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Submitter Information

Sheila Fish
Email: sheila.fish@scie.org.uk

Abstract Information

Abstract Title:

New types of evidence in child welfare: a practice-based “systems” model for learning from tragedies

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Authors:

Sheila Fish, PdD, Research Analyst Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

Abstract:

How can we better safeguard and protect children? What kinds of evidence do we need to support policy making and practice in this field? In a recent project led and supported by the Social Care Institute for Excellence a ‘systems’ model for conceptualising and learning from front-line child welfare practice has been developed. This can be used across agencies in child death reviews. It is already being found useful in the UK and in other countries. It promises practice-led evidence to complement evidence from more standard sources. Attempts to improve children’s safety, health and well-being need to be assessed for their effectiveness. But good quality studies of such a kind remain scarce and even where systematic synthesis of multiple studies is feasible, the results are invariably ambiguous and, therefore, difficult to interpret and apply in practice. In addition we need to know how something works or doesn’t and the reasons why, whether it works in a way that is acceptable to the people concerned, or even if the outcomes successfully effected are ones that people using the service want. Answering those kinds of questions requires the examination of research studies that can be described broadly as ‘qualitative’. Yet even when policies and procedures do have a lot of good, varied kinds of evidence behind them, they may be less productive in a real world setting where they interact with many other variables. In multi-agency children’s services, with so many agencies with varying priorities interacting, it becomes increasingly difficult to predict with any certainty what the effects of any attempted change to working practices will be. So how then can we find out, for example, whether new policies, and procedures are actually being enacted in practice and if not why not, or whether they are really having the consequences initially intended? This too requires cumulative learning but not of the kind provided by systematic reviews. Instead, evidence that is closer-to-practice is needed. A practice-led view is necessary in order to help highlight for senior management how new policies and guidance, strategic and operational decisions impact on direct work with children, young people and their carers and families. This systems approach provides this. It was developed as a method of accident investigation in aviation and other high-risk industries. Rather than stopping after faults in professional practice have been identified, this approach looks for causal explanations in all parts of the system. It does so by investigating the many factors that interact and influence an individual worker’s decisions, actions and inactions. This allows for the identification of more effective solutions. SCIE’s “learning together” model provides a framework for organising all the layers of interaction that influence work with a family and will be presented in this paper. FISH, S; MUNRO, E; BAIRSTOW, S. 2008. Learning together to safeguard children: developing a systems approach to case reviews. London: SCIE.
<http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/resourceguides/rg13/index.asp>
