# The oversight and review of cases in the light of changing circumstances and new information: how do people respond to new (and challenging) information?

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*'A non-judgemental acceptance that errors are inevitable makes it easier to recognise, acknowledge and learn from them'*

## Key messages

- Assessments are fallible, and contexts constantly changing. Therefore, professionals need to keep their judgements under constant critical review (Munro 2008a).

- The single most important factor in minimising errors is to admit that you might be wrong (Munro 2008a).

- Nonetheless there is a tendency to persist in initial judgements or assessments and to re-frame, minimise or dismiss discordant new evidence. Bias is inevitable and comes from the many ways our minds can distort, avoid or exaggerate information.

- On the other hand, some practitioners respond to new information, not by sticking to their preferred view, but by jumping around from one item or theory to the next, never reaching a coherent conclusion or coordinated response.

- Therefore, practitioners must be willing, encouraged and supported to challenge, and where necessary revise, their views throughout the period of any intervention.

To achieve this, practitioners and their managers should routinely play their own 'devil's advocate' in considering alternative actions, explanations or hypotheses.

• Studies of the implementation of the *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families* (Department of Health *et al* 2000) have reported improvements in consistency, transparency and accountability, though concerns persist in the quality and level of analysis in assessments.

• Supervision should provide a safe but challenging space to oversee and review cases with the help of a fresh, experienced, pair of eyes and to systematically guard against either rigid adherence to a particular view or the opposite tendency to jump from one theory to another without resolution.

• Managers at all levels must ensure a 'learning culture' (Laming 2003) with an ethos in which reflective practice and self-questioning are accepted and actively promoted – a non-judgemental acceptance that errors are inevitable makes it easier to recognise, acknowledge and learn from them.

## Key topics and some example questions

### The agency culture

• How does our agency culture promote critical reflection and revision of views in light of new evidence or alternative hypotheses? Are we open to challenging input from our staff, peers or from outside agencies?

• How do we guard against a culture of denial and false optimism in the questions we ask and in deciding the information we pay attention to?

### Audit

• What models/methods do we have for auditing front-line practice?

• Do our audit processes involve talking directly to practitioners and to children and families as well as reading written records? (Fish 2009)

• Do our tools for individual/multi-agency case file audits ask questions that elicit information about practitioner–family contact to inform us about actual practice?

• Do they help us to understand why practitioners act as they do and what factors influence them?

• Do we consider what impact audits have on changing practice?

• How involved are senior managers in auditing and other quality assurance processes?

### Organisational practice

• How confident are we that our specialist advisers, legal advisers, reviewing officers, chairs of conferences and other staff who have responsibility for auditing and reviewing cases, are themselves able to question, probe, challenge and effectively assist decision-making and proper consideration of new information?

- How robust is our supervision policy? How do we know it is being implemented in all aspects? Does it differentiate between its various functions and allow the possibility of splitting roles where necessary? How else do practitioners get access to advice and support?

- How do we ensure that agency policies, overt or covert, do not compound problems such as a lack of receptiveness to new information?

## Learning from experience

- How do we learn from, and help others to learn from, successes and mistakes?

- How effective is our approach to serious case reviews and learning from them? What are we learning from reviewing all child deaths? In addition, have we looked at innovative approaches/audit models for evaluating critical incidents and learning from best practice?

### Front-line staff

- What do we know about how our newly qualified staff's experience of working in our agency? How are they being supervised and their professional development nurtured?



- How do we encourage front-line staff to reflect regularly on and check their decisions?

- How are we promoting continuing professional development for all front-line staff?

- Do front-line staff have protected time to update themselves on new policy and research and how are they being encouraged to translate and apply it to their practice? Are they expected and encouraged to 'research' more complex cases by seeking out the relevant knowledge, and are they given time to do so? (Fish 2009).

- Are we using professional development bodies, and if so how?

- When, as we must do, we read case reports or files or ask managers about practice, do we ask which cases they are most worried about and why?

- Do we also ask which cases they are least worried about and why?

- When we read these files or hear about these cases, do we get a clear picture of what daily life is like for that child, living in that household?

# Introduction

Research indicates that people are reluctant decision-makers. In child protection work, this may manifest itself in avoiding decision-making so that, ultimately, decisions are often made in response to a crisis. Agency policies and the prevailing culture and ethos can either exacerbate or mitigate this problem.

This briefing focuses on what is known about how people make decisions in child protection work and, in particular, on how they respond to new and challenging information under pressure, in ongoing chronic situations when children may be at significant risk of harm. It will assist Directors of Children's Services and senior managers in all relevant agencies to reflect on, develop and sustain the culture and ethos around supervision and management to ensure better oversight and review of cases. The briefing draws on research as well as on knowledge of practice. While it has drawn heavily on social work practice and research, the messages are applicable to all professionals and agencies.

# What is the issue?

*'One of the most common, problematic tendencies in human cognition … is our failure to review judgements and plans – once we have formed a view on what is going on, we often fail to notice or to dismiss evidence that challenges that picture.'*

**(Fish, Munro and Bairstow 2009: p9)**

Child protection inevitably involves working with uncertainties and making difficult decisions and complex judgements on the basis of incomplete information in rapidly evolving, often hostile and highly stressful contexts. Leaving a child in a dangerous home or splitting a family are both potentially very damaging and mistakes are inevitable. Judgements and decisions must be taken, and working hypotheses reached, but nonetheless professionals need to constantly guard against the tendency to cling to their original beliefs and overlook, devalue or re-frame any new information that challenges those beliefs (Munro 1999, 2008b).

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Gambrill (2005), writing on errors in decision-making in child welfare and the complex context in which mistakes are made, comments that 'many errors occur because of confirmation biases', when professionals search only for information that supports their preferred view. She similarly notes the dangers of 'ratcheting', persisting with a viewpoint in spite of apparent evidence that it is wrong. Holland (2004: p144) comments on the need for social workers to take active steps to work against 'our human tendency to seek only the information that we wish to find', and Hollows (2003) confirms the dangers of a tendency to 'unconflicted adherence' where new information or risk of harm is discounted and the current strategy maintained without challenge or change.

## Developing and revising rational assessments

The need to constantly revisit – and if necessary revise – initial assumptions in the light of either fresh evidence or a fresh view of that existing evidence is essential if judgements are not to be rendered unsound as the premises and circumstances on which they were based change. The skills of reasoning, deduction and judgement necessary in developing, and subsequently revising,

rational assessments require social workers to employ a reflective, constantly self-critical approach in which the ability to change their mind is a prerequisite.

Munro (2008: p137) notes that "the single most pervasive bias in human reasoning is that people like to hold on to their beliefs". In the case of Victoria Climbié, an initial mislabelling of the referral as being 'a child in need' or 'Section 17' case, and failure to consider that a 'child in need' may also be a child who is suffering significant harm, requiring a Section 47 inquiry, framed subsequent assumptions, activities and interventions. This led to a poor-quality assessment and actions lacking the urgency which later evidence might have suggested as appropriate, if subsequent judgements had not been framed by the initial mindset or contextualisation (Munro 2005a).

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Similar instances of initial or premature mislabelling and, more critically, the failure to revise earlier judgements, even when subsequently presented with contradictory information, have been noted in other studies of serious cases of abuse (Munro 1996, 1999; Dale *et al* 2002; Reder and Duncan 2004; Brandon *et al* 2008, 2009).

There are other well-known biases that can beset child protection work. In their seminal study Dingwall *et al* (1983) identified three specific types of biases in child protection work. Concepts often referred to are 'the rule of optimism' (find the most positive explanation), 'natural love' (parents invariably and naturally love their children) and 'cultural relativism' (elastic norms and standards about care of children and family life linked to perceived cultural differences). The rule of optimism, in particular, is frequently misused as a kind of shorthand to reinforce the stereotype of individual, naive, gullible practitioners.

However, the actions and decisions of individual practitioners must be examined and understood in the wider context of both the organisation's internal ethos and the wider political and social context. Dingwall *et al* saw the rule of optimism "as a dimension of the organisational culture of child protection services which is founded on the deep ambivalence that we feel in a liberal society about state intervention in families". They go on to say that "although the rule is, of course, operated by individuals, they do so as members of organisations where structures, incentives and sanctions are designed to sustain the preference which it embodies" (Dingwall *et al* 1995: p247).

## Healthy scepticism and respectful uncertainty

As already observed, child protection inevitably involves frontline staff working in unstable, distressing and sometimes personally threatening situations, where instances of evasiveness, concealment or outright dishonesty by some of the protagonists can be anticipated, if not assumed. Munro (2005b) comments that repeated inquiry reports show the extraordinary lengths to which some abusive parents can go in their efforts to deceive practitioners. In light of this reality, and his view that in the Victoria Climbié case the inexperienced and poorly supervised social worker had failed to keep an open mind as to alternative explanations or to test out all the concerns raised and the explanations given, Lord Laming proposed that the concepts of 'healthy scepticism' and 'respectful uncertainty' should form the basis of relationships between social worker and families in such cases (Laming 2003: pp159, 205, 322).

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Laming also acknowledged that, while directors of children's services cannot be expected to micro-manage or know the detail of every case in their area, they do need to ensure that the quality assurance systems are in place so that managers and front-line staff can readily identify where things are going wrong at an early stage and can take early corrective action (House of Commons Health Committee 2003). Establishing a culture of openness to change, to constructive challenge and self-criticism is fundamental to this process. This is particularly critical given other research indicating that even in a multi-agency context, views of a case can crystallise early on, within and between agencies, and such views can persist, despite fresh information or evidence to the contrary (Farmer and Owen 1995).

## The quality of analysis in assessments

Assessment should be seen as an ongoing process. It requires practitioners to be adept in developing trusting relationships with children and families on the basis of which they can probe to gain a deeper understanding of needs and circumstances; synthesising and analysing information in order to form judgements and make decisions about the best way to safeguard and promote a particular child's welfare.

Assessment is one of the most critical, complex and controversial areas of child protection practice and approaches to assessment models ranging from the diagnostic, predictive, broad social and bureaucratic, have all been in use in recent years (Holland 2004). The *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families* (Department of Health *et al* 2000), with its focus on the child's needs, the parenting capacity of the main carers, as well as wider family and environmental factors, draws on a broader social assessment approach and has arguably provided a helpful foundation for strengthening assessments (Cleaver and Walker 2004). Nonetheless, some would question whether the prominence of, and reliance on, checklists and forms, helps or hinders thoughtful, reflective practice. At the same time, inspection reports and some studies, such as Cleaver and Walker's, have continued to highlight concerns about the quality of analysis in assessment.

*'Assessment should be seen as an ongoing process. It requires practitioners to be adept in developing trusting relationships with children and families'*

Munro argues that professional judgements should be regarded as valuable, but fallible, perspectives, as merely working hypotheses that require further testing. Child protection services and managers need to establish the systems, ethos and context in which constant testing and revision of hypotheses and assumptions can underpin practice, as well as creating a working environment where professionals are actively encouraged to question their judgements and to invite alternative opinion – one in which it is acceptable and safe to simply change their mind. In *Common errors of reasoning in child protection work* (Munro 1999), the author argues that although professionals have often demonstrated a reluctance to revise their initial risk assessments or to reappraise the situation in light of new evidence, by being made aware of this tendency they can also take steps to avoid its dangers.

## How to respond to changing circumstances or evidence

To date two main strategies have been identified as effective. These can be summarised as:

• professionals playing their own devil's advocate

• bringing in a fresh pair of eyes to consider the case (Munro 2007).

Possible routes to achieving these strategies are explored below.

## Playing the devil's advocate

It is inevitable, however supportive and collaborative their work environment, that frontline workers must constantly make snap assessments and judgements while working on their own. According to Munro (2008b), research has found that the most effective corrective to initial biases, misjudgements or the subsequent clinging to erroneous belief despite new evidence, is for social workers to play their own devil's advocate: taking the opposite view to their own view and arguing for that opposing view.

Reder and Duncan (1999) similarly argue that front-line staff need to develop 'a dialectic mindset' in which there is a constant balancing of opposing arguments, alternative hypotheses or conflicting versions of events. Practitioners need to be clear when receiving initial referral information – 'who is saying what about whom' – and be able to distinguish the referrer's opinions from views based on their actual observations. Initial hypotheses can then be developed which can be tested against information from other sources and direct observation in interviews with the family. Alternative explanations or interpretations should then be considered and a synthesis of opposing views – a best judgement on balance of probabilities – arrived at. In doing so, predispositions to bias must be carefully considered. 'Initial assessment and enquiries: ten pitfalls and how to avoid them', in *Working together to safeguard children*, suggests that professionals ask themselves:

• Would I react differently if these reports had come from a different source?

• What were my assumptions about this family and what, if any, is the hard evidence supporting them?

(Department of Health, Home Office, Department for Education and Employment, 2006: p113)

Hart and Powell (2006) offer practice tips including 'base your judgements on evidence not optimism'. In addition, they urge practitioners to 'see life from the child's point of view'. They ask practitioners to consider:

*'Can you picture what life is like for this child? Does this case file give you a real sense of the day-to-day experiences of this child living with these parents? Now and in the future? Has the child been seen and spoken to?'*

**(Hart and Powell 2006: p19)**

Noting the strong similarities between the Victoria Climbié Inquiry findings and those of numerous previous inquiry reports, Reder and Duncan argue the need for fundamental improvements in the capacity of professionals to think critically about their cases and judgements. They also argue for the improvements in training and resources to support such critical thinking:

*'Practitioners need to adopt an assessment mindset, in which they automatically embark on an assessment in order to inform them how they should respond to a referral and regularly review their assumptions and formulations in the light of new information.'*

**(Reder and Duncan 2004: p105)**

Dalzell and Sawyer (2007) reiterate Reder and Duncan's call for a dialectic or reflective mindset, following the Socratean principles of 'the acquisition of knowledge through dialogue and argument'. They recommend that practitioners and professionals revisit their narratives and thought processes in a particular case and ask themselves questions such as:

• At what points did you change your assessment of the situation?

• What alternative goals may have existed at certain points?

• What alternative goals were available to the ones taken?

• What factors might have led to the chosen option?

• Ask hypothetical questions, such as what might have happened if a particular piece of information had not arrived or if another agent in the story had acted in a different way?

• If a particular option had been blocked, what would your reaction have been?

• What would you have done or thought if something that happened hadn't happened?

• What might your assumptions have been?

(Dalzell and Sawyer 2007: p96)

The authors also recommend that, at the outset of a case, practitioners carry out a 'cultural review' alerting themselves to any areas where their assumptions, prejudices or simple lack of knowledge may have a bearing on their response to the family and the approach taken to working with them. Shemmings (2008) invites practitioners to interrogate their view of what is happening on a case, to ask themselves:

• Why do I think that?

• What is my evidence?

• How can I test my view?

• Might there be other explanations?

• How might others describe and explain what is going on?

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He then suggests that they review their original hypotheses, asking themselves:

• Does this still make sense?

• Do I need to change my view?

(Shemmings 2008)

Many, including Reder and Duncan (1999), Schon (1983) and Holland (2004) argue for a 'reflective mindset'. Dalzell and Sawyer (2007) acknowledge that, while achieving such reflective practice may appear an aspirational goal for many social workers caught up in intense pressures of front-line work, it is, nonetheless, essential in order to make the best possible decisions. Reflective practice needs to be supported at the individual, team and agency level and requires careful nurturing, time and space in which to thrive.

It is evident that the agency ethos, work environment and context can facilitate, reinforce or obstruct such reflective practices. Lord Laming (2009) in his recent progress report on child protection practice in England emphasises the vital importance of 'a supportive learning environment that actively encourages the continuous development of judgement and skills'.

# Introducing a fresh pair of eyes

Lord Laming (2009) reiterates the long-accepted position that high-quality supervision is critical to good practice. It is the primary mechanism for assuring effective oversight and review of practice and most commentators observe that the quality of supervision available is one of the most direct and significant determinants of practitioners' ability to develop and maintain critical mindsets and work in a reflective way. For first-line managers/casework supervisors to undertake this role well, requires that their training is balanced towards continuing professional knowledge development and towards the acquisition of skills in supervision and team leadership, and less on purely managerial knowledge and skills.

As many have observed:

*'Practitioners who are well supported, receive supervision and have access to training are more likely to think clearly and exercise professional discretion.'*

**(Brandon *et al* 2005: p174).**

## Supervision and reflective practice

*'Supervision helps practitioners to think, to explain and to understand. It also helps them to cope with the complex emotional demands of work with children and their families.'*

**(Brandon *et al* 2008: p106)**

*'Supervision sessions should both support and challenge practitioners'*

Supervisors can support critical thinking and reflection, helping practitioners to use both their intuitive and analytic reasoning skills, to value and understand the respective contributions of each, and hopefully to achieve a more integrated approach. Supervision sessions should both support and challenge practitioners, helping them to avoid the temptation to slip uncritically into either an analysis skewed by bias and unfounded assumptions, or simply defaulting to the entrenched 'agency view'. This is particularly important where, as is now often the case due to high staff turnover, practitioners are relatively inexperienced and new to the work, or where cases have been known to the

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agency for a long period of time. Supervisors reading case files before, and maintaining curiosity during and outside of, supervision will help the process. Timely review and reassessments in light of changing circumstances or emerging evidence are central functions of supervision and central to the organisation's ability to identify and respond effectively to new and challenging information:

*'The supervisor's role is to ensure that the worker considers the implications of new information and changing circumstances for their original analysis, and to explore the degree of fit between the worker's previous and current understanding of the situation.'*

**(CWDC 2009: 4.1)**

Literature on supervision suggests that in theory it should serve four distinct functions:

### Managerial

Managers can ensure competent and accountable performance. They ensure that workers follow the procedures and policies of their agency by offering the reference to a more experienced and authoritative person (Gadsby Waters 1992). However, if the 'case management' function of supervision takes precedence over other functions, it can reduce it to 'a rubber-stamping process leading ultimately to dangerous practice' (Rushton and Nathan in Fish *et al* 2008: p54). Exclusive emphasis on the managerial function will leave the supervisee feeling that the supervisor is only interested in 'checking up on them' or watching their own or the agency's back (Morrison 2005).

### Continuing professional development/educational function

This function entails enabling staff to reflect honestly on their work and interactions with users and other professionals, their assessments and strategies (Morrison 2005). It also entails imparting and sharing knowledge. Supervisors play a critical role in helping workers to critique their thinking about a case (Munro 2008). They should also be experienced and knowledgeable enough to alert their workers to relevant research and to help them make interpretative use of it in their practice (Richards *et al* 1990). Beyond supervision social workers need time to reflect, discuss and learn, if they are to avoid, or at least learn from, mistakes. New staff need time to acquire the vital confidence and experience necessary for this demanding work:

*'Dedicated time for regular supervision and learning and sufficient time to read files, to write up notes, to discuss cases with colleagues, to consult in-house libraries and to think.'*

**(Reder and Duncan 2004: p111)**

### Supportive or enabling

Child protection work is inherently stressful and, apart from any human and managerial 'duty of care' considerations, this can adversely affect practice and judgement. Workers can be profoundly affected by the hostile situations and distressing cases with which they are confronted. They require support in dealing with the emotions aroused and reassurance that they are operating 'along the right lines'.

Several writers comment on the vital importance of the support function of supervision in helping frontline staff cope with the stress and anxiety generated by their work (Richards *et al* 1990; Rushton and Nathan 1996; Littlechild 2003). Owen and Pritchard (1993) state that it is crucial that workers feel free to express

their fears openly and with the confidence that they will be supported through supervision, without fear of such admissions being seen as 'not coping'. Gibbs (2001) suggests that refocusing supervision from a perceived bias towards largely managerial functions to the supportive and reflective learning functions, could go some way to lowering the high attrition rates among child protection workers.

In his recent report, Lord Laming again emphasises the importance of 'regular, high-quality, organised' supervision in promoting reflective practice and as an outlet for the severe emotional and psychological stresses under which child protection staff operate. He recommends that the General Social Care Council revise its *Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers of Social Care Workers* to clarify expectations about the quality and amount of supervision, time for reflective practice and support which staff should receive. Once this has been done, he recommends that the employer's code be made statutory for all employers of social workers (Laming 2009: p57).

### *Engaging the individual with the organisation (mediation function)*

This may involve representing staff needs to higher management, negotiating other services needing to be coordinated or clarifying to others outside the agency the legal and resource constraints within which the team is operating (CWDC 2009; Richards *et al* 1990).

*'Supervision is an accountable process which supports, assures and develops the knowledge skills and values of an individual, group or team'.*

**(CWDC 2007: p4)**

# Supervision: the rhetoric versus reality gap

Studies indicate that while all parties might acknowledge the importance of all these functions, in practice the weight perceived as being necessary or given over to each is variable by role, with a significant difference in emphasis between team managers and front-line social workers. Team managers may emphasise the managerial aspects of supervision, while front-line social workers express a need for time within the process to explore their thoughts and feelings and to reflect on their practice (Noakes *et al* 1998).

*'Many agencies and teams make effective use of advisers, reviewing officers, consultation services and liaison workers from other agencies to enrich learning and thinking'*

It was a recommendation of both Lord Laming's reports (2003, 2009) that the work of staff in direct contact with children be regularly supervised. Laming also emphasised the particular importance of supervision in supporting social workers' practical and emotional needs during stressful frontline dealings with at-risk children and their families. Despite this, a recent article in *Community Care* found, in a survey of front-line social workers, that most felt that their access to adequate professional supervision was the same now as it had been in 2003, at the time of the original Victoria Climbié Inquiry. More than a quarter of those who took part in the survey felt that *the situation had actually worsened*, with an increasing emphasis on bureaucratic and managerial goals and meeting targets rather than encouraging analysis and reflective practice (Hunter 2009).

Commenting on the 'widely recognised' view that the theoretically multiple functions of supervision, embracing management, education and support have been eroded to allow managerial requirements to dominate, Ruch (2007) argues that in practice supervision no longer helps practitioners reflect and clarify their thoughts and feelings about a case:

*'In its current configuration, supervision – certainly within most statutory social work settings – does not offer the appropriate conditions in which thoughtful practice that embraces "respectful uncertainty" and "healthy scepticism" can be nurtured.'*

**(Ruch 2007: p372)**

## Other ways of providing/ensuring effective oversight and providing the 'fresh pair of eyes' for cases

If the new managerial preoccupations of supervision have increasingly eroded its educative and reflective functions, then some critics argue the need to provide 'a new person to take a fresh look at the evidence or of helping the worker consider a rival point of view' (Munro 2005b). Ruch suggests that other forums may be necessary to provide the reflective space essential for good practice. Ruch draws attention to the positive contribution of 'communicative and collaborative practices' such as co-working, consultation forums, group supervision and case discussions in allocation and team meetings. In an analysis of serious case reviews, Brandon *et al* (2005) identify the need for access to, and skilled use of, external specialists and child protection specialists. They argue that the restructuring of services and new policy frameworks will not, on their own, produce safer decisions about children.

Many agencies and teams make effective use of advisers, reviewing officers, consultation services and liaison workers from other agencies to enrich learning and thinking. Other models/approaches include splitting off the managerial from the reflective aspects by having a clinical supervisor as well as a line manager; mentoring schemes, especially for new staff and for new managers; and having a small team led by an experienced practitioner attached to a child, rather than a single worker. All of these have the potential to bring in different perspectives, to challenge and to share responsibility but managers should be alert to the risks of diffusing responsibility and must ensure that lines of accountability are explicitly addressed and regularly reviewed.

*'Managers should continuously work to promote an ethos of openness, rigour and challenge, to produce staff who routinely and effectively play their own devil's advocate'*

The thoughtful and creative use of case file audits within individual agencies and across multi-agency teams is another idea generating interest. The spirit with which this is approached is crucial. It must be seen as an opportunity for self-reflection and as a dynamic learning process, undertaken in a climate of openness.

Multi-agency teams and forums such as core group meetings, network meetings and child protection conferences should also provide opportunities for oversight, review and challenge. However, it should be noted that it is not only individuals who show a propensity for bias and distorted thinking. 'Groupthink', the term applied by Janis (1982) to the tendency of groups to avoid dissension, is also a hazard. Other researchers (Corby 1987; Birchall and Hallett 1995; Farmer and Owen 1995) have all reported a high level of conformity in case conferences. Group leaders therefore have to challenge themselves to encourage dissent and be open to challenge, sometimes even appointing a 'devil's advocate' to diminish this tendency.

# Implications of the research for senior managers

Lord Laming places strong emphasis on the role of senior managers, urging them to:

*'value first-line managers ensuring that management oversight of decision-making is rigorous and that the lines of communication between senior managers and front-line child protection staff are as short and effective as possible'.*

**(Laming 2009: p20)**

Senior managers set the tone and significantly influence the culture of the agency. The questions they ask, the areas they visit and the timing of visits, the framing of questions will all influence how staff approach their work and the expectations they have of supervision. Staff will be influenced by the messages, both overt and covert, which they get about priorities within the agency.

Senior managers can demonstrate their commitment to continuous development and reflective practice through the systems and processes they encourage. These may include, for example, journal clubs, time and permission for different types of supervision, participation in case discussions, sometimes providing front-line cover to enable managers to participate in improvement activities.

In short, managers should continuously work to promote an ethos of openness, rigour and challenge, as such environments are most likely to produce staff who routinely and effectively play their own 'devil's advocate', using opportunities such as supervision, surgeries, consultation sessions, co-working and other forums or mechanisms to engage a 'fresh pair of eyes'.

Demonstrable commitment to agency policies around training and development for first-level managers that focus on their role as managers of practice is another way for senior managers to influence the practice environment.

Senior managers must also apply these mechanisms and approaches to themselves, playing their own devil's advocate and inviting alternative perspectives, honest and open questioning and challenging their own work, as well as performing these functions for their staff. They must consider the extent to which their audit and management practices are likely to promote or work against such a learning ethos and open, thoughtful, practice.

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This briefing is one of three considering the quality assurance aspects of safeguarding services:

**Briefing 1**: *Effective interventions where there are concerns about, or evidence of, a child suffering significant harm* – considers the questions we should ask about and for the families we work with.

**Briefing 2**: *What are the key questions for audit of child protection systems and decision-making?*

**Briefing 3**: *The oversight and review of cases in the light of changing circumstances and new information: how do people respond to new (and challenging) information?*

Briefings 2 and 3 consider the questions we should ask of the services we work in.

# Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO)

Funded by the DCSF, C4EO has been established to help transform outcomes for children, young people and their families. It will do this by identifying and coordinating local, regional and national evidence of 'what works' to create a single and comprehensive picture of effective practice. To find out more and to look at our resources, please visit **www.c4eo.org.uk**

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