



## Influencing and Supporting Policy



### Dr Simone McCaughren

#### SCHOOL

School of Social Work and Social Policy

#### PARTNER AGENCIES

One Family ☯ Department of Justice ☯ Adoption Authority of Ireland

#### FUNDERS:

Department of Justice ☯ Adoption Authority of Ireland ☯ RTÉ Toy Show Appeal ☯ The Community Foundation of Ireland

#### SUBJECT AREAS

Legal Issues ☯ Children's Rights ☯ Legal Profession ☯ Social Care Profession ☯ Family Law Reform ☯ Intercountry Adoption ☯ Adoptive Parenting ☯ Judicial Processes ☯ Family Breakdown ☯ Voices of Young Children in Research ☯ Decisions Affecting Welfare of the Child

## The child's right to be heard

The Irish family law system has for a long time contended with balancing transparency in family and childcare law with the rights to privacy of those children who are impacted as well as the adults involved.

Trinity's Dr Simone McCaughren, in partnership with colleagues Dr Aisling Parkes, Dr Kenneth Burns and Maria D'jalma Torres Sánchez, all based in UCC, has provided much needed insight into what the legal profession, care workers and civil society groups can see happening to children and young people interacting with the family law courts in the case of family breakdown.

This has led to greater transparency around the *in camera* rule, increased recognition of very young children's voices in family law, and a co-designed national inquiry into inter-country adoption. It is contributions such as these which move complex systems toward greater fairness and effectiveness.

By showing how rigorous, focused research can reverberate in the courtroom and the care system, Dr McCaughren models a Trinity approach to public engagement: disciplined, collaborative, and oriented to the best interests of children and families in Ireland.

This work showcases how Trinity is using demonstrable models and advisory roles to challenge policymakers to consider how and whether climate action solutions can be implemented with success while reducing emissions.

Prepared by Trinity Civic Engagement for Societal Impact, August 2025



## In Camera Rule

Historically, the confidentiality provided by the *in camera* rule has shielded families. It has also, however, limited public understanding. Dr McCaughren and colleagues' 2025 systematic examination of how the rule operates and how its opacity shapes outcomes and public trust for the Dept of Justice has led to Minister for Justice Jim O'Callaghan TD to commit to the following policy action: "I have asked my officials to now consider this report and revert by the end of this year with policy proposals for my consideration that will reform the *in camera* rule."

"As researchers, we were astonished to hear people's experience of the [*in camera*] rule, which means family hearings are heard in private, described by various participants as horrific, misogynistic and abusive."

Dr Simone McCaughren & Dr Aisling Parkes,  
Irish Independent,  
May 2025



## Intercountry Adoption

Dr McCaughren, along with colleague Dr Aisling Parkes, has announced a national study on intercountry adoption. Crucially, the survey for adoptive parents was devised in partnership with the Adoption Authority of Ireland, the independent public body established to improve standards in both domestic and intercountry adoption.

This is an example of co-production that is likely to benefit the quality of the study itself by association with the national body while also increasing the prospect of the findings feeding directly into policy and practice in the area of intercountry adoption.

The study also commits to hearing the voices of adoptive parents and adopted children aged 12 years and under themselves, a population who may not be traditionally consulted in policy-focussed research work such as this.

This work builds on Prof McCaughren's record of researching adoption in Ireland, questioning current models and proposing new ones.

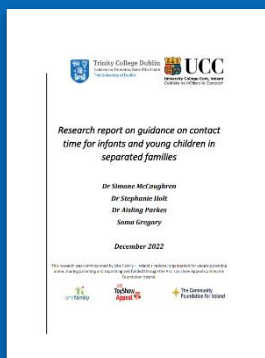
## Intervarsity Partnership

This impact-focussed work also highlights the importance of intervarsity, interdisciplinary research as a way to shape family and child law reform in Ireland. Dr McCaughren plays a central role in this partnership, bringing her expertise in adoption, children's rights, and narrative methodology to the joint projects. This research not only informs policy and practice but also strengthens academic links between the institutions, ensuring evidence-based contributions to Irish social policy.

## Editorial Leadership

Dr McCaughren is on the editorial board of the Editorial board of the Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma.

# Outputs

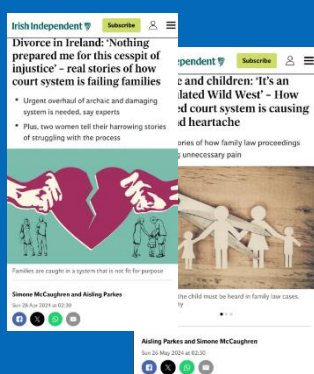
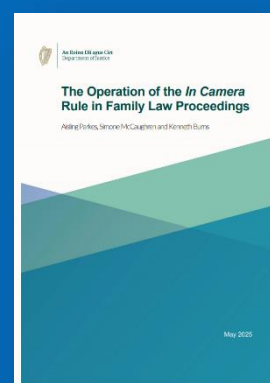


## Research report on guidance on contact time for infants and young children in separated families (2022)

Commissioned by One Family, the overall aim of this interdisciplinary / interuniversity research was to establish what are the most effective practices internationally in relation to contact for time for infants and young children where their parents no longer or have never lived together.

## Report on The Operation of the In Camera Rule in Family Law Proceedings (2025)

This interdisciplinary / interuniversity study reviews the current operation of the *in camera* rule; analyse issues with the current operation, and the statutory exceptions which permit research and reporting on cases; and make recommendations relating to reform of the law which can enhance clarity and transparency, and offer the necessary protections for those involved in proceedings.

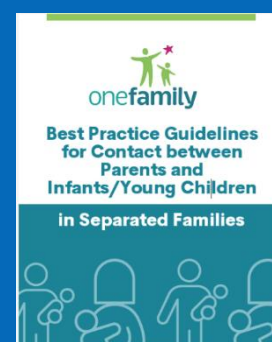


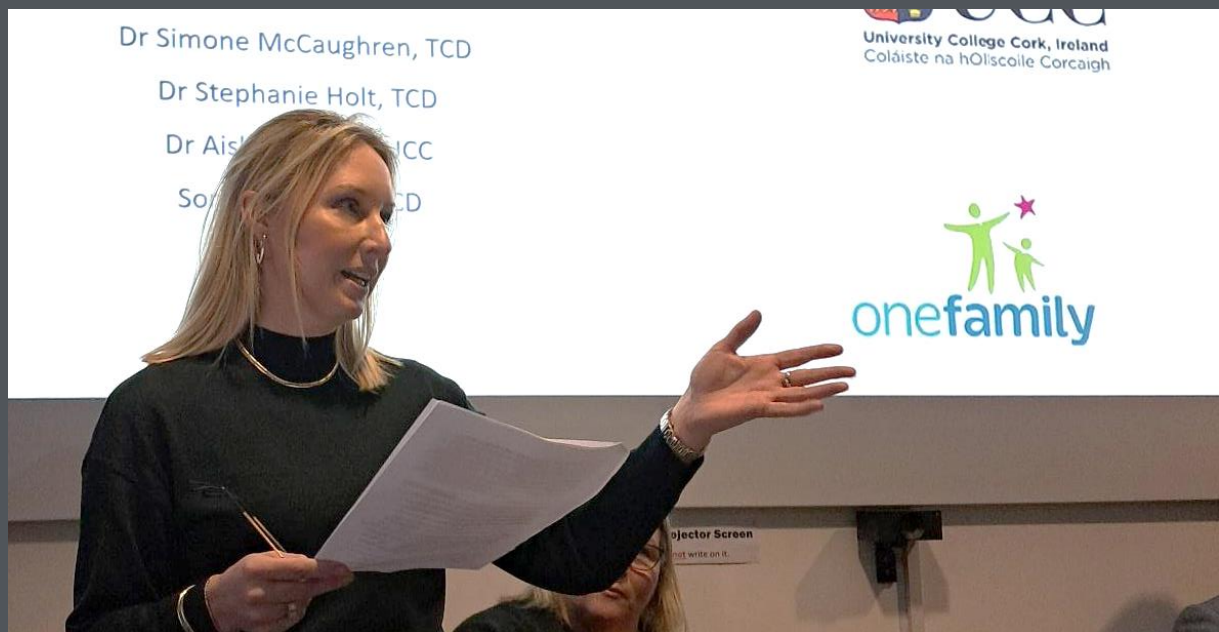
## Articles in the Irish Independent on family breakdown (2025)

In April and May 2024, Dr McCaughren and Dr Parkes highlighted the stories of families and, based on that, the need for reform in the family court system regarding the *in camera* rule.

## One Family Best Practice Guidelines for Contact between Parents and Infants / Young Children in Separated Families (2022)

One Family, an advocacy organisation for separated families, provided this evidence-based guide Best Practice Guidance on contact between parents and their children. It emphasises the child's right to a relationship with both parents when safe.





Dr Simone McCaughren is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin. Her scholarship, rooted in human rights, is focussed on adoption law and policy, children's rights, post-adoption contact, and related interdisciplinary themes.

In 2022, she led a pioneering interdisciplinary study that established guidelines for contact arrangements for children aged 0–6 in custody and access cases. This work, commissioned by the Department of Justice and the Adoption Authority of Ireland, continues to inform key family law reform projects. She is a member of the review board of the Children and Youth Services Review.

Dr McCaughren has mentored doctoral students on fostering, adoption, and reunion themes, guiding completed PhDs on foster care experiences and supervising advanced social science candidates.

## For More Information

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