How organisations can learn to reduce risk to children

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Professor Munro completed her PhD in ‘The role of scientific methods in social work’ and undertook a study of child abuse inquiries. This work has influenced Community Services as well as other child protection services in several countries. She has also written and published extensively on child protection, including ‘Learning together to safeguard children, learning to reduce risk in child protection’ and a co-authored report: ‘Children’s databases: safety and privacy’. In May 2011, Professor Munro released the final report of her independent review of the child protection system in England. The full reports are available at www.education.gov.uk.

This paper provides a summary of the findings of the review.
Introduction
Determining how to improve child protection systems is a difficult task as these systems are inherently complex. The problems faced by children are complicated and the cost of failure is high. Abuse and neglect can present in ambiguous ways and concerns about a child’s safety or development can arise from myriad signs and symptoms. Future predictions about abusive behaviours are necessarily fallible. The numbers of professions and agencies who have some role in identifying and responding to abuse and neglect means the coordination and communication between them is crucial to success.

Historically, there have been four key driving forces that have shaped child protection systems:

• the importance of the safety and welfare of children and young people and the understandable strong reaction when a child is killed or seriously harmed;

• a commonly held belief that the complexity and associated uncertainty of child protection work can be eradicated;

• a readiness, in high profile public inquiries into the death of a child, to focus on professional error without looking deeply enough into its causes; and

• the undue importance given to performance indicators and targets which provide only part of the picture of practice, and which have skewed attention to process over the quality and effectiveness of help given.

These four drivers have interacted in ways that lead to further problems. Concern with managing uncertainty has been affected by the level of public outcry when mistakes are made, so that there has been a shift towards defensive practice where a concern with protecting oneself or one’s agency has competed, and sometimes overridden, a concern with protecting children.

This leads to systems that put so much emphasis on procedures and recording, that insufficient attention is given to developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children, young people and families.

When these conflict, even the most dedicated child-centred professionals can feel pressured to prioritise the performance demand over the child’s needs.
The principles of an effective child protection system

My work has considered the child’s journey through the child protection system – from needing to receiving help – to show how the system could be improved. I have concluded that instead of ‘doing things right’ (i.e. following procedures) child protection systems needed to be focused on doing the right thing (i.e. checking whether children and young people are being helped).

The following are principles of a good child protection system:

1. The system should be child-centred: everyone involved in child protection should pursue a child-centred approach to their work and recognise children and young people as individuals with rights, including their right to participate in decisions about them in line with their age and maturity. Although a focus of work is often on helping parents with their problems, it is important to keep assessing whether this is leading to sufficient improvement in the capacity of the parents to respond to each of their children’s needs. This, at times, requires difficult judgements about whether the parents can change quickly enough to meet the child’s developmental needs.

2. The family is usually the best place for bringing up children and young people; but difficult judgements are sometimes needed in balancing the right of a child to be with their birth family with their right to protection from abuse and neglect.

3. Helping children and families involves working with them: and therefore the quality of the relationship between the child and family and professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given. Professionals need a difficult combination of skills; being able to be authoritative and ask challenging questions about family life, as well as engaging with parents in order to work with them to resolve their problems, and improve their parenting capacity. Professionals can struggle with this. Some are so focused on supporting parents that they are insufficiently challenging of problematic parenting; others are so focused on checking that the child is safe that they enter an adversarial relationship with the parents. Sometimes the latter is unavoidable, however skilled the professional, but overall, successful engagement with the parents is a key contributor to effective helping.

4. Early help is better for children: it minimises the period of adverse experiences and improves outcomes for children. Research on children’s development emphasises the importance of the early years on their long-term outcomes so preventative services to help parents are a key strategy. Early help, however, is needed not just in the early years but throughout childhood as problems develop.

5. Children’s needs and circumstances are varied so the system needs to offer equal variety in its response: a child protection system needs ‘requisite variety’ to respond to the varied needs of children and young people. Professionals have described to me that they were working in an over-standardised framework that made it difficult for them to tailor their responses to the specific circumstances of individual children. Yet children’s needs and circumstances are varied and this is not an area that can be reduced to a set response. Consequently, professional judgement needs to be exercised in determining how or whether to follow procedures and guidance in any specific case. This requires professionals to understand the rationale for procedures and guidance in order to use them intelligently.

6. Good professional practice is informed by knowledge of the latest theory and research: for all the professional groups involved in child protection, continuing professional development is important so that children and families can benefit from the use of best evidence. Therefore the system should be flexible enough to enable professionals to incorporate new learning into their practice.
7. Uncertainty and risk are features of child protection work: risk management can only reduce risks, not eliminate them. The big problem for society (and consequently for professionals) is working out a realistic expectation of professionals’ ability to predict the future and manage risk of harm to children and young people. Child protection workers face the possibility of censure whatever they do: they are ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t.’ It is therefore important to convey a more accurate picture of the work and an understanding that the death or serious injury of a child may follow even when the quality of professional practice is high.

8. The measure of the success of child protection systems, both local and national, is whether children are receiving effective help: agencies can only improve if they have a good understanding (through, for example, collecting feedback from children and families) of what contribution, if any, they are making to children’s safety and welfare. This is particularly important in terms of checking whether services are having a negative impact on children and families.

The Munro review of child protection

In June 2010, I was asked by the UK Secretary of State for Education to conduct an independent review of child protection in England. In this review, I asked a central question: ‘what helps professionals make the best judgements they can to protect a vulnerable child?’.

This review set out recommendations that would help reform the English child protection system from being over bureaucratised and concerned with compliance, to one that keeps a focus on children, checking whether they are being effectively helped and adapting when problems are identified.

In this review, I considered the five themes for discussion:

1. A system that values professional expertise;
2. Clarifying accountabilities and improving learning;
3. The provision of early help;
4. Developing expertise;
5. The organisational context: supporting effective practice.

1. A system that values professional expertise

Procedures play a crucial role when people have to work together, enabling them to predict what each other will do and setting out basic rules about roles and tasks. This is even more important when it is not an established team but a group who come together for a particular purpose, as is often the case when carrying out an assessment into an allegation of child abuse and neglect.

In professional practice, procedures are an effective way of formulating best practice in carrying out a task so that the wisdom of experienced staff is readily disseminated throughout the organisation and variation in the quality and type of service received is reduced. Procedures are also good as training tools, helping novices get started in learning a task, giving them simple rules to follow without going through the longer process of understanding why those rules are sensible. For experienced workers, they are valuable as a checklist to use when reviewing their work, and are particularly helpful if they are interrupted and have to leave the task for a while.

Procedures, however, have a number of weaknesses. The strength mentioned above, that newcomers can quickly learn to follow procedures even when they do not understand them, is also a weakness. It can lead to people just following procedures and not seeking to understand them or trying to become more effective in their completed tasks.

Another weakness is that procedures are always incomplete and require skill and the use of judgement to implement them. Key skills in child protection work are to engage, communicate with others, and make complex interpretations of the information about a child or young person’s needs and circumstances. When the organisation does not pay sufficient attention to these skills, then procedures may be followed in a way that is technically correct but is so inexpert that the desired result is not achieved.
These two weaknesses are interwoven: procedures can deal well with typical scenarios but not with unusual ones, and an organisational culture where procedural compliance is dominant can stifle the development of expertise. In child protection, the needs and circumstances of children and young people are so varied that procedures cannot fully encompass that variety. Dealing with the variety of need is better achieved by professionals understanding the underlying principles of good practice and developing the expertise to apply them, taking account of the specifics of a child or young person’s circumstances.

For my review of systems in England, practitioners told me that statutory guidance, targets and local rules have become so extensive that they limit professional’s ability to stay child centred. The demands of bureaucracy have reduced their capacity to work directly with children, young people and families. Services have become so standardised that they do not provide the required range of responses to the variety of need that is presented.

Child protection systems need a balance in the amount of central prescription to help professionals move from a compliance culture to a learning culture, where they have more freedom to use their expertise in assessing need and providing the right help.

2. Clarifying accountabilities and creating a learning environment

The number of agencies and professions required to work together well in order to build an accurate understanding of what is happening in the child’s life and to provide help is part of the inherent challenge in building an effective child protection system. To achieve this, lines of accountability within and between different agencies need to be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

The remit of my review into child protection systems in England included a request to consider how serious case reviews could be improved. Criticism of the current methods in England included evidence that there was too much emphasis on getting the process right, rather than improving outcomes for children.

Practitioners were feeling criticised rather than supported by the process and there was a belief that:

- Serious case reviews were generally successful at identifying what had happened to the children concerned, but were less effective at addressing why.

Without being able to explain why professionals acted or failed to act as they did, serious case review recommendations tended to take the form of admonishments to professionals of what they ‘should’, ‘need’ or ‘must’ do in specific situations in the future. This has ended up reinforcing a prescriptive approach toward practice.

The problem with such a prescriptive approach is that without sufficient understanding of what is making it difficult for staff to comply with certain standards or procedures in the first place, renewing and revising those procedures, or reminding professionals of their existence, is unlikely to be effective in securing or sustaining the desired change.

My review recommended a move towards a systems approach for serious case review, based on an organisational learning approach used by the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK. This approach argues that the issue of medical errors was ‘not a ‘bad apple’ problem’ and that ‘mistakes can best be prevented by designing the health system at all levels to make it safer – make it harder for people to do something wrong and easier for them to do it right’.

This approach takes the view that blaming individuals for errors and mistakes is rarely helpful or productive. It produces inadequate learning and, in some cases, creates new obstacles to improving performance. Instead errors and mistakes should be accepted as to some degree inevitable and to be expected, given the complexity of the task and work environment. In place of a blame culture, where people try to conceal difficulties, it is better for people to discuss problems so that they can be managed or minimised. This approach explicitly focuses on understanding professional practice in context. It draws on human factors research which aims to design and re-design processes and procedures.


that are based on realistic conceptions of human strengths and weaknesses, so that broader compatibility can be achieved between people, technology, and work environments.

Child protection systems have much to gain from adopting this approach. Critically, a systems approach to case review explicitly focuses on a deeper understanding of why professionals have acted in the way they have, so that any resulting changes are grounded in practice realities. It provides a clear theoretical framework for understanding professional practice in context. The merit in the approach is that it counters the tendency of the current serious case review methods to reinforce prescriptive approaches to practice, focusing instead on professional learning and increasing professional capacity and expertise.

The systems approach creates the opportunity to study the whole system, enabling learning not just of flaws but also about what is working well.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) Learning Together model has been designed as a systems approach to learning from serious case reviews. The goal of the model is to move beyond the specifics of the particular case – what happened and why – to identify the ‘deeper’, underlying issues that are influencing practice more generally. This involves exploring, among other factors, the ‘local rationality’ or thinking of those involved. It is these generic patterns that count as ‘findings’ or ‘lessons’ from a case and changing them will contribute to improving practice more widely.

While this approach was designed specifically to apply to cases involving multiagency work, it can also be applied to any example of professional practice. In 2010, I participated in a workshop with Community Services to consult on the division’s adaptation of the Learning Together model for internal case reviews. In this workshop, I shared my experiences of using this approach, and provided advice to Community Services about the development of the agency’s methodology for case review.

3. The provision of early help

Services offering early help are not just aimed at preventing abuse or neglect but at improving the life chances of children and young people in general. My review noted the growing body of evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention with children and families, that is, that preventative services can do more to reduce abuse and neglect than reactive services.

The arguments for early intervention

The arguments for early help are three-fold. First, it is cost-effective when current expenditure is compared with estimated expenditure if serious problems develop later.

Secondly, there is the moral argument for minimising adverse experiences for children and young people. From a child or young person’s point of view, the earlier any necessary help is offered the better, since it minimises his or her experience of difficulties. The research evidence demonstrates how deficiencies in early childhood experiences have an enduring impact on the child or young person’s subsequent development and opportunities in life, or resolve maltreatment problems when they are at an early stage, rather than when serious abuse or neglect has occurred.

Finally, there is the argument of ‘now or never’ arising from the evidence of how difficult it is to reverse damage to children and young people’s development. The ‘now or never’ argument cites the compelling evidence on the enduring damage done to babies by unresponsive and neglectful adults. Later in life, their abilities to develop social and emotional capabilities are at serious risk. Babies reach out from birth naturally to create emotional bonds. Such bonds develop at their best when caring adults respond warmly and consistently.

This secure attachment with those close to them leads to the development of empathy, trust and wellbeing. In contrast, an impoverished, neglectful or abusive environment often results in a child who doesn’t develop empathy, learn how to regulate their emotions or develop social skills, and this can lead to an increased risk of mental health problems, relationship difficulties, anti-social behaviour and aggression ... some forms of insecure attachment are associated with significantly elevated levels of perpetrating domestic violence, higher levels of alcohol and substance misuse...

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Neuroscience also offers lessons on the importance of the early years. A recent paper by the Royal Society on the implications of neuroscience for education policy, highlights that there are changes in the brain taking place throughout life, but the number decreases with age. The worst and deepest brain damage occurs before birth and in the first 18 months of life when the emotional circuits are forming.

Identifying abuse and neglect

There is a persuasive case for providing early help to strengthen families and reduce the risk of maltreatment occurring. However, it is not easy for professionals to differentiate between families with low level difficulties who should be offered help, from families who are abusing or neglecting their children where a more authoritative approach is needed. Abuse and neglect rarely present with a clear, unequivocal picture. It is often the totality of information, the overall pattern of the child’s story that raises suspicions of possible abuse or neglect.

There is a tension in providing support to parents. For most, the right approach is to offer services to children and families where they are able to make a voluntary choice to receive them. Then there are parents whose capacity to meet their children’s needs raises some concerns and the relevant services can make more strenuous efforts to make them aware of the help available and to gain their cooperation. There is a third category of parents whose capacity to parent their children raises serious concerns, and it may be necessary to take a more coercive approach. It is the problem of deciding when to escalate the level of professional involvement that is the major challenge in practice. There are risks both to keeping families in the voluntary support services and to escalating them into the child protection service. Workers in the support services, less experienced with abuse and neglect, may be misled by the family and underestimate the harm the child is experiencing. Similarly, there is a cost to having a low threshold of referral to the child protection system. In many cases, suspected abuse or neglect will not be substantiated but the children and families may have been subject to a child protection assessment which is an expensive, unpleasant, and sometimes traumatic experience.

A complicating factor is that parents who voluntarily engage with support services tend to make more progress, while a more coercive approach can deteriorate into an adversarial relationship which blocks progress. Therefore, moving up the scale of intrusiveness carries both gains and losses and so creates a complex decision.

To assist those outside the child protection service to assess families more accurately, it is helpful to have professionals in those services who are trained in child protection and who can offer advice to their colleagues in deciding whether children’s presenting needs mean they are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm.

4. Developing expertise

Whilst sound professional judgement requires time, it also requires child protection practitioners to be in possession of the right knowledge and be capable of clear reasoning. Children need and deserve a high level of expertise from professionals who make such crucial decisions about what is in their best interests. This expertise should include being skilled in relationships where care and control often need to be combined, able to make critical use of best evidence from research to inform the complex judgements and decisions needed, and to help children and families solve problems and to change.

Child protection practitioners can make a significant contribution to improving the lives of children and their families. Some practice is already excellent but my review was concerned to create the context in which that high level of expertise can become the norm.

There is now a considerable body of research on how expertise, in whatever field, is developed. This provides valuable lessons for child protection work. Intuitive and analytic reasoning skills are developed in different ways. Child protection services need to recognise the differing requirements if they are to help practitioners move from being novices to being experts on both dimensions. Analytic skills can be enhanced by formal teaching and reading. Intuitive skills are essentially derived from experience.

Experience on its own, however, is not enough. It needs to be allied to feedback, learning what has happened to the families you have worked with – and to reflection – time and attention given to mulling over the experience and learning from it. This is often best achieved in conversation with others, in supervision, for example, or in discussions with colleagues. Michael Oakeshott (1989) draws attention to the limitations of a ‘crowded’ life where people are continually occupied and engaged but have no time to stand back and think. A working life given over to distracted involvement does not allow for the integration of experience.

The requisite for expertise for child and family work is considered in three sections; (i) relationship skills; (ii) reasoning and emotions in relationship-based practice; and (iii) using evidence.

**Relationship skills**
Skills in forming relationships are fundamental to obtaining the information that helps practitioners understand what problems a family has and to engaging the child and family and working with them to promote change. There is considerable research evidence to support the claim that relationship skills are important in helping people to change, whatever intervention method is being used.

Barlow and Scott (2010) report that:

> A recent overview of the evidence about effective interventions for complex families where there were concerns about (or evidence of) a child suffering significant harm, showed the importance of providing ‘a dependable professional relationship’ for parents and children, in particular with those families who conceal or minimise their difficulties.

Skills identified as contributing to relationship building and positive outcomes include:

a) therapist credibility;
b) empathic understanding and affirmation of the service user;
c) skill in engaging the user;
d) a focus on the user’s concerns; and
e) skill in directing the user’s attention to the user’s emotional experiences.

My review found that practitioners sometimes felt inadequately trained to communicate with children, particularly as children may be very distressed or frightened, needing very sensitive skills in creating a level of trust where the child is willing to speak. The emotional impact of this work can also be very painful, making workers aware of how terrible some children’s lives are.

Communicating with men is also a recurrent problem and leads to them being less visible in the way the case is managed, with their impact on their children being less well assessed or the direct focus of work. A study of cases where the men were known to be violent to their partners provides evidence of a lack of involvement or good assessment of the impact they are having on the children.

**Reasoning and emotions in relationship-based practice**
Focusing on the centrality of relationship skills draws attention to the roles of intuitive understanding and emotional responses. Conscious logical thinking has quite rightly been highly valued as a human attribute, but the traditional view that it is inherently superior to intuition and emotion has been overturned by developments in neuropsychology.

Hammond (1966) argues convincingly for the need to see logical and intuitive thinking on a cognitive continuum where we use a different balance between them depending on what task we are carrying out.

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Solving a maths problem is at the analytic extreme while calming a frightened child uses intuitive understanding.

Research in neuropsychology suggests that our intuitive and emotional responses occur automatically and outside conscious awareness; we cannot choose to be only logical, thinking machines. When a child protection worker visits a home and the father behaves in a threatening manner, the worker’s body reacts automatically, generating stress hormones in response to the perceived threat. Similarly, when an experienced worker meets a family, he or she can quickly pick up an intuitive awareness of the state of the dynamics in the family – the warmth of the relationship between family members, or the level of fear felt by a child. Appreciating the importance of both logical and intuitive understanding and the contribution of emotions, offers guidance on the different training needs in using them to best effect.

Gut feelings are neither stupid nor perfect. They take advantage of the evolved capacities of the brain and are based on rules of thumb that enable us to act fast and with astounding accuracy, shown, for example, in our ability to recognise faces. They are not infallible, as research shows, because intuitive judgments are vulnerable to predictable types of error. Critical challenge by others is needed to help workers catch such biases and correct them – hence the importance of supervision.

The emotional dimension of working with children and families plays a significant part in how social workers reason and act. If it is not explicitly discussed and addressed then its impact can be harmful. It can lead to distortions in workers’ reasoning because of the unconscious influence it has on where attention is focused and how information is interpreted. For example, a practitioner can feel such compassion for the neediness of a mother that he or she fails to see her child’s suffering.

Child protection workers should always consider matters from the perspective of the child and ask themselves, ‘What are the child’s needs?’ The second harmful repercussion is on its impact on the practitioners themselves. Being exposed to the powerful, and often negative, emotions found in child protection work comes at a personal cost. If the work environment does not help support practitioners and debrief them after particularly traumatic experiences, then it increases the risk of burnout which, in the human services, has been defined in terms of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment.

Critical appraisal of the assessment and planning for a child and family, therefore, should be seen as central to good practice in reducing error. Ideally, this should be part of the culture and seen as not a personal attack but an outsider helping to pick up the unseen spots or offering a new angle on the problem. Supervision is one context in which this can happen: it should not be limited to this but something that colleagues or fellow professionals are able to do. The more punitive and defensive the culture, the harder it is for anyone to accept flaws in their reasoning:

Child protection professionals are constantly making judgments that impinge on the rights of parents to be with and relate to their children and the parallel right of children to their parents. The stakes are high and child protection decision-making needs to be as explicit as possible and be available for review and scrutiny.

Using evidence

Evidence is fundamental in casework practice. Practitioners use direct observation and evidence from the child, family, or others who know them to form an understanding of what is going on. They can use evidence from research to inform their analysis of why any problems are happening and they can use evidence on effectiveness to guide their plans on how to help solve the problems. Currently, the use of evidence in the final two categories is very limited and improving this is one necessary element in driving up the level of expertise in the profession.

Evidence on the natural history of problems can make substantial contributions to plans. Where domestic violence is an issue, for example, it might be thought that the children were safe if the parents separated but research indicates that the violence continues in 50 per cent of cases, often during contact visits so practitioners should not believe that the problem is necessarily solved by separation. Evidence-based practice ‘is the conscientious, explicit, judicious, use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients’ Evidence-based practice is sometimes used in a narrow sense to refer to using methods of helping service users that have research evidence of some degree of effectiveness in some places where the methods have been tried and evaluated. Here it is used in the broader sense of drawing on the best available evidence to inform practice at all stages of the work and of integrating that evidence with the worker’s own understanding of the child and family’s circumstances and their values and preferences. It is not simply a case of taking an intervention off the shelf and applying it to a child and family.

My review found that, as a minimum, the capabilities being developed for child and family work must include:

Knowledge

• knowledge of child development and attachment and how to use this knowledge to assess a child’s current developmental state;
• understanding the impact of parental problems such as domestic violence, mental ill health, and substance misuse on children’s health and development at different stages during their childhood; and
• knowledge of the impact of child abuse and neglect on children in both the short and long term and into adulthood.

Critical reflection and analysis

• ability to analyse critically the evidence about a child and family’s circumstances and to make well-evidenced decisions and recommendations, including when a child cannot remain living in their family either as a temporary or permanent arrangement; and
• skills in achieving some objectivity about what is happening in a child’s life and within their family, and assessing change over time.

Intervention and skills

• recognising and acting on signs and symptoms of child abuse and neglect;
• purposeful relationship building with children, parents and carers and families;
• skills in adopting an authoritative but compassionate style of working;
• skills to assess family functioning, take a comprehensive family history, and use this information when making decisions about a child’s safety and welfare;
• knowledge of theoretical frameworks and their effective application for the provision of therapeutic help;
• knowledge about, and skills to use and keep up-to-date with, relevant research findings on effective approaches to working with children and families and, in particular, where there are concerns about abuse or neglect;
• understanding the respective roles and responsibilities of other professionals and how child and family social workers can contribute their unique role as part of a multi-disciplinary team; and
• skills in presenting and explaining one’s reasoning to diverse audiences, including children and judges.

5. The organisational context: supporting effective practice

To be able to practise well, child protection practitioners have to be employed in an organisation that supports them and their professional development. Ferguson’s research on direct work with children and families concludes:

The extent to which social workers are able to delve into the depths to protect children and explore the deeper reaches and inner lives of service users – the degree to which they feel able to get up and walk across the room to directly engage with, touch, and be active with the child or follow through on seeing...
kitchens and bedrooms – is directly related to how secure and contained they feel in separating from the office/car. They can only really take risks if they feel they will be emotionally held and supported on returning to the office that their feelings and struggles will be listened to. Workers’ state of mind and the quality of attention they can give to children is directly related to the quality of support, care and attention they themselves receive from supervision, managers and peers."}

The role of leadership
Managers have to satisfy the needs of both today and tomorrow. They provide day-to-day stable and consistent management of child protection services. But they also exercise leadership to challenge and bring about change and improvement focused on securing a better future. Leadership is needed through periods of organisational change, especially to help move from a command-and-control culture that encourages compliance to a learning culture that adapts to resolve problems.

Leadership is often only understood in terms of individuals at the top of the hierarchy, but it is much more than the simple authority of one or two key figureheads. Leadership behaviours should be valued and encouraged at all levels of organisations. At the front line, personal qualities of leadership are needed to work with children and families when practising in a more professional, less rule-bound, way. Practitioners need to challenge poor parenting, and have the confidence to use their expertise in making principled judgments about how best to help the child and family.

Changing the way organisations manage frontline staff will have an impact on how they interact with children and families. There is evidence that workers tend to treat the service user in the same way as they themselves are treated by their managers.

For some organisations, the change will need a move away from a blaming, defensive culture to one that recognises the uncertainty inherent in the work and that professional judgment, however expert, cannot guarantee positive outcomes for children and families. In child protection, a key responsibility of leaders is to manage the anxiety that the work generates. Some degree of anxiety is inevitable. Whilst practitioners have a key role in protecting children, their safety and welfare cannot be guaranteed. Additional anxiety is fuelled by the level of public criticism that may be directed at child protection professionals if they are involved in a case with a tragic outcome.

An effective child protection system
My review considered that an effective child protection system would have the following characteristics:

• a clear understanding of the capabilities required by staff, based on theory and best practice evidence;

• an operational structure and systems (practice and managerial) which enable all workers to spend most of their time undertaking effective work that directly benefits children and families and which values continuity of worker with children and families;

• a robust selection process for all staff in that structure, so that the requisite knowledge, skills and methodological interests that are needed locally are present and that all recruits have the necessary personal qualities required to develop and learn;

• a clear view on what regulation is absolutely necessary to enable practitioners to do their jobs in a reflective way;

• comprehensive and sufficiently resourced professional development activity to give practitioners the necessary skills set and effect positive and demonstrable change in children and families;

• arrangements for practitioners to have frequent case consultations to explore and reflect on their direct work and plans for children and families, which is separate from ongoing case supervision arrangements;

• arrangements for frequent case supervision for practitioners to reflect on service effectiveness and case decision-making, separate from arrangements for individual pastoral care and professional development;

• arrangements for managers to observe practitioners’ direct work with children and families in both family and multi-disciplinary contexts;

• a demonstrable teaching culture, where all managers and leaders are actively and frequently involved in a mix of case consultation, direct work with children and families and the teaching of theory and practice; and

• a learning culture which results in the organisation knowing its child and family work service and making adjustments to facilitate its practice effectiveness with families and improve outcomes for children.

The public image of child protection work: enhancing responsible coverage
Child protection is naturally of great public interest and will always be extensively reported by the media. My review was not concerned with looking at how to inhibit such reporting, but how to enhance responsible and sensitive coverage, which both acknowledges the difficulties facing those that work in this highly complex area and holds those who are involved to account for their actions.

There is a delicate balance that child protection services and the media should aim to strike when reporting on child protection issues:

• agencies should work proactively with the media to inform the debate as much as they can, without compromising clients’ right to privacy under the law; and

• the media should provide a scrutiny role and has a responsibility to make sure reporting is balanced and accurate, and recognises the complexity of this work.

Presenting the full picture in relation to the complexities of child protection can help society to understand more about what child protection work entails. A one-dimensional view, however, can impact on the child protection system in a way that makes it less safe for children.

A lack of public confidence in child protection professionals can help create spikes in demand that social care teams struggle to cope with, making it more difficult to react quickly to the most serious of cases. Morale among child protection workers can also be damaged, leading to more workers leaving the profession and making it more difficult for the profession to attract candidates and retain skilled staff.

Decisions about the protection of children are among the most difficult that any professional group has to take, and often involve workers making difficult judgment calls, such as whether a child should be moved from the family, based on whether there is evidence or suspicion of maltreatment, or how best to work with a family unit in an attempt to improve relationships between different family members.

To aid understanding about child protection work, while holding those involved to account, media reporting could also helpfully recognise factors that are common to child protection cases, such as:

• adults perpetrating child abuse are often skilful at hiding that abuse from child protection workers and other professionals;

• in many circumstances agencies face both legal and professional constraints that make it very difficult for them to be able to communicate openly about the full circumstances of a case that is under the media spotlight;

• child protection is a multi-agency business – child protection workers, schools, police and others are all involved. It is tempting to seek to identify one particular agency as having failed, but it is more useful to look at the wider picture in terms of the services that have been involved; and

• while there is a natural tendency when confronted with the horrors of a child protection case to seek to find someone, or some organisation, to ‘blame’, the harsh fact of the matter is that in the first instance blame, if it is to be attributed, must be laid at the door of the perpetrator or perpetrators.
References


