach their child a more successful strategy.'

Preparation for working with parents on positive guidance

We also asked the early childhood professionals what aspects of their undergraduate or graduate program prepared them to work with parents and what they thought could have better prepared them. Some stated that, although they did not receive training specifically on working with parents, they did learn how to do so through practical experiences and by observing other early childhood professionals during their undergraduate or graduate study:

As a graduate student I saw others work with parents and supervise undergraduates, so through that modelling I could apply knowledge to my own work with parents.

I feel the hands-on experience I received during my education most prepared me for working with parents in using positive guidance. This hands-on experience gave me practical experience and practical ways I could use as a professional when working with parents.

When asked about how they could have been better prepared for work with parents, several of the early childhood professionals stated that more direct practice would have been helpful:

Practice working with parents. Just like I got to practise working with children, it would have been nice to have opportunities to practise working with parents (overseen by a mentor).

Possibly a little bit more training on specifically how to work with parents. I more learned as I went and didn't feel as if I had received specific training on how to work with parents.

Discussion

This study examined mothers' and early childhood professionals' experiences of their participation in a hands-on parenting program in which early childhood professionals mentored and supported parents in the use of positive guidance. Research questions focused on the benefits and challenges as well as ways professionals can most effectively support parents in this area. We also examined early childhood professionals' perspectives on how teacher education programs could have better prepared them to work with parents. Using Grounded Theory and the constant comparative method, themes and contributing

properties were identified from survey responses in order to answer the research questions.

The theme of 'guidance in action' describes the most effective way that early childhood professionals were able to support parents in their use of positive guidance. The contributing properties of 'modelling', 'feedback' and 'support' describe how parents were able to learn more than they would have if they were not able to interact with the early childhood professionals in such a way. Observing and receiving supportive feedback was described as being the most effective element of parents using and understanding positive guidance themselves. This finding supports other research suggesting that interactive and hands-on practice is an effective way for pre-service teachers to learn positive guidance techniques (McFarland, Saunders & Allen, 2009). However, our study focused specifically on the use of positive guidance by parents and was unique in involving childhood professionals as mentors.

The theme of 'relationships' describes the main benefit cited by early childhood professionals of supporting parents in positive guidance. The contributing properties of 'team approach' and 'empowering' suggest that when early childhood professionals and parents work together, both feel empowered. This sense of empowerment is important for parents' confidence in their ability to respond to their children's challenging behaviours (Stonehouse, 1994). It may also build early childhood professionals' confidence in their practice as well as their ability to positively impact on the parent–child relationship. As found in other studies, relationships between families and early childhood professionals benefit everyone involved, most importantly children (Christian, 2006).

The theme of 'home and classroom environment' describes both a benefit and a challenge to early childhood professionals supporting parents in the use of positive guidance. The contributing property of 'linking' suggests that parents were able to make some links between the use of positive guidance in the classroom to particular situations at home with their own children. However, the contributing properties of 'discontinuity' and 'values' suggest there were challenges in the linking of home and classroom environments. Some participants described the home and classroom environments as being quite different; so much so that they did not feel that positive guidance could always be used in the same way in home situations. Some parents felt that the home environment should be more relaxed and playful compared to the 'professional' classroom environment. Some participants also suggested that the positive guidance approach used in the classroom may contrast with some parents' personal or cultural beliefs about discipline, as well as some of the values about discipline held by the wider society. This is important

for early childhood professionals to remember as they work with parents; respect for personal and/or cultural beliefs is essential.

The themes and contributing properties that emerged in this study can also be interpreted using Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises the multiple influences on children's development. In this model of children's development, different environments in which children interact (e.g. preschool, a neighbour's house) are separate microsystems. When these microsystems overlap, a mesosystem is created (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When the people involved in the child's mesosystems work supportively together, children may be better prepared to thrive in other microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The themes of 'guidance in action' and 'relationships' describe how the early childhood professional can support parents in guiding their children's behaviour, which has benefits for children. The theme of 'home and classroom environment' suggests that, while there is some overlap between the two environments, they are also separate, with their own rules and values.

This study also examined early childhood professionals' perspectives on how they were prepared in their university programs to work with parents. None of our participants had received specific training in this area, although some said they learned by watching others interact with parents. Some participants said they could have been better prepared for work with parents by receiving more direct training and practice. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that teachers often feel under-prepared for their work with parents (Bennett et al., 2006), and they receive little pre-service training in this area (Christian, 2006). Other studies have found that direct experience interacting with parents throughout pre-service coursework can be beneficial in building the confidence of pre-service teachers in their ability to build relationships with parents (McFarland & Lord, 2008).

The present study has some limitations. The sample size was small, thus results must be interpreted cautiously. Although we aimed to include all participants from the original study, the response rate was less than half for both parents and early childhood professionals. Also, the mothers in our sample were generally highly educated and had high incomes. Additionally, the parenting intervention occurred in a model university laboratory school with small class sizes and excellent teacher–child ratios. Future research could examine how early childhood professionals could mentor parents in positive guidance in more typical classroom settings. Future research could also explore ways for early childhood professionals to connect with and support families who have their own ways of managing children's behaviours. By bridging the communication

gap and creating genuine rapport, it may be possible for families whose beliefs are very different from positive guidance to learn from as well as teach the early childhood professionals who care for their children.

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to the literature on parent–teacher relationships and parent-education programs by suggesting ways in which these two areas can overlap. Results from the study can be applied to both parent education program design and early childhood professionals' work with families. Results also highlight the need for more emphasis on working with parents in teacher education programs. Additionally, these findings are particularly useful for cooperative (co-op) childcare programs, common in the United States, where parents work in classrooms on a regular basis under the guidance of early childhood professionals.

Early childhood professionals and parents have an opportunity to be a resource for one another. Because parents and teachers alike are concerned about the development of the same children, it is essential that the two find common ground to work together as a team. By sharing knowledge, education, and family culture with one another, early childhood professionals and parents, together, can positively impact on the development of the children in their care.

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