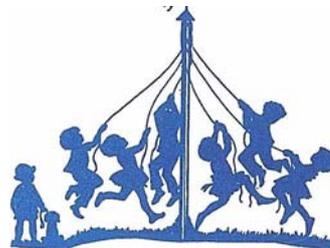


Child Protection Research into Practice: Who Takes the Risks?

THE MICHAEL SIEFF FOUNDATION
Working Together for Children's Welfare

**REPORT OF THE CONFERENCE HOSTED BY THE
MICHAEL SIEFF FOUNDATION HELD AT
CUMBERLAND LODGE SEPTEMBER 1995**



Introduction and Summary

It seems unlikely that any politician will ever seek to gain popularity by promoting a distinctive personal or party policy in the area of child welfare. There is little to be gained politically from successful policies, and much to be lost from the inevitable failures. Thus, more than in most areas of government, policy is likely to be formed by finding out accurately what is happening, and what works best when problems are addressed. Research is crucially important.

The conference considered the changes which are suggested by the available research, the way that changes are being implemented in a number of localities, and some of the general problems relating to change within large organisations. This was done from the perspectives of researchers, practitioners and the judiciary, as well as by comparison with what is happening in France.

Frequent reference was made at the conference to the programme of fourteen research studies commissioned by the Department of Health following the Cleveland Inquiry. Most have now been published — two weeks are needed to read what is available. An overview, *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (known as *The Blue Book*) has been published recently. Although it is hoped this report will be intelligible and interesting to those who have not read the Blue Book, familiarity with its contents was taken for granted at the conference. Throughout this report 'the research' refers to that programme, and those who require the precise source of every statistic should read the Blue Book, if not the research itself.

Child Protection: Messages from Research HMSO [1995] ISBN 0 11 321781 1 £14

Recommendations from the Conference

During the conference eight discussion groups each met for over three hours. Recurrent themes in their recommendations were identified by **Richard White**, who then, together with **Dr Alan Gilmour**, used them to lead a wide-ranging discussion.

Children's Service Plans

These provide many opportunities for development and it was suggested that the Department of Health should commission some demonstration projects.

Although statutory responsibilities for Children's Service Plans rest solely on social services, there usually has to be evidence of joint agency agreements before multi-million pound grants are released. This was thought to be a good model which could be adopted by the Home Office, for example, with regard to money for working with juveniles. Unfortunately some politicians regard such specific grants as an attack on local democracy.

Area Child Protection Committees

Should ACPCs continue to be concerned with children at risk and run in parallel with systems for multi-disciplinary work elsewhere, or should there be a unified Area Child Support Committee to apply liaison between agencies across the board, and child protection in only a few cases?

Some thought that ACPCs have no place in a unified process, others thought they should continue to have

an important role in encouraging continued liaison (as opposed to planning) or as one of a number of working sub-groups on specific problem areas such as the disabled.

Case Conferences and the Child Protection Register

It was noted that many children are pushed into case conferences, because that is sometimes the only way to get multi-agency attention. Some were alarmed at this example of family support being delivered through a child protection structure. Others thought that this is an effective use of an existing structure which could be built on, particularly if the child protection registers are abolished and case conferences come to be seen as less threatening.

There was some reluctance to abandon the child protection registers at the present time. They perhaps have some use in the identification and monitoring of dangerous cases, but they are certainly not an indicator of service provision, and they are often seen as the end of a process when they should be seen as just the beginning. Would something similar be re-invented if they were abolished?

It was suggested that a list of children who had undergone a case conference would be as useful as a list of children who had been registered, but would that lead to disagreements about whether or not some case conferences had only been strategy meetings?

An Integrated Inter-Agency Process

There is clearly no good way of separating child protection from children in more general need without perpetuating the polarisation and having a clear boundary between them.

The process must be integrated and inter-agency both at the strategic planning stage and at the tactical stage of assessing particular family needs.

Teachers, doctors and the police are all seen as key agencies - in some way - for children in need, but precisely how to involve them is not clear.

It was suggested that there should be inter-agency duties of co-operation in delivering services and resources to children in need, but that will largely have been achieved once Section 27 of The Children Act has been fully implemented.

Progress Through the Process

1 The entry point should be concern about the child.

- 2 Multi-dimensional assessment, and consultation with professionals, parents and children to establish the nature and severity of problems and needs.
- 3 Setting multi-dimensional objectives and allocating responsibility for achieving them.
- 4 Delivery of agreed services and support systems.
- 5 Re-assessment and monitoring of outcomes.

Stages 2 to 5 can be repeated indefinitely. *No further action* is always an option. Investigation is strictly a side branch which will always lead back into the main process.

User Involvement

There should be user involvement at all stages, including research.

There is a need to understand parental strategies for handling risk. Much attention is paid to professional and agency risk, but we need to understand behaviour from the parental perspective so that we can feed in to their strategy. In cases of domestic violence, for example, women will sometimes reduce risk to their children by increasing the risk to themselves.

Dangerous Cases

These must continue to be identified and criteria for immediate action established. They must certainly not be ignored - protection is still a very real need which must to be met - but they cannot be allowed to dominate our thinking.

Social workers not involved in investigations feel that their career prospects are diminished

Some social services departments are moving towards the use of small, highly trained teams of social workers who concentrate on child-focused investigations, often working in parallel with police teams. This frees other skilled practitioners for work with other children in need. Some departments are moving away from this approach. It seems that social workers who are not involved in investigations feel that their skills are not recognised and that their career prospects are diminished. The families involved do not like to be 'dumped' by one team of social workers which is replaced by another when the investigation is finished, and there is sometimes too much concentration on forensic issues rather than the more difficult contextual issues.

Records

The holding of very detailed records easily accessible by many has wider implications for society

Some called for copious amounts of detailed multi-dimensional information to be kept about children which could be accessed by many agencies. Others were concerned that this could be a large retrograde step away from the kind of society in which most of us want to live.

If records included expectations and intentions, particularly when there are no options which are completely satisfactory, that would enable outcomes to be evaluated against reality rather than against some kind of abstract ideal.

If records are not systematic and comprehensive there is a danger that the absence of some particular information will be thought to indicate that there is no problem, rather than that the relevant questions were not asked

Access to records as they are currently kept is not straightforward. If more information is to be stored, commensurate retrieval systems will need to be put in place.

Information on its own is not necessarily of any value

It was pointed out that the dangerous cases often come with thick and detailed files. The problem is that there is no action plan. Information on its own is not necessarily of any value - it is the use that is made of it that matters

Supervision

Better supervision of social workers would allow informed professional judgements to be made with more confidence. At the moment there are only procedures and guidelines.

Managers are frequently being taught management techniques in isolation, without understanding their products, which ate children's services. If you are in charge of child care you must *understand* child care, and this is frequently not happening.

Dissemination of Research and Training

There is always a danger of being pre-occupied with the current topical issue, whether it is The Children Act, community care, or the latest research. It must

be remembered that all these generate on-going training needs.

There is a need for more research. Results must be disseminated along with good practice, and linked to training.

The Department of Health and senior social services managers should speak with one voice on research messages and their implications for practice, consistent with what it is reasonable to expect from front line workers.

Important documents should not be priced at £200, but the conference was reminded that local authority libraries can buy all HMSO publications at 50% discount.

Messages from research should be published along with their status. Some are findings that can be treated with confidence, some are tentative, others are only interesting possibilities which might usefully be borne in mind. It was pointed out that the essay which forms the introduction to the Blue Book includes only the most authoritative ideas in that research.