



Joined-up working with children and families on the front line



Joined-up working is far from easy. A **research in practice** review of partnership working to support children and families shows there is no simple recipe book for success. But a rich and complex range of findings does suggest some possible ways forward.

- Effective leadership is critical to making joined-up working a success. Leaders need to be able to inspire and support all staff through a process of change. Effective leaders will be ‘boundary spanners’ who can work across traditional divides and create new solutions to public policy problems.
- Co-location can be a key driver of effective partnership working. It can help to break down many of the barriers to joined-up working by encouraging greater respect and understanding between professionals, better information sharing, informal learning, and a stronger sense of teamwork and belonging. But it doesn’t solve all the problems.
- Not everyone accepts that partnership working is necessarily a good thing. Although they are in the minority, some critics argue that co-ordination works against the interests of service users, or that it does not necessarily have a positive impact on outcomes for children.
- Training can act as both a barrier to joined-up working (for example, initial qualifying training that defines professional identity in terms of difference only), and as a facilitator (for example, post-qualifying joint training). The informal learning that takes place while working together on the front line can be just as important as formal training.
- The language associated with partnership working is not always used consistently or with precision. In particular, there is some confusion or varied usage in the research and related literature about phrases such as co-ordination, co-operation, partnership, working together, and joined-up thinking.
- Whatever the difficulties associated with partnership working, there is evidence that many practitioners embrace the concept enthusiastically. Practitioners working alongside colleagues from different professional backgrounds commonly report that it has given them a broader perspective and a better understanding of other agencies, and that working in joined-up teams is challenging and exciting.

SIGNPOSTS, compiled by Steve Flood, highlights key themes from the **research in practice** publication *Professionalism, partnership and joined-up thinking: a research review of front-line working with children and families* by Nick Frost, Senior Lecturer, University of Leeds. It provides a useful introduction to the book, which includes more detail about the evidence from which the themes noted here are drawn as well as full references, brief historical and conceptual context, and practice examples. Visit www.rip.org.uk/publications for more information.

research in practice is a department of The Dartington Hall Trust run in collaboration with the University of Sheffield, the Association of Directors of Social Services and our network of over 100 participating agencies in England and Wales. Our mission is to promote positive outcomes for children and families through proper and greater use of research evidence. Our services are designed to improve access to research and strengthen its understanding and adoption through the promotion of evidence-informed practice.



Joined-up working on the front line

the evidence

This section highlights the key findings of the research as it affects the practice of professionals working together on the front line. Findings are grouped around six key themes which the evidence suggests shape and influence front-line practice. Detailed discussion can be found in the full report, which also includes analysis of the use of language and terminology in partnership working, and a definition of terms.

education and learning

The issue explored most often is training. Sometimes training is seen as a barrier to joined-up working; more often it is seen as an encouragement.

training as a barrier Not only is inter-professional collaboration something that many professionals have not trained for, but initial professional training has often militated against joined-up working by helping to create modes of understanding and intervention that define professional identity in terms of difference; this negative impact can be reinforced later during professional development training.

training as a facilitator Multi-professional training can facilitate effective joined-up working, however. There are many examples of positive practice, both at the initial training stage and later in joint post-qualifying 'on the job' training. A systematic review of models of joint working¹ identified post-qualifying training and team building as a key driver of effective joined-up work. The evidence suggests joint training is far from common, however; nor should it be seen as a panacea – it does not work well unless preceded by joint working arrangements.

informal learning Learning does not only take place in traditional training sessions. It also happens informally when different professionals work together.

sharing information and communicating

One benefit of joined-up working is assumed to be enhanced information sharing (although this is precisely the concern of some critics). There is evidence that information sharing is both a necessary condition of enhanced partnership, and also a direct result of that improved partnership. While there is a need for carefully thought-out protocols for access to joint information, one benefit of co-location is that important information exchange is also likely to take place informally – the informal chat to 'talk things through', for example. However, information sharing is not straightforward – and joined-up working and co-location do not necessarily solve all information exchange problems, such as concerns about confidentiality.

joint working: barriers and facilitators

barriers Professional attitudes and values can act as barriers to effective joint working. People may find it hard to accept there is another way of doing things; and building a joint enterprise can be difficult because of division and rivalry, particularly if professionals define themselves primarily in terms of difference. Differing 'models' of explanation can also act as a significant barrier – for example, between professionals who adhere to 'social' or 'medical' models within some health teams.

facilitators Whatever the barriers, there is evidence of a willingness to overcome them; this alone can have a positive effect. Professionals working alongside colleagues from different backgrounds commonly report that this gives them a broader perspective, and that working in joined-up teams is exciting and challenging. One way of encouraging this enthusiasm may be to ensure that the status and contribution of each profession is recognised. This can help when engagement is uneven across the professions – a common characteristic of joined-up working. It also guards against 'the colonisation of multidisciplinary effort by one powerful perspective or agency view.'²



- 1 Cameron A and Lart R (2003) 'Factors Promoting and Obstacles Hindering Joint Working: A systematic review of the research evidence' *Journal of Integrated Care* 11 (2)
- 2 Murphy M (1995) *Working Together in Child Protection: An exploration of the multidisciplinary task and system*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing
- 3 Hochstadt NJ and Harwicke NJ (1985) 'How Effective is the Multidisciplinary Approach? A follow-up study' *Child Abuse and Neglect* 9 (3)
- 4 Townsley R, Abbott D and Watson D (2004) *Making a Difference? Exploring the impact of multiagency working on disabled children with complex health care needs, their families and the professionals who support them*. Bristol: Policy Press
- 5 Hudson B (2002) 'Interprofessionalism in Health and Social Care: The Achilles' Heel of Partnership?' *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 16:1
- 6 Wenger E (1998) *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge

complexity and difference Joined-up working does not necessarily mean doing away with difference; teams can evolve cultures that allow for the containment of difference. This complexity is illustrated by disagreement within a joined-up youth team as to whether a group of young offenders should be 'treated' to a visit overseas. Social work team members provided a rationale for the visit, but their legally-trained colleagues (police and probation) saw it as an affront to the victims of crime. Despite these differences, police officers and social workers reported positive working relationships.

change and outcomes

The acid test of joined-up working has to be its impact on service-users; does it improve process and outcomes for them? Many authors provide a positive case for working together based on both. One study³ found that a large percentage of services recommended by a multidisciplinary team working with abused and neglected children had been obtained one year after assessment – in contrast with the low probability of service acquisition in samples of children identified by child protection teams who do not have access to multidisciplinary assessment.

The evidence is not always straightforward however. Townsley and colleagues⁴ spent a week at a time in six multiagency services, each of which aimed to improve co-ordination for disabled children and their families. Professionals reported improvements to their working lives, and better communication between staff and families. Families also felt multiagency services had made a positive difference, but the gains were not always significant; they still experienced gaps in meeting their social and emotional needs, as well as prolonged difficulties getting equipment and physical adaptations to their homes.

co-location

Co-location encourages informal learning and sharing. Being in the same building makes it easier to have conversations, leave a note on someone's desk, and appreciate the pressures facing colleagues. Co-location can also enhance feelings of teamwork and belonging. Drawing on interviews with front-line health and welfare staff, Hudson⁵ found that co-location was identified as a valuable basis for joint working; it facilitated information sharing and helped develop respect and trust between professionals from different backgrounds and with different status. Moreover, while formal procedures were adhered to, they were modified by the closer relationships that developed: 'in effect, a shift was taking place from hierarchy to network.'

organisational and policy support

The primary concern of the review is how front-line workers work together, but this cannot be separated entirely from more strategic and managerial issues. Effective joined-up working requires a supportive policy and managerial context. Staff commonly identify a shortage of funding and human resources as a barrier to joined-up working and its sustainability. Many authors emphasise the need to ensure that adequate time is allowed for effective practice to emerge. Agencies and professionals have to redefine their roles in a new context; this requires a period of adjustment.



Joined-up working on the front line

implications for policy and practice

Here are some indicators of how joined-up working on the front line might be taken forward, grouped within the three key elements of Wenger's model of effective 'communities of practice'⁶ described in the review.

mutual engagement

- **joint procedures and inclusive planning** Procedures and policies only become real on the front line, so effective joined-up working requires procedures that have been developed with the participation of front-line staff. This takes time, careful planning and regular review.
- **clear lines of accountability** 'Joined-up' organisations tend to be complex organisations; lines of accountability can easily become more blurred than in traditional agencies with vertical management structures. This complexity should not be allowed to dilute clear lines of accountability, support and supervision.
- **employment conditions and individual identities** Professionals in joined-up working are often juggling two identities; they need time and support to adapt. Professionals working together may also have very different service conditions; reducing these differences should enhance partnership working.
- **leadership** Effective leadership is crucial. Effective leaders of joined-up teams often have strong 'entrepreneurial' skills, enabling them to broker inter-agency agreements and operate across traditional divides to create new solutions.
- **role clarification** One challenge of joined-up working is that roles can easily become confused; effective joined-up working should not imply that people become unclear about exactly what they do.
- **status and hierarchies** Exhortations to work together cannot erase the harsh reality of barriers related to status and hierarchies. Partnership working must recognise, celebrate and build on diversity and difference.

joint enterprise

- **strategic objectives and core aims** Partnership working can only operate effectively if there are shared aims; joined-up thinking is dependent on joined-up targets.
- **communication with partner agencies** Most joined-up teams have to relate to agencies that fund, second, host or manage joined-up teams, so structures and funding streams can be very complicated – but they need to be clear and coherent.
- **co-location** Co-location can drive joined-up thinking; there is evidence that it enhances communication, learning and understanding of roles.
- **peripheral team members** Joined-up working can unintentionally create peripheral participants, such as those who work part time, are seconded for short periods or are not co-located. Effective leadership recognises these dangers.

shared repertoire

- **impact of change on service-users** Effective joined-up working involves partnerships with service-users; their views and experiences must be taken seriously.
- **opportunities for reflection** Joined-up practice is complex, difficult and challenging; staff will need time to reflect on, discuss and review their practice and related policies.
- **joint client-focused activities** The best practice emerges not only from thinking and planning, but doing; the most effective partnership work happens in practice with service-users.
- **supporting professional development** Professionals working in partnership can learn from each other; this process needs to be supported and facilitated.
- **specialist skills retention** Staff may fear their expertise will be undermined by an emphasis on generalist working; in effective teams, their skills can be recognised and developed to the benefit of all.



research in practice

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