

- Cash, S.J. & Berry, M. (2003) 'Measuring service delivery in a placement prevention program: An application to an ecological model', *Administration in Social Work*, 27, 65-85.
- Cash, S.J. & Berry, M. (2002) 'Family characteristics and child welfare services: Does assessment drive service provision?', *Families in Society*, 83, 499-507.
- Cash, S.J. (2001) 'Risk assessment in child welfare: The art and science', *Children & Youth Services Review*, 23, 811-830.
- Chorpita, B.F., Bernstein, A. & Daleiden, E.L. (2008) 'The Research Network on Youth Mental Health', *Administration Policy Mental Health*, 35, 114-123.
- DePanfilis, D. & Zuravin, S.J. (2002) 'The effect of services on the recurrence of maltreatment', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 187-205.
- DePanfilis, D. & Zuravin, S.J. (2001) 'Assessing risk to determine the need for services', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 23, 3-20.
- Fluke, J., Edwards, M., Bussey, M., Wells, S. & Johnson, W. (2001) 'Reducing recurrence in child protective services: Impact of a targeted safety protocol', *Child Maltreatment*, 6, 207-218.
- Fraser, M.W., Pecora, P.J. & Haapala, D.A. (1991) *Families in crisis: The impact of family preservation services*, New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Fuller, T.L., Wells, S.J. & Cotton, E.E. (2001) 'Predictors of maltreatment recurrence at two milestones in the life of a case', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 23, 49-78.
- Gambrill, E. & Shlonsky, A. (2000) Risk assessment in context, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22, 813-837.
- Halpern, R. (1997) 'Good practice with multiply-vulnerable young families: Challenges and principles', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 19, 253-275.
- Inkelas, M. & Halfon, N. (1997) 'Recidivism in child protective services', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 19, 139-161.
- Lambert, M. (2005) 'Emerging methods for providing clinicians with timely feedback on treatment effectiveness: An introduction', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61, 141-144.
- Lambert, M., Harmon, C., Slade, K., Whipple, J. & Hawkins, E. (2005) 'Providing feedback to psychotherapists on their patients' progress: Clinical results and practice suggestions', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61, 165-174.
- Lambert, M.J., Whipple, J.L., Hawkins, E.J., Vermeersch, D.A., Nielsen, S.L. & Smart, D.W. (2003) 'Is it time for clinicians to routinely track patient outcomes? A meta-analysis', *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10, 288-301.
- Leschied, A.W., Chiodo, D., Whitehead, P.C., Hurley, D. & Marshall, L. (2003) 'The empirical basis of risk assessment in child welfare: The accuracy of risk assessment and clinical judgment', *Child Welfare*, 82, 527-540.
- Lyle, C.G. & Graham, E. (2000) 'Looks can be deceiving: Using a risk assessment instrument to evaluate the outcomes of child protection services', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22(11), 935-949.
- Millar, A., Simeone, R.S. & Carnevale, J.T. (2001) 'Logic models: A systems tool for performance management', *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 24, 73-81.
- Munro, E. (2004) 'A simpler way to understand the results of risk assessment instruments', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 877-887.
- Pecora, P.J., Seelig, W.R., Zirps, F.A. & Davis, S.M. (eds) (1996) *Quality improvement and evaluation in child and family services: Managing into the next century*, Washington, DC.: Child Welfare League of America.
- Pecora, P.J., Fraser, M.W., Nelson, K.E., McCroskey, J. & Meezan, W. (1995) *Evaluating family-based services*, New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Reed-Ashcraft, K., Kirk, R.S. & Fraser, M.W. (2001) 'The reliability and validity of the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale', *Research on Social Work Practice*, 11(4), 503-520.
- Rittner, B. (2002) 'The use of risk assessment instruments in child protective services case planning closures', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24, 189-207.
- Sapyta, J., Reimer, M. & Bickman, L. (2005) 'Feedback to clinicians: Theory, research, and practice', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61, 145-153.
- Schwalbe, C. (2004) 'Re-visioning risk assessment for human service decision making', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 561-576.
- Shlonsky, A. & Wagner, D. (2005) 'The next step: Integrating actuarial risk assessment and clinical judgment into a knowledge-based practice framework in CPS case management', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 409-427.
- Shlonsky, A. & Gambrill, E. (2001) 'The assessment and management of risk in child welfare services', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 23, 1-2.
- Staff, I. & Fein, E. (1994) 'Inside the black box: An exploration of service delivery in a family reunification program', *Child Welfare*, 73, 195-211.
- Wright, L. & Paget, K. (2002) 'A learning-organization approach to evaluation', (pp. 127-140), in A.N. Maluccio, C. Canali & T. Vecchiato (eds.), *Assessing Outcomes in Child and Family Services*, New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.

## INVITED COMMENTARY by Patricia Hansen

on 'Continuous family assessment: How are you going? How are you going now?' by Marianne Berry & Scotty J. Cash

The Structured Decision Making (SDM) model is already established in Queensland and South Australia, and NSW has implemented some SDM components (Children's Research Centre). Other states may follow if policy makers see this as a solution to the problems in the child protection system. Justice Wood's (2008) Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW includes a recommendation that SDM should be implemented in NSW. Recommendation 9.1 states:

DoCS should test the use of Structured Decision Making tools at the Helpline and at CSC's in relation to assessments and interventions including restoration (p.xv).

The Report cites evidence from the United States that SDM has stronger predictive validity than consensus based instruments (D' Andrade, Austin & Benton 2008), but independent Australian research shows that use of SDM in Queensland did not produce consistency in decision making

(Wood 2008, Chapter 9, p. 333, para 9.39). It is clear that more evaluation is required.

Berry and Cash point out that the narrow focus of SDM is on past indicators of potential risks to children and that this does not provide sufficient information about current risks to children. SDM attempts to predict but does not assess comprehensively the current situation. The view presented is that we need a shift from a risk focus to a needs and service focus (Lonne, Parton, Thomson & Harries 2009).

In Australia we have an increase in the number of children being removed from the family home as shown in the latest data released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). There were 31,166 children in out of home care at 30 June 2008 (AIHW 2009, p.ix). Such removal of children is the most extreme form of intervention which traumatises the child, as well as the parents and extended family, and this should be prevented whenever it is possible to do so. More is required than simple risk assessment to make such serious decisions.

The seduction of risk assessment instruments is that this checklist approach creates a sense of certainty for decision making in complex situations where there can be no certainty. Given enough confidence in the instrument, anyone can feel able to make a decision to leave children with parents or to remove them without thinking about the total situation.

Some child protection authorities in Australia have decided to de-professionalise and to accept a variety of workers into child protection positions instead of insisting on appropriate qualified staff. To work effectively in child protection, a considerable body of knowledge is required. This includes knowledge of child protection history and processes, understanding of human growth and development, family structures, family systems and processes, and the influence of cultural, religious and racial differences on parenting and problem solving. For these newly appointed, diversely

qualified, child protection staff, a risk assessment tool provides a framework to follow where there are gaps in knowledge. Indeed, the use of SDM may be seen as the total focus for assessment. In that simplicity there is a horrible possibility of destructive and harmful practice.

Berry and Cash provide an example of an alternative assessment model. The *Strengths and Stressors* assessment has been specifically designed to be effective as an assessment of risk and also to identify the family and children's needs and the potential resources to meet those needs. It has been developed from a sound theoretical perspective that is relevant to child welfare and child protection practitioners and families, it includes a strengths focus and it is easy to use. Most of all, it is designed specifically to aid assessment, planning of intervention and monitoring progress in relation to potential restoration. All child welfare and child protection practitioners, from all disciplines, should take time to consider the messages contained here.

## REFERENCES

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009) *Child protection Australia 2007-2008*, Canberra: AIHW.
- D'Andrade, A., Austin, M. & Benton, A. (2008) 'Risk and safety assessment in child welfare: Instrument comparisons', *Journal of Evidence Based Social Work*, 5 (1/2), 31-50.
- Children's Research Centre, The Structured Decision Making model, viewed 08/02/09, [www.nccd-crc-org/crc/c\\_sdm\\_cps.html](http://www.nccd-crc-org/crc/c_sdm_cps.html)
- Lonne, B., Parton, N., Thomson, J. & Harries, M. (2009) *Reforming child protection*, Abingdon Oxford: Routledge.
- Wood, J. (2008) *Report of the special commission of inquiry into child protection services in NSW*, Sydney: NSW Government.

---

*Dr. Patricia Hansen is Head of the School of Social Work at Australian Catholic University. Her research interests are in family and children's services, including child protection. Her current work includes part-time work as a solicitor with experience in Children's Courts.*

## Children Australia 2009

Volume 34 (quarterly)

Standard subscription .....	\$77 (inc GST)
Student subscription .....	\$55 (inc GST)
Overseas subscription .....	A\$99 (airmail)

For further details and subscription forms, see OzChild's website <[www.ozchild.org.au](http://www.ozchild.org.au)>  
or email Lorraine Redshaw <[lredshaw@ozchild.org.au](mailto:lredshaw@ozchild.org.au)>