



# Strengthening our engagement with families and understanding practice depth

*Megan Chapman and Jo Field*

Statutory child protection work is often viewed as the sharp end of social work practice, located in a turbulent environment characterised by continuous change, complex case dynamics and scarce resources. Working in such a demanding context can be fraught with anxiety, tension and stress for both practitioners and managers. It requires workers to be resilient and resourceful in order to maintain a practice approach that empowers vulnerable families to utilise their strengths and resources, and to make safe decisions for their children. Critical to this process is the way practitioners engage with vulnerable families to create relationships and conditions that facilitate change in human systems.

This article describes the importance of how we approach and respond to children, young people and families, and explains the importance of practice depth. Organisational factors can impact on practice depth and we therefore pay particular attention to this. Strengths-based practice and professional supervision provide opportunities to mitigate against these influences, supporting practice that is engaging, respectful and focused on the safety of children and young people.

## *From child rescue to strengths-based practice*

Child protection practice has historically oscillated between family preservation and “child rescue” models. Extreme expression of these positions can mean excessive state intervention at the child rescue end of the continuum and minimisation of the safety issues at the other. According to Weil (cited in Patti, 2000, p. 483):

*“As service systems have grown, the child rescue approach and the community-based service approach have co-existed, and in some periods, the pendulum of social policy has swung forcefully one way or the other, with the child rescue approach usually prevailing.”*

Whilst the pendulum has swung, it is nevertheless a delicate balance to manage risk in the context of family support. A key factor disturbing this delicate balance has arguably been the reviewing of child deaths (Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993), which writers have suggested creates an overly cautious, defensive practice approach (Connolly & Doolan, 2007). Defensive practice is elicited by very strong anxiety factors, which can be a powerful and

controlling dynamic for workers who are not safely contained by competent professional supervision. A defensive practice culture can unhelpfully reinforce a “child rescue” approach where children are too easily removed from their families for fear of blame from the organisation and/or the media if anything goes wrong. Despite the rarity of child deaths, such tragic events nevertheless rest at the heart of practitioner fear (Ferguson, 2004, p. 122):

*“The paradox is that social workers’ fears and anxieties have multiplied at a time when the actual phenomenon of child death in child protection is such an extremely rare experience that only a tiny fraction of professionals will ever encounter it.”*

The heavily interventionist response that can be driven by these anxieties can also lead to the critical alienation of the child from their family and is not conducive to a safe, timely return home.

Other factors that have been identified as contributing to a more defensive practice philosophy are: the media (Ferguson, 2004; Mansell, 2006), the prevailing political climate and social policies (Munro, 2002), and budgetary constraints and the availability of resources (Field, 2004). Invariably the development of non-defensive practice philosophy will also be influenced by the individual practitioner’s own value base, knowledge, skills and competencies.

In recent years, the move to strengths-based practice principles has emphasised the need to promote strengths and address vulnerabilities of

individuals/families/groups in order to increase resilience, coping skills and the achievement of their goals (Berg and Kelly, 1997; de Shazer, 1985; Scott and O’Neil, 1996). The approach focuses on the abilities, hopes and dreams of clients and accords them expertise in their own lives. It seeks to shift the power dynamic away from a relationship based on ‘expert professional/helpless client’ to one that creates a partnership of working together to achieve

goals. The focus is on “solution finding” (Berg and Kelly, 1997) rather than problem-solving.

### ***“Safety organised practice”***

Strengths-based work is manifested in the “solution-building” approach (Berg and Kelly, 1997) to child protection work. Berg and Kelly suggest that social workers, like all helping professions, have been

trained in the traditional problem-solving approach based on the medical model. They argue that this locks workers into being ‘the expert’, with a heavy emphasis on professional assessment and intervention. This dependence on assessing the problem and analysing the causes has the potential to keep workers and the family stuck in an unhelpful deficit cycle. Strengths-based practice puts less emphasis on the nature and severity of the problem and more focus on solutions – sometimes querying whether problems and solutions have to be connected. This presents a significant challenge to the fundamental thinking of the problem-solving approach. Strengths-based practitioners argue that the clients are the ‘experts’ in their own lives and therefore focus

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on building solutions as a way to move families forward.

Because of their clear mandate to support child safety, the notion of clients being 'experts' in their own lives creates a potential dilemma for child protection practitioners trying to work in a strengths-based way. Statutory decision-making about child protection often involves using authoritative social work knowledge and expert opinions from other professionals. This can create challenge for the worker regarding their understanding of 'expertise'. It is a tension that needs careful reflection and supervision to achieve the appropriate balance.

In the "signs of safety" approach (Turnell and Edwards, 1999) the focus of strengths is reframed into how they can be used by the family or practitioner to increase the safety of children. The level of danger and risk of harm to a child is compared to the strengths and protective factors in the family's situation but safety of the child or children remains the key focus – what Turnell now refers to as "safety organised practice". This approach emphasises the need to build safety from protective factors. Tools used to support this practice (Turnell and Edwards, 1997) have been designed to be used and shared with the family. This shifts the use of assessment resources from the professional 'expert' domain toward a process of engagement and transparency with the family, supporting relationship building, and the generation of hope and conditions for change. From this, families are empowered to make safe decisions about their children.

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These themes are emphasised in the practice frameworks introduced into Child, Youth and Family practice in 2005 (Connolly, 2007). Practice frameworks integrate empirical research, social work theory, ethical principles and cultural strengths in practical ways that help practitioners use knowledge to inform their work (Connolly & Ward, 2008). The care and protection practice framework incorporates three perspectives: child-centred; family-led and culturally responsive; and strengths and evidence-based practice.

It also includes key messages from the literature relating to child protection work. The youth justice practice framework includes "justice and accountability focused" as an additional perspective. These frameworks provide opportunities for workers to understand and deepen their practice knowledge while reflecting on their approach and decision-making.

### *Understanding practice depth*

The importance of developing practice depth is not a new idea. It is usually associated with descriptions of reflective practice: sound decision-making, characterised by reflective analysis and demonstration of comprehensive professional knowledge and skill. The literature often refers to in-depth practice being promoted and supported by quality supervision.

However, in recent years, writers have noted the challenges of promoting practice depth within pressured child protection work environments (Ferguson, 2004; Munro, 2002; Scott, 2006). Indeed, in what he identifies as "conveyor-belt practice", Ferguson (2004, p. 212) argues:

*“Pressure to get cases ‘through the system’ creates a situation where attention, time and resources are diverted from doing in-depth, needs-driven work with children and families in ways which can promote child safety, welfare and healing.”*

Drawing upon Ferguson’s work we now explore levels of practice depth from *conveyor-belt* practice to the kind of reflective practice that characterises in-depth work (figure 1). Within this conceptualisation, conveyor-belt practice is event-driven (i.e. notification) and front-end focused. It is characterised by the need to respond primarily to efficiency drivers and getting families through the system. Meeting targets and moving quickly to case closure is considered critically important.

The second level of practice we identify as *pragmatic practice*. Here practice is characterised by general compliance with policy and practice guidelines, and moderate engagement with family and other agencies (that is considered sufficient to efficiently manage the work), with a focus on case management and administrative supervision.

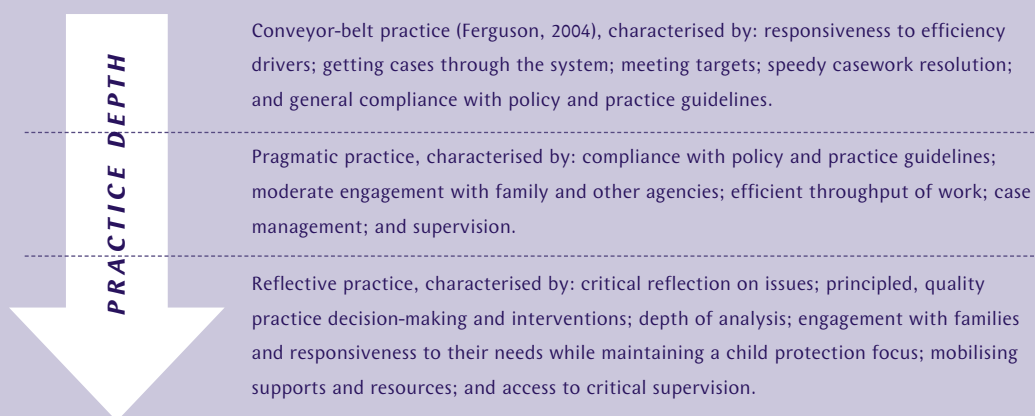
The third level of practice we identify is *reflective practice*. This is characterised by processes of critical reflection, strong professional decision-making, and an emphasis on engagement with and responsiveness to children, young people and their families. A key feature of reflective practice is access to supervision that encourages critical reflection on issues.

We would argue that practice systems under pressure are more likely to be susceptible to less in-depth reflective practice. We would also suggest that even when pressure abates, conveyor-belt and pragmatic practice potentially have lasting consequences as a culture of less in-depth practice becomes entrenched and difficult to change.

### ***Challenges to in-depth practice***

Within pressured organisational settings there are times when conveyor-belt or pragmatic practice may seem unavoidable, for example during periods of increased notification rates, when sites are responding to high levels of unallocated cases, or when there are significant

**Figure 1: Understanding practice depth**



numbers of staff vacancies. Having time to critically reflect upon aspects of an intervention can seem a luxury for a busy practitioner. There are also occasions when moving quickly toward an appropriate referral to a community support agency is exactly the right thing to do. Not all interventions require the same level of intensity, nor do they all require processes of in-depth reflection.

When practice is occurring at the conveyor-belt or pragmatic level, however, it is important for workers to have the capacity to pause and take a deeper look at a case when needed. For example, in situations of several intakes over a short period of time, it is important to look at the particular safety needs of the child and the support needs of the family. While previous intakes may have been dealt with appropriately in an efficient way, continued referrals about a child or family may require more reflective and critical analysis. In this regard, Child, Youth and Family's dangerous situations policy (2002) states that where three or more notifications have been received for a child within a period of 12 months:

*"this is sometimes an indication that a pattern has emerged that requires a closer evaluation including, where appropriate, a review by the practice leader or a referral to the dangerous situations team."*

Hence, professional judgement is required to determine what level of practice depth may be required at different times during the life of a case. The initial assessment of a notification requires that the social worker understand at a deeper level what issues confront the family,

and their ability to provide safety and security for their child. Similarly when new information is received, for example there is a new partner in the home or the family has a crisis, a more in-depth approach may be needed to ensure that the safety risk has not increased for the child.

It is also important to understand the relationship between practice depth and processes of engagement with families in child

protection work. There will be times when a situation requires only one contact with a family. In these cases, as with more enduring and/or intense encounters, practice needs to be respectfully engaging, informative and clear with regard to what the family might expect and where they may seek future support.

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### ***What can we do about "risk anxiety"?***

Hearing of cases involving the non-accidental injury of infants and other vulnerable children can create fear or anxiety amongst social work practitioners, particularly in the child protection field. Practitioners may wonder whether a similar incident could happen on their caseload, or whether they will miss a vital piece of information or assess the level of risk incorrectly. They may think of all the cases they are responsible for and believe that they all have the potential to result in a negative outcome. Ferguson (2004, p. 117) refers to this fear as "risk anxiety" which he believes is a relatively recent shift in thinking:

*"Up to the 1970s under simple modernity professionals had an inherent belief in the capacity of their expertise to enable them to protect children in time. Even if in*

*practice they sometimes failed to do this, the sequestration of child death both expressed and bolstered their faith in the science of child protection. The dominant belief among social workers today is that no matter how effectively the child protection system operates it cannot guarantee safety for children.”*

Strengths-based supervision and reflective practice can create more supportive practice environments and alleviate a good deal of this fear and anxiety (Morrison, 2001). Field (2004) argues that a primary goal for all supervisors is to maintain a safe supervision practice regime that responds to the individual needs of practitioners. Social work staff will respond to their work in unique ways. An important aspect of the supervisor’s role is to understand the particular needs of staff, to identify when risk anxiety is hindering positive practice with families, and to influence and support social workers as they manage the complex but necessary dynamics of child safety, family support, and family decision-making.

Regular supervision is a key component in promoting greater practice depth and the lessening of risk anxiety. Child, Youth and Family has a supervision policy that provides mechanisms for safeguarding the work undertaken with children and families, and provides opportunities to encourage critical reflection of practice that in turn creates confidence in assessment and decision-making.

Munro (2002, p. 154) reinforces the role of supervision as vital to ensuring a reflective, open-minded approach to working with and assessing family situations:

*“Not only does [supervision] provide the intellectual challenges to help practitioners stand back and be critical of their work but it also provides the secure setting in which they can face this emotionally challenging task.”*

Supervision is therefore a process which supports the worker, challenges them to ensure a respectful and competent approach, contains their anxiety, and moderates the practice depth.

In pressured systems, the ability to create supportive supervisory environments can be challenging for organisations managing complex child protection situations. Developing capacity-building, peer group learning environments for staff; utilising practice leadership strengths

across the wider system; and creating structured processes that strategically target areas of concern are all important to strengthen practice.

### **Conclusion**

Building practice depth requires a whole-of-organisation approach that acknowledges the inevitable

challenges of contemporary child protection work and works across a range of systems to enhance in-depth service delivery. Within Child, Youth and Family, the practice frameworks introduced in 2005 have provided a foundation for more engaging quality practice with children, young people and their families. The recent enhancements of the vulnerable infant practice triggers are a further way of promoting more reflective practice as workers assess and respond to vulnerable children.

The challenge for any organisation is to ensure that workers continue to apply the practice

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framework principles and explicitly consider the practice triggers in their practice. This promotes the adoption of a respectful and skilful practice approach that adds practice depth, even in the context of a pressured work environment. Practice frameworks offer an antidote when practice cultures lacking in depth become entrenched.

Strengths-based practice provides workers with an approach that respects and values the strengths and resources that families can use to empower themselves and create lasting change. While the organisational environment can either support or hinder strengths-based practice by constraining practice depth, less in-depth practice does not mean that the worker abandons a respectful, engaging approach to the family. Strengths-based practice can still be applied at all levels of practice, even when high levels of casework intensity are not required.

It can be easy to dismiss reflective practice as being too time consuming, labour intensive and impossible within a challenging organisational environment where the meeting of targets and speedy casework resolution is promoted. Reflective practice, however, need not take impossible amounts of time. Critical reflection of practice can occur whenever casework is discussed. It can become the way things are done, rather than being seen as an added pressure. In reality we spend a considerable amount of time talking about casework. Maximising these conversations to increase reflective opportunity creates more reflexive environments that are possible even in the

busiest of offices. Familiarity with practice triggers and their application can also be effective in guiding immediate decision-making.

In developing the practice depth conceptualisation in figure 1, we aimed to illuminate the levels of practice available to workers when they engage with children, young people and their families. Greater understanding

of these levels, and the style of practice they promote, helps us to more fully appreciate how practice cultures develop and what this might mean for the delivery of services.

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