

Promoting family preservation for children at the edge of care: A realist evaluation



Sam Redgate & Debbie Smart



Background

There were 80,850 children looked after by a local authority in England in 2021¹

Children and families who are at the edge of care are amongst the most disadvantaged in society. There are substantial human and financial costs to a child being taken into the care of a local authority.

Effective interventions to prevent care entry or reduce placement duration are important for the families and children involved.

Keeping Families Connected aims to:

PREVENT children and young people from coming into care

STABILISE placements at risk of disruption and avoid an escalation in placement costs

RETURN children and young people from care to their families when safe to do so

¹ Department for Education (2021) Children looked after in England including adoptions

Research aim and objectives

To evaluate the Keeping Families Connected service using a realist evaluative approach to expose the mechanisms through which the project interacts with families and their contextual circumstances to produce service outcomes and inform future development of a sustainable intervention

Objectives:

- Develop understanding of how the intervention works (to build programme theory) and identify contextual factors which impact on delivery of the interventions
- Identify generative mechanisms which facilitate and/or hinder the interventions effectiveness
- Assess effectiveness of the intervention through routinely collected service outcomes data
 - Prevention of children being taken into local authority care
 - Supporting reunification of children in local authority care with their birth families

Realist approach

Ideas and assumptions underlying *how, why and in what circumstances* interventions work

Three steps:

1. Develop programme theories
2. Test programme theories using data
3. Refine and consolidate programme theories

So, what
is a
programme
theory?

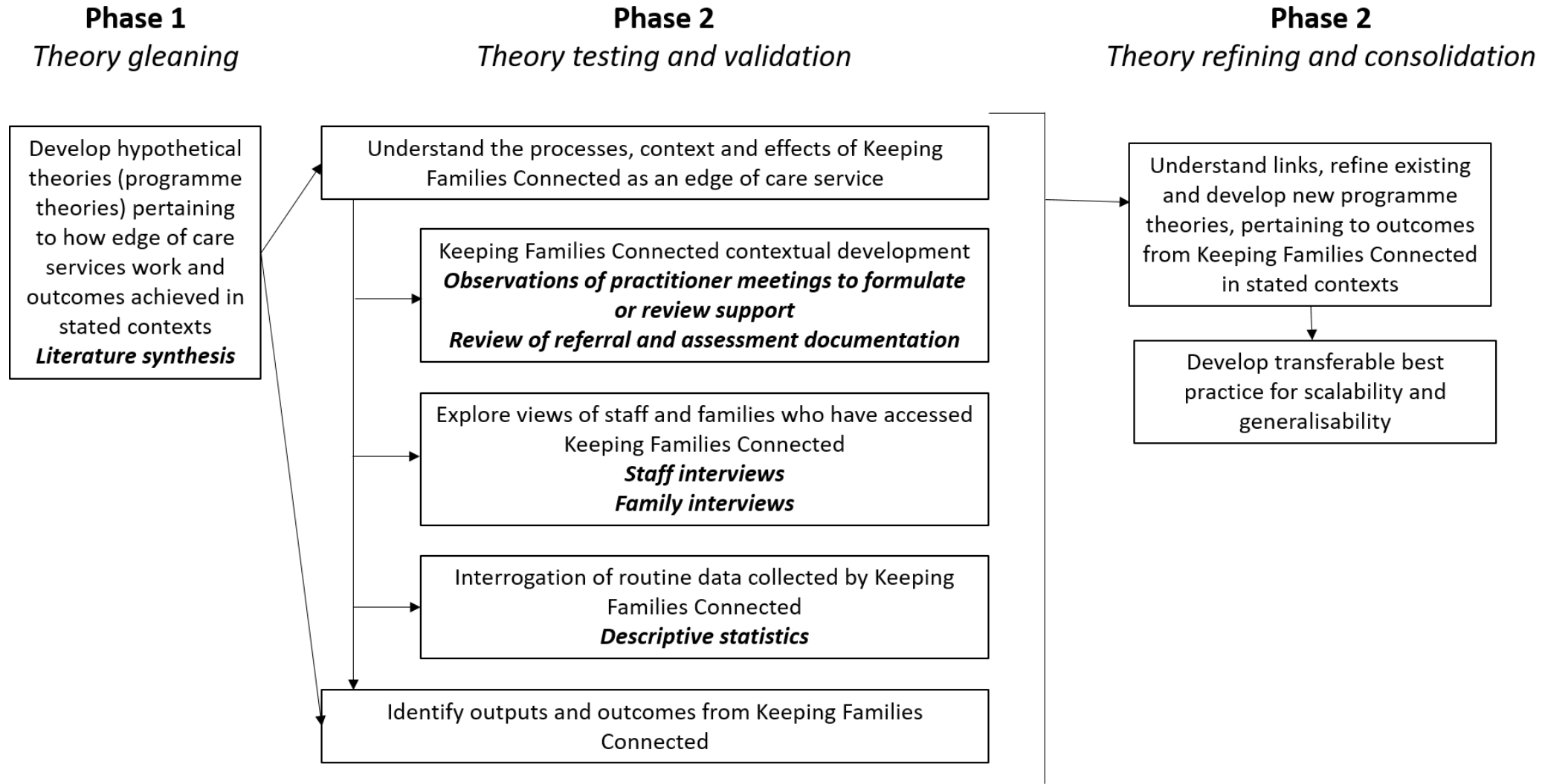


It's just how
and why you
think the
intervention will
work.

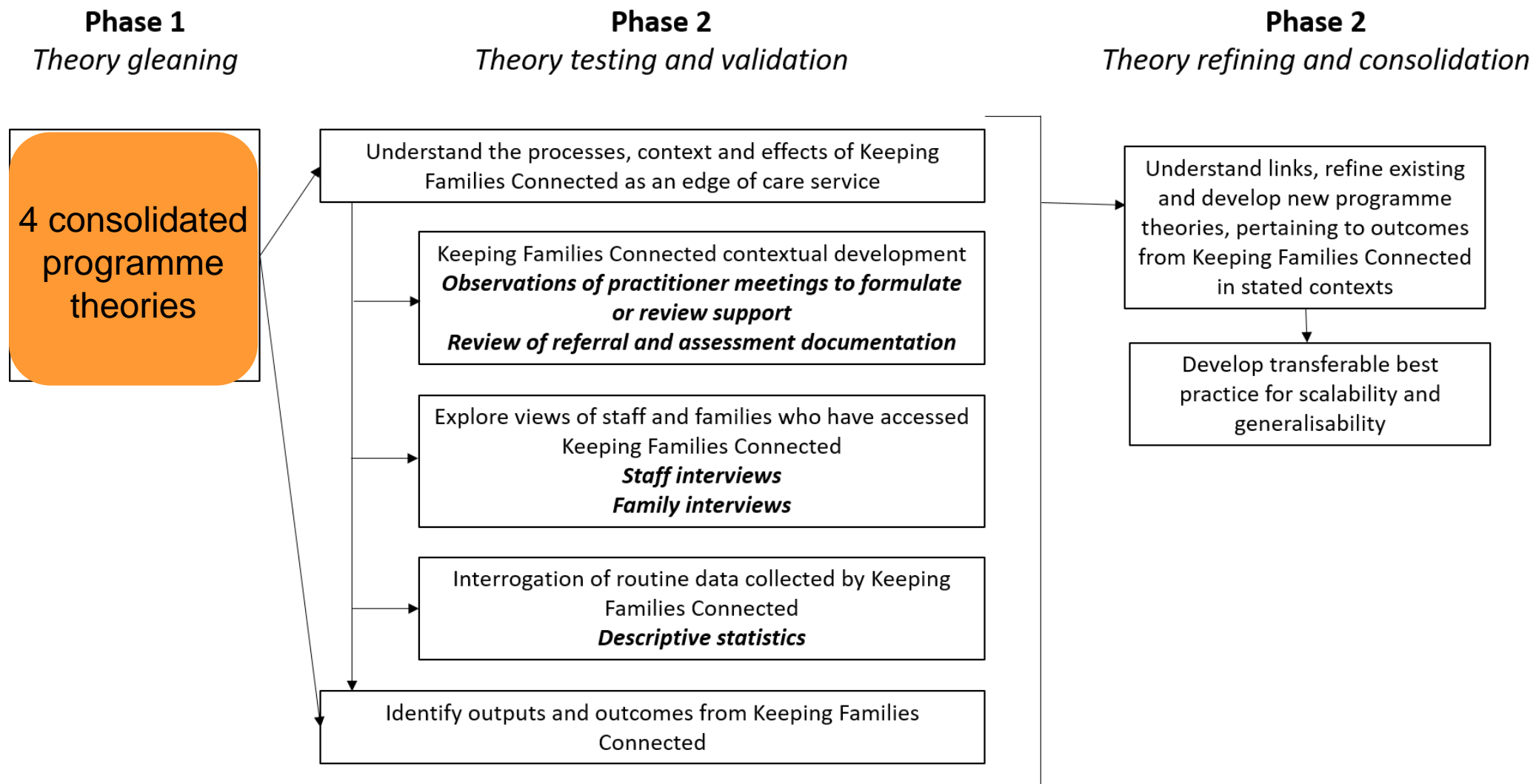


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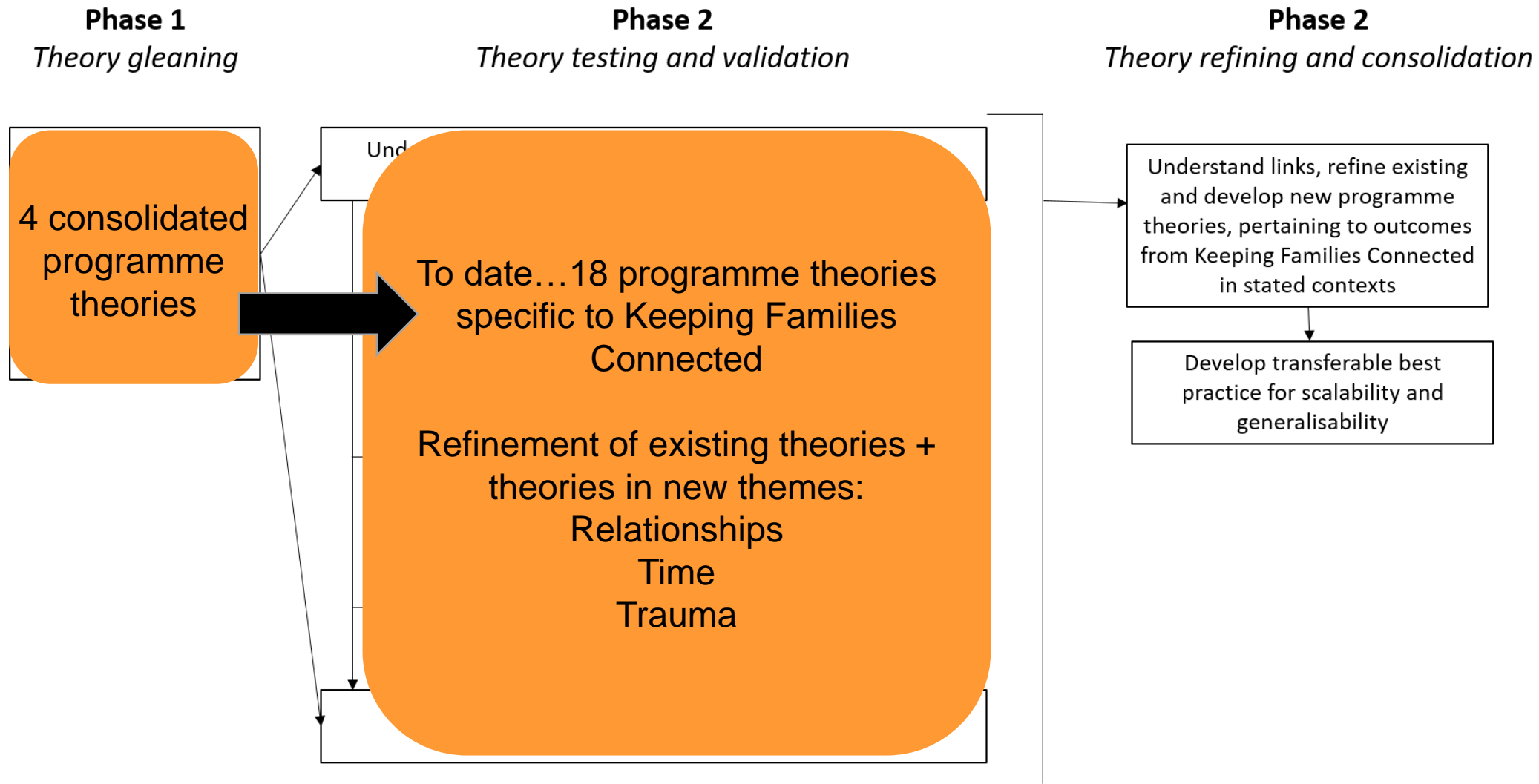
Method



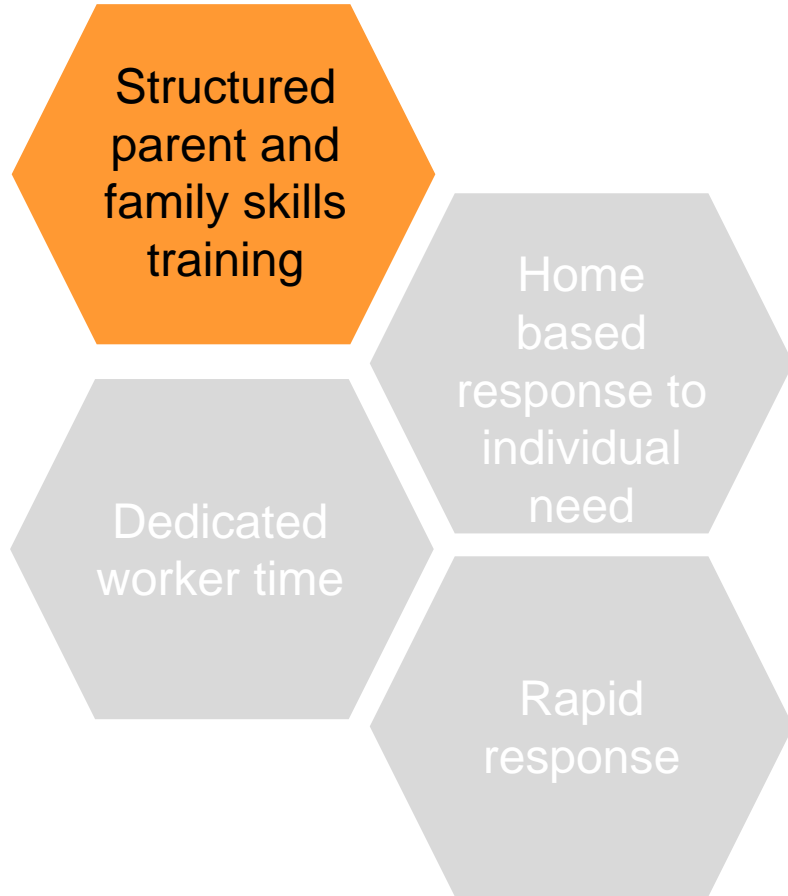
Method



Method

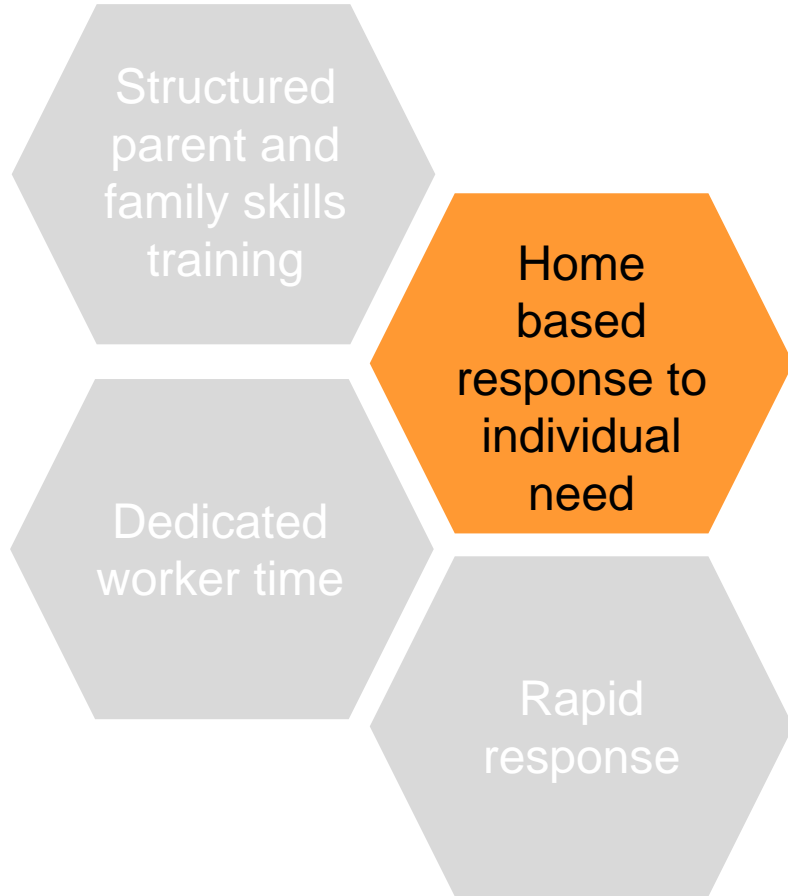


Phase 1 Findings



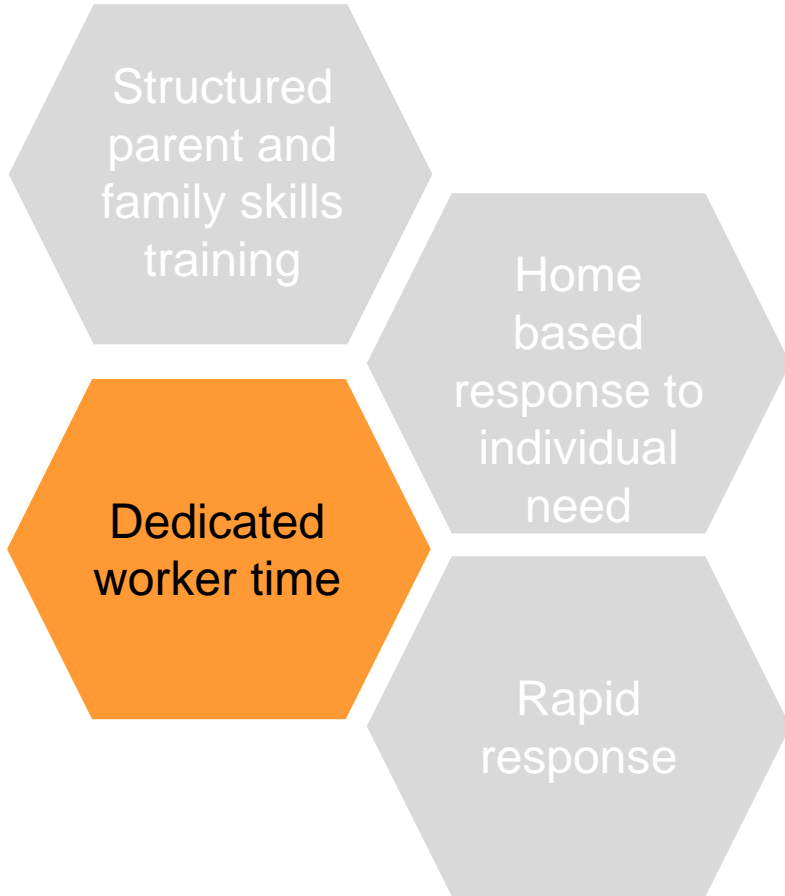
Viewing a child's primary carer as the catalyst for change (context), training facilitated by the worker, informed by formal service models (mechanism; resource I) supports positive strength and skill development within the family (mechanism; resource II) which empowers families (mechanism; reasoning) and promotes pro-social behaviours (outcome).

Phase 1 Findings



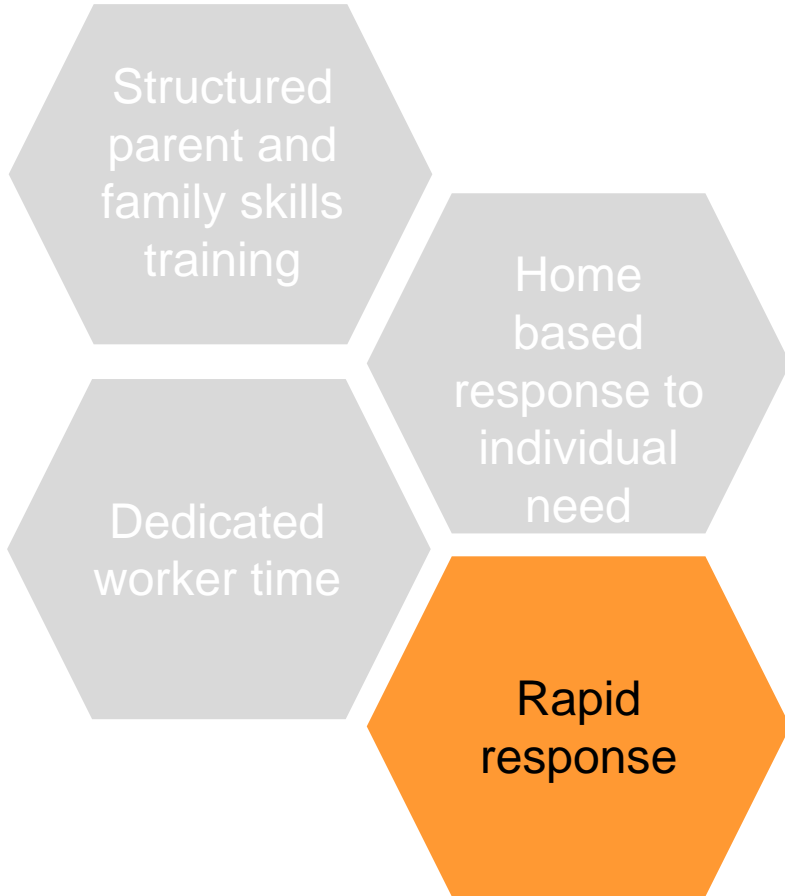
By delivering services within a family's natural home environment (context) observations by the worker can ensure that the family feels understood (Mechanism; resource I) and barriers to engagement are reduced (Mechanism; resource II), by shifting the power dynamic from the worker to the family (Mechanism; reasoning) and thus increases opportunities to promote positive family functioning (outcome).

Phase 1 Findings



When families are experiencing multiple problem issues (context) having a dedicated worker working alongside them providing intensive support (Mechanism; resource I) in the form of both practical and therapeutic assistance (Mechanism; resource II) in response to individual family need (Mechanism; reasoning), builds trust between family and worker (Outcome I) and promotes positive intervention effects (Outcome II).

Phase 1 Findings



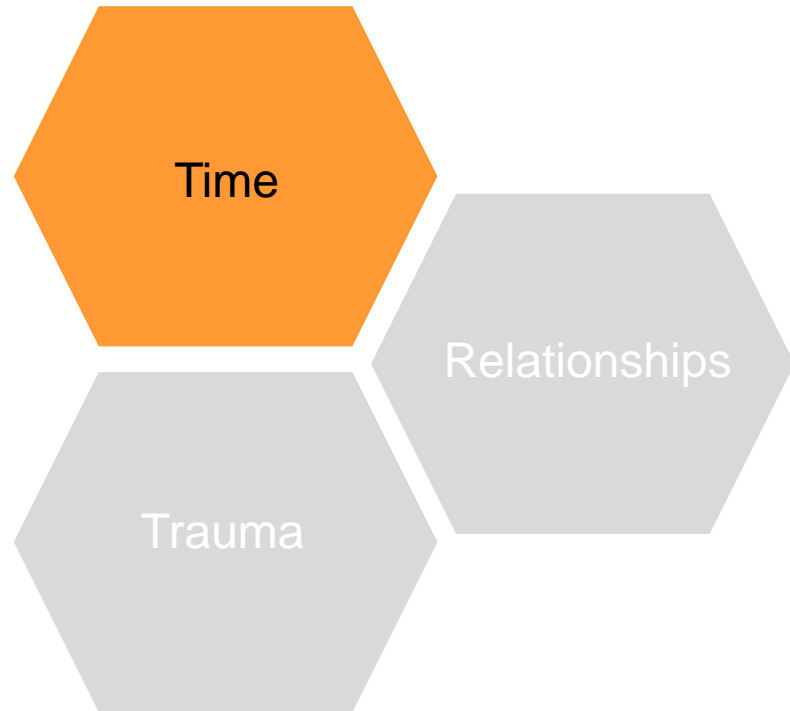
When families are experiencing high stress (Context), interventions need to provide immediate, action orientated response (Mechanism; resource) to assist families to contain and stabilise the crises (Mechanism; reasoning) without breaking down (Outcome I) and promote positive engagement with services (Outcome II).

Phase 2: Realist evaluation of Keeping Families Connected

Method

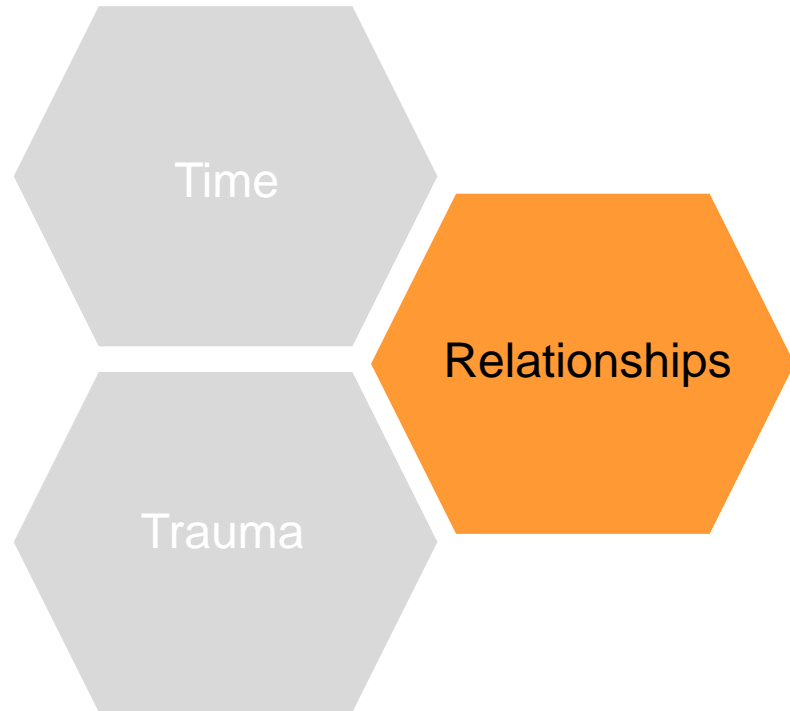
- Focus group/interviews Keeping Families Connected practitioners n = 6
- Interviews with social workers n = 11
- Interviews with families in receipt of support n = 14
- Meeting observations n= 11
- Document analysis of referrals and support plans n=8
- Analysis of routine data collected by local authority

Phase 2 Findings: Emerging themes



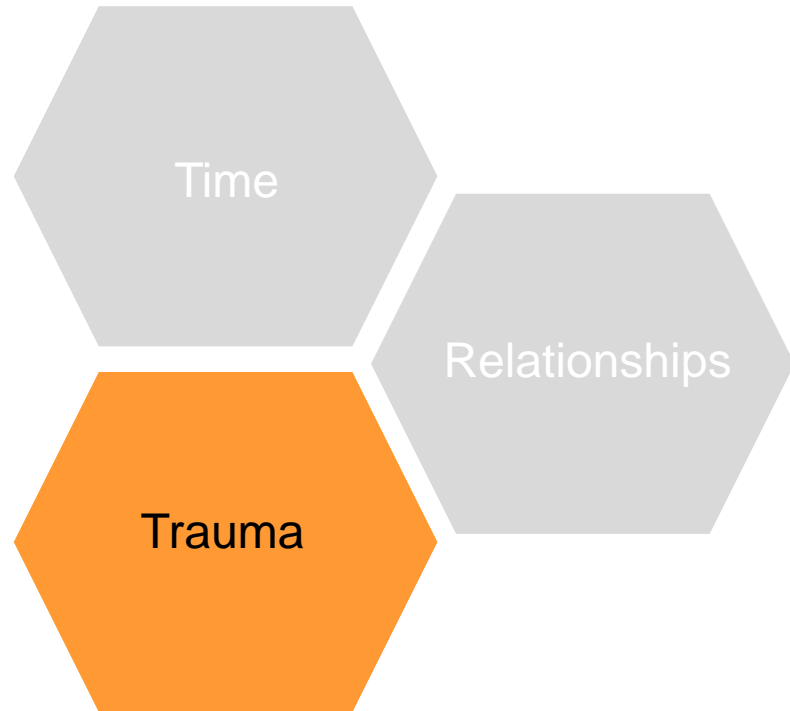
KFC workers are able to undertake time intensive work and do this within timescales for families of 4-15 weeks to support changes (context), these timescales are made clear to the family and professionals involved (mechanism, resource) which helps to frame expectations for both families and KFC to do effective collaborative work together including goal setting (mechanisms, reasoning), which avoids drift in the work and timely change for families (outcome).

Phase 2 Findings: Emerging themes



By placing emphasis on self-belief through the work undertaken by KFC workers with the family (Context), the families capacity to make changes is increased (Outcome I) through increased confidence (Mechanism: resource) which provides the motivation (Mechanism: reasoning) to make and sustain changes (Outcome II).

Phase 2 Findings: Emerging themes



Keeping Families Connected workers recognise behaviours in families from unresolved issues which cause them distress (context), a trauma informed model of support is adopted and delivered at parent/child's own pace which gives families control over how they access the intervention and leads to a positive experience of support (outcome)

Next steps

- Complete data collection with families
- Refine, refute & consolidate programme theories
- Disseminate findings to local authority and wider stakeholders

Thank you

Sam Redgate

Samantha.redgate@newcastle.ac.uk

Debbie Smart

Deborah.smart@newcastle.ac.uk

On behalf of the project team:

Ruth McGovern, Julie Firth, Emma Adams, Hayley Alderson, Simon Barrett,
Carrie Barron, Samantha Burns, Hilda Frost, Eileen Kaner, Will McGovern, Vikki
Peart, Tara Renwick, Pete Xeros

