



# research in practice

supporting evidence-informed practice  
with children and families

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Dear Eileen

## **Submission to Munro Review of Child Protection: better frontline services to protect children – call for evidence**

You will have seen the research review recently published by **research in practice**: *Safeguarding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: where to now* written by Professor Jane Barlow (Professor of Public Health in the Early Years at the University of Warwick) with Dr Jane Scott. We think this research review speaks directly to the need to strengthen the social work profession, particularly freeing and equipping frontline practitioners to make well-informed judgements based on a more nuanced understanding of families and within the framework of current research and theory.

Our submission summarises key findings and recommendations from the review. We also provide more information about how **research in practice**'s work can contribute to the reform of social work practice. The annex provides details of practice examples from recent **research in practice** publications which may be of particular interest to your review.

## **KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH REVIEW**

### **Importance of pregnancy, early years and parenting**

The review highlights that early environment and the first three years play a significant role in shaping cognitive, behavioural, social and emotional development, and that the most important aspect in this environment is the child's relationship with their caregivers. It argues that pregnancy and the early years should be central to safeguarding practice, both as the foundation for children's development and as the optimal window for prevention and early intervention. It also highlights how parents' own early experiences shape their parenting, and that early relationship patterns are developed in interaction with primary carers, internalised, and re-enacted within later relationships, including those with partners, children and service providers.

## **Assessment of families**

These findings have important implications for both assessment and casework. The review challenges existing assessment processes for being too focused on specific events and on prediction of risk. It points to the benefits of integrated and structured decision-making which are based on sound scientific knowledge but which encourage the use of professional discretion. It argues that the assessment process should focus on assessing parenting capacity; assessing parent-child interaction, and assessing parental readiness and capacity for change.

This calls for a more nuanced approach to assessments, using validated tools alongside professional discretion, and equipping practitioners to build into their assessments an understanding of the emotional relationship between parent and child, the parents' ability to form intimate and healthy relationships, infants' behavioural cues and development needs, and the parent's understanding of problems and causes and of the possible impact of their own experiences of being parented.

## **Relationship-based and reflective practice**

The implications for frontline practice and how it should be supported organisationally are also profound, and we think highly relevant to the focus of your review.

The implication is that the professional-client relationship should be a pivotal part of all work with families across the safeguarding continuum. Practitioners should aim to provide a supportive therapeutic stance based on the principles of acceptance, empathy, genuineness and trust, which fosters a strong alliance between client and worker and help to meet some of parents' unmet development needs. A focus on interpersonal and relational issues is needed, aimed at providing parents with an opportunity to reflect on the parenting they provide in the light of their own experiences of being parented, and at increasing their capacity for reflective functioning and empathetic parenting. Partnership-based working which is goal-focused and change-oriented is an essential part of this approach.

The review highlights the importance of evidence-based approaches which are theoretically based and describes a number of effective interventions. It also highlights the importance of dyadic and resilience- or strength-based approaches. It concludes that evidence-based interventions should be provided in the context of a broader approach based on a long-term dependable professional relationship.

Relationship-based approaches and a more nuanced understanding of family interactions also require a stronger focus on reflective practice, and organisational change to support it. The review highlights the need to improve the capacity of professionals to think critically about the families and children they work with and to develop reflective mindsets, recognising the emotional responses of both client and practitioner and using the emotions engendered by the client-practitioner relationship to learn more about the family's situation. This involves analytical self-awareness, critical thinking and communication skills, supported by high quality supervision which provides the reflective space essential for good practice.

## **Implications for the strengthening of the social work profession**

The review highlights that aspects of organisational culture are antithetical to these approaches, particularly heavy workloads, extensive bureaucracy, perceived norms in social work practice, target-driven cultures focused on managerial concerns and cultures that do not support learning. It highlights the need to support reflective practice within safe, containing contexts characterised by clear organisational and professional boundaries; multifaceted reflective forums; collaborative and communicative working practices; open managers who understand the contexts their staff work in, and reflective spaces where practitioners can think, feel and talk about their work with families. Team structures and practices and supervision have a pivotal role to play in supporting this. Supervision needs to provide social workers with intellectual and emotional support and needs to be provided by experienced relationship-based practitioners. This is a challenge to the existing tendency to managerial and procedural ways of working and requires employers to articulate clear goals in line with a child welfare approach and realistic strategies to achieve them.

These issues also have implications for the selection and training of social workers. The review notes the importance of selecting social workers for training on the basis of their demonstrated capacity to become reflective practitioners working in relationship-based ways. It argues there is a need for more focus in basic training on working in partnership with families, relationship-based approaches; structured decision-making and assessment and the use of proven standardised tools; observational skills to interpret parent-child relationships; an understanding of early child development, and proven methods of intervening based on it. It highlights the need to skill up the workforce in these ways of working.

## **Models of integrated working**

Finally, the review highlights implications for models of integrated working, pointing to the need for teams of practitioners in which social workers work alongside other specialists. The review highlights the importance of effective integrated working, and notes evidence of better integration in countries utilising holistic, family-welfare focused systems than in those using child protection focused systems. It highlights models such as the 'team around the child and family'; the single worker with a small caseload and 24-hour availability of supervision or consultation based on US models of intensive family preservation; co-working models of intensive support sharing the lead professional role, and the social work units model used in Hackney's Reclaiming Social Work programme.

## **ABOUT RESEARCH IN PRACTICE**

It may also be helpful if I outline how **research in practice** can support children's services. We are the leading agency focused on building capacity for evidence-informed practice in children's services in England and Wales. We are a membership-based network of over 110 agencies (including 83 local authorities in England and all 22 in Wales), and core partner in the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). Our work with our Partner agencies focuses on

building capacity for confident and evidence-informed decision-making, critical thinking and professional development, and is based around:

- **Research summaries:** a regular flow of commissioned and peer-reviewed research summaries which are accessible, concise and practice-focused and link good practice with the research evidence
- **Learning Programme:** creative, action-oriented events delivered by experts in their field, targeted at interdisciplinary audiences of frontline practitioners and managers; plus e-learning resources. Our current programme includes workshops for team managers on using evidence-informed practice to improve case work and decision-making
- **Change Projects:** collaborative research implementation projects where a group of agencies carry out pilot projects and develop a set of practical tools and exemplars to support embedding evidence in a particular area of practice. Current and recent Change Projects focus on developing organisational approaches that support evidence-informed practice; using research in court proceedings; and developing analysis and critical thinking skills in assessment
- **Website:** a rich resource of materials and interactive learning platform to support evidence-informed practice including What Works for Troubled Children - a searchable database of information about evidence-based programmes and recommended approaches to case work
- **Networking activities** – annual events for strategic leaders, elected members and Link Officers, and an electronic good practice exchange forum
- **In-house support:** tailored to the needs of each individual Partner, including workshops and strategic advice and guidance

Our Partner agencies tell us these services play an important role in helping them to build capacity for evidence-informed judgement and critical thinking, and in supporting professional development.

I hope that this submission, and the full research review, will support your work. If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised or need further details or clarification, or if we can support the work of your review in any way, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Best wishes

Yours sincerely

Jane Lewis  
Director

## **ANNEX**

### **PRACTICE EXAMPLES**

The following practice examples, extracted from **research in practice** Prompt Topic Briefings which bring together research and practice examples, may be of particular interest to the review's work on **identifying children and young people in need and improving social work practice in assessing and helping children, young people and their families**.

#### **From Prompt Topic Briefing: Thresholds for children's social care (May 2010)**

##### **Torbay: CAF mentors**

Torbay's CAF mentor scheme was set up in April 2008. Four CAF mentors (with professional experience in social work, youth work, early intervention and Connections) and two administrators have dealt with around 1387 CAF submissions since 2006. The mentors receive all CAF referrals, liaise with referrers to set up family support meetings, and chair the meetings where a referrer is not confident to take that role themselves.

A large number of Torbay's CAF referrals come from schools, which also use a 'pseudo CAF' to make referrals for attendance services to the local authority (these are not strictly CAFs as the referrals are not voluntary on part of families and children/young people, but they follow the same format and prompt the CAF Mentors to contact Attendance Officers on any prior or existing CAF support). The team work closely with Health Visitors, school nurses, parent support facilitators, family support, targeted youth support, housing, voluntary agency staff and volunteers. Initially there were 'pockets of resistance' to the CAF process, but it is now becoming embedded within Torbay's service delivery.

Late in 2009 the CAF mentor team relocated into the children's care services offices, as part of a wider set of developments towards a single point of entry at Torbay. Torbay is working towards greater compatibility between the CAF and children's social care systems of recording, with a view to minimising the duplication of paperwork.

For cases that don't meet the threshold for children's social care which in the past would have been marked for 'no further action', the CAF process is providing a 'safety net'. Where there is not an active or imminent safeguarding concern to children's social care, or where there is lack of concrete or corroborated evidence, and where the adults in the family will engage voluntarily, the CAF process is used to deliver support services such as Triple P parenting programmes and targeted youth support. Where the adults in the family will not engage, with case is reviewed.

Since July 2009, evaluation of outcomes is being undertaken using a tool developed by the CAF team at Bristol City Council. This uses a scoring system to rate a child's vulnerability, which is updated after 6 months to measure 'distance travelled' over that time. The most recent evaluation data shows that in 31 of 39 cases for which second scoring data are available, distance travelled was in the direction of improvement, with 4 cases deteriorating and 4 cases remaining at the same level as in initial scoring.

The CAF mentors are aware of the need to keep a distinct profile - as a source of support to those who will engage voluntarily – in order to counter initial perceptions that CAF is ‘another arm’ of children’s social care. Post-statutory CAF work with families with the most entrenched, long-term problems can be challenging. While these families may not require statutory intervention all the time, they may also pay ‘lip service’ to voluntary engagement. The mentors are doing their best to support practitioners in establishing relationships of trust, to be seen as available when wanted and taking a back seat when families don’t want to engage (with an eye to safeguarding concerns). In time, the mentors hope to see the CAF process working as an early intervention tool with these families – focusing on younger age groups and in response to particular family crises, social workers able to an increased range of support services emerging in response to the needs identified within the CAF process. In fact, over the first two years, the CAF mentors have been children's and parents' practitioners across the board in dealing with many families who would not in the past have got support from anywhere at all.

### **Devon: Multi-agency safeguarding hub**

In April 2010, Devon began the introduction of a multi-agency safeguarding hub to deal with all referrals to social care in a new way.

Referrals that do not meet Devon’s threshold for statutory services tended in the past to lack follow up and in many cases there was an escalating level of concern and multiple referrals until the threshold was met. The hub will put together an information package and then determine the course of action, working closely with the Early Response Service who will support single agency response or CAF / TAC process.

The multi-agency safeguarding hub has three functions: Managing referrals from the police, in partnership with the police; contacts and referrals to Early Years and Families; and liaison with the Early Response Service to meet children and young people’s needs that do not meet the threshold for Early Years and Families.

The Multi-Agency Safeguarding hub includes representatives of Probation, Health, Education, Adult Services, Fire and Ambulance Services, some located physically in the same building, with others participating virtually. Service delivery will be managed outside the hub and governance and management arrangements of all actions fall to the organisations with responsibility for delivery of service.

The hub is not intended to replace the functions of assessment, information sharing or multi-agency working. It is intended to collate the full information known within separate organisations into a coherent format to be passed in order to progress assessment and service delivery in a timely manner. The work of the hub will roll out across the county over six months and Devon and Cornwall Police are looking at developing the hub concept across the peninsula. The function of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding hub is to:

- Manage contacts and referrals received from any source
- Develop a document recording the concern/risk information and all available information within the hub within agreed timescales
- Early Years and Families manager will make an informed decision using all of the

available information

- Develop concern/risk information into an Early Years and Families referral if services are required under section 17 and / or section 47, Children Act 1989
- Liaise with the Early Response Service for children and Young People requiring services not meeting Children Act 1989 threshold
- Provide consultation to agency referrers about thresholds

The expectation is that better informed multi agency information sharing and decision making will lead to a decrease in the number of initial assessments undertaken by Early Years and Families Assessment Service. It is anticipated that there may be a potential decrease in re-referral rates due to increased information being available to managers at the point of deciding an appropriate referral outcome based on the child's needs.

The Early Years and Families' manager will determine if cases meet the threshold for a referral for statutory services, provide line management and supervision to Early Years and Families staff in the hub, and consultation to staff and managers from partner agencies. An Early Years and Families' referral coordinator will develop an electronic recording system for information on concerns/risk regarding a child/young person from any source. The coordinator will check data systems (e.g. CareFirst, ContactPoint) for additional information and this add to the record and liaise with other professionals (including virtual members) of the hub. The referral coordinator will also develop an Early Years and Families referral form for cases that reach the threshold for statutory services. In the first phase CareFirst will provide the platform for the multi-agency safeguarding hub recording tool. Information sharing governance will be developed by the Children's Trust information governance group, led by the police.

### **From Prompt Topic Briefing: Parent and baby assessment placements (November 2009)**

#### **Somerset Council and South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership Project on Parent and Baby Assessment Provision**

The work began in late 2008 with a scoping of practice. In June 2009 Somerset hosted a regional meeting and various strands of work are currently underway, including:

- A regional good practice event in October 2009
- A questionnaire with CAFCASS guardians which explored standards of assessment, in order to inform a set of agreed baseline criteria for assessments that can be validated by courts and guardians
- An investigation into the pros and cons of regional contracting for parent and baby placements
- A consideration of agreeing a regional fee for foster assessment placements
- Development of a regional accredited training programme, with plans to trial this in Somerset in winter 2009 and to disseminate the programme in 2010

Through this project Somerset aim to develop more control on the quality of assessments and more control of contracts with providers.

Plymouth's tool for core assessment received a good deal of interest at the regional conference. The tool identifies areas in need of assessment and uses a 'traffic light'

system to indicate severity of concern around particular issues. Which specific areas are to be addressed in individual cases are identified in a pre-birth assessment. The tool is revisited week on week. Family Support Services focuses on working to address the 'red' concerns. Risk indicators can be seen to go from 'amber' to 'green' and then if the risk is raised again back to 'amber'. The tool shows strengths and weaknesses and helps to assess parental capacity to change.

### **From Prompt Topic Briefing: Effective targeting (September 2008)**

#### **Leicester: Junior Youth Inclusion Programme (YIP)**

In the first year of the project only 1% of the young people participating reoffended, while a third of the young people it worked with stayed out of trouble altogether.

Twice a year the project identifies 40 young people most vulnerable to social exclusion and becoming involved in crime and anti-social behaviour through a multi-agency referral process. The YIP works in three areas in Leicester that are in the top 5% of indices of deprivation and have the highest crime rates. The project works with young people towards achieving better outcomes and quality of life, with focus on supporting educational attendance and attainment, and working on behavioural issues. There are few activities for 8 to 12 year olds in these areas and Leicester has one of the highest levels of school non-attendance and exclusion in the country.

The project starts with a home visit, then, based on their interests, young people are involved in a programme of developmental and diversionary activities and interventions. This often includes parent/carer support and signposting. The relationships between project staff and the children/young people and families are central to the success of this preventative model of working. Leicester Junior YIP is independently evaluated using an action-learning research model. The team identifies the best 'link person' (professional) whose role is to encourage and support involvement; they have established exciting activities in the young people's home neighbourhood.

#### **Hull: Goodwin Volunteer Doula Project**

Goodwin Volunteer Doula Project and Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust received an award from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Maternity in 2008. The awards acknowledge inspiring work in improving local maternity services.

Newland and Avenue Sure Start in Hull have developed a project to recruit, train and match up volunteer 'doulas' with pregnant women in the local area. The project has now expanded to cover the whole of Hull. The doulas offer emotional and physical support to women before, during and after childbirth. The Hull Doulas are trained to offer support in the latter stages of pregnancy, at childbirth and in the first few weeks of family life, and to signpost women to other services where needed. They receive training around breastfeeding, child protection Level 1, health & safety, aromatherapy, domestic violence awareness, water births and smoking cessation in pregnancy.

The project aims are to:

- Train and support local women to become volunteer doulas

- Provide non judgmental, consistent and tailored support for isolated and vulnerable women and their families
- Enthusiastically promote the benefits of natural birth and breastfeeding to ensure these women know the options available to them
- Build links and develop positive relationships between midwifery services and the voluntary and community sector
- Listen to the needs of local women from disadvantaged communities, ensuring we are meeting these needs

Feedback has been very positive. There have been reduced incidences of medical intervention and increased breastfeeding rates and the project is a rewarding experience for volunteers. Breastfeeding rates for new mums engaged in the project are very good; most recent figures show 77% of new mums initiating breastfeeding, compared to local rates of around 46%. 68% were still breastfeeding at six weeks. The project is being researched by Hull University.

#### **OTHER research in practice RESOURCES INCLUDING PRACTICE EXAMPLES**

The Hand Books produced following **research in practice** Change Projects may also be of particular interest to the review's work on **strategies for skills development**. They combine a summary of the research evidence with learning and resources from pilot projects carried out by Partner agencies:

- Critical analysis skills in assessment (work in progress)
- Integrated practice on the frontline (published 2009)
- Evidence Matters – social work expertise in the family courts (published 2008)
- Leading evidence-informed practice (published 2007)

For copies of these and other **research in practice** publications please contact [jane@rip.org.uk](mailto:jane@rip.org.uk)