

Effective Child Protection

Project Evaluation

Interim Project Evaluation 2020

March 2022

Bruce Thornton

Consultant and trainer in social care

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Extract from the Effective Child Protection Project Evaluation Full Report; sections introducing the interim project evaluation undertaken in early 2020 as Covid impacted on services. The interim evaluation involved three separate inquiries.

Interim Project Evaluation 2020

Interim Evaluation was commissioned towards the end of the first stage of the project in January-March 2020. This involved 3 separate areas of focus.

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Unfortunately, COVID restrictions impacted on (1B) Non Davies' interviews that had been delayed and the COVID emergency cancelled some of those scheduled interviews until a later date. These became difficult to re-schedule but the project was eager to try to complete the evaluation. When those interviews were actually undertaken the workforce was traumatised and it has been difficult to ascertain the impact of this on the clarity and completeness of the evaluation.

Evaluations 1A and 1C were completed prior to COVID or their nature did not make them as susceptible to its effects.

Within hindsight, Evaluation stream 1B should have been suspended as a consequence of COVID.

1A Bruce Thornton

Brief:

Bruce Thornton is a consultant and trainer and professionally competent to analyse the specific practice issues evident in the case file analysis.

Bruce Thornton was asked to look at a sample of case files for the period prior to; and following the introduction of ECP principles into Child Protection practice. In particular there was focus on Case Conferences where the Minutes of Case Conferences was reviewed and Social Work Reports to Case Conferences. The task was to evaluate whether there was a discernible difference in practice since the implementation of the project.

His findings are clear that practice is fundamentally different even in these early days.

Findings:

All of these cases surveyed appear to have been supervised by the same team manager. It was clear from the records that she supervised the social workers very well, was familiar with the families and actively involved in decisions. There were numerous examples of very good practice by social workers and their manager.

The project mentor had worked with the social worker on many of these cases providing mentoring. This appeared to make a significant contribution to developing the project. To measure effectiveness there needs to be a clear focus on what is trying to be achieved. In many of the early cases (pre-ECP) it was hard to see what this was. The project sets a clear sense of direction and breaks this down into the 4 elements. When these are explained they appear obvious, I and others may wonder why someone had not thought of this before.

However, it is a tribute to the problem-solving work that has been done to identify a solution, and the persistence to achieve it.

Reviewing the 4 elements being tested formed the basis of this enquiry.

The overall conclusions are clear and unequivocal.

- The project works very well and moves child protection conferences and associated practice to a new level of clarity and focus, based on evidence and analysis.
- It encourages conferences, managers and practitioners to further develop their skills in these areas with a view to ensuring children are safeguarded effectively.
- There are further developments and adaptations that will inevitably be required, but the project, even at this stage, is an undoubted success and I recommend that support should be continued.

No technical adjustments were suggested in relation to the development of the approach but Brue Thornton gave a clear message to continue confidently in the development of the model.

1B Non Davies

Brief:

Non Davies is an experienced social worker, consultant and trainer and has provided training and consultancy in the areas of the implementation of the 2014 Act and Wales Safeguarding Procedures.

Non Davies was asked to interview staff using a semi structured interview methodology to come to a conclusion about how well the taught ideas of ECP was penetrating into the mindset and meaning making structures of social workers. Emphasis was put on the words practitioners used to describe work, how they framed practice and made sense of their work. That is to test how the fundamental ideas were influencing practice.

The subtlety and precision of trying to evaluate worker's meaning making was justified when commissioned to ensure there was alignment between project intent and effect. However, with COVID the workforce was traumatised and increasingly crisis focussed and the interviews were more difficult as a consequence.

The evaluation showed that practitioners had a basic understanding of the core component of ECP. This was evident in the meaning making and the way words and concepts were used. However, more attention was required to embed the 'change (change statement) and measure(Steps to Change) elements of the model.

Findings

- Evaluation has been staggered, 3 initial interviews conducted late March during the first week in lockdown, others June / July. Whilst focus on pre-March difficult to limit and opportunity to learn from post COVID period taken
- Emerging realisation impact of COVID including on assessment and CP Conferences etc., difficult to quantify extent to which any challenges to implementation/embedding are attributable to Covid-19 implications.
- Interesting analogy between central concepts of ECP – change and measure are applicable to the evaluation
- Need to ensure and maintain 'Secure Base' for practitioners, (regardless of concepts and frameworks utilised practitioners cannot effectively safeguard unless they feel secure and safe themselves)
- Respondents report that they feel very well supported in relation to the ECP Project and the mixed menu of sources of support dependent on need
- Central role of practitioner confidence in applying concepts in practice particularly in multi-agency setting and key determinant in embarking on new model
- **More confidence needed in application of Change and Measure concepts**
- **Specific training of applying ECP concepts in CP and dual mandate of care and control**
- **Inclusion and Involvement of Child / Young Person**
- Assessment Framework Risk 2 held in high regard in assisting and reinforcing professional judgement e.g. establishing threshold and analysing link between harm and impact, practice of retrospective application of Risk 2 to s.47, use in peer supervision; not substitute but does complement and supplement – role of confidence in this; guidance welcomed e.g. pre-birth
- Own agency and multi-agency shared understanding and ownership is essential - shared training would assist

- Synchronicity of documentation and consistency of CP Conference and Core Group and their central role in setting and monitoring ECP Project expectations
- Cultural realignment with families – difficult to instil in current climate of uncertainty
- Importance of maintaining momentum of project
- Assessments increasingly being conducted virtually – implications:
 - assessing actual / likelihood of significant harm
 - pre-birth risk assessment
 - parental capacity to change
 - additional sources of evidence to ensure triangulation / corroboration – Graded Care Profile, Home Conditions etc...

The evaluation was frustrated by the effects of COVID. No technical adjustments were suggested in relation to the development of the approach; largely as so much was unknown as practice in child protection, individually and in Conferences was unprecedentedly shifting to a virtual platform.

1C Mari Ellis Roberts

Brief:

Mari Ellis Roberts is an experienced executive coach and mentor, coach supervisor and trainer. She is competent in the evaluation of the application of coaching and mentoring within the project; defined as a novel approach of 'Practice Mentoring.'

Mari spoke to the Project Lead and undertook a series of interviews with the Practice Mentor. The purpose of these interviews was to evaluate the account provided by the Practice Mentor of how she was applying herself to this role. There was a focus on the 1:1 and group mentoring sessions.

The Practice Mentoring approach was described as innovative and the mentor was well supported and developing in skills and competence. No technical adjustments were suggested in relation to the development of the approach.

Findings:

It can be argued that there are mixed elements of coaching and mentoring in the style of the practitioner at work. For example, the intervention is about a specific task (child protection) and the development of specific skills, which suggests that coaching is at work here. On the other hand, the intervention is about developing capacity and long-term potential, which implies mentoring. Whatever the style, it has a positive impact and evidence suggests that it is a learner-led process, which is fundamentally important. This is illustrated by the clear agenda being set by the learner from the outset.

Mention must be made of the ground breaking work running alongside this project, Reflective Practice Groups in the field of child protection. The Practice Mentor has clearly benefited greatly from working with groups and practicing using some of the reflective tools such as CLEAR, motivational interviewing, the practice of storytelling. She noted that she had noticed that people really liked these techniques. These experiences have certainly increased the confidence of the Practice Mentor and she is now keen to do a qualification where theory can be integrated with the opportunity to further develop practical skills.

Overall the evidence suggests that the scheme has developed the confidence of the Practice Mentor to try new things. This in turn has enabled her to develop a confident mentor persona to complement her expertise as a senior social worker. As a result, the scheme has created a good asset for use in child protection both within and outside the county. Intentionally or unintentionally, the role of the Mentoring Practitioner, is similar to a change agent. There is certainly scope to use this type of role and to further influence in extending and sharing the scheme beyond the boundaries of Gwynedd Council. In response to the concept that the role allowed for the creation of opportunities for change he stated:

"I'm on the front line with the staff helping people to embed the learning in a practical way. My role as a mentor is one thing, there are many influences. People need to buy in, make time and see value in the project."

Finally, the Practice Mentor was asked to define the important attributes of the role. When considering these you can argue that they also reflect the key skills of a social worker. Work on identifying these could be included in a future mentor training package as there is an important element of raising self-awareness in doing so.

The following were noted:

- Good communication skills
- Proximity (approachability)
- Flexibility
- Enthusiasm and ability to challenge others
- Confidence
- Don't take things personally e.g. someone cancels a meeting
- Interest in people and ability to build relationships

In conclusion, here is an example of an innovative project that was well designed with some structure but was flexible enough to accommodate natural evolution. In addition, with a view to creating mentoring opportunities for child protection practitioners, a website has been developed containing fresh and useful resources and guidance for child protection agencies and practitioners. These are concrete, concrete things that busy practitioners can use to improve the quality of provision.

The author of the full report

Bruce Thornton

I am a registered social worker having qualified in 1971. My background has predominantly been in child care and I have held social work, management and training posts in local authorities.

I have also lectured on a professional social work course and I am a joint author of Community Care's Guide to the Children Act 1989.

Since 1992 I have been a freelance trainer and service developer in both Wales and England. I am the joint author of the Gwynedd Risk Model and have a particular interest in the development of child protection that has a practical application for local authorities.

I have introduced the Risk Model into numerous local authority Children's Services Departments and I am familiar with many child protection systems.

I understand the background of the Effective Child Protection project but I have not been involved in its development or implementation. However, I did undertake a part of the interim review into the project based on comparing and contrasting child protection conference reports from pre and post implementation.