



# Defensible decision-making in children's social care

## Resource Pack

## Foreword

In 2020 the North West Regional Research in Practice Partnership (comprising 23 local authorities) commissioned Research in Practice to develop a publication to support practice supervisors in the task of making defensible decisions about work with children and families. In order to do so, we consulted with staff working in children's social care including practice supervisors, Principal Social Workers, HMI Inspectors from Ofsted and senior leaders.

The original publication has now been developed further to create three related resources on the topic of defensible decision-making. We hope that you find the resources useful.

We are grateful to Samantha Sirisambhand, (previously) Policy and Performance Manager, North West Association of Directors of Children's Services, whose input helped shape the remit of this work.

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## Section One: Using this resource pack

### Who is this resource pack for?

This resource pack has been developed to support practice supervisors to:

- > facilitate reflective and analytical discussions in supervision which inform defensible decision-making
- > review and develop skills in writing brief, analytical summaries which ensure that each child's social care record demonstrates evidence of defensible decision-making and a coherent narrative about their involvement with the organisation
- > promote team-wide discussion and shared learning about analysis and defensible decision-making with the practitioners they line manage in order to enhance assessment.

The resource will be relevant to any member of staff who provides individual or group supervision and / or line manages social workers. For example, practice supervisors, advanced practitioners, team managers or assistant team managers.

Section Two highlights the importance of having a clear understanding about the significant role that case files play in helping people to understand their own childhood and their family's involvement with services.

Section Three contains five tools which can be used by practice supervisors in children's social care to support defensible decision-making in supervision discussions and when recording on a child's file.

Section Four includes three tools which can be used to facilitate group discussion, reflection and shared team learning about making defensible decisions when assessing the needs of children and families.

Your organisation may ask you to also attend CPD sessions exploring defensible decision-making as well as reading this resource pack (see below).

You can use this resource as evidence for **Social Work England's Professional Standard 4: Maintaining my CPD** (<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/cpd/>).

### How does this resource pack link with other publications on defensible decision-making?

This resource pack sits alongside two other linked publications designed to be used together to support and promote defensible decision-making within children's social care organisations.

### Defensible decision-making in children's social care: CPD Guide

- > Relevant to anyone who has responsibility for training and development.
- > Provides detailed guidance about how to facilitate three half-day CPD sessions for practice supervisors using tools provided in this resource pack.

### Defensible decision-making in children's social care: challenge questions for leaders

- > Provides an overview of key issues to prompt discussion and enhance organisational capability in defensible decision-making.
- > Includes challenge questions for middle managers and senior leaders to consider.

Collins and Daly (2011, p.15) argue that decision-making processes are 'something that can be taught and improved upon'. We hope that this resource pack supports you in promoting defensible decision-making as a practice supervisor within your organisation.

### Additional resources you may find useful

We suggest that you read the strategic briefing *Good practice in recording and access to records* (2022) published by Research in Practice alongside this resource pack. This provides an overview of recent research in children's social care record keeping and makes the case for developing more participatory approaches to record keeping with children and families.

You can also access two linked **podcasts** – Reflections on accessing care records and supporting good recording – which explore the emotional impact of receiving care files, the importance of child-centred recording, and provide suggestions of how practitioners can implement good recording.

For more general context about making decisions and assessment practice you might wish to look at the following resources:

- 1) **Risks, rights and the role of the state: Grounded professional judgment (2018)**. In this podcast Professor Danielle Turney discusses the concept of grounded professional judgment and its relevance in decision-making.
- 2) **Analysis and critical thinking in assessment: resource pack (2014)**.

You can access additional resources providing information, guidance and ideas about ways to structure and approach supervision in children's social care on the open access website, **PSDP-Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors**. The website contains over 100 resources freely available for you to use and includes knowledge briefings, podcasts, presentations, films and learning tools, many of which have been adapted from teaching materials used on the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP).

## Section Two: Why do children's records need to show evidence of defensible decision-making?

*... the record should clearly and succinctly explain what has happened to and for the child, both to inform the support provided to the child today, and, when they become adults, to help them understand what decisions were made during their childhood and why*  
(Yvette Stanley, National Director of Social Care at Ofsted, 2019a).

O'Rourke (2010) highlights that there are three main reasons that records are kept in social work practice:

- > To provide evidence that policy, procedures and practice have been followed and that the service is professional and competent.
- > To give a rationale explaining why actions were taken.
- > To provide a clear picture of a child and family's relationships and experiences with professionals and to record their views about what they would like to happen.

In order to sense check and quality assure decision-making, it is helpful to have a framework against which to interrogate the thinking and processes underpinning decisions and subsequent actions. The concept of defensible decision-making is, therefore, helpful in thinking further about the role of record keeping in explaining or justifying why actions were taken.

### What do we mean by defensible decision-making?

Where defensible decisions have been made we can see evidence in the records that:

- > 'all reasonable steps are taken to safeguard and protect children and young people and engage families
- > reliable assessment methods are used
- > information is thoroughly evaluated
- > decisions are recorded and carried through
- > processes and procedures are followed
- > practitioners and managers are investigative and proactive' (Kemshall, 2003 in Earle et al, 2017, p. 35).

When we think about the term 'defensible' we might be thinking, for instance, about internal scrutiny and quality assurance carried out by colleagues, the judgment of the inspectorate on our organisation's records, or defending our decisions and recommendations in the Family Court. Perhaps the most meaningful lens with which we want to review our decision-making and record keeping is through the eyes of the child we are writing about.

This perspective requires a shift away from seeing records as primarily a vehicle for professionals to share information between themselves, to thinking about the very significant role that case files play in shaping people's understanding of their own childhood and their family's involvement with services. The fact that Ofsted inspectors frequently highlight difficulties in understanding the sequence and progression of actions and decisions taken about children and families when they look at written records is, therefore, a matter of concern (Stanley, 2019a).

Children's social care practitioners are required to make dynamic assessments about safeguarding children and young people in uncertain and complex situations. Working out how much uncertainty and risk can be tolerated, and when preventive or protective action needs to be taken, is a difficult balancing act. Children's social care organisations are very aware of the reputational risk if adverse outcomes occur, and in such circumstances it is easy for the focus to move from defensible decision-making to an approach of 'defensive recording' (Balkow & Lillis, 2019, p. 4). When we record defensively, the focus shifts towards demonstrating 'accountability' and 'providing an electronic audit trail showing that correct procedures have been followed' (Wastell & White, 2014, p. 144). Where the focus is on providing evidence of organisational accountability, there is a tendency for records to be written for a future auditor or inspector, and we can lose sight of the primary objective, which is to provide a clear picture of the child and family's journey.

### **Writing records is a skilled craft**

All of this requires succinct, clear written records. While social workers and practice supervisors spend a lot of their working day engaging in different forms of writing (Lillis & Gray, 2016), very little research has been undertaken exploring the issue of writing and record keeping in the profession (<http://www.writinginsocialwork.com/>). Writing often 'takes place at the margins of work (the official workload day)' (Lillis & Gray, 2016, p.10) and has to be fitted in around other tasks. For many practice supervisors, writing up management oversight commentaries and record keeping 'is an interrupted and fragmented activity' (Balkow & Lillis, 2019, p.19). In thinking further about what factors may impede practice supervisors' work in this area it is important to consider:

- > The demands and volume of work: practice supervisors may complete their management oversight summaries quickly, providing the minimum information required to complete the task.
- > Writing is a craft. It takes time, effort and practice to write succinct, evaluative and analytical management oversight summaries which provide a clear rationale about ongoing work with a child.
- > The way in which electronic recording systems operate is often experienced as getting in the way of effective recording and thought of as 'a time-consuming activity, hampered by the systems and processes that underpin it' (Lynch, 2009; O'Rourke, 2010; Social Work Inspection Agency Scotland, 2010). Further challenge is presented by the fact that:

***A child's record isn't all in one place, even within the same system. It sits in assessments, reports to court and case conferences, review records, chronologies, records of visits to the child, direct work with the child and so on***

(Lillis & Gray, 2016, p. 10).

## The role which practice supervisors play in supporting defensible decision-making

Yvette Stanley, National Director of Social Care at Ofsted, highlights that local authorities and trusts who are rated highly in Ofsted inspections ensure that workers closest to the child and family are supported to have the most responsibility for decision-making (2019b). Consequently, it is important to acknowledge the key role which practice supervisors play in supporting practitioners to make defensible and reasoned decisions in practice. Defensible decision-making should, therefore, run like a golden thread throughout social care practice with children and families. It should be evident in every supervision discussion between first-line managers and practitioners, and all case records and management oversight summaries on a child's file. Three key elements need to be in place to support defensible decision-making within the organisation, all of which are covered in this resource pack:

- > Practitioners need high quality supervision which supports the process of defensible decision-making.
- > Both practitioners and practice supervisors should be able to provide clearly written commentary on a child's file which explains how and why decisions were made.
- > A child's file belongs to them. We need to be confident that decision-making is recorded in respectful and clear language, providing a coherent narrative about ongoing work with a family and the rationale behind key decisions.

We hope that the tools and ideas contained in this resource pack are helpful in supporting defensible decision-making and record keeping in your organisation.

### Section Three: Tools to support defensible decision-making

Five tools to support defensible decision-making are provided in this section of the resource pack.

Tools one to three each present a different method for structuring reflective discussions in supervision. They are included here because of their value in helping practice supervisors promote critical reflection and analysis which in turn helps to facilitate defensible decision-making. They are also available in the *Reflective Supervision Resource Pack* (Earle et al., 2017) published by Research in Practice, or on the PSDP (Practice Supervisor Development Programme) open access website Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors.

Tools four and five have been developed specifically for this resource pack. Tool four focuses on how using summaries in supervision discussions can help make the process of reasoning and decision-making explicit.

Tool five aims to support the development of professional writing skills – ‘a core and complex element of professional practice’ (Balkow & Lillis, 2019, p.19) – and enable practice supervisors and practitioners to explore ways in which their skills in the different forms of professional writing in social work can develop.

## Tool 1: Wonnacott's Discrepancy Matrix

(Author - Jane Wonnacott)

This tool encourages practitioners to reflect on what is known about work with a child and family and what is unknown or not yet known – a vital aspect of working with uncertainty. It supports the practitioner to tease out the information they hold into four types: evidence, ambiguous, assumption, and missing.

This tool was originally published by Research in Practice in the 'Reflective Supervision Resource Pack' (Earle et al., 2017).

### Aim

To help the practitioner think critically about the information upon which they're basing their decision-making.

### Instructions

Follow the steps below and record key evidence of reflection and the outcomes of the discussion either in the matrix itself or by using a recording template.

#### Step One: Telling the story

The case-holding practitioner tells their story briefly. The supervisor or group members then begin to support the practitioner to sort the information they have been told into each of the boxes. Questions such as:

- > How do you know that...?
- > What other evidence do you have that this is true?
- > How often have you felt like that even though you have no evidence it is true?
- > When do you feel that most strongly? Why?
- > If you had this piece of information what might it make you do differently?

#### Step Two: Sorting information

The information is sorted into the four areas as the practitioner answers the questions.

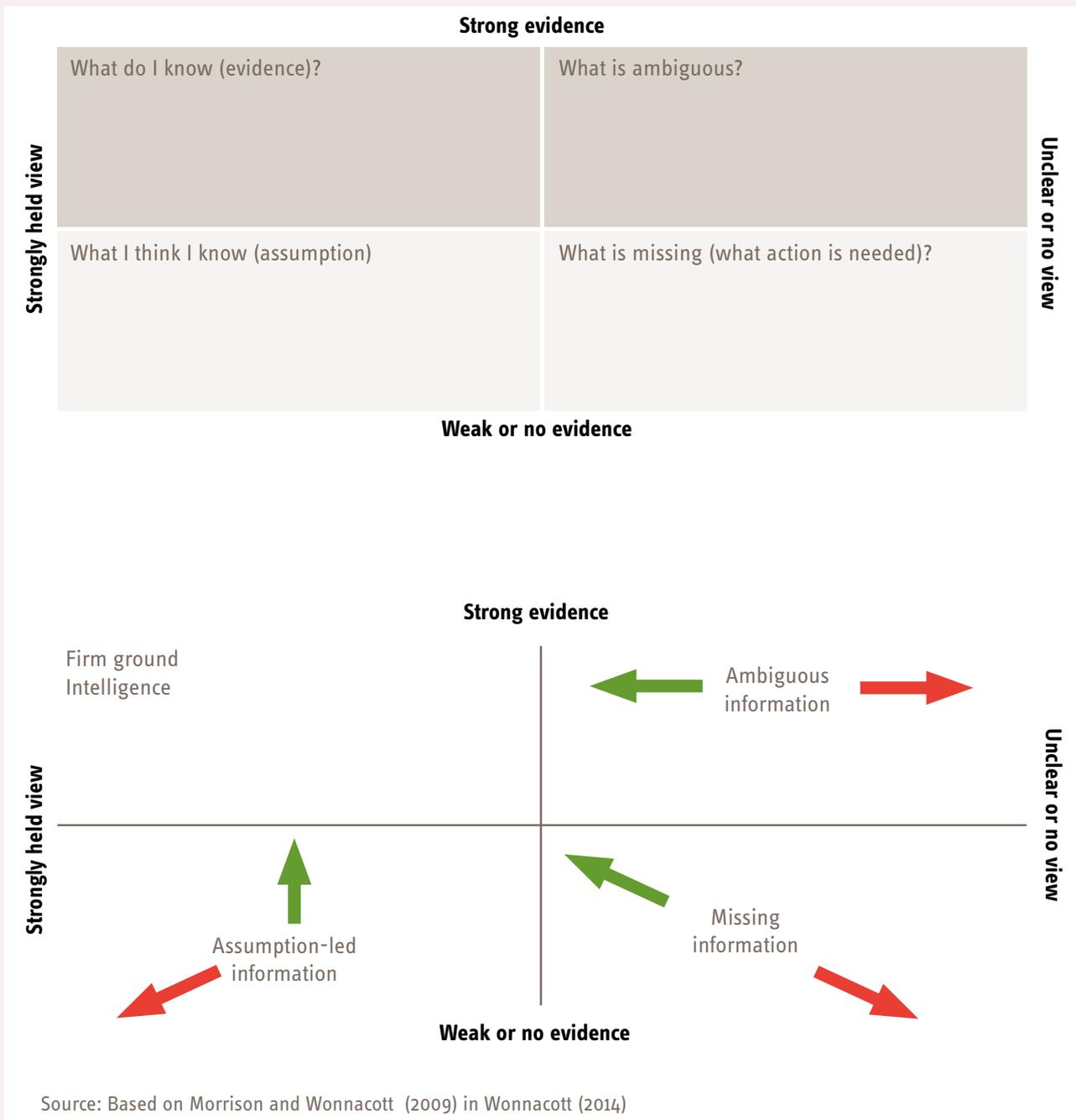
- 1. What do I know?** For something to go into the 'evidence' category, it needs to be proven and verified (in other words, come from more than one source as a fact). Evidence also includes knowledge about legal frameworks and roles and responsibilities under the Children Act, as well as research. This category provides the strongest factual evidence for analysis and decision-making.
- 2. What is ambiguous?** This relates to information that is not properly understood, is only hearsay or has more than one meaning dependent on context, or is hinted at by others but not clarified or owned.
- 3. What I think I know** This allows the practitioner to explore their own practice wisdom and also their own prejudices to see how this is informing the case. Emotion and values can also be explored in this area and the self-aware practitioner can explore how they are responding and reacting to risk.
- 4. What is missing?** These are the requests for information coming from the people listening to the story (supervisors, peers, other agency staff) that prompt the practitioner to acknowledge there are gaps in the information. The gaps then have to be examined to see if the lack of information might have a bearing on the decision-making in the case; if so, it needs to be explored.

**Step Three: Reflections**

Once the exercise is complete the practitioner is then asked:

1. What has changed about what you know?
2. What do you still need to know?
3. What does this mean for the child/family?
4. What do you want to do next?

**Discrepancy matrix**



## Tool 2: Using the five anchor principles in supervision

(Authors - Alison Domakin and Penny Sturt)

This tool is also available in the **'PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors' website** which was funded by the Department for Education. The original tool is also available on the (Department for Education-funded) PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors website; you can access it [here](#).

### Introduction

This learning tool provides information about five 'anchor principles' which can be used to inform assessment planning and discussion. Summary information about each anchor principle is provided followed by key questions you might wish to use in supervision.

Using the five anchor principles ensures that analysis and critical thinking is an explicit thread running through an assessment process. They can be used at any stage in an assessment or as a framework for discussion in supervision.

The idea of using five anchor principles to guide assessments in social work was originally suggested in a literature review (Brown, Moore and Turney - 2014). This was then developed further by an analysis and critical thinking in assessment change project group (made up of social work managers and practitioners from ten local authorities across the country) within Research in Practice.

The term anchor principles was used because they underpin good assessment practice and help practitioners to become 'anchored' into what they need to know to analyse assessment practice with children and families.

It is essential that social workers have the opportunity to reflect on any factors related to difference, diversity and power when using anchor principles within supervision discussions.

'The problems in assessment seem to lie in the move from the collection of data or information to its use in practice to support judgement or decision-making... Social workers are generally good communicators and skilled at gathering information about families and their circumstances... then have difficulty in processing the material they have collected. The difficulties seem to lie in synthesising and analysing the data, evaluating it and drawing conclusions.' (Turney, 2009 in Brown, Moore and Turney, 2014, p2).

## The five anchor assessment principles

### Anchor principle one

What is the assessment for?



### Anchor principle two

What is the story?



### Anchor principle three

What does the story mean?



### Anchor principle four

What needs to happen?



### Anchor principle five

How will we know we are making progress?

## Anchor principle one: what is the assessment for?

Research highlights how important it is for social workers to be clear about their reason for involvement with a family, and to be able to work purposefully and collaboratively with families to help them make changes (Forrester et al., 2019).

Being clear about the purpose of the assessment from the beginning will give an immediate structure and basis for analysis. It prompts practitioners to start thinking about key issues as early as possible.

The first principle, therefore, asks, ‘What is the assessment for?’ (This is very different to asking, ‘Why are we doing the assessment?’ which could elicit a process-driven response.) Practitioners can then start to identify and collect knowledge that will be relevant for the assessment drawn from:

- > research
- > practice experience
- > views of family members
- > observation and interaction with the family.

Early work might involve constructing a chronology of family history, looking at what a worker already knows from observations, or identifying from research/experience what a practitioner knows about this particular issue. This helps practitioners collect relevant knowledge and structure conversations.

### Questions for practice supervisors to ask

What do you think the purpose of this assessment is?	What is your immediate response to the assessment task?	What ethical considerations are raised for you about doing this assessment?
Who needs to know you are doing this work?	What do you need permission to do and who needs to give their consent?	What is your understanding of the legal context you are working in?
What do you already know about this child/family and what sources have you used?	What sense have you made of the information already available to you?	What are the gaps and where will you go to find out more information?
What support might you need (e.g. interpreters)?	What is the child and family's understanding of the purpose of the assessment?	How are you going to find out how the child/family feel about what you want to do?
How much choice can you give the family about how you work with them?	What timescales are you working within?	How will you explain the assessment to the child and family?

### Questions for you to consider as practice supervisor include:

What things do you need to ensure are discussed?	What theories are guiding your thinking?	What analytical tools help you make sense of information?
<p>How might any of the family or social worker's social GRRRAACCEEESSS (aspects of personal and social identity which include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality – Burnham, 2012) impact on how the assessment is carried out?</p>		

## Anchor principle two: what's the story?

Asking the question, 'What's the story?' will support the practitioner to think about how the family came to be here. The word 'story' was chosen deliberately because stories have characters, sub-plots, twists and turns, multiple perspectives and multiple possible endings.

Telling a story involves connecting relevant circumstances, facts and events to create a coherent narrative. Simple descriptions of events or lists of apparently unconnected or irrelevant facts do not constitute a story and cannot create a coherent picture or provide a sound basis on which to base a plan.

There may also be several stories depending on the differing perspectives of family members. It is our job to form these into a coherent narrative, and to acknowledge when people have different stories about the same event or situation.

Thinking about the story is a crucial part of analysis. As well as forming a sound basis for the next anchor, it also is an analytical stage in itself, since practitioners decide, in partnership with the child, family and significant others, what is and isn't relevant to the family's story. It is also an opportunity to find out if there are different perspectives emerging e.g. between the practitioner and the family or another agency e.g. the school.

Practitioners need space in supervision to reflect on the sources of information, what they know, who they have talked to, who they have observed, and build up the narrative that makes sense of the child or family's situation. By this point, supervisees are working with a number of hypotheses, some of which will emerge as the assessment progresses. Other hypotheses will develop from discussions with family members or other professionals.

They also need to reflect on the impact that meeting this particular family is having on them, and what emotional responses are present within the multi-agency group.

## Questions for practice supervisors to ask

Who else have you spoken to in the family?	Whose view is missing?	What is the family's story about what is going on?
What does each child or young person in the family think about what should happen?	What are the views and ideas of each family member about what is happening?	How might the family's class, culture, ethnicity, immigration status, economic status, etc. influence their story?
Which other professionals have you spoken to?	What are the different stories held by different professionals working with the family?	What do you think the story is?
What is the most important issue for you and why? How might this be influenced by your social GRRRAACCEEESSS lens?	What have you been surprised by?	How do you feel when you are with the child / other family members?
What is the most important issue for you and why?		

## Anchor principle three: what does the story mean?

Looking at what the story means will help to identify the impact that the situation is having on the child and family. In this phase, you will have ample opportunity to notice and give feedback about the supervisee's strengths and areas for development when analysing information in an assessment process.

Once the supervisee has worked through the information they have gathered, and can present a narrative that begins to answer the original question of what they are looking for, there needs to be a focus on what meaning can be ascribed to the various factors.

Discussion should now focus on:

- > **Hypothesising – making suggestions about what could be happening and how the supervisee knows this.**
- > **Testing – is all or part of your hypothesis correct? This could involve observation or interviews with the family.**
- > **Reflecting – what do we know about this child and family? What are the gaps in the story about the child and family? How can we find further information? Is this the only hypothesis, or are there other possibilities that need testing?**
- > **Planning – once we have a strong, evidence-informed hypothesis, how do we take this forward?**
- > **Serious Case Reviews continually point out the need to 'think the unthinkable' and so asking what might be forgotten, overlooked or assumed throughout is invaluable.**

By the conclusion of this phase there should be a shared understanding of areas of risk and resilience for the child and family. You should have gained a detailed picture of the child, their abilities, needs and vulnerabilities. It is important to remember that if relevant new information comes to light, that will change the story, which then might change what the story means or the purpose of the assessment.

**Questions for practice supervisors to ask**

What have you learnt about the child and how they are in the family and their community?	How might any of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS influence how the story is understood by the social worker or family members?	What is your assessment of the strengths in the family on offer to the child?
What factors are you worried about?	What support is available to the family? How well do they use it?	What is your assessment of risk and need?
What information is disputed and why is that?	What have you not been able to find out? Why is that?	What information is missing? What do we not know? How significant could this be?
Might your thinking be biased about what is happening to this child/ family? What evidence do you have?	Tell me about a day in the life of this family from the child's point of view and the parent's (or parents') point of view?	What are the most likeable things about this child, their parent/ carer or extended family members?
Why is this child vulnerable?	Who asked for the assessment and why?	
Is there a difference between what you think should happen next and the family's views? What do you attribute this to? Would it be useful to consider whether any similarities or differences in the social GRRRAACCEEESSS between the social worker and family influence this?		

## Anchor principle four: what needs to happen?

This is the stage at which practitioners start to put a plan together about what they think should happen now. Plans should be clearly linked to the analytical assessment of the situation, and to the views of children and families.

The key to outcomes-based planning is analysis, and that is why going through the situation very carefully is key. If there is not a thorough analysis of the situation, then you cannot decide what the next course of action should be.

It is important to be aware of two common pitfalls at this stage:

- > Writing about universal rather than specific needs (for example saying simply, 'this child needs to be safe' rather than focusing on what this specific child needs to be safe from, exactly).
- > Expressing needs in terms of service provision. For example, 'Danny needs CAMHS input' rather than outlining what specific issues the child and family need support to work on, which might look more like, 'Danny needs help to understand his feelings and how they might be driving his behaviour' or 'Danny's parents need help to understand how they have contributed to his current situation'.

## Questions for practice supervisors to ask

<p>Tell me what the child's needs are and how you are prioritising them?</p>	<p>What do you think needs to happen next?</p>	<p>What does the child think needs to happen next?</p>
<p>What about the parent/ carer(s), what do they think the next steps are?</p>	<p>Is there a difference between what you think should happen next and the family's views? What do you attribute this to?</p>	<p>Who is best placed to meet this? How will they do this?</p>
<p>How able is the child or family to do this or work with this agency at this moment?</p>	<p>What support do they need and who should provide it, and how?</p>	
<p>From all the information you have gathered what do you think is most likely to happen next, what will deliver the best outcome and how will the child/ parent/agency judge how well things are going for them?</p>	<p>Have you shared your reasoning and the plan with the child and family and with other professionals? What do each of them think about the plan and do they have views about what this should focus on?</p>	

## Anchor principle five: how will we know we are making progress?

The clearer the plans and intended outcomes are, the easier it will be for all involved to understand them, and to review progress. This is especially true if there is an audit trail and clear recording of the rationale for decisions throughout the assessment process.

If interventions and support are not making a difference, you as a supervisor need to help the practitioner understand why and give them the confidence to try something that might be more likely to make a difference.

Where outcomes are not achieved or progressed towards in a timely fashion, more questions have to be asked and hypotheses retested. Not achieving outcomes will not necessarily be linked to flawed practice, which is important for supervisors to make clear to practitioners.

For example, when working with families in challenging and complex circumstances, information may not always be shared at the outset and new insights can emerge as time progresses, and plans will need to be altered.

The role of the supervisor is to help the practitioner to look at each outcome individually and prompt discussion about:

- > Has it been achieved? If not, why not?
- > Was the analysis flawed?
- > Has the hypothesis been disproved?
- > Is there an alternative hypothesis?
- > Has new information emerged?

None of us are infallible in our thinking processes. We are all subject to bias and traps. There is nothing inherently wrong with that. However, as social work practitioners, we have a duty to be alert to them and as supervisors we have the additional responsibility to be alert to them in other people. This is why the process of critical thinking is so invaluable.

## Questions for practice supervisors to ask

<p>What changes do you want to see in the child and family's life?</p>	<p>How will we know the family is making progress? What steps will we see along the way? How will we measure these changes?</p>	<p>Was there a gap between the need and the service?</p>
<p>Has any unknown factor emerged affecting the family's ability to do the task at this stage? For example, financial setback, bereavement or serious illness?</p>	<p>What are the current priorities for this child/family?</p>	<p>What is working well and why?</p>
<p>What is not working well and why?</p>	<p>What would you have expected to have happened in the last three months?</p>	<p>What is urgent about this child's situation, how different is that from your last assessment?</p>
<p>What strengths could you work on more with this family, perhaps using extended family networks or their friendship group?</p>	<p>What is your role with this child?</p>	

## Other ways you can use this tool

The five anchor principles can be used in a number of ways. In, for example:

individual supervision to guide practitioners' own reflection and critical thinking.

group supervision by asking the group to generate their own list of questions for each of the principles.

they can also be used by practitioners to help structure a written report or presentation.

## Tool 3: Safe Uncertainty

This tool is also available in the 'PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors' website which was funded by the Department for Education. The original tool is also available on the (Department for Education-funded) PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors website; you can access it [here](#).

(Author - Jo Williams)

### Introduction

The concept of 'safe uncertainty' is widely used in systemic practice and is also considered to be useful for social work with children and their families.

The concept was coined by Barry Mason (a systemic family therapist) and is particularly helpful in assessing risk.

This visual tool helps practitioners critically analyse their work with families and explore what factors may be influencing their perceptions of risk (and how much uncertainty we can tolerate). It can helpfully be used in supervision to aid critical reflection.

Ideas around the concept of 'risk' and 'certainty' are discussed, and the theoretical concept of safe uncertainty explained. There are then a series of reflective questions to help practice supervisors consider how they can support social workers to assess risk within their work and in supervision discussions.

## Managing risk: the quest for certainty

In English local authorities, ideas about good supervision are shaped by the paramountcy of the individual child's safety and welfare. However, Featherstone et al. (2014, p.5) argue that 'radical individualisation of childhood limits the range of potential responses, creating a system which seeks an impossible actuarial certainty about risks to the relatively few.' Arguably, if practice focuses on wider systemic and contextual factors, it may broaden the range of ways we can creatively view the issue of risk. There is also a plausible perspective to consider in relation to perceptions of risk. Munro (2004, p. 1077) suggests as follows:

Factors such as risk and safeguarding within social work with children and families are, arguably, a socially constructed phenomenon. These factors are also compounded by issues of structural inequality and unconscious bias. For example, the disproportionate prevalence among children's services caseloads of black children (Owen & Statham, 2009) and children living in deprived areas (Bywaters et al., 2014, 2015) suggests that risk and safety may be perceived differently when factors such as race, culture and economic status are taken into account.

'This concern with risk has led to the protective duties of social services becoming increasingly dominant... the growth of scientific knowledge and its associated technologies has led us to see the natural and the social world as understandable and predictable.

Where previous generations would have attributed tragedies and failures to 'fate' or God, we increasingly believe that we can control our environment and make it risk-free.'

Through the political agenda, media influence and public expectation, these ideas have become a social reality, accumulating from factors such as language and social perceptions evolving over time to understand these concepts. With this seems to have come an increasing anxiety over several layers of society, a factor which was perhaps highlighted in the aftermath of the death of Peter Connelly in 2007.

The responsibility constructed from this anxiety is high and, it could be argued, has been met by even higher scrutiny over compliance and performance. This has perhaps rendered the process of supervision as responsible for mitigating this and essentially leads us to consider the expectations of the supervision process in relation to risk.

Mason (1993, p38) suggests that a more helpful way to explore issues of risk and certainty in child protection work would be to develop a different kind of inquiry 'away from trying to find the "true way", while keeping central the safety of the child'. He developed the concept of 'safe uncertainty' to help social workers working within frontline child protection to usefully reflect on what they are doing, and develop more practice confidence towards taking a position of 'authoritative doubt'.

## Safe Uncertainty: the concept

The challenge of social work is to practice within a context of uncertainty, making us strive for positions of 'safe certainty'. That said, we can safely say with all certainty that there is no certainty!

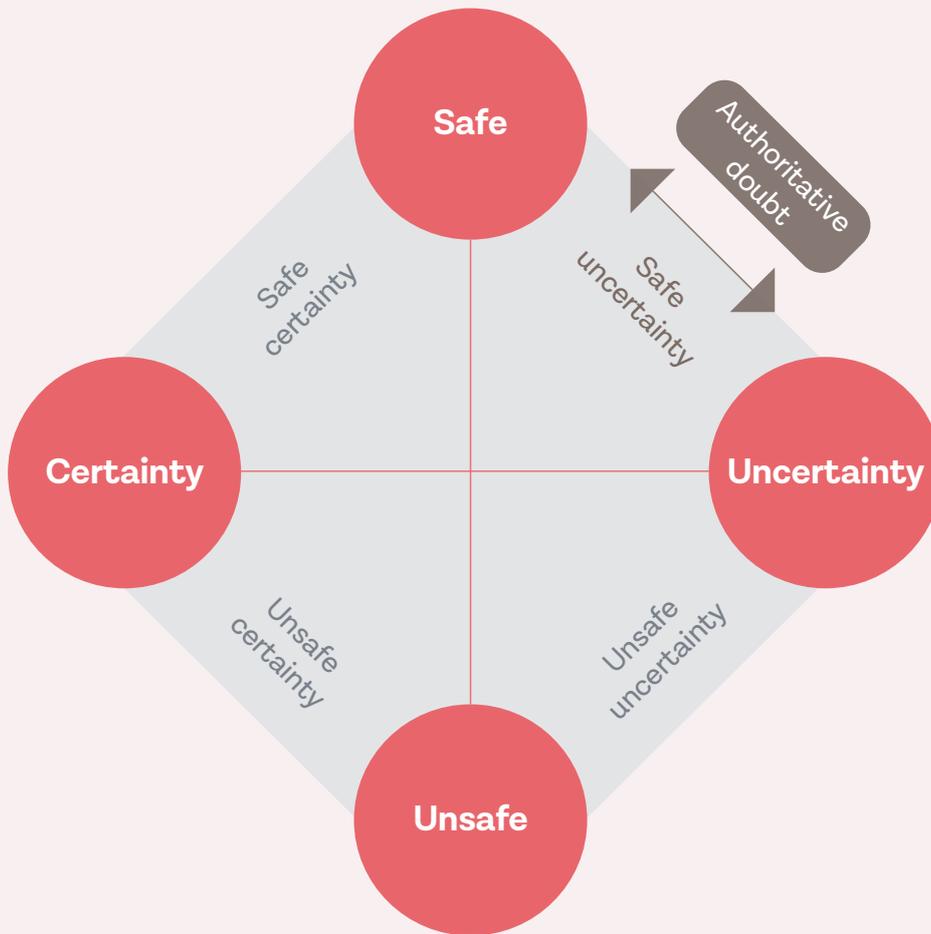
Mason (1993) recognises that as humans we all, at times, seek a sense of certainty and that some degree of certainty can help us move forward in our lives. However, he also suggests that sometimes this can lead to paralysis and lack of creativity. If we are to recognise that social work is not an exact science, we also need to embrace the existence of uncertainty within this.

The model of safe uncertainty is founded on the core systemic concepts of 'first' and 'second order' positioning. The former position is one of knowing and expertise and the latter embraces a position of 'not knowing', curiosity and uncertainty.

Mason (1993, p191) even warns against the notion of seeking to 'understand' because this arguably is to reach a position of 'premature certainty' and can lead to misunderstanding through closing down other possibilities. He also challenges the concept of establishing 'solutions', arguing that even this suggests a fixed and certain position. Mason (1993, p195) explains as follows:

'For useful change to happen we sometimes need to become less certain of the positions we hold. When we become less certain of the positions we hold we are more likely to become receptive to other possibilities, other meanings we might put to events. If we can become more open to the possible influence of other perspectives, we open up space for other views to be stated and heard.'

He suggests that holding a position of 'authoritative doubt' in social work is to encompass both expertise and uncertainty. This is illustrated on the model for safe uncertainty below:



Mason's four quadrant model describes four themes, as follows:

Unsafe uncertainty	Unsafe certainty	Safe certainty	Safe uncertainty
Hopeless, having a problem and feeling there is no solution.	Having a problem but being clear what is causing it and what will solve it.	That the problem can be solved or is solvable, that risk can be eradicated.	Is not fixed and is always in a state of flow and exploration with multiple explanations for the problem and the solution.

## Some questions for supervisors and social workers

Safe uncertainty is not a technique or a skill but an ever-evolving state of being, and the concept of authoritative doubt invites practitioners to own their expertise in the context of uncertainty. Within supervision, the model above can be used as a framework to help people position themselves and reflect on their practice with children and families when they are faced with issues of certainty and uncertainty.

You might bring this model into a supervision session and explain to the social worker what the concept is, by talking through each quadrant.

By focusing on what factors are at play, you could explore how they or other workers in the system perceive or manage risk, and what needs to happen to move to a position of safe uncertainty. The questions below are designed to prompt your thoughts together, in conversation, whilst interpreting the model, and to help you consider how it may relate to your practice:

When reading about the concept of safe uncertainty, which families or social work examples came to mind? Where would you place these on the discrepancy matrix? What might you need to consider in order to hold a position of safe uncertainty?

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When you think about holding a position of authoritative doubt, can you think of a situation or a child and family where you have achieved this? What were the factors that contributed towards this? What needed to happen in order to confidently hold this position?

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How might the GRRRAACCEEESSS (gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality - Burnham, 2012) affect how risk is viewed? How might conscious / unconscious bias on the part of the supervisee and / or the organisation be a factor to consider?

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Think about a child and family where the pull towards reaching a position of safe certainty is strong? What might be driving this? How might you take a position of 'not knowing'? What would need to happen to help you to do this?

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## Other ways you can use this tool

Share it with your team, draw the model on flip chart paper and then have a discussion with them about the idea.

Use it in group supervision to help the group apply this to their work with a family, explore risk, multiple truths about the family and hypotheses about what may be happening, and how they can reach a position of authoritative doubt.

Invite social workers to use the model to reflect on their work with a family, either to prepare for supervision, or to help guide an assessment or review of their work.

## Tool 4: Using summaries to make decisions explicit in supervision

This tool is also available in the ‘PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors’ [website](#) which was funded by the Department for Education. The original tool is also available on the (Department for Education-funded) PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors website; you can access it [here](#).

### Introduction

Effective supervision is ‘key to sound decision-making’ in child and family social work (Collins and Daly, 2011, p.5). The process of engaging in reflective discussion can encourage both social workers and practice supervisors to articulate their views and decide jointly what should happen next. Such decision-making needs to be recognisable and explicit to both social workers and practice supervisors, and to a child or young person reading their file.

Decisions can range from supporting a newly qualified worker to decide how best to engage a family in order to progress the work and build relationships, to determining social work recommendations about the course of formal action the local authority takes when risk is deemed to have increased (e.g. requesting a legal gateway discussion for advice about how to proceed).

Decisions can be life changing for children and families. It is, therefore, important to ensure that wider social factors that impact on day-to-day family life and parenting are explicitly considered as part of the decision-making process and not overlooked. Research shows that children and families from some marginalised social groups are often disadvantaged by, over-represented or invisible in child protection systems (Gupta and Featherstone, 2016). Having clear decision-making processes in which these factors are discussed, analysed and recorded promotes a more equitable service and anti-discriminatory practice.

Decisions and actions from each supervision session are usually recorded on a standardised template and uploaded on to the electronic recording system. However, research suggests that, in practice, social workers can struggle to ‘articulate the decision-making process’ (Collins and Daly, 2011, p. 15), a theme often echoed by Ofsted. Inspectors often highlight how well practitioners speak about their work with children and families and are able to verbally outline in clear detail what work is being planned and why during inspection visits. However, inspectors often find it difficult to identify where decisions are recorded on a child’s file or when exactly a decision was made.

### How to use this tool

This tool makes the case that practice supervisors need to explicitly draw attention to decision points arising from reflective supervision discussions, and proposes that you use summaries as a deliberate technique to draw attention to the rationale and professional judgements that inform your decisions. It has been developed to be used alongside other tools in this resource pack, which provide frameworks for structuring reflective conversations in supervision:

- > Wonnacott’s discrepancy matrix.
- > Using the five anchor principles in supervision.
- > Safe Uncertainty.

## Locating the point when a decision is made

One of the key tensions in social work supervision is finding time to discuss each of the children that practitioners are working with over an agreed number of supervision cycles. Each supervision session is likely to include updates about ongoing work as well as require time to unpick complex practice issues. Research by Wilkins et al. (2017) recorded a number of supervision sessions and analysed what they heard. They identified that supervision sessions tended to follow a similar structure:

- > **Verbal deluge:** at the start of each discussion about a child and family the social worker provides an extensive update about what has happened and work undertaken.
- > **Identifying the problem:** the discussion then moves quickly to identifying key problems.
- > **Solutions:** advice is provided about how to proceed. Next steps and direction for ongoing work are agreed.

Most of the audio recordings in the research study contained the sound of the supervisor typing throughout the discussion in order to keep the recording system up to date.

One hypothesis suggested by Wilkins and colleagues' findings is the need to disrupt the 'verbal deluge' by structuring feedback as a reflective summary of key points. This is particularly important when we are busy, or experience heightened emotions (because of stress, tiredness or overload) which make it harder to remember conversations in detail and identify the points at which decisions have been reached.

## Using summaries to draw attention to decision-making in supervision

Regular staging points to summarise and review what has been discussed help to make the decision-making process explicit and transparent. Summaries, therefore, allow practice supervisors to:

- > pause and jointly reflect on key themes
- > review and highlight important points arising from the conversation as a whole as it draws to a conclusion or transition point
- > check understanding about what has been agreed, what decisions have been made and on what basis
- > review whether or not anything else needs to be considered or has been missed.

Summaries can also be helpful as a way of moving forward and unblocking a conversation which may have become overwhelmingly detailed, lost focus, or become stuck.

A structure for discussing each child and family might look like this:

1. **Introductory discussion** and update from the social worker.
2. **Reflective discussion** jointly exploring and reflecting on key issues.
3. **Clarifying what decisions have been made and the reasoning behind these** using summaries to aid this process.
4. **Agreeing tasks and actions** reinforced in a summary.

None of this is rocket science but we know that it is all too easy to move straight to tasks and actions so having a structure which prompts you to resist this pressure can be useful. Remembering the importance of a pause to summarise provides the opportunity to review decisions that have been made and articulate the reasoning behind them.

### Preparing the ground with your supervisee before you start

Before you start to use summaries in supervision we suggest that you tell your supervisee what you are going to do and why. If supervisees understand what you are trying to achieve and the role they can play by being prepared with their own summaries of what they feel the issues are, they are more likely to be able to engage with this fully and maximise the benefit.

No conversation happens in a vacuum and it is important to acknowledge with your supervisee that you hold more power in supervision discussions given your role as practice supervisor. This might prevent a supervisee from sharing a different point of view or disagreeing when making decisions in supervision. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that aspects of your own personal and social identity, and that of your supervisee (for example: gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality) may influence communication and the decision-making process in supervision (Burnham, 2012). Inviting dialogue about these issues is helpful in promoting engagement and collaboration in the decision-making process.

## Ideas for using summaries in supervision

Using summaries is simple to do, you just have to get into the practice of using them. Over time you will develop a style and technique which works for you.

As you start to use them, seek feedback from your supervisees about whether they notice any benefits of doing so. Here are some tips for you to consider:

- > Use summaries regularly throughout your supervision sessions to get into the habit. You might want to think about the value of summaries as quick pause and recap points (which you can use at any point in the discussion) and longer formal summaries (at the end of a discussion about a child and family). As you do so pay attention to what changes or what you see happening in the discussion, and encourage your supervisee to do this also.
- > Make it clear when you are moving into the summary phase of a discussion so that supervisees understand that this is the point where the focus is on reviewing learning, themes and any decisions, and is distinct from the preceding discussion.
- > Begin by sharing your brief overview about what you have discussed or by inviting your supervisee to do so. You might find using prompt questions useful to help consider salient points from the discussion and to identify what you may have missed.

### These might include:

- > What are the specific issues that the worker, child / family or others are worried about?
  - > What are we concerned might happen if we don't 'do' something?
  - > What are the options for taking action? What do we think about that?
  - > Have we considered the strengths, resources and resilience of the child and family members and how we can support these? For example, strengths related to overcoming oppression and structural inequality, early childhood deprivation, living with disability or living on a low income.
  - > Have we discussed what the child and family members want to happen?
  - > Is there anything that we may have missed thinking about? Have we considered wider social factors in our discussion? For example, race, culture, disability, experience of oppression within the community, poverty, unemployment or health disparity?
- > As you conclude your summary discussion it is useful to highlight what has been agreed by answering the following questions. If you can answer each question articulately and clearly in two or three sentences the decision-making process is clear and tangible, which in turn makes it easier to record the decision on a child's file. In fact, this may be the point at which some practice supervisors make a record:

- > What decision have we reached?
- > Why have we made this decision?
- > What are we going to do next in relation to this decision?

- > Clarity about the process of reaching a decision can support social workers to identify learning needs. You may want to conclude a summary discussion by asking additional questions which focus on supporting the practitioner's skill and knowledge development. For example:

- > How easy or challenging was it to make this decision? Why?
- > Were there any aspects of the decision-making process or discussion in supervision that you disagreed with or where you felt your professional opinion was not heard?
- > What have you learnt about yourself, your values and the way you practice as a social worker when reaching this decision?
- > How do you balance thinking about the impact of social and economic inequality on the lived experience of the child and family alongside your own concerns and that of other professionals about any potential risks?
- > Can you identify any research or professional literature that has influenced your professional judgement when making this decision?
- > If you had a magic wand, what would you do differently?

## Using the content of summary discussions in supervision to inform the recording of decisions on a child's file

Engaging in this structured process of discussion in supervision has additional benefits. Social workers can be encouraged to draw on the analysis and reasoning made explicit during summary discussions in supervision to ensure that their written input on a child's file provides evidence of defensible decision-making and, in doing so, clearly articulates on the file the point at which a decision was reached and why.

### Other ways you can use this tool

Agree with a colleague that you will both start using the summaries in supervision discussions. Discuss together what you learn and what changes you see as a result.

Share the ideas presented in this tool with your team at a meeting or away day to learn more about what supports them to provide evidence of defensible decision-making.

## Tool 5: Evidencing defensible decision-making with ‘the child on your shoulder’ in child and family social care

This tool is also available in the ‘PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors’ [website](#) which was funded by the Department for Education. The original tool is also available on the (Department for Education-funded) PSDP: Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors website; you can access it [here](#).

### Introduction

Writing is a key activity in social work, primarily the maintenance of comprehensive records on automated electronic systems. Practice supervisors are tasked with making sure that social workers keep these records up to date and that the information they contain evidences defensible decision-making and high standards of service delivery. Practice supervisors are also asked to regularly provide management oversight comments on children’s files.

### How to use this tool

In working through this tool you will:

- > Reflect on the purposes and functions of keeping records and of management oversight commentary.
- > Consider the role you play as practice supervisor in ensuring that records provide both a coherent narrative and evidence of defensible decision-making.
- > Look back at examples of your own management oversight commentaries, using the ideas presented as a lens through which to review your work.

Each section of the tool considers a different evidence-informed perspective about keeping records in children’s social care. When looking back at examples of your management oversight commentaries, we suggest you choose a different child’s record for each different section of the tool.

If you are able to, we recommend that you pair up with another practice supervisor so you can feedback on each other’s work when doing these exercises (reviewing your own written work is valuable for learning and development but you can learn even more if you get feedback from a peer). When doing this, it’s important to establish ground rules around things like confidentiality first so you feel comfortable when sharing your written work and when providing feedback on your colleague’s. This can also be used as evidence for Social Work England **Professional Standard 4 ‘Maintaining my continuing professional development’**.

At the end of this tool we invite you to review your learning and identify how you can provide evidence of defensible decision-making when writing in a child’s file.

### Questions for you to consider:

- > What are the hallmarks of good, professionally written records in children's social care?
- > When you are auditing children's files, what are the key things you look out for or pay attention to?
- > Are you able to review whether or not issues around aspects of identity like race, class, age, sexuality and so on are addressed in a child's file?
- > What does excellent record keeping look like?

## What is the purpose of keeping a record of involvement with a child and family?

O'Rourke (2010) suggests there are three main reasons to keep records in social work practice:

- > To provide evidence that policy, procedures and practice have been followed and that the service is professional and competent.
- > To give a rationale that explains why actions were taken.
- > To provide a clear picture of the care-experienced person's journey and views about what they would like to happen.

The concept of defensible decision-making helps us think further about the role of record keeping when justifying why certain actions were taken. Where defensible decisions have been made, evidence in the records shows:

- > all reasonable steps were taken (to safeguard and protect children and young people and engage families)
- > reliable assessment methods were used
- > information was thoroughly evaluated
- > decisions were recorded and carried through
- > processes and procedures were followed
- > practitioners and managers were investigative and proactive (Kemshall, 2003 in Earle et al, 2017, p.35).

Written records provide social workers and practice supervisors with opportunities to monitor and analyse their decisions (e.g. Wilkins, 2017) and can therefore be used to identify anti-oppressive practice whereby equal opportunities, diversity and social inclusion are promoted.

Records should be inclusive and accessible as they may be accessed by the child at a later stage in their life (Bowen, 2020). Poet and care-experienced writer, Lemn Sissay (2015), argues that a child's 'file is an anagram of life'. Our written records can be a critical element in supporting the 'coherent autobiographical memory' which provides 'crucial foundations for us all to thrive' (Brown, Grimm and Clunie, 2020 p1-2).

This perspective requires a shift away from seeing records as primarily a vehicle for professionals to 'gather, share and monitor information' between themselves (Payne 2008 in Hoyle et al, 2019, p.1862) and towards thinking about the very significant role that case files play for children and young people in shaping their understanding of their childhoods and of their family's involvement with social care. Sissay wrote a powerful account of his childhood using his own case file records (*My Name is Why*, published in 2019) and has reproduced many pages of them [on his blog](#).

As Brown, Grimm and Clunie (2020) have described, 'a secure sense of self and the capacity for self-love and self-understanding, structured around coherent autobiographical memory, are crucial foundations for us all to thrive'. In seeking that narrative, care-experienced people often apply for their care records 'in search of answers to address gaps and inconsistencies in the knowledge they hold about their childhoods... to build – and where necessary to reconstruct – coherent narratives of childhood and personal development.' (Brown, Grimm and Clunie, 2020, p.1-2)

Speaking from their own experiences and those of the Who Cares? Scotland group they are part of, the authors describe how this process of accessing written records is often 'frustrating, alienating and re-traumatising' and can result in the discovery of 'files which are disordered, incomplete and fragmentary, which contain very significant, unexplained and often inconsistent redactions, which use unprofessional and stigmatising language' (Brown, Grimm & Clunie, 2020).

They assert that supporting these 'crucial foundations' should be understood in the broader context of corporate parenting duties: 'any good parent should support their children to understand who they are, where they've been and to have the pride and confidence needed to stand tall in a challenging social world' (Brown, Grimm & Clunie, 2020).

They advocate for a complete 'shift in power as regards the production and control of information' (ibid, p.1) that sees care records (as far as possible) co-produced and available throughout an individual's involvement with child and family services as 'part of a broader process within which children and young people are supported to shape, reflect upon and understand their lives, alongside loving carers and supportive professionals' (Brown, Grimm & Clunie, 2020).

Given the challenges of safeguarding children and young people, this aspect of record keeping can easily become lost. So we must keep reminding ourselves that to take a 'relational approach' to what we write in a child's file and write records with the child in mind.

### Questions for you to consider:

- > O'Rourke (2010) suggests that there are three main reasons that we keep records in social work practice. Have a look at these again and think about how they influence the way recording is approached within your organisation, both in your teams and by you personally. What do you think works well? What might you like to do differently?
- > It's understandable for the balance to shift towards providing evidence that policy, procedures and practice have been followed. How can you avoid this tendency and encourage your team to do so, too?
- > How might thinking about the purpose of records as providing 'coherent narratives of childhood and personal development' read by the child in later life influence what you write and how you audit children's files?

### Reviewing what you have written on a child's file:

Spend a few minutes looking at examples of your own management oversight comments on a child's file, using Kemshall's (2003) defensible decision-making principles as a lens through which to review what you have written, and imagining you're reading these comments for the first time:

- > If you were the child at the centre of the case, would these comments contribute to a 'coherent narrative' that makes sense from that point of view?
- > How defensible to an external reader is the recorded decision-making?
- > Can you identify any areas of 'defensive recording' (in which you focus less on the importance of your comments for the benefit of the child and more on providing evidence that policy and procedures have been followed)?

When they look at written records, Ofsted inspectors frequently highlight difficulties in understanding the sequence and progression of actions and decisions (Stanley, 2019):

- > How does what you wrote help an external reader to clearly understand the sequence and rationale of the decisions that were made over time?
- > Looking back now, how might you change what you have written? What might stay the same?

## Writing records with the child at your shoulder

In 2016, Brighton and Hove City Council initiated a new approach to record keeping called ‘Me and My World’. This was developed to support the council’s relationship-based practice model with children in care and social workers were encouraged to write review reports **directly to the child**. Question prompts in the recording template were designed to act as nudges to encourage social workers to, ‘focus on relationships, identity and life story rather than statutory processes’ in their reports (Watts, 2020, p.10). For example:

- > What family and kinship members are significant to me? What do we do when we spend time together and how do I feel about it?
- > What’s important in making me who I am? Have I experienced any racism or discrimination in my life?
- > Who are my friends and what sorts of things do I enjoy doing with them?
- > How am I getting on at school? Do I like going? What teachers have been important to me this year?
- > How do I manage my feelings? What is the impact of my early life on how I feel about myself and my relationships with others now?
- > What do I think is going well? Is there anything I would like to change?

A recent review of ‘Me and My World’ (Watts, 2020) identified that there can be a tendency to write in a way which results in ‘routine homogenised case files’ (2020, p.8) or, what the review of Sissay’s book in the **New Statesman** describes as, ‘the clunky, typewritten drone of officialise that “click clack clacks” through the files monitoring a child in the care system’). Writing directly to the child encouraged a ‘simple, direct writing style’ (Watts, 2020, p.5) which avoided the ‘mental shortcut’ (Kirkham and Melrose, 2014 p18) of professional jargon and helped practitioners to experience more empathy for the child’s perspective and situation.

Social workers who took part in the research identified that writing directly to the child helped them to focus on recording significant events and providing explanations and updates about what happened and why. These findings echo Balkow and Lillis’s argument that writing directly to the child will alter ‘both the content and form of what is being expressed’ (2019, p.17).

Rather than writing in ‘a form and a voice with a presumed distant, although specific addressee - a manager, a judge etc.’ (Balkow and Lillis, 2019, p.17), writing directly to the child instils a more personalised and child-centred response in the author which in turn prompts them to structure the recording differently.

The review highlights the importance of imagining the child reading or listening to what you write. Workers at Brighton and Hove emphasised the importance of this and the need to: ‘bring to mind the living breathing child’ (Watts, 2020, p.42) when writing anything about them.

This approach has the potential to influence the way in which we approach all written records in children’s social care. Imagining the child at your shoulder when writing up management oversight when a case is closed, may well prompt a move away from writing ‘case closed’ and towards providing a succinct explanation of what changed to make this possible.

### Questions for you to consider:

- > How might writing more directly to the child influence what you write and how you approach this work?
- > What aspects of the ideas presented in the section above might you want to use when you and your team are writing records about children?
- > If writing to the child enables workers to empathise more with them, what role can supervision play in helping social workers to understand and express any feelings that may arise from this empathy?

### Reviewing what you have written on a child's file:

Spend a few minutes with 'the child on your shoulder' (Watts, 2020, p.21) looking at examples of your own management oversight comments and imagine you are reading them for the first time:

- > How well does what you have written outline the unique needs and decisions made about an individual child?
- > Does what you write in a child's file differ depending on the child? Or are there stock phrases you use more generally? What do you think about this?
- > Can you hear the child's voice and views in what you or others have written in this file?
- > Looking back now with the child at your shoulder, how might you change what you have written? What might stay the same?

## Using summary, evaluation and analysis (SEA) to structure how you write up oversight commentary

The comment below reveals the challenge facing practice supervisors when writing management oversight comments on a child's file:

'It can be hard to write in depth about the evidence base for a professional judgement or decision in a case note when there is a concurrent demand to make notes succinct.'  
(Bowen, 2020)

The task, then, is to ensure that there is a coherent narrative which:

- > provides evidence about what decisions have been made and why
- > distils key information into concise evaluative summaries spanning a number of interventions with a family over a period of time
- > focuses on the unique qualities of the child, addressing their social location and other aspects of social identity
- > is coherent and succinct.

This is challenging for any writer, regardless of experience. Using the acronym SEA (**s**ummary, **e**valuation and **a**nalysis) can help you to structure your writing to meet these requirements. Ofsted inspectors are trained to use these principles in order to produce brief, analytical records of inspection visits, and they can be helpful for structuring management oversight comments on a child's file, too.

### How to apply the SEA principles

Begin with a **summary** that presents a brief overview and update about what has happened with a child and family, illustrating why certain decisions were made. To be effective, summaries should follow the **3 Cs** and be **c**omprehensive, **c**oncise and **c**oherent, condensing information to include only those elements which, in your professional judgement, are most important (<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/rwc/handouts/the-writing-process-1/invention/Guidelines-for-Writing-a-Summary>).

The next stage is **analysis**, which presents your professional judgement of significant factors about a child and family in order to answer questions about 'how' or 'why' certain decisions have been made. This may also include an analysis of 'what we don't yet know' as well as 'what we do know' (Brown and Turney, 2014). The aim is to produce a brief yet 'cogent narrative that connects risk and protective factors with the perspectives and motives of caregivers' (Pecora et al, 2013, p.155).

The entry on a child's file should conclude with an **evaluation** that provides information about how agents of social care plan to work with a child or family, highlighting:

- > 'what should or shouldn't happen now?' (Johnstone, 2017, p.18)
- > plans on how to progress
- > what work is being undertaken and by whom.

**Questions for you to consider:**

- > Can you identify any advantages of using the SEA principles to guide you each time you write on a child's file?
- > How can the organisation support you to continue to develop skills in writing succinct, evaluative and analytical management oversight summaries?

**Reviewing what you have written on a child's file:**

Spend a few minutes looking at examples of your own management oversight comments on a child's file, using SEA as a lens through which to consider what you have written. Imagine you are reading your comments for the first time:

- > Can you identify elements of summary, evaluation and analysis in what you have written?
- > How might following a structure of summary, analysis and evaluation change what you wrote?
- > Could aspects of what you have written be briefer or more evaluative? How so?
- > Looking back now, how might you change what you have written? What might stay the same?

## Getting in the zone to focus on writing

It can be challenging in busy work environments to find the space and time to focus on written records. One way to address these pressures is to create habits and routines that help you to change the way you think about management oversight commentary. It may be useful to:

### **1. Set aside regular time slots in your diary to write**

Some practice supervisors do this by making time in their diaries daily to focus on writing on a child's file. Despite the fact that this slot may often be taken up by having to attend to other things, practice supervisors who work in this way say that setting aside a small amount of time devoted only to writing commentary and oversight is helpful. Taking time out to reflect, plan and write can feel like 'going against the flow' but it is important to focus on this as an antidote to the fact that: 'busyness' or too much 'doing' can get in the way of, or become a substitute for, thinking' (Brown and Turney, 2014, p.14).

### **2. Think about where you can write so you encounter minimal distractions and interruptions**

Consider where you might be able to focus on writing most effectively. This may mean booking out a private room or 'pod' to allow you to work uninterrupted. Some practice supervisors flag to their teams that they are going to concentrate on a particular task for a period of time and ask that any queries are put on hold as they do. In the busyness of children's social care contexts, there are implicit pressures to always be available to respond to pressing needs or tasks. However, this is not conducive to the focused attention that writing commentary on a child's file requires.

### **3. Give yourself time to think and plan before and after writing**

It is useful to take some time to plan what you are going to write before you do it, even if only for five minutes. Think about how you might structure what you write to ensure you include a brief summary, analysis and evaluation. Some practice supervisors find it useful to quickly jot down key points or make quick notes as mind maps, allowing them to organise their thoughts in preparation for writing. Having finished writing, leave time to go back and review what you have said.

### Questions for you to consider:

Balkow and Lillis (2019, p.19) observe that for many social work professionals, writing is 'an interrupted and fragmented activity which takes place at the margins of work (the official workload day)':

- > Spend a few moments reflecting on your experience of writing management oversight summaries. When and where do you tend to do these? Are you able to focus or are you often interrupted?
- > What routines or habits would you like to introduce for you and your team to focus on writing within the 'official workload day'?
- > How can you get into the zone for writing to give you the best chance of focusing with the least interruptions?
- > Do you have any ideas about 'quick wins' or ways of freeing yourself up to focus on writing, given the challenges of finding adequate space and time?
- > Are there any top tips you can pick up from other practice supervisors about how they manage the challenges of writing?

## Reviewing your learning: where to from here?

### Task one

For this final activity, please spend a few minutes reminding yourself of what you thought as you read each section of the tool and considered your own written work in tandem.

### Task two

How does this reflection inform your overall learning? Please use these questions to deepen your understanding:

#### When writing on a child's file as a practice supervisor:

- > What do you need to stop doing?
- > What do you need to keep doing?
- > What do you need to start doing differently?

**In order to ensure that what you write clearly tells the story of the child's journey and involvement with children's social care, as well as providing evidence of defensible decision-making (in terms of scrutiny, quality assurance and legal processes, and to the child and family themselves):**

- > How might thinking about writing as a craft that takes time, effort and practice influence the way in which you approach this task, and support others to do so?
- > How might your organisation support you to continue to develop your professional writing skills?

## Finally, here are ten top tips for reviewing what you write on a child's file:

1. Is what you have written clear and concise?
2. Have you summarised the key information succinctly?
3. Have you avoided jargon and used straightforward language?
4. Was the child 'at your shoulder' when writing?
5. Have you communicated a clear sense of this individual child and their unique circumstances?
6. Have you included information about what the child and family wants to happen and what they have said?
7. Have you clearly outlined the reasoning behind any decisions taken?
8. Have you included your professional judgement, and how and why you reached it?
9. Have you noted areas of strength and progress as well as what still concerns you?
10. Have you made reference to what you don't yet know or understand?

## Other ways you can use this tool:

You could work through the activities with a practice supervisor you trust, sharing ideas and reflections as you go.

You could share these ideas with your team at a meeting or away day to prompt discussion about how team members can support each other to further develop their case recording skills.

## Section Four: Tools to support group learning about defensible decision-making

*The problems in assessment seem to lie in the move from the collection of data or information to its use in practice as the basis for judgement and decision-making*

(Brown, Moore & Turney, 2014, p. 3).

There can be a tendency within children's social care to focus on individual case management and supervision, and in doing so, overlook the potential which group supervision and team discussion can play in developing a shared knowledge base and understanding about how effective assessment practice informs defensible decision-making. The role of the practice supervisor is key in building a supportive culture of team learning and development given that:

*Child welfare decisions are frequently made in conditions of uncertainty, drawing on complex, incomplete and sometimes contradictory information*

(APSW Knowledge and Evidence Briefing 3 – Everyday social work with children and families, 2021).

Three tools to support group learning and shared team discussion about defensible decision-making are provided in this section of the resource pack. Each provides outline information about a group discussion activity which practice supervisors can use to support practitioners to engage in 'analytical, critical and reflective thinking and writing' in assessment and decision-making (Brown, Moore & Turney, 2014, p. 2).

The tools are available in their original form in the *Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment: Resource Pack 2nd edition* (2014) published by Research in Practice).

## Tool six: What makes a sound analytical assessment?

This tool provides information about a group exercise which stimulates practitioners to explore and critique the qualities of a sound analytical assessment. It builds upon the anchor principles which you were introduced to in tool two (page 11). We suggest that you allow 1 hour 15 minutes for this exercise. However, if you have less time available to you, this is still a worthwhile group discussion.

### **Introductions and ground rules (5 minutes)**

It is helpful to 'warm the context' (Burnham, 2005) by giving a brief overview of the activity and this can support analysis, assessment practice and defensible decision-making.

Setting the right tone for learning is essential to encourage everyone to take part in the activities without feeling defensive or feeling that any comments reflect on the quality of their work or that of others. It is useful to acknowledge this and ask the group for their suggestions/ground rules about how they would like to work together. We suggest that you make reference to confidentiality, respect for difference and diverse opinions, thereby creating space for everyone in the group to contribute to the discussion (if these are not brought up by the group).

### **Ask the group to list the qualities they would expect to find in a good analytical assessment (10-15 minutes)**

The aim is to quickly produce a shared list which everyone in the group has contributed to. You can advise the group that once the list is complete there will be the chance to explore the different aspects of an analytical assessment which they have identified. If contributions are a little slow getting started you could offer a couple of comments to encourage discussion. For example, you could note specific elements that should be included (e.g. a history of the family) or comments about how the assessment is written (e.g. well-structured).

**When the list is complete, ask the group to pause for a moment and read the list to themselves and then ask the following questions (15-20 minutes)**

- > Are any of these qualities more important than the others?**
- > If so, how would you rank the ideas suggested, along with any of your own points?**

You might want to ask the group to take five minutes in order to write down their responses to these questions individually before opening this up for group discussion.

**Please then prompt the group to share their responses with each other.** The aim in this part of the discussion is to try and reach a shared understanding about what the key qualities of an analytical assessment are. As practice supervisor you might want to share your observations with the group highlighting areas of commonality and difference in the points which are made and, in doing so, modelling curiosity and reflection.

**Ask the group to see if their responses to the question ‘What qualities would you expect to find in a good analytical assessment?’ align with the five anchor principles (15-20 minutes)**

If the group is not familiar with the five anchor principles, please spend five minutes explaining what these are and why they are important.

The idea of using five anchor principles was originally suggested in a literature review (Brown, Moore & Turney, 2014). This was then developed further by an analysis and critical thinking in assessment change project group (made up of social work managers and practitioners from ten local authorities across the country) within Research in Practice.

Have the five anchor principles available for people to see during this part of the discussion.

Q. What is the assessment for?

Q. What is the story?

Q. What does the story mean?

Q. What needs to happen?

Q. How will we know we are making progress?

Once the five anchor principles have been explained, please ask the group to go through their responses to the question ‘What are the qualities of an analytical assessment?’ The task now is to debate where each point in the compiled list fits with the five anchor principles model.

When this is complete, ask the group if this activity has prompted any reflections about assessment. What do they think of the principles? Was it easy to fit their responses into the five anchor principles? Did some principles get more hits or matches with the group’s responses than others?

This can prompt useful discussion about which of the five anchor principles members of the group feel more confident in and which less so. Alternatively, you might discuss which of the anchor principles might be more easily overlooked given the demands of practice (and how to safeguard against this)?

**Group review of learning (10-15 minutes)**

Please ask everyone in the group to share their learning from the session and to identify one thing they are going to do differently to support the process of analytical assessment in their work.

Participants from the Change Project also debated the question ‘What are the qualities of an analytical assessment?’ Their responses are provided below. You may find it useful to read these as context to support your facilitation of the group discussion activity. Alternatively, you may wish to make this available to the group as part of the discussion or share this after the activity as additional information.

**What are the qualities of an analytical assessment? Summary of responses from Change Project participants****Aims**

- > Provide a good picture of the child, the parent and their story.
- > Provide an understanding of why the assessment is being done and what you’re expecting to get out of it.
- > Be specific about the individual child’s needs, rather than following a generic assessment template.
- > Be clear about the seriousness of the needs identified and the likely consequences or risks for the child if they are not addressed.
- > State clearly what is going to happen as a direct result of the assessment – the ‘So what?’ question

**Context**

- > Show an understanding of family history and context (the issue of context is key).
- > Include an analysis of what we don’t yet know (analysis is an ongoing process and it’s acceptable to say we need more information about a particular issue).
- > Show an understanding of the emotional implications for the family of what has been observed.
- > Adopt an open-minded and questioning approach – e.g. is this the only way of understanding this? (Uncertainty is acceptable as assessment is part of an ongoing conversation, so a good assessment is always likely to contain some uncertainty.)
- > Contain information directly relevant to the purpose of the assessment.

**Style**

- > Be logical, both in terms of ‘showing your working’ (i.e. making sure your thinking process is clear to the reader, showing how you have got from point to point, how you have used the information available to reach certain conclusions, etc.) so that recommendations can be seen to follow from the information obtained.
- > Be succinct, concise, relevant and specific at each stage.
- > Be free of jargon, both words and phrases that will mean little to the family and those that might have different meanings for different professionals.
- > Link the action plan back to specific parts of the assessment (the plan must clearly emerge from the analysis – an outsider should be able to work out the general story of the child and family from the plan).

**Expertise**

- > Be clear about your concerns, and the reasons behind these concerns.
- > Contain hypotheses, i.e. your preliminary (and probably still tentative) explanations for the situation or behaviours at issue.

**Evidence**

- > Make explicit the underpinning knowledge (for example, child development theory, knowledge about the effects of bereavement and loss) and evidence (observation material, research findings, etc.) that have informed your argument.
- > Include evidence for the judgments made, whether this is research messages or your own observations.
- > Include a clear, evidence-informed prediction about the likely impact on the child or young person if identified needs are not met (what will be the consequences or risks for this child in the short and long term?).
- > Show confidence in your analysis – ‘I think ... because ...’ – and include clear statements with evidence to back them up rather than hide behind flowery language (there is often a reluctance to do this, as closed statements are less open to challenge than those that specify the reasons behind decisions).

**Views**

- > Include the family’s views and an analysis of those views.

## Tool seven: Speed analysing

Until they are embedded in practice, analysis and critical thinking can feel like hard work, and practitioners sometimes feel that the demands on their time to fulfil bureaucratic tasks leave little left over for reflection.

This tool introduces a structured form of analysis and reflection (speed analysing) which can be used to support practitioners in articulating the key issues or concerns in relation to a particular child or family. This group exercise demonstrates that thinking and analysing key issues when working with children and families are what practitioners do all the time – albeit often unconsciously. By making this thinking explicit at a conscious level, practice supervisors can support practitioners to understand how much they can (and are) deducing and critically reflecting on information provided within a limited time frame.

Prior to the discussion, prepare a short case study presenting information about a referral or ongoing work with a child and family. Alternatively, you might ask a member of the team to spend five minutes giving a verbal overview of details of work with a child and family. It is important to anonymise information if you are working across teams or agencies in this exercise.

### **Introductions and ground rules (5 minutes)**

Give a brief overview of the activity, the purpose of which is to support analysis, assessment and defensible decision-making. It is important to give a clear message about the value of group shared learning and encourage everyone to take part in the discussion without feeling defensive about the quality of their work.

If the group are not used to working together, spend a few minutes asking for their suggestions/ ground rules about how they would like to work together to get the most out of the session.

**Speed analysing: Stage 1 (15 minutes)**

Ask the group to either read a short case study or listen to a five-minute verbal presentation about a referral or work with a child and family. If you choose to use a verbal presentation, warn the presenter that you will stop them after five minutes. It is also important to advise the group that they should take notes and not interrupt the presenter when speaking.

Allow five minutes after the group has been introduced to this information to ask clarifying questions. Then move on to the activity below.

The group then splits into pairs. With one person taking notes, each pair is given three minutes to decide together what the pressing needs of the child or young person in the case study are. They must make sure they don't describe needs:

- > **in universal terms (for example, 'the child or young person needs to stay safe')**
- > **in terms of the need for a service**
- > **in terms of the need for assessment.**

Remind group members of the need to bear in mind that very often the best way of addressing children's needs is to address the needs of parents and carers – so they may well be identifying parents' needs too.

**Speed analysing: Stage 2 (approximately 20 minutes depending on the size of the group)**

After three minutes, those who weren't taking notes move round one place (in the same direction). When everyone is seated, the new couples each have three minutes to edit, or add to, the list of needs. Depending on the number of participants, this can be repeated again until everyone has had the chance to contribute.

**Group discussion (15 minutes)**

Ask the whole group to come together to review their responses and discuss the following questions:

- > **How much agreement is there about pressing needs?**
- > **How easy was it to come to decisions about these needs?**
- > **If there are differences, what are they?**
- > **What is the evidence for the needs identified?**
- > **How might any hypotheses underlying the needs identified be tested?**
- > **Would the child and family understand the needs that have been identified?**
- > **Would the child and family agree with the needs identified?**

**Reviewing learning (10 minutes)**

As a closure activity ask the group to consider the following questions:

- > **How did it feel to review information focusing on the specific needs of a child and avoiding describing a child's needs in universal terms, the need for a service or the need for an assessment?**
- > **What do the group think of using this activity? What have they learnt from doing this?**
- > **Would it be possible to use this method of analysis going forward either as a group or individually?**
- > **What might this method of analysis offer in preparing for supervision discussions?**

It is useful to highlight to the group that reviewing information about the child and family in this way can be used as a reflective technique by individual practitioners as well as a team or group discussion exercise, for example when new referrals or assessments are allocated to the team.

This exercise is taken from material originally developed by RyanTunnardBrown (<https://www.ryantunnardbrown.com/>).

## Tool eight: Focusing on needs, outcomes and planning to support decision-making

This tool presents a structured group reflection which can be used to support reflection, analysis and planning when working with children and families in children's social care. It can be used in a range of situations where practitioners want to develop their analytical skills – for example, in a team meeting, in a training session, or by a multi-agency group who are working to integrate the services they offer.

In this exercise, the facilitator leads the group through a staged discussion about ongoing work with a child and family in which they reflect on the following questions (exploring needs, outcomes and planning):

- > What are the child's needs?
- > What is the potential impact on the child if these needs are not addressed?
- > What is it realistic to expect in terms of an outcome for this child and family?
- > What needs to happen to address the needs of the child or family?

It is important to prepare the group before the activity so that they come ready to take an active role by either presenting work with a child and family for discussion, or working with others in the group to support a process of evaluation and planning. Ask everyone in the group to prepare by identifying one child or family it would be helpful to talk about where they can succinctly present the key issues without much preparation.

Allow 75 minutes for discussion (or less if you don't have that long).

### Introductions and ground rules (5-10 minutes)

Explain that this activity consists of a structured analytical discussion which gives the group the opportunity to observe and / or practice taking part in this. The purpose of the activity is for the group to pause and focus on understanding and analysing work with a child and family in detail before thinking about what to do. Remind the group that, whilst they will be identifying useful suggestions for practice, the real decision making takes place elsewhere.

It is important to outline at the outset that practitioners can feel pressure to achieve positive results when working with children and families despite the fact that they routinely encounter complex, challenging and uncertain situations in practice. This is something the group should bear in mind as they listen to a practitioner present information about work with a child and family and engage in a process of joint discussion about this.

If the group are not used to working together, spend a few minutes asking for their suggestions/ ground rules about how they would like to work together to get the most out of the session.

The group may also need to decide how they will address confidentiality issues. This will be affected by the context but, in general, it is easiest to agree to use first names only.

### **Presenting a summary of work with a child and family (20 minutes)**

Ask for a volunteer to speak for five to ten minutes about work with a child and family. The focus should be on work with an individual child. If there are several children in a family, only one should be chosen – for example, the youngest or the child causing greatest concern.

#### **Explain to the presenter that it is helpful if the summary includes the following:**

- > The reason the assessment is being undertaken.
- > The family composition/relevant people in the child's life (drawing a genogram<sup>1</sup> can be helpful here).
- > The child's story, including their age, significant life events, significant adults in their life, significant relationships, development, wishes and feelings and areas of strengths/resilience within the family etc.
- > The practitioner's relationship with the family and the child or family's view about working with the practitioner.
- > Any dilemmas or challenges for the practitioner.

Then the group has the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Remind the presenter to answer questions briefly to ensure that everyone who wants to can ask a question.

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**1** You can read more about using genograms in this practice tool

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2021/february/using-genograms-in-practice-practice-tool-2021](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2021/february/using-genograms-in-practice-practice-tool-2021)

### **Group discussion (30 minutes)**

The facilitator then invites the group to engage in a structured discussion which is outlined below. The presenter should not take part in the discussion but the group can ask for the presenter's opinion or for additional information as required to help them undertake the activity.

#### **Stage 1: What are the child's needs?**

The aim of this first stage of the discussion is to get as rounded a picture as possible of the needs of the child and of adults close to the child.

#### **Stage 2: What is the potential impact on the child if these needs are not addressed?**

The second stage is about making a judgment about the impact these needs are likely to have on the child if they are not addressed. In other words, to think about the seriousness of the child's needs. This should include a focus on how knowledge from the three areas outlined below might support the group's judgment:

- > **research evidence (including national and local data)**
- > **practice expertise (skills and knowledge from practice)**
- > **the views and experiences of the child or family.**

#### **Stage 3: What is it realistic to expect in terms of an outcome for this child and family?**

The third stage is to think about what it might be reasonable to expect in terms of an outcome, given the nature and extent of the child's and family's needs.

#### **Stage 4: What needs to happen to address the needs of the child or family?**

In the fourth stage the group are encouraged to articulate and plan what needs to happen to address the extent of the needs that have been identified and achieve the outcomes that have been specified. The aim of the discussion is for the group to produce a list of bullet points formulating an overall plan of work for the child and family. Remind the group that they should also consider how they review and evaluate progress towards achieving positive outcomes for the child and family. What milestones and progress do they need to see?

### **Debrief and reviewing learning (15 minutes)**

Invite the presenter to give feedback about what it was like to present the information about work with the child and family and then listen to the discussion focusing on needs, outcomes and planning. Did anything strike them? Are there any points or ideas which might be useful?

Then invite the group to reflect on the experience and any learning points from this which they can take forward into practice.

This exercise is taken from material originally developed by RyanTunnardBrown (<https://www.ryantunnardbrown.com/>).



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