

Recognition Matters

A Knowledge Exchange and Impact Project



Key Messages

Respectful, inclusive processes that involve families have value in themselves.

Family members need to feel 'recognised', in order to be able to participate fully in key decisions.

When children are really vulnerable to harm social workers have to work even harder to create partnership with families where risk is present. For infants, babies, and very young children, as well as older children who are non-verbal or require constant care as they grow up, we need to find ways to work with risk that do not necessarily involve family separations.

Family Group Conferencing is one way of holding risk with the older children and adults in a family and agreeing how that risk will be addressed.

Parents and expectant parents need an opportunity to demonstrate what they can do, with the sustained relationship-based support of professionals. This is the opportunity Azaria took.

Children cannot always remain in their families safely. However, parents, children, and wider family members can always be recognised by professionals.

Recognition theory offers a way of understanding the different components of relationship based practice.

The Recognition Matters Team

Azaria Faver – a young mother who has experience of child protection processes, as she was using drugs when she became pregnant. Azaria now contributes regularly to training and social work education.

Nicky Hunter – Nicky Hunter – a social worker based in the hospital team within the City of Edinburgh Council. Nicky is often involved in decisions about whether babies can safely go home. Many of the families she works with are homeless or living in temporary accommodation. Nicky was social worker to Azaria's baby.

Julie Falconer – Team Leader within Family Group Decision Making in the City of Edinburgh Council. Family Group Decision Making is also known as Family Group Conferencing. It is a meeting convened by the independent coordinator enabling the child's wider family to come together with key professionals and agree a family plan to support their child. This meeting happens before a life-changing decision is made about their future. Julie co-ordinated a meeting for Azaria and her family before her baby was born.

Heather Rush – a social work practitioner who now works as a Family Group Decision Making Coordinator for the City of Edinburgh Council. Heather has special interest and expertise in the use of Family Group Conferences in planning for infants at risk.

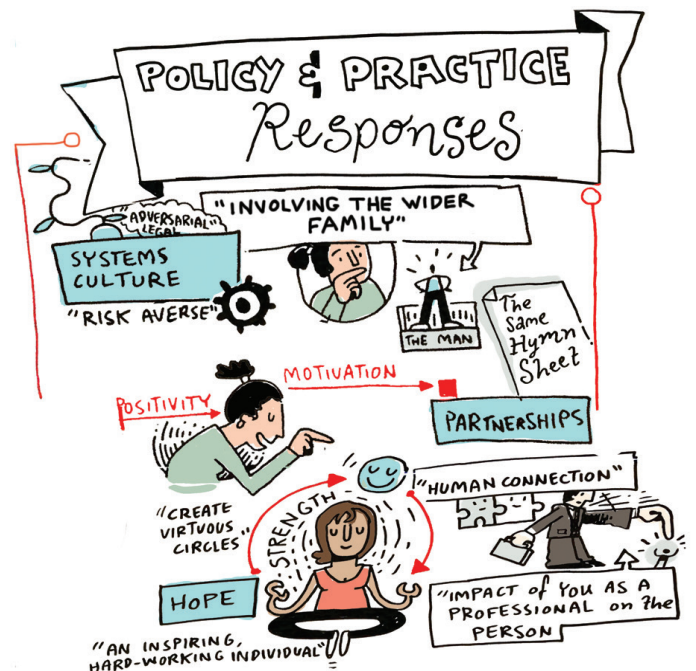
Dr Mary Mitchell – a social work academic based at the University of Edinburgh, where she completed her PhD in Social Policy in 2018. Mary investigated the contribution Family Group Conferencing makes towards outcomes for looked after children at risk of being accommodated, and their families. She used recognition theory to understand the components of relationship-based practice.

Dr Ariane Critchley – completed her PhD in Social Work at the University of Edinburgh in 2019 and is now based at Edinburgh Napier University. Ariane researched what happened in practice between social workers and families in pre-birth child protection assessments. Her study sought the views of expectant parents as well as social work practitioners.

Background

In 2019, this group of six women came together to create the Recognition Matters project. They had a shared perspective on child welfare and protection, but had arrived at this perspective in different ways. They wanted to bring together their knowledge to strengthen practice and improve the experiences of families.

Mary and Ariane realised that although their PhD projects were very different, there was overlap in their research findings. They both found that the process for making decisions about children's futures is very important – not only the outcome of whether the family can stay together. This was something that Heather, Julie and Nicky knew from their practice and they wanted to share their experiences of working in partnership with families to create safe plans for children. Azaria had been speaking to social work students and practitioners since having her daughter, and she agreed to share her story on film. Her daughter has seen Azaria on screen talking about how special she is – and she calls the Recognition Matters team, "the bossy ladies".



The team made a short film that told Azaria's story, in her own words. This powerful film can be accessed [here](#). In it Azaria recounts her experiences of pre-birth child protection and being part of a Family Group Conference for her child. She explains how important the relationships she built with professionals were for her, and for her family.

After recording Azaria's Story, the team organised a seminar for people from across Scotland with the power to make a difference in child welfare and protection. Once the film was shown, the team shared research findings, practice wisdom, and life story experience.

This process led to the longer film, Recognition Matters which brings all of these messages together. This film can be accessed [here](#). It is designed to be used as a teaching and training tool, and to be shared with families who are going through child welfare processes. The film and this briefing note together cover the key messages and perspectives from the Recognition Matters project and includes Azaria's Story in full.

Azaria's social worker: Nicky Hunter

I completely understand the interest in Azaria's story, as I recognise how far Azaria has come since she was homeless and using substances. Azaria has been an inspiration, particularly when I am having a challenging day at work. I also know first-hand how her blog Heroin to Homemaker has helped other families that I have worked with.

Thinking about recognition I need to be mindful about my own language and the messages that I give to people. Although I was Azaria's social worker, I had not appreciated the impact the negative messages from other professionals had had upon her or the way they had made her feel until she talked about this in the film. It is imperative that as social workers we are honest and transparent with families and are very clear about the risks and what needs to change to enable them to care for their child. However, it is equally important that we engage families and provide them with the tools to help make these changes. We need to give them hope and to let them know that change is possible.

Not all families can make the changes that Azaria and Alec made. We then have a role with supporting people through a different journey. It is just as important that we continue to engage families and be open and honest with them, even though the outcome could be very different.

Family group conferencing can really make a difference. Family group conferencing helped Azaria's family to stay together: the meetings allowed the whole family to come up with a plan that alleviated the concerns of social work.

Azaria's Family Group Conferencing Coordinator: Julie Falconer

Azaria's referral, like others coming into our team, came because there were safeguarding concerns being raised by professionals for a child, young person or baby.

As the Family Group Decision Making Coordinator who worked with Azaria, her family and the other key professionals in this story I feel an overwhelming sense of pride in the work we undertook together and the outcome of that journey. Bringing together both Azaria and Alec's families ensured that tasks were shared to create a supportive infrastructure for them and their baby. I admire and respect Azaria and all that she and her family have achieved. The experience of being recognised, working in partnership and feeling supported while addressing the risks, helped to create a positive outcome.

Her story brings together the reality of what recognition means to those who are involved in formal processes, whether Pre-Birth Child Protection Case Conferences, Children's Hearings or other formal decision-making meetings. What was significant was the relationship Azaria had with her social worker, which is critical to the work that we do in family group decision making. We often think that as social work practitioners we are skilled at making and sustaining relationships with the families we work with, but actually that is not always true. It cannot be taken for granted.



Why does recognition matter? Notes for practice

In her study, Mary found Axel Honneth's Recognition Theory (Honneth 1996) a useful way to understand the nature of relationships in the family group conferencing process. One part of Honneth's model describes three forms of 'recognition' which are especially relevant for social work:

'love' - intimate relationships in which a sense of self develops;

'rights' - equality of respect for persons and;

'solidarity' - relations of reciprocal esteem for each person's contribution to shared values.

For Honneth, recognition offered a model of understanding the development of individuals, and of whole societies, as the experiences of love, respect and solidarity can impact an individual's identity formation – their self-identity. Experiences of misrecognition are seen as providing an impetus for struggle and change, for individuals and society. Within this model, rights are fundamental, alongside other critical dimensions of recognition, to ensure a just society.

Applying ideas from recognition theory to social work practice draws attention to the activities which facilitate relationships, for example between individuals involved in the family group conferencing process. We believe the experience of being recognised through the forms of love, rights and solidarity contributes towards improved outcomes for the family members as well as supporting a just society.

Azaria's story highlights the experience of someone who has been through both the pre-birth child protection process and family group conferencing. Azaria explains how important it was for her, her partner and their families to experience being recognised and involved in decision making. In her view, this meant the difference between her child being removed soon after birth, and coming home with support. Recognition was a key quality of the work that led to a positive outcome for her family.

Honneth, A. (1996). *The Struggle for Recognition: the Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, UK, Polity Press.

You can access the film at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wydm54Gk9ml&feature=youtu.be>

Want to find out more? Please contact:

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