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Safeguarding in the 21st century - where to now

A compelling vision offering a 21st century model of safeguarding. This review is essential reading for everyone leading work around the safeguarding of children from abuse.

Using published research and policy documents to give an overview of both the history and context of safeguarding policy, as well as the ongoing challenges facing everyone working in child protection, this review highlights the direction in which social work must move to enable more effective practice. While written for directors of children's services, and senior managers, the findings are directly relevant to all practitioners whose work involves safeguarding children from abuse.

Detailed chapters cover the assessment process, effective intervention with families and integrated working, as well as detailed discussion of 16 evidence-informed concepts that underpin the safeguarding model, including relationship-based practice, partnership with parents and transdisciplinary working.

The review argues that although there is little ‘hard’ evidence about what works for ‘multi-problem’ and ‘resistant’ families, a broader evidence-based is now emerging from the fields of infant mental health, developmental psychology, and counselling and psychotherapeutic practice more generally.

The review concludes with a series of detailed recommendations at strategic, operational and practitioner level.

Written by Jane Barlow, Professor of Public Health in the Early Years at the University of Warwick.
research in practice

Safeguarding in the 21st century - where to now

Jane Barlow with Jane Scott

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QUALITY MARK This review has been peer-reviewed by a range of service agency directors, academics, and policy practitioners committed to the development of evidence-informed practice. The authors would like to thank the following for their helpful comments: Celia Atherton, Susannah Bowyer, Sandra Campbell, Tracy Collins, Hilton Davis, Crispin Day, Stuart Gallimore, Jenny Gray, Colin Green, Anne Goldsmith, David Howe, Ruth Kingdom, Jane Lewis, Sarah Moore, Jo Tucker, and Andrew Webb.

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The views expressed in this document are those of the authors alone.
Introduction

Research in practice works to make it easier for those who deliver services to children and families to access reliable research, summarised and interpreted with their particular needs in mind. This series of research reviews addresses issues identified by strategic planners, policy makers and practitioners and is of relevance whether they work in local authorities, voluntary organisations, health settings, other Children's Trust partners, central government or national organisations. The reviews are intended to shape systems, services, approaches and practice that will promote better outcomes for children and families.

This review sets out a vision of safeguarding that is fit for the twenty-first century. Its premise is that we are at a point where we need to make real changes to our approach. The last few years have seen a refocusing of safeguarding policy away from narrow interpretations of child protection to a wider vision of well-being and children's welfare needs. This shift is well supported by research, and indeed recent evidence shows falling levels of possible child abuse related deaths and greater progress in reducing such deaths in England and Wales than in most other major developed countries.

And yet there are real tensions in the system. We know that the extent of child abuse is greater than previously recognised, that there is still a real gap in its identification, and that the problems faced by the families in which it takes place are profound and multifaceted. The professions engaged in safeguarding - particularly but not only social work - highlight the problems caused by proceduralist tendencies, low tolerance of risk, low professional confidence and pressures on reflective decision-making and practice.

This review calls for a new conceptual model for safeguarding - one that will bring provision on the ground into alignment with policy and indeed go further in realising the ambition of a child-welfare approach. This means safeguarding practice that is more clearly rooted in what we know about child development. It means approaches to assessment which reflect what we know about parent-child interaction and the complexity of families' social worlds. It means an approach that sees the sustained client-practitioner relationship as key to successful therapeutic work with abusive parents and abused children. And it means organisational contexts that facilitate holistic reflective practice.

The review will be of real value to those concerned with the systems and practices used in assessment, intervention and integrated working, and to those engaged in professional training and development, across the professions engaged in safeguarding children.

Jane Lewis
Director of research in practice
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The changing face of safeguarding in the 21st century

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this publication is to set out a vision of a 21st century model of safeguarding in terms of its conceptual underpinnings (Chapter Two), the assessment process (Chapter Three), the provision of targeted family support (Chapter Four), and joint working (Chapter Five). It is based on the findings from a review of both published research and a range of policy and commentary documents (see Appendix A for a description of the methods used).

Although the focus of the review is local authority children’s services and social work, the findings are relevant to all practitioners whose work involves the safeguarding of children from abuse. Furthermore, it will be suggested that the model of safeguarding being proposed, particularly in terms of some of the conceptual underpinnings, are of relevance across the safeguarding spectrum, and that the care-control continuum that is continuously being negotiated by social care practitioners in particular, is better navigated using some of the approaches recommended here, many of which are typically abandoned once serious child protections concerns become an issue. Indeed, we will suggest that although there is very little ‘hard’ (ie randomised controlled trials) evidence about what works for ‘multi-problem’ and ‘resistant’ families, there is a broader evidence base emerging from the field of infant mental health, developmental psychology and counselling and psychotherapeutic practice more generally, which very clearly highlights the direction in which social work professionals now need to move in order to both advance the profession and to enable it to return to more effective methods of practice.

In this chapter, we start by examining some of the ongoing issues in the field of safeguarding. We then provide a brief overview of policy developments and their links with the broader social and political context. Chapter Two provides a summary of the findings about the conceptual underpinnings that the literature suggests are appropriate for a 21st century model of safeguarding, and outlines what such a model should comprise. This conceptual model is used to frame the findings throughout subsequent chapters. Chapter Three examines the evidence in relation to the assessment process; we focus in particular on evidence in relation to both the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the use of ‘initial’ and ‘core’ assessments undertaken by social workers. Chapter Four examines the evidence in relation to what effective working with complex families should comprise and the organisational infrastructure required to facilitate this. Chapter Five examines recent evidence in relation to integrated or joined-up working. The review covers a wide evidence base, and we have attempted to draw out the implications of the findings in Chapter Six in terms of leadership, organisational models, practice, training and workforce development.

1.2 The issues

In 2008 The Lancet medical journal commissioned four papers addressing what is currently known about child abuse. These reviews of the evidence showed that the extent of the problem was far greater than had been recognised to date, giving a prevalence in the region of 10 per cent based on data obtained from retrospective
The conceptual basis for a 21st century model of safeguarding

This chapter discusses 16 concepts that can be applied at a number of levels (ie organisational, practitioner and user), and that the research suggests are fundamental to an effective 21st century model of safeguarding. Together these provide a coherent over-arching and evidence-based framework for practice.

2.1 Introduction

Policy changes over the past decade (see Chapter One) have created the context for a model of safeguarding that has at its heart the promotion of the well-being of all children, and indeed, recognition of children’s right not only to protection but to optimal conditions in which to grow and develop (Committee on the Rights of the Child 1989). These policy developments are consistent with recent evidence, which strongly suggests the need to move in the direction of a child and family welfare model of safeguarding. Recent research also points, however, to the need for child-care practitioners generally, and social workers more specifically, to develop a more holistic understanding of individual functioning - one that embraces the ‘complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty that characterises human behaviour and people’s lives’ and thereby the professional worker-client relationship (Ruch 2005). This research suggests that the orthodox, technical-rational understandings of knowledge that have emerged alongside some of the policy changes, and which have been described as ‘desperate attempts to cling on to certainty and eliminate risk through the application of increasingly proceduralised responses to the challenges of practices...’, now need changing because they have proved fruitless (Ruch 2005).

This chapter will bring together a number of concepts which the research suggests are fundamental to effective safeguarding, and which will be used to define the approach adopted throughout the remainder of this publication. The concepts that have been selected for inclusion have all been the subject of considerable research and debate over the past ten years and can be applied at a number of levels - systems-level, practice-level, and user-level. These categories, however, are not exclusive, and concepts that have, for the purpose of our discussion, been organised as user-level could equally be defined as system-level concepts within another context. Neither is this list definitive. It seems likely there are other concepts that could complement the list assembled here and that it should be extended as time progresses.

2.2 Underpinning concepts

Overview

Box 2.1 summarises the core concepts that our review of the evidence has highlighted as being fundamental to a 21st century model of safeguarding. They are consistent with recent policy developments such as Think Family: Improving the life chances of families at risk (Cabinet Office 2007), and the application of these concepts across the safeguarding continuum would address some of the practice issues that have emerged during the past two decades. They provide the basis for an advanced model of practice that should be embraced both by managers and practitioners working across children’s services.
chapter three

Assessment of families

This chapter examines:
> recent findings with regard to the use of the Common Assessment Framework
> recent findings since the refocusing initiative with regard to the use of initial and core assessments
> recent evidence that emphasises the importance of assessing parenting capacity, parent-child interaction, and parental readiness and capacity for change.

3.1 Introduction

Child and family policy in the UK is focused on helping children to achieve good developmental outcomes by reducing social exclusion and providing both practical and emotional support at an early stage with the aim of preventing more long-term problems (Cleaver and Walker 2004). One consequence of this has been the need for a range of service providers to become involved in ‘assessment’ in order to ‘identify accurately and sensitively those children who may require services’ (Cleaver and Walker 2004).

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF/eCAF) is one part of a tripartite system (including also the ContactPoint database and Lead Professional), which was introduced to facilitate better outcomes for children (Garrett 2009) through the ‘development of a culture of assessment, information sharing and earlier intervention amongst child welfare practitioners’ (Pithouse et al. 2009). It is ‘a tool to enable early and effective assessment of children and young people who need additional services or support from more than one agency’, and comprises a ‘holistic consent-based needs assessment framework which records, in a single place and in a structured and consistent way, every aspect of a child's life, family and environment’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010). It is directed at universal service practitioners (eg health, education, voluntary and private sectors) and is located firmly within the Every Child Matters agenda, which identified five outcomes that are key to well-being in childhood and later life - being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and economic well-being (Department for Education and Skills 2003). It was piloted across a number of ‘trailblazing’ local authorities in 2005 with the long-term aim of being fully implemented in England by the close of 2008. It was intended that the CAF would help practitioners develop a shared understanding of a child’s needs, so they can be met more effectively and that it would ‘avoid children and families having to tell and re-tell their story’; it was ‘designed specifically to help practitioners assess needs at an earlier stage and then work with families alongside other practitioners and agencies to meet them’ (Gilligan and Manby 2008). The CAF is not, however, a referral form (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010).

The ‘refocusing’ initiative (see Chapter One), which was similarly based on the findings from a programme of research on child protection (Department of Health 1995) and a series of government inspections (Social Services Inspectorate 1997; Cleaver and Walker 2004), aimed to introduce a more holistic, multiagency approach towards the assessment of children in need. It was intended to move the focus away from the identification of
How do we intervene effectively with families?

This chapter:

> considers how we should be supporting multi-problem families to change their behaviour by examining what is known about ‘what works’

> examines evidence-based models of ‘partnership’ and ‘relationship-based’ practice as the core features of all intervention strategies, and discusses what such practice should involve

> examines the evidence about ‘what works’ to improve the parent-child relationship and parenting practice where there is concern about the abuse of (i) children under four, and (ii) older children

> discusses the importance of assessing parents’ capacity to change within the context of the services being provided and ways of assessing whether the desired change in parenting has taken place.

4.1 Introduction

One of the key components of safeguarding practice is intervening effectively to bring about change in families experiencing complex problems, and the research suggests that expectations on this front are currently too low. Many children and families receive a plethora of services that don’t meet stringent criteria in terms of ‘effectiveness’ and are therefore often not rated as being of value, and there is a significant gap in the evidence base in relation to how to intervene with more ‘complex’ cases at later stages of the problem (Brandon and Thoburn 2008). Indeed, there is some suggestion that the most ‘complex’, most ‘challenging families’ are those least likely to be helped by the programmes that emerge from systematic reviews as being effective (Utting, Monteiro and Ghate 2007).

These issues are compounded by a range of other factors. For example, one study that involved both clients and social workers found that the process of intervention was affected by a process of ‘disculpability’ in which each group blamed the other when interventions ran a negative course. What was termed ‘adequate impotence’ reigned supreme because each party felt unable to promote good relationships or efficacy, with each blaming the other for the outcomes, and both parties feeling that the outcome didn’t really depend upon their actions (Sousa and Eusebio 2007).

There is increasing recognition that the practitioner/service-user relationship currently emphasises ‘legal and administrative requirements and tasks and outcomes’ (Howe 1997), as opposed to the professional relationship and emotional aspects of an individual’s circumstances, and that practice is dominated by ‘procedural and managerialist responses’ (Ruch 2005). There is also increasing recognition that ‘under certain circumstances the child protection system can be harmful, specifically when statutory involvement acts to disempower parents and fails to specify or acknowledge changes that the family need to make to achieve a minimal standard of parenting’ (Harnett and Day 2008).

The training of a range of practitioners over recent years, including social workers, has resulted in the development of a safeguarding workforce who are reluctant to ‘engage
Effective integrated working

This chapter:
> discusses in detail research about the different models of integrated working that have been identified, including models of integrated working in other European countries
> examines what the research suggests in terms of the factors that are now recognised to be hindering or facilitating the development of effective integrated working
> concludes with an examination of the evidence about the outcomes of integrated working.

5.1 Introduction

Following the Laming Inquiry in 2003 joint working was made a priority for children's services. The Children Act 2004 required local public bodies to work together through Children's Trusts, which most areas were expected to have in place by 2006, and all by 2008. However, the national Audit Commission (2008) found there was considerable local confusion about whether 'Children's Trust' meant a new statutory body or mandated partnership working.

Child protection services have faced problems with interagency collaboration since the 1960s, on issues such as 'lack of ownership amongst senior managers; inflexible organisational structures; conflicting professional ideologies; lack of budget control; communication problems; poor understanding of roles and responsibilities; and mistrust amongst professionals' (see Horwath and Morrison 2007 for an overview). Many of these problems have continued into recent times. They have been exacerbated by the fact that much of the current research fails to provide a common language to describe collaboration and by an absence of consistent messages about how to address the issues (Horwath and Morrison 2007).

A range of terms have been used to describe integrated working. These include holistic governance, joined-up working, multi- and cross-agency working, multi-professional/disciplinary working, cross-boundary working, networks, collaboration and co-ordination (Percy-Smith 2006). Although some of these terms pertain to different levels of delivery, shared characteristics include the following:

> the structure and/or way of working involves two or more organisations.
> the organisations retain their own separate identities
> the relationship between the organisations is not that of contractor to provider
> there is some kind of agreement between the organisations to work together in pursuit of an agreed aim
> that aim could not be achieved, or is unlikely to be achieved, by any one organisation working alone
> relationships between organisations are formalised (ie partnership is more than a network) and are expressed through an organisational structure and the planning, implementation and review of an agreed programme of work (Percy-Smith 2006).
6.1 Introduction

In this section we bring together our vision of a 21st century model of safeguarding, by drawing out some of the key messages from the range of published papers and documents that we identified, which addressed the questions raised at the outset (see Chapter One). Although much of the discussion has been informed by evidence from rigorously conducted research, we have where necessary based our conclusions on knowledge secured from discussion papers and books. For example, while some of the conceptual issues are very firmly underpinned by a widely developed evidence base (such as the importance of the first three years of life and children’s social and emotional development), some of the concepts (such as, for example, complexity and critical realism) are the culmination of wide-ranging discussions and consensus opinion.

The key messages in this publication are consistent with the policy context for safeguarding that has been developed over the past decade, which has begun the process of moving away from a child protection to a child-welfare model of safeguarding (Gilbert et al. 2009a). This policy move has brought the UK into alignment with our European counterparts (Katz and Hetherington 2006), although there is still much more that we can learn from them in terms of integrated working, investment, and training (Boddy and Statham 2009).

The policy context for moving toward a child-welfare model of working, which emphasises the delivery of family support across all levels of provision (ie from universal level through to specialist services), is now largely in place. Three of the key findings of this report are:

1. The practices arising from revised policy are more favourable to both families and practitioners, and there is early evidence of better outcomes.
2. There is, nevertheless, a significant gap between such policy and actual provision on the ground, and a need for considerable change to practice to bring it into alignment with policy.
3. There is a need for further changes to practice that go beyond the policy recommendations that have been made to date.

Although we recognise the lead role and professional responsibility of social workers with regard to safeguarding, the findings of this report are of relevance to all practitioners working across the safeguarding continuum.

The next section examines the overall model that is suggested by both policy and research, and the second section examines the recommendations at strategic, operational and practitioner level.

6.2 An evidence-based 21st century model of safeguarding

Every Child Matters and the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families have created the necessary policy context for a 21st century model of safeguarding. However, the research suggests that further changes are now needed, and supports the model of provision depicted in Figure 6.1.
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