Thinking the Unthinkable


Victoria Climbié


Peter Connelly


Khyra Ishaq


Daniel Pelka


Keanu Williams

Reviews into child deaths repeatedly highlight how professionals were too trusting of abusive parents. But are social workers given the tools to effectively challenge those intent on harming the children in their care? **Shahid Naqvi** examines the issues.

It's a depressingly familiar pattern when a child dies due to abuse or neglect. The media gets into a frenzy, pointing fingers at the 'mistakes' and 'missed opportunities' that could have prevented the tragedy. And the public is left wondering why those whose job it is to protect children are not doing it properly.

This was the scenario following the publication of recent serious case reviews (SCRs) into the deaths of Daniel Pelka, Keanu Williams and Hamzah Khan, who were all no older than four years of age. Media outrage focused on the fact that the tragic children had become 'invisible' behind the smokescreen of deception and manipulation of their abusive carers. Commentators have taken to the airwaves to ask repeatedly in recent weeks about the lessons that were supposed to have been learned following the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connolly in London, Khyra Ishaq in Birmingham or Brandon Muir in Dundee.

The Daniel Pelka review emphasised the need for professionals to be able to "think the unthinkable" rather than accept parental versions of what is happening at home. Lord Laming made a similar point in his inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, calling for social workers to practise "respectful uncertainty".

But how reasonable is this, and when things are missed, who is really to blame?

A simple fact consistently overlooked in the din of media hysteria is that child protection is an inherently complex business. It involves making tough decisions in emotionally fraught circumstances where the stakes of getting things wrong are incredibly high. The inherent complexities are one reason why Dafydd Paul was last month awarded a prize for Innovative Social Worker of the Year at BASW Cymru's Awards in Wales for his development of a model that aims to enable social workers to make consistent judgements about the risk present in child protection cases [see page 21]. Almost a holy grail for the profession, Mr Paul's work has been picked up by councils in Wales and England and has even attracted interest from New Zealand.

Mr Paul was responding to the work of Professor Eileen Munro's in her review of child protection in 2011. In an interim report Professor Munro outlined the complex thought processes going on in a social worker's head when they visit a child at home: "Their conscious mind is paying attention to the purpose of their visit; at an intuitive level they are forming a picture of the child and family and sensing the dynamics in the room, noting evidence of anger, confusion, or anxiety."

At the same time, stresses Munro, practitioners also need to know not only what data to collect, but how to collect it – "how to get through the front door and create a relationship where the parent is willing to tell the social worker anything about the child and family; how to ask challenging questions about very serious matters, and having the expertise to sense the child or parent is being evasive."

For Pam Ledward, Principal Social Work Advisor with the Family Rights Group, however, the concern is that a social worker's senses don't become so acute as to find blame where there is none. "If you get to a point where social workers are going in and being over-judgemental and not listening to parents, you are not going to get a good outcome for the child. We have people who call up and say their social worker is not listening to them, they are not engaged and their story is not being heard. Judgements are being made before they get to know the family or the child. If that happens they are fearful that social workers represent removal of children."

Sue Woolmore, who has worked in child protection for a quarter of a century, knows better than most the difficulties faced by practitioners. "Some families are very good at providing professionals with what they need to hear. It can be very hard for a social worker, particularly someone with a very full caseload who is very busy, to dig that little bit deeper."

Ms Woolmore, who now trains professionals in how to see beyond the barriers put up by families says it is vital social workers retain their "professional curiosity".

She adds: "If that is dulled or has waned it is going to make them a lot less effective. All the time they need to be observing, not just what's being said, but non-verbal clues too, such as body language. Noticing the small details in the home and in the way children present and behave and "wondering" about the potential significance of this is vital.

"They also need a willingness to talk to other people who may have some window on that family. I don't just mean school or health professionals, but less obvious services too. For instance, housing officers can give a very good insight into family life. It is also important to build relationships with people in the community, such as police community support officers and the voluntary sector."

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Ms Woolmore, who runs training consultancy Sandstories, understands how social workers can be tempted to, in effect, collude with parents who present a false image of co-operating with welfare agencies – so-called "disguised compliance." She believes this is partly due to the "unflinching optimism" of wanting families to succeed. But she also blames a system that encourages social workers to look for signs of "strength and resilience" when it's not always there.

"If you look at the 'Troubled Families' agenda, councils are rewarded when they provide evidence that they have turned families around. While I have no doubt there is a lot of good work going on, I have some concern that that agenda will encourage over-optimism. Social workers have to look for evidence that the change is genuine and lasting."

With so much hinging on the assessment skills of social workers, it is vital the right people are recruited, says Janet Foulds, an experienced child protection manager. "If you get the wrong people in post it doesn't matter how many years of training they have. It doesn't matter how many guidelines and procedures you have, they will screw it up."

But Ms Foulds, who manages Derby's Child Sexual Abuse Unit, says the need for good training and supervision right from the start of a social worker's career is just as crucial. "Training on the job is really important because that is how you learn the skills. There is a lot of stuff people can learn but you can't learn it all at once. You can't come out of university and say, 'I am stamped and ready to go'."

Ms Foulds is unimpressed by the current "far from perfect" level of support given to social workers in child protection. "We may have supervision but it is often managerial supervision. A lot of social workers would say we don't have the time for the right level of reflection because we are overloaded and skitting from one case to another."

David Jones, Vice Chair of the Association of Independent Chairs of Local Safeguarding Boards, agrees good supervision is key. "If you want to help people as a social worker you have to be optimistic, but you also have to be realistic, which means you have to hold the possibility that people are playing games with you or there is some deception going on.

"Holding that together is really quite complicated which is why it is essential to have supervision. The key thing is having someone outside the situation who can talk it through and take another perspective."

A survey in June of 600 social workers by *Community Care* magazine found over two-thirds claiming supervision was weighted towards case management and reviewing performance targets, rather than critical analysis and reflection. The reason good supervision is not happening has a lot to do with lack of time.

"At the moment time is being squeezed really heavily," says Ray Jones, a Professor of Social Work at Kingston University, London. "There is not the space for the reflection there ought to be. Within supervision there is not always the time to challenge assumptions and check your assumptions are being reached. It is not difficult to understand why people may not take their thinking as far as they may need to."

When the stakes are so high in child protection, Ms Foulds believes failing to give social workers the tools to do their job is bordering on criminal. "Overloading social workers on the frontline is complicit in negligence, in my view. It is like a surgeon running in late saying, 'I am really sorry, I have ten other operations to do, I will fit you in when I can'." PSW

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM ACTORS AND LAWYERS

JIM WILD believes "active learning", where actors simulate the challenging behaviour of parents and carers, can better prepare social workers for the frontline. Mr Wild, founder of the Centre for Active and Ethical Learning, says: "There needs to be a paradigm shift to active learning where students and frontline workers can constantly practise their skills via recorded 'simulations' which they scrutinise with coaches and mentors.

"We can have the best of research, we can listen to some of the greatest speakers on child protection and we can theorise interventions via paper exercises, but these do not address or examine the skills of the worker or provide evidence of their abilities or vulnerabilities.

CAROL LONG, the NSPCC's Director of Services for Children and Families, says social work training should take a leaf out of the legal profession's book: "There are a lot of models about working with people but what isn't focused on quite so strongly is a critical reasoning approach. I have often endorsed the legal profession for this because that is what they are trained to do. There is something for social work in learning that.

"It is a lack of critical thinking and an analytical approach that has lead to people being caught in the rule of optimism or what is described as the 'garden path syndrome' of not thinking more laterally."

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