

Hidden in Plain Sight: Health inequity experienced by Children in Care

Exploring Mental Health Practitioner's Perceptions of the Specific Needs of Children in Care

Introduction:

Children in care (CIC) in England are over four times more likely to have a diagnosed mental health disorder than children not in the care system (NSPCC 2024). However, CIC are not given priority in accessing mental health services locally. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act (2026) calls for supporting children in care to thrive and introduces a set of corporate parenting responsibilities that will apply to NHS Trusts whose services impact on CIC and care leaver's lives. NHS Trust's need to consider how they can support breaking down barriers to good outcomes for CIC, including designing and delivering services that consider their specific needs and reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by them. There is no known literature available focused on mental health practitioner's perspectives of the specific needs of CIC and the impact of the perceptions on CIC accessing mental health support.

Aims: To understand the social processes constructed by mental health practitioners of the specific needs of children in care and their role as barriers or enablers to children in care accessing mental health services.

The research question : **A constructivist grounded theory approach to exploring mental health practitioner's perceptions of the specific needs of children in care.**

There were 3 objectives;

1. Conduct a scoping review of the literature
2. Explore current perceptions of mental health practitioner's perceptions of the specific needs of CIC
3. Understand how these perceptions are constructed to inform policy and training for staff to improve access and outcomes for CIC.

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What has been achieved so far:

A constructivist grounded theory approach and design was applied to explore mental health practitioner's perceptions of the specific needs of CIC. Constructivism is grounded in the belief that people actively construct reality based on how they view the world (Given 2016) and that humans are active and influenced by others in their construction of reality. Holloway & Freshwater (2007) define this process as building perceptions and perspectives of culture and history and meaning developed through social group connections, interaction and language. Grounded theorists are well placed to research issues of difference and the context of injustice (Birks and Mills 2015) such as the that experienced by CIC.

Sampling

A purposive sample of nine mental health practitioners were recruited within the researcher's organisation from CAMHS teams across the county. Participants represented nursing, psychology, social work, psychotherapy and psychiatry and had varying degrees of experience.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was through posters in clinical areas, an advert in the CAMHS newsletter and an email via managers. Initial estimation was to interview five practitioners but nine were recruited.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine mental health practitioner's working with both CIC and children not in care to elicit the social processes underlying their perceptions of the specific needs of CIC. The interviews were via MS Teams and recorded and transcribed

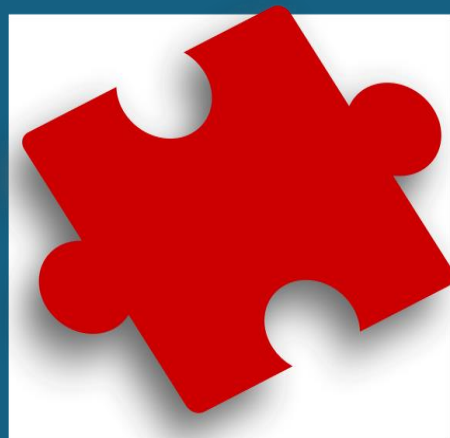
Data Analysis

The data were coded and categorised using constant comparison supported by memoing to ensure reflexivity and a constructivist grounded theory approach which acknowledges the experiences of the researcher. The focus codes were developed into theoretical codes and three themes were constructed. An overarching core category was constructed to illustrate the findings and outcome of the study.

What has been achieved so far continued.

Co constructed categories were:

'Professional caring' - that CIC needed additional time and consideration and a passion to do more for these children came from a true caring professional role and understanding



Jigsawing' - multi agency working is complex and bringing all the pieces together includes drawing on theory to inform practice

'Developing organically' - that knowledge and skills developed organically through experience, exposure and interest



A core category of 'missing' illustrated what is missing for CIC, that CIC are missing from professional training and systemic thinking



What is hoped for the future impact of the project:

The project has identified a potential inequity in understanding in the work force that requires further exploration. A larger scale mixed methods project is proposed in the future. If all mental health practitioner's skills and knowledge included the three categories identified this would very likely improve outcomes for CIC and improve their experience of accessing mental health services. As well as informing how practitioners can be upskilled and trained in the absence of CIC in formal professional education programmes. This inequity needs to be addressed to improve clinical practice. Having CIC champions in teams and a CIC forum is proposed to ensure CIC are not missing and not missing out.

Acknowledgements:

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