

Children contact centres in France

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This paper addresses the issue of contact centres, which have evolved to address the needs of children and parents affected by separation and divorce. The author notes the emergence of contact services in Australia and the establishment of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Children's Contact Services (ANZACCS). The bulk of the paper outlines the development of children contact centres in France, summarises findings from the evaluation of 10 centres, and describes examples of three different French contact centre models. Brief summaries are also included of the situation in the UK and the USA. Some suggestions for Australian services are made, including the need for multi-disciplinary working parties in each State and Territory to advise programs.

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A lot is known in Australia about how other English-speaking countries deal with high conflict and complex situations between separating parents, particularly about services available to parents who are opposed to the other parent having contact with the child(dren) for reasons of safety (child abuse or family violence) or owing to high levels of interparental conflict. Much less is known about the practice in Western European countries like France and Spain. Contact services also exist in Israel, Ireland, China and Hong Kong.

The Australian and New Zealand Association of Children's Contact Services (ANZACCS) was formed in April 1994 to encourage the government to provide funding for the establishment of children's contact services (known as access services prior to the Family Law Reform Act of 1996), to identify minimum standards and to advise on funding. Interim Standards were evolved during March 1995 after a national consultative process. The Federal Government Justice Statement in May 1995 made provision for a national pilot scheme and allocated funding for the pilot for 4 years. Ten centres have received federal funding since mid-1996. Adherence to the Standards is a condition of obtaining funding for participation in the pilot scheme. The Standards were the first in the world and have been taken as a blueprint by the USA and Canada for their centres.

The 1995 Justice Statement (Attorney-General 1995) in relation to handover

centres emphasised that parents using these centres should also be given the opportunity to become involved in family skills training, to be assisted to develop parenting skills:

Where these skills are inadequate, parenting skills education will encourage quality family relationships with the interests of children being paramount.

The Victorian Working Party of ANZACCS is developing a National Training Program for centre coordinators and facilitators/supervisors. The present staff profile for a centre includes a full-time co-ordinator, who is most often but not necessarily tertiary qualified, with a minimum of two supervisors, and voluntary staff (and a security officer, if necessary, for cases of domestic violence).

The detailed presentation of French contact centres that follows and the comparison with UK and US practice are offered in the hope of broadening the scope of the initially proposed Australian model(s), in particular with regard to:

- (a) the need for male professional presence at some centres;
- (b) association with a mental health agency, hospital or child protective service;
- (c) the extent to which supervisors either simply observe or evaluate and intervene;
- (d) the need to match services available at the centre with the degree of

training offered to volunteers, whether undergraduates on practicums or community-based;

(e) the charging of fees.

CONTEXT IN WHICH DIVORCE TAKES PLACE IN FRANCE

France, where the divorce rate is high (50% of couples in the Paris region and 30% in the provinces), has so far had to deal with a total of 900,000 children whose parents find maintaining relationships with them problematic. Prior to the creation of the contact centres, 50% of children lost all contact with one of their parents in the two years following the separation.

Since 1976, two types of divorce have existed in France – by mutual consent and by fault. Joint legal guardianship was introduced in 1987. As of 1 January 1995, matrimonial judges have become family judges to allow the same judge to hear a variety of matters that until then were spread through various jurisdictions. Moreover, in February 1995 a bill regulating civil practice was enacted setting terms under which a judge could approve of a third party to either conciliate or mediate a dispute.

In France, when a couple wishes to divorce by mutual consent, they seek lawyers and prepare a joint divorce application, together with a temporary agreement which sets out the relationship between the spouses during proceedings and a draft of the final agreement. The couple appears before the judge twice – first in his chambers when the provisional or interim agreement is made valid, and second, following an interval of at least six months, when the couple report on the working of the temporary agreement. Property settlement follows divorce.

THE CREATION OF CHILDREN CONTACT CENTRES

The creation of contact centres has been supported in France since 1987 by the French Foundation, with most centres being created in the last seven years and being designated as 'meeting places'. The centres have developed primarily within existing organisations which have extended their activities on

behalf of parents and families to encompass the variety of needs of the divorcing population. Some of these organisations dealt with marital and family problems, while others targeted at-risk groups of children, adolescents and one-parent families. Professionals in these organisations have had a background of psychology, social work and medicine. Leading among these organisations was the School of Parents and Educators, which has branches throughout France and which was the organisation that first instituted training courses in family mediation, initially limited to its own professionals and later expanded to include others.

In 1995 there were 37 contact centres receiving some help from the French Foundation; five of these offered mediation services. In 1991-92 the Foundation financed the establishment of ten new centres in addition to the dozen already existing. At the end of 1992, the Foundation embarked on an evaluation of these ten centres. Demographic and procedural data from this evaluation follows.

EVALUATION OF THE FRENCH CONTACT CENTRES AND THEIR FOCUS

Average number of families seen in a day

Between 16 and 21 families.

Average number of visits

The average number per case was 8 visits; 75% of children had between 5 and 25 contacts. On the whole the higher the number of contacts, the greater the chances of a positive outcome. Thus, when visits only numbered 10, a 'negative outcome' could be expected in 53% of cases, while when visits numbered 20, the chances of a 'negative outcome' fell to 22% of cases.

Contact centre outcome

For around 40% of children, the requirement to use the contact centre ceased as a result of a new parental agreement; for a further 40%, as the result of a new decision by the judge that the contact could proceed somewhere else. For the remaining children, visits came to a premature end either because of parental non-

attendance or withdrawal or because of a decision by the centre.

Day and length of visits

Visits took place on Saturdays in 75% of cases. In 50% of cases visits lasted half a day, in 25% only a couple of hours. More unusual were visits lasting ¾ of a day or involving a whole weekend (two of the centres offered overnight facilities and these were used in 7.4% of cases).

Frequency of contact with contact parent

The majority of children enjoyed fortnightly contact. Twenty per cent of children had contact 3 times a month, while 30% only had monthly contact. The frequency of contact was determined by either a judicial order, the parents or the centre and parents combined.

Nature of services provided

Supervised contact was required by and offered to 60% of children. The centres were used as a changeover station by 13.8% of children. About 19% of children were allowed by the centre to go on short outings with the contact parent (pool, nearby park, etc).

Age of children attending

The fourth birthday had not been reached by 25% of the children; 25% were between 4 and 6; 20% were between 7 and 9 years of age and 30% were 10 years and over.

Referral source

Judicial decisions arising out of a complex and conflictual situation were the source in 76.5% of cases; relatives were the referrers in 2.8% of cases, behavioural sciences professionals in 13.5%, and lawyers in 1.6% of cases.

Residential parent

Mother was the residential parent in 78% of the cases, father for 13.4% and significant others for 8%.

Guardianship

Mother had sole guardianship in 64% of the cases, 21.5% of parents had joint guardianship and father was the sole guardian in 8%.

Length of interruption of contact

For 60% of children contact had been interrupted for less than 6 months, for 20% contact interruption had lasted

between 6 months and a year and for another 20%, interruption had lasted over a year.

Civil status of parents

About 30% of parents were divorced, 50% were separated (equally divided between previously married and de facto), 13% had recoupled, 6% were single and a small proportion were widows/widowers.

SOME MODELS OF CONTACT CENTRES

It seems important to focus attention on the most distinctive French models of existing contact centres. Bordeaux has been chosen because of its high number of judicial referrals requiring medium to high vigilance and because it has become the training centre for at least six other centres in other major cities of the Aquitaine region. Grenoble has been included because of its different emphasis on making available to children and separated parents not living in proximity to each other a homely centre separate from the legal system – hence its overnight and food facilities. Finally, Bobigny or ADEF-Mediation has been included because of the three distinct services it offers in four locations in a poor suburb of Paris and its full-time operation (during the week as well as weekends until late).

Bordeaux (Point Rencontre)

This centre was born of the French Association of Marriage and Counselling Centres. It was psycho-analytically oriented when it opened in 1986, and its goal was to build an autonomous identity for the child. Presently it operates with a 12 person multidisciplinary team which includes psychologists, couple and relationship counsellors and a social worker. All of these professionals have employment somewhere else but work two Saturdays a month at the centre, from 1.00pm to 7.00pm in teams of four, as well as attend a monthly meeting and a biannual general meeting, for all of which they are remunerated.

Judicial referrals amount to 90% and the remaining 10% come from the child welfare field. Judges look to Bordeaux as a high vigilance professional centre and send their most difficult cases

where contact has been interrupted for a long time, or where conflict is very acute because of the intractability of parents or adolescents. Contact time is limited in most cases, particularly where fathers are considered dangerous, and takes place in the presence of an interviewing professional.

Prior to the creation of the contact centres, 50% of children lost all contact with one of their parents in the two years following the separation.

A core principle in Bordeaux is that the interviewing professional should be exchangeable so as to avoid developing a privileged relationship with the client(s). If parents wish for therapy for themselves they are referred somewhere else. Other than in unusual cases, the judges receive no reports or visit content information, simply attendance dates. In extreme cases, however, the interviewers may contact the judge to inform on the situation and suggest changes to the visit format. An average of 37 families use the centre, with visits taking place on Saturdays and running between 2.00 pm and 6.00 pm – this allows the team one hour to review the list of expected clients, re-read folders and notes and, at the end of the day, another hour to make further observations and recommendations.

With the increase in client numbers and Bordeaux becoming the training centre for the six other Point Rencontre Centres created by the Association, as well as its active participation in the national network of contact centres, an office has been established that remains open during the week and is headed by an administrator and a coordinator. The service is free to families, but the Centre receives grants from the Attorney General, local government, the French Foundation and the Departments of Social and Community Services and raises money through its training programs.

Grenoble (La Passerelle)

This centre, started in 1988, was the offspring of an association formed two years earlier by a social researcher and a psychologist, who to this day remain its Director and President. Their idea was to offer to self-referred families who joined the association a homely welcome and contact services extending to weekend stays in the case of geographically distant parents. Pressure from the judicial system has meant that 30% of Grenoble's cases are judicial referrals. Weekend parents use the centre from Saturday morning to Sunday afternoon, while parents using it as an exchange centre attend on Saturday afternoons. The centre plays host to about 60 families every six months and most contact is fortnightly.

Apart from the Director, there is a team of 6 intake counsellors, all women with either medicosocial, social research or marriage counselling experience, and all of whom have studied psychology. They are employed part-time (30 fortnightly hours of service provision are split between two teams). Intake and inter-views are held on Wednesdays, and on Saturdays students of psychology or relationship counselling join the team as volunteer help. The Director is there practically full-time and calls on a psychiatrist and a psychotherapist when needed. The President handles the most complex cases.

Additional to the above work, the centre does a small number of structured mediations each year, as well as offering shuttle mediation to some parents. It has rules about punctuality and non-violence and a schedule of fees for overnight stay and day contact. The Justice Department, local governments, Department of Social Services, and various women's organisations all contribute to its financing.

Bobigny known as AAEF-Mediation (Association in Aid of Parents and Families)

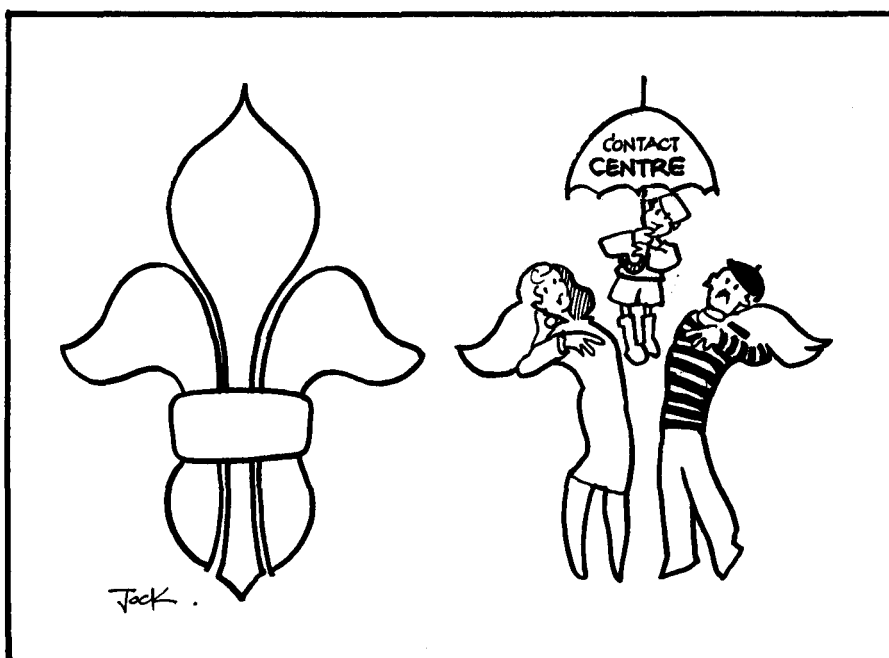
This centre opened in 1990 in a working class suburb of Paris characterised by high unemployment rates and a large migrant population (16% from Magreb countries and 8% from

African countries). The Association's rationale in creating the centre was to help the child and visiting parents, as well as children and families in general, by offering a neutral place to meet where emotional support and conflict negotiation facilities were available.

This centre operates from four locations and offers three distinct services:

1. The welcoming and intake service represents 60% of the centre's work. The Association deals with situations where risk to the physical, emotional or moral well-being of children is great, so first interviews are carefully conducted before setting up visiting schedules.
2. The contact service (called Family Space) offers children who have lost contact with their parent(s) or for whom contact is difficult, a safe and neutral place to meet. Mediators have a supervisory function. The first meeting is held within the Court building and parents are interviewed singly. If risk exists, future contacts are restricted to the Court premises. This supervisory service makes up about 25% of the centre's work.
3. The mediation service represents 15% of the Association's work. Mediation as a process is interpreted quite liberally and is not limited to one or two sessions; it may in fact extend to 4 to 6 months (along the lines of Johnson's Therapeutic Mediation). The model involves a co-mediation team of both genders. Agreements are examined by the Association's lawyer and, in cases involving real property, a solicitor is called; however, most clients have no assets. Children are allowed to participate in the advanced stages of mediation if both parents agree. Mediators are never called as expert witnesses.

A quarter of referrals come from family judges, 31% from social workers, 6% from lawyers, 6% from children's magistrates, 3% from doctors and 7% are referred from within the Association. The total number of cases seen in 1994 was 439, involving 1935 interviews.



The administrative staff includes the Director (who is the Vice-President of the National Federation of Contact Centres) and a secretary. The Director herself is professionally trained as a therapist. Other professionals include four full-time mediators and four practicum mediators. On call are a lawyer, an information officer and an occupational therapist. Consultations with the ethnopsychiatric team of Bobigny Hospital are also held when necessary.

Funding is received regularly in the amount of 60% from the General Council of the Department of Seine St. Denis, and the French Foundation has covered some of its costs. Clients only pay 100 francs (A\$35) a year. The charges are low because funded access to legal advice is rare in France, with only 19% of women and 10% of men qualifying for legal aid.

No written reports are made available.

SUMMARY OF FEATURES OF FRENCH CONTACT CENTRES

1. Most of the contact centres were born out of associations started by behavioural sciences professionals involved in family work, aware of the need to provide meeting places for separating parents and their children so that the relationship with the non-residential parent

would not be lost or could be re-established, if lost for some time.

2. All of the centres seek to offer reassurance to the residential parent about the child's safety while with the other parent and, although committed to neutrality, to protect the contact parent against false accusations.
3. The provision of information to the court or other evaluators is limited to the number and length of contacts, and reports of a serious nature only.
4. The centres work to increase the parental skills of both the residential and contact parent and to ensure treatment for unacceptable behaviour on the child's part. In some instances off-site contact is allowed.
5. Centres use professionals as counsellors or interviewers in a part-time capacity, and remunerate them appropriately; directors or coordinators are behavioural sciences professionals and volunteers are undergraduates on placement for their medical or behavioural studies.
6. The centres are associated with, or offer themselves as, conflict resolution services, as well as co-opting mental health professionals as the need arises or referring

clients to them where long-term treatment is needed and accepted.

7. The centres see themselves as an evolving, temporary facility helping parents and families to process their stage of loss and grief, and helping with the necessary transitions.
8. Given the centralised nature of the French government, a substantial part of their funding is extended through the Departmental 'Prefet', supplemented by grants from the French Foundation, and by housing offered by county or local authorities.
9. Centres either charge a small fee to clients or require them to join the association which created and manages them.

SUMMARY OF SALIENT FEATURES OF CONTACT CENTRES IN THE UK

1. The network of contact centres (NAAC) in Britain, Scotland and Wales has drawn together 120 of the 150 existing contact centres.
2. NAAC classifies the centres according to 7 types (6 in Scotland), depending on the initiator, which could be either the Probation Departments, the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS), community groups, churches, mediation services, parents themselves or voluntary organisations.
3. Except for the Probation Department centres, the majority of them are not run by professionals, ie, community centres are run by volunteers, church centres are run by the congregation or the pastor. Centres initiated by voluntary organisations have a mixture of paid staff and volunteers. There is very little involvement by family therapists, psychotherapists, psychologists and the medical profession, except in volunteer training, which varies in length and scope.
4. Virtually all the centres are free and hours of opening are limited, ranging from 2 hours on Saturday

to a full day (18 centres); a few are open mornings only.

5. UK centres aim to provide short-term help and support towards establishing meaningful contact between child and visiting parent by putting into practice agreements or arrangements made somewhere else.
6. In 1991-92, the Lothian Family Conciliation Service conducted the only evaluation of these centres available in the UK. The evaluation was of a qualitative and quantitative nature and was based on the replies of 35% of parents using their 6 centres. The evaluation was positive for 82% of respondents. The advantages of having centres quoted by parents and children were often very similar, ie, they allow contact to take place, offer safety, avoid the child witnessing tension and conflict between parents, offer parents a break. The centres were credited with having staff that focused on the child's interests and behaved professionally. The disadvantages mentioned related to distance and cost, lack of privacy, and limited supplies of toys. Fathers' suggestions dealt with the need for longer opening hours as well as a wider choice of days and some male presence. Contact parents were very receptive to the idea of 'conciliators' being made available by the centres.
7. Lothian centre staff usually include one paid organiser, not necessarily a social worker, plus a volunteer. These centres do not have as a goal the provision of formal supervision of contact.

SUMMARY OF SALIENT FEATURES OF US CENTRES

1. As of 1993 the US Supervised Visitation Network listed 60 member programs in 17 states. There is some indication that the number may have almost doubled in the years since, possibly as the result of the proposed Child Safety Act, which would make federal funding available.

2. Centres provide three basic types of supervision: 1) one-to-one (high vigilance), one variant of which is therapeutic supervision; 2) exchange supervision; and 3) loose monitoring (low vigilance).
3. Their objectives are: to provide a setting in which a relationship can be maintained or re-established with the contact parent; to reassure the residential parent of the child's safety while with the other parent; to protect the contact parent against false accusations; to document the interaction between each parent and child for use by court or other evaluators; to provide feedback to the supervised parent to better his or her relationship with the child.
4. The US centres' objectives seem to fall between the more ambitious, educational and therapeutic goals of the French centres and the more limited but categorised goals of the UK centres.
5. The same is true of their use of professionals. Some centres use exclusively professional mental health staff, others benefit from undergraduate or community volunteers.
6. On the whole, programs are associated with larger organisations and operate under their umbrella, sometimes inside their building, or act as a referral centre and clearing house for professionals working to help families in situations involving separation, dysfunctional relationships, domestic violence, etc.
7. Costs and fees vary widely – most charge on a sliding scale, although a few are free.
8. Transport services are provided in some rural areas.
9. In addition to fees, all centres need financial support in the form of grants or help from combined charities like United Way, or subsidies from legal foundations.

CONCLUSION

The proposed evaluation and research by Legal Aid and Family Services (LAFS) and ANZACCS of the ten recently federally funded centres should

go a long way to guiding the four years' life of the project's centres. Australia's great geographical distances and still scarce population pose particular problems for the establishment of centres based on a uniform model and with the same degree of existing support services. Some of the centres in the project were already in existence, some are new. Some are run by agencies involved in work with couples and families and employ professionally trained counsellors, others have their roots in community centres, while others are set up within legal centres.

In the view of the author, all centres should include an educational component for client parents to enrich their parental skills and to create the awareness that children are not miniature adults and their needs change with stages of development. Except for those

meeting high vigilance requirements, centres should ward against being overrun with judicial referrals and allowing the judiciary to avoid addressing difficult issues by making temporary situations permanent.

The French Foundation has held regular colloquies or conferences where the 42 centres receiving financial help meet to reflect and exchange impressions and realities. To these are invited the Heads of Departments of Social Work and other services dealing with families. It would be reassuring to include in the ANZACCS' scheme of things working parties for each Australian state, to act as an advisory group to the particular programs. These should include child development and mental health professionals, side by side with social workers, and the court and court service representatives. □

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The UK 'Looking After Children' project – Appendix 1

Michael Clare

THE 1975 CHILDREN ACT (UK) – THE NINE RESEARCH STUDIES

- Adcock M. et al 1983, *The administrative parent: a study of the assumption of parental rights*, British Agencies for Fostering and Adoption (London)

A consecutive sample of 267 cases in which the local authority assumed parental rights and duties was drawn from two urban and two county authorities.

- Fisher M. et al 1986 *In and out of care: the experience of children, parents and social workers*, Batsford / B.A.A.F. (London)

A client study of the experiences of workers and clients at admission to care, movements within care and discharge from care. 331 interviews with parents, siblings, social workers, residential workers and carers.

- Hilgendorf L. 1981, *Social workers and solicitors in child care*, H.M. S. O. (London)

A study of 150 social workers and 50 solicitors in five local authorities.

- Millham S. et al 1985, *Children lost in care: the family contact of children in care*, Gower (Aldershot)

A study by the Dartington Research Unit (1980-1983) of 450 children entering local authority care and the problems some experienced in maintaining links with their families. Over a two year period the care careers of all children were traced whatever their status, age or duration in care.

- Packman J. et al 1986, *Who needs care? Social work decisions about children*, Blackwell (Oxford)

A study of decisions for / against admitting children to care in

two similar local authorities in the south of England. All cases considered for care in one year were monitored and followed-up six months later. Parents and social workers were interviewed.

- Rowe J. et al 1984, *Long-term foster care*, Batsford / B.A.A.F. (London)

A research study of 'successful' foster placements in that all 200 cases had lasted for at least three years with the average being nine years. Foster children and some birth parents, as well as social workers and foster carers were interviewed.

- Sinclair R. 1984, *Decision making in statutory reviews on children in care*, Gower (Aldershot)

A study of almost 300 reviews of the cases of children placed in foster care in three social work districts in one local authority.

- Stevenson O. and Smith J., *The implementation of Section 56 of the Children Act, 1975* (Unpublished research report)

This section of the Act requires parents or guardians to give not less than 28 days notice of their intention to remove a child from questionnaires of a sample of 339 cases drawn from eleven local authorities.

- Vernon J. and Fruin D. 1985, *In care: a study of social work decision-making*, National Children's Bureau (London)

A study of social work decision-making and its relationship to the length of time children spend in care. Research in eleven English local authorities followed the case histories of 185 children for at least one year.