

# Baptism of Fire: Supporting New Workers in a Community Child-Protection Agency Efforts

Lee Zhi Lin Melissa | Shannia Nadarajan | Toh Shumin | Jas Tan Jing Hui | Siti Noor Adilla Binte Daud

From: Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre in Singapore

1

## OBJECTIVE

This study looks into ways to enhance support for new workers in the community child protection sector.

3

## METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study consisting of structured interviews of the lived experiences of Social/Case workers from Big Love. 153 households, between April 2018 and March 2022, were chosen due to the perceived level of risk and complexity. In all these households, statutory intervention had to eventually take over. A random selection of 66 out of these 153 households were chosen for discussion with 22 Social/Case workers from Big Love. The interviews were transcribed for the purpose of thematic coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, audio recordings of some interviews were not usable due to data corruption; hence the data for eight affected interviews were excluded from the final analysis. Thematic coding and analysis proceeded with the transcripts of the remaining 14 interviews, covering a total of 43 households. These workers were of varying levels of experience. Studies have shown that it takes about two years for a child protection practitioner to have the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions to work independently (Csiernik et al., 2010). This study similarly defined "new workers" as those with less than two years of experience in child protection. At the point of the interviews, 71% had less than two years of experience in child protection work (Figure 1).

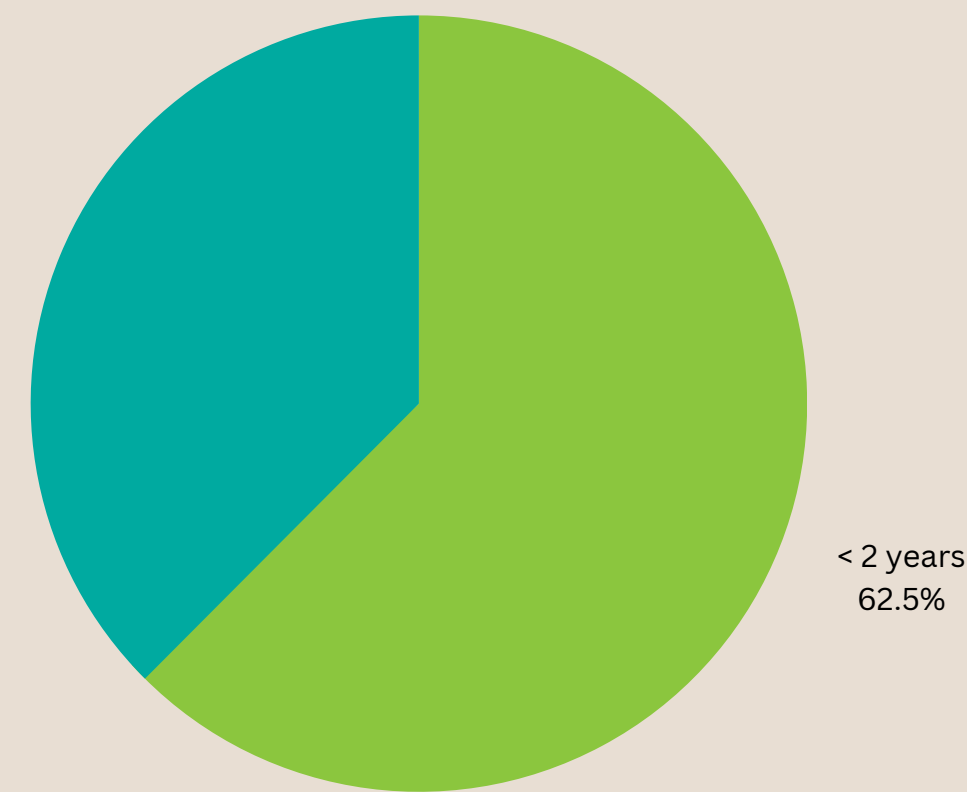


Fig. 1 Workers' experience in BL

5

## RECOMENDATIONS

Recommendations surrounding crisis management, and supervisory and training support for both new and experienced workers were identified.

### • Strengthen orientation and crisis management processes

To better support new workers, it is recommended to provide a clear breakdown of what to expect (e.g., in processes and protocols, organisational boundaries), and early shadowing opportunities. Studies seeking to understand ways to minimise staff attrition in child protection found that more orientation and job shadowing in the initial months before independent case work would be helpful (Csiernik et al., 2010).

In the case of experienced workers, it is recommended to increase opportunities for them to be involved in decision-making in crises, such as being part of the crisis support team. This would provide experienced workers more opportunities to deepen their clinical acumen and assessment skills with the support of a group, and also promote the sustainability and rigour of the crisis team.

It is also recommended practice for all workers to have a debrief with their supervisors after each crisis. This would help to consolidate their learning, review possible gaps in their case management practice, and provide timely support to strengthen workers' resilience as they move forward with their cases.

### • Promote reflective practice, enhance supervision, and facilitate increased peer support

Agencies may consider facilitating periodic intentional checkpoints within the team, such as a "day of recollection", or using group supervision more intentionally to support workers in this area. Studies have found that it is recommended for social workers to reflect more purposefully on their experiences (Zwane, 2016), as this could build resilience and positive meaning-making to minimise burn-out.

The study also noted that providing clear expectations of work processes and roles could be helpful especially for new workers. Meanwhile, experienced workers may benefit from having safe spaces to process their experiences (e.g., peer support groups amongst experienced workers), to normalise their growing pains and minimise the burdens they may carry in perceived isolation.

### • Clarify developmental roadmaps and provide ongoing training opportunities

It is recommended to provide new workers with a training roadmap, to orientate them on existing resources and training plans. The objective would be to add clarity to the developmental milestones for new workers, and increase accessibility to resources that could ease the steep learning curve. It would also be important for experienced workers to undergo ongoing training to deepen their clinical acumen and competency. Training on crisis work could also be expanded to include more staff on the crisis support team.

In summary, this study offered a glimpse into the lived experiences of a community-based child protection worker, based on the reflections of Big Love workers. Findings of this study may provide valuable insights to how crisis management processes, supervision practices, and training plans can be enhanced to further support such workers. Beyond Big Love, these findings could be considered by community-based agencies supporting high-risk cases. This study also marks the agency's steps in learning through workers' practice to guide the management in responding to the needs of the ground (Gardner & Brandon, 2008). By increasing the support for workers and building up competency, it may contribute to a strengthened child protection system and increased accountability to our stakeholders.

6

## REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Csiernik, R., Smith, C., Dewar, J., Dromgole, L., & O'Neill, A. (2010). Supporting new workers in a child welfare agency: An exploratory study. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 25(3), 218-232.
- Ellett, A. J., Ellis, J. I., Westbrook, T. M., & Dews, D. (2007). A qualitative study of 369 child welfare professionals' perspectives about factors contributing to employee retention and turnover. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(2), 264-281.
- Gardner, R., & Brandon, M. (2008). Child protection: crisis management or learning curve?. *Public Policy Research*, 15(4), 177-186.
- Sullivan, C., Whitehead, P. C., Leschied, A. W., Chiodo, D., & Hurley, D. (2008). Perception of risk among child protection workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(7), 699-704.
- Zwane, C. A. (2016). The use of crisis intervention with parents of children identified as in need of care and protection: experiences of social workers (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).

2

## INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

This study was conducted within Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre (Big Love), a community-based child protection agency in Singapore that seeks to help families with child protection concerns improve their functioning and resilience. The child protection sector commonly faces challenges with staff attrition due to the nature and intensity of work (Ellett et al., 2007), a situation that Big Love faces. This may lead to the hiring of new and largely inexperienced child protection workers (Sullivan et al., 2008). This study was done with the goal of enhancing case management capabilities and practices.

4

## FINDINGS

### 1. "Are we there yet?": Workers' shared struggle of self-doubt while journeying towards competency.

- "It's really been a process. You need the journey to get there." - W6

This study found that the "making of" a child protection worker was a journey of gradually building competency, accompanied with themes of self-doubt and grappling with not knowing. There appeared to be a 'baptism of fire' for new workers, where there was a scaffolding of knowledge and skills built over time through the workers' life cycle on the job. The study also highlighted that experienced workers continued to face evolving challenges.

The study noted that while information related to managing crises was provided at onboarding, new workers still felt ill-equipped when responding to crises when they eventually occurred. The knowledge appeared to be translated into a competency only after workers had the hands-on opportunity to apply the information. New workers also felt uncertain in areas such as engagement, balancing between the function of control and change with families, and more. Generally, new workers struggled with feelings of fear, incompetence, and an overall sense of not even knowing what they did not know.

- "Challenge is technical knowledge... I haven't even got the chance to go to engagement knowledge." - W13
- "I didn't know.. what to even do in a crisis. ..I only realised when I went down. In general, I was just very lost." - W8
- "Because I don't know what I don't know, ...I don't know what to ask." - W5
- "I was so new I didn't know what parts were there." - W2

Meanwhile, the more experienced workers faced challenges in other areas, such as deepening clinical skills, and managing their own attitudes (e.g., own/perceived expectations and beliefs of themselves and their work). Reflections from the experienced workers surfaced feelings of helplessness, and a sense of burdened responsibility and pressure.

- "After a while, I felt very, very lost. What else can I do for these children?" - W1
- "I think that the expectation of 'okay I can do this because I've done it before'... but when I found that this (expectation I had of myself) could not be met, I got frustrated. I felt like I had to come in to find a solution or find a remedy to the situation." - W6
- "I felt like I had to do everything." - W14

Overall, both new and experienced workers questioned their clinical acumen where they struggled with self-doubt and thoughts of "Should I have..?" in their work. Other studies have found that less experienced child protection workers may perceive risk differently than experienced workers, and lack confidence managing risk in the community (Sullivan et al., 2008).

### 2. "Who am I?": Workers made meaning and developed insights on their identity as a child protector

The study found that workers had made meaning, either through challenging or affirming their identity and growth as a child protection practitioner, as they journeyed through their cases. Various workers viewed the impact of cases on them differently; some workers developed a clearer sense of their own job fit, while others saw them as opportunities for personal and professional growth.

- "This case really really made me feel..and think that also I'm not suitable to be a child protection worker." - W4
- "I felt like I wasn't ready to take on this case because it seems quite complex." - W15
- "There was that patience and resilience that I found in myself for such cases. ... I honestly appreciated this case also, regardless of the challenges." - W6

The study observed that while workers' takeaways from their cases may differ, they appeared to have developed an increase in self-awareness and resilience. Reflective practice enabled the workers to deepen their insights and learnings, amidst challenges.

### 3. "I am not alone": Workers found strength in the presence of support

This study had identified that elements of Big Love's existing internal support framework such as supervisors and an on-call crisis consult and support system ("crisis team"), was a source of strength for workers. Presence, either in-person or an overall sense of accessibility such as prompt responsiveness from the team through texts/calls, was a key factor contributing to workers feeling supported.

- "I always get responses very fast no matter who I go to, and instructions are always very clear. ... I could get a very concrete direction and I think that helped me make my decision." - W7
- "I felt very supported because (the crisis team) was there all the way. ...I mean she wasn't physically there but she was contactable... She still listened to my opinions about how... support should come in." - W9
- "I had two people to support me... apart from that, ...there was the crisis support group chat.. when you are unsure of things you ask inside the group chat and they give very affirmative answers, ...that reassures me quite a bit." - W11

Strengths identified in the existing support structure included being accompanied for more complex cases, and having access to clear and timely case directions either from supervisors or the crisis team. In addition, the study revealed a desire amongst workers to have more emotional support during supervision, in line with the above-mentioned reflections of self-doubt and other difficult emotions.

7

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the help of many in transcribing, analysing, and formatting:

Dr Frederick Low, Research Mentor | Ang Wei Xuan, Case Worker | Chong Xiao Lei, Case Worker | Chee Heng Ching, Case Worker | Jolyn Ho, Social Worker | Nga Jie Hui, Social Worker | Wang ZhiMin Glada, Social Worker | Zoe Ang Jia Wei, Social Worker | Lim Jia Min, Associate Psychologist | Brian Yeo, BL Intern | Celestene Leow, BL Intern | Nurul Maslinda Binti A Rahim, BL Intern | Tammy Chang, BL Intern | Yasmeen Nawwarah Bte Mohamed R, BL Intern | Carina Seah, Programme Executive | Enya Yeo, Programme Associate | Deborah Yu Xuan Koh, Research Assistant | Koh Cheng, Kimmy, Research Assistant