



Assisting risk assessment work

Tony Stanley discusses the Risk Estimation System in practice with social workers

I just see all the tools as being a part of the puzzle, so when you're looking to formulate the big picture, each has a role to play in sort of determining or assessing what the risks are. (Social Worker 5)

Introduction

Risk assessment and its management are pivotal components of child protection social work today (Appleton & Craig, 2006). In a practical sense, this is best illustrated by the development of the risk assessment tools that social workers can use to reach conclusions about the level of risk to which children can be exposed. While there has been a significant amount of research into the efficacy of risk assessment tools (English & Pecora, 1994; Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000), less research attention has been paid to social workers who are charged with doing risk assessment work. According to Hall and White (2005), there is much to be learned from the actual working experiences of social workers.

In my doctoral research, I discussed risk assessment work with 70 New Zealand child protection social workers as part of a larger study that considered decision-making and risk. I wrote about the findings of that project in my thesis and presented a paper at the 10th

Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Wellington in February 2006. This larger study was a qualitative research project, where Child, Youth and Family social workers recalled complex and straightforward cases of child protection assessment work and their associated practice decisions.

As part of the larger project, a group of social workers described how Child, Youth and Family's Risk Estimation System (RES) assisted them in their assessment work.

The Risk Estimation System

The development of the RES began in 1994 with the establishment of a project team to instigate a 'professional response to the emerging crisis in child protection' (Smith 1998). Through analyses of practice, the team found that approaches to child protection practice were inconsistent across the country.

RES, which was introduced in 1996, is a consensus-based model. The RES used in Aotearoa/New Zealand is an adaptation of the Manitoba Model, modified to incorporate the specific cultural factors for New Zealand. Twenty-two risk scales are included in the analysis. Parental attitudes, family or whānau history, thinking, behaviour, as well as social

factors, can be incorporated into the assessment (Appleton & Craig, 2006). Cultural guidelines are incorporated into the risk assessment framework and, as with other sections of the tool, composite scores are established following a narrative recording by the social worker. In summary, risk assessment practice is guided by the professional, cultural and agency context.

The RES has two main features. First, risk is treated as a compound concept of the vulnerability of the child, the likelihood of reoccurring abuse or neglect and the probability of future harm. Second, the model attends to the behaviour of adults, their cognitions, beliefs, attitudes and responsibilities with regard to child abuse and neglect (Appleton & Craig, 2006). According to Smith (1998) 'the intent is to strengthen the professional role of the social worker by providing a framework for structured assessment and decision-making'. Social workers are encouraged to use the tool to enquire, to investigate through information gathering from a wide range of sources and to then formulate their analysis (Appleton & Craig, 2006).

Risk assessment tools were developed to reduce worker inconsistency in decision-making (DePanfillis and Zuravin, 1999). There are compelling arguments for the use of formalised risk assessments to assist social work assessment work (Appleton & Craig, 2006). One argument is that without a risk assessment tool in cases of neglect, 'it will be difficult to see how [social workers] can be expected to know whether a child is likely to be harmed in the future' (Coohey, 2003). Assessing risk is a matter of judgement, and not fact finding. Social workers need to maintain a professional and ethical approach toward it.

At best, [risk assessment] instruments and models are wonderful tools in decision-making and good casework practice. At worst, they can negate practitioner responsibility and be used mechanistically and defensively (Smith, 1995).

It is important to note that not all of the social workers who participated in the research

experienced the RES as described in the preceding paragraph. However, the benefits for those who approached the RES as a 'tool of inquiry' are worth reporting on, as these offer insight into how this actually assisted assessment practice.

There are four ways in which

the RES assisted assessment work.

1. Formulating assessment questions.
2. Highlighting assessment gaps.
3. Family and whānau participation.
4. Drawing on literature and research.

Formulating assessment questions

The most significant way that the RES assisted assessment work was to use it as a 'tool of inquiry'. The RES contains a range of assessment sections that social workers can use to formulate assessment questions.

I've been trying, and it's become practice for me, to use the various risk estimation headings [in assessment work]. Like the way I bring it to parents is [to ask them], "What do your mates think about your parenting when you talk to your friends about how your kids are getting on?" (Social Worker 18)

[I]f you're getting all that information from your families and wider people, about all the factors that are in the RES, if you can get information

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out of them all, you've got heaps of information to actually assess the risk stuff.

(Social Worker 52)

The RES provided questioning areas for social workers. Social workers can use the RES headings to prompt them to consider further assessment areas that they need to cover. The RES assisted these social workers generate assessment questions.

We are continually assessing the risk for the child ... like access, reoccurrence, history. Those are the sorts of questions that we ask all the time, continually, when we are doing our investigation, our assessment [work]

(Social Worker 3)

[W]hen you're out, kind of, meeting with the family ... going through the RES process, when we're asking these questions and talking about their tendency, you know, history of violence and tendencies, attitudes to discipline and stuff. So we were doing that, and gathering that information, so we'd done it in our heads, you know, so when we actually had to sit down and [complete the RES in the computer], it was quite reassuring, I guess, to think, yeah, in a sense that our assessment was leading us to form this view and that these were the risks. (Social Worker 42)

Highlighting assessment gaps

The RES can highlight gaps in assessment work, as workers may not have gathered sufficient information to complete it. This next social worker was explicit about this.

I tend to use [the RES] usually [in] my investigation, like, when I first go out for an

interview, a home visit and an interview, basically, my interview is based on what I need to know to do a reasonable sort of RES.

(Social Worker 61)

Family and whānau participation

Families and whānau are important participants in risk assessment work, and the concepts contained in the RES helped a number of social workers generate conversations about child protection with whānau and families. One social worker noted that she used the RES reference guide to show whānau the definition of vulnerability. She said that this facilitated a discussion about vulnerability, what this was and how to manage the risks associated with it.

Another social worker explained how she used the RES to assist her with whānau participation. She said that this helped her to build a relationship with one particular whānau.

Sometimes when you're talking to parents, if they're old school, or they come from another generation,

they'll question you on your decision and you might say to them, "Do you mind, I want to show you something that helps me in weighing up the probability". And I'll quickly go to [the RES section], if it's drugs or alcohol, and then I'll say, "If you don't mind, I'll read it to you", and they're really listening. (Social Worker 55)

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Drawing on literature and research

The RES has 14 research components that aim to underpin social work decision-making. One of the social workers described a case where this was helpful. During a whānau meeting, the social worker told them that the RES was one of the tools she used to assist her assessment work.

The tool, she explained, contained research areas that could help her reach decisions about the level of risk to which children may be exposed. One of these was alcohol and drug research, and the worker noted that the RES provided her with some information about the lengths of time people may need in managing drug and alcohol issues. Her access to literature and research assisted her to inform her conversation with the whānau, and supported her in the decisions she made about risk.

The RES assists risk assessment work

The practice and organisational context will always influence the effectiveness of the RES (Appleton & Craig, 2006). This means that the approach taken by social workers and their supervisors toward the RES is crucial. When used as a tool of inquiry the RES offers social workers a risk assessment framework that assists with family and whānau participation, generates assessment questioning, and, importantly, facilitates discussions about risk and its management during supervision meetings. This is illustrated by one social worker's explanation that supervision provided a forum to assist with risk assessment work.

I had supervision, and that's where we discuss things that you would fill in on an RES. I might not actually do it on the computer but I discuss it with my supervisor who [helps me define] what the risks are. (Social Worker 12)

Statutory social workers make difficult decisions every day. They need the support of supervision and the RES to assist them to do this (Appleton & Craig, 2006). Assessment questions can be generated from the RES headings and sections, and the RES can prompt assessment areas that social workers may need to consider. Any information gaps can then be attended to.

Families and whānau can participate in risk assessment work when the RES is discussed with them. Used in this way, the RES provides an opportunity for generating investigation and assessment questions about what constitutes risk. Assessing risk is complex, demanding and difficult work, yet the RES is one tool that offers an exciting, culturally informed and research-based framework that can help shape the way social workers think about the point and purpose of it.

Acknowledgments

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