

**DEBATE:
RISK ASSESSMENT IN CHILD
PROTECTION SERVICES**

**Yes: "An Integral Part of Casework
Practice"**

Ross Dawson

RISK ASSESSMENT, whether informal or formalized, is an integral part of casework practice in child protection. Virtually all decisions concerning child protection require some judgment about risk. Each year child protection authorities receive thousands of reports of child maltreatment. In Canada over 100,000 child protection reports are made and assessed annually. These reports start in motion a series of actions intended to ensure the safety and protection of children, including investigation of the report, assessment of risk to a child, and use of a range of interventions to ensure the child's well-being. Earlier child welfare legislation provided for intervention only after a child had suffered maltreatment. Now, legislation in most jurisdictions requires child protective services to intervene when there is a likelihood of harm to a child. These expanded legal protections for children, in turn, require child protection workers to assess not just current but future risk of harm to children.

There are three compelling reasons for utilizing formalized risk assessment methods in child protective services.

Good clinical practice is informed by theory and research

Assessment is the foundation of effective social work practice. It involves the ability to collect relevant information and to synthesize and interpret it so that appropriate service decisions can be made. Similarly, risk assessment is the backbone of child protection practice. Simply

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Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 18, Number 1 (2001) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 18, numéro 1 (2001)

Printed in Canada / Imprimé au Canada

put, risk assessment is a formalized method that provides a uniform structure and criteria for determining risk. It guides child protection workers in making an educated prediction about the likelihood that a child will be maltreated, based on a careful consideration of relevant factors.

Good clinical practice is based on the presence and use of knowledge relevant to an identified problem. In the area of risk assessment, there is considerable knowledge that can inform practice. Clinical experience and research have identified factors that are clearly related to the occurrence and recurrence of child maltreatment. These risk factors are far from arbitrary. We now know that certain factors operating in the lives of troubled families tend to increase or decrease the likelihood of child maltreatment. The careful consideration of these factors is essential in assessing risk and informing decision making. To do otherwise is to ignore what we know and to provide no organizing framework for undertaking such important work.

The need for accurate and consistent child protection decision making

Thousands of child protection reports are made each year. In response to each report, a child protection worker must make an assessment and decide whether the case should be closed, whether it should be opened for in-home protective family services, or whether the child must be placed out of the home to ensure protection. These decisions potentially have enormous consequences for children and families. For example, children who could possibly be protected within their families may experience unnecessary separation and placement. On the other hand, over 10 per cent of abused children are known to experience further abuse within a 12-month period while receiving in-home protective services.

Accurately assessing family relationships is inherently difficult in all areas of human service. Families and relationships are complex and dynamic. Assessment can be especially difficult in child protective service for many reasons, including the volume of referrals, workload, lack of cooperation resulting from families' strong emotional reactions to intervention in family life, and the requirement to make immediate decisions regarding the safety of children based on limited data.

At the same time, child protection workers have a wide range of educational backgrounds as well as very different personal and professional experiences. As a result they bring different viewpoints, values, and skill levels to child protection practice. Frequently, new and rela-

tively inexperienced child protection workers are required to make critical decisions that even seasoned practitioners find very difficult.

This combination of the inherent difficulties in assessing families, the response to child protection intervention, and the range of experiences and skills of workers has resulted in widespread disparity in child protection decision making. A lack of accuracy in assessment and decision making can leave children or families unprotected. At the same time, a lack of consistency can result in significant practice inequities that are detrimental to families.

Under these conditions, responsible social work practice requires that decision making, with its potentially serious consequences for children and families, be guided by a formal assessment structure and consistent criteria. The goal of risk assessment is to improve the accuracy and consistency of assessments and decision making. A more accurate estimation of risk can improve decisions and outcomes for children and families. In this way, risk assessment is client-centred; it guides and supplements, but does not replace, clinical judgment.

Promoting open and accountable child protection practice

Child protective service has a duty to ensure that the process by which it concludes that a child is at risk and that intervention justified is clear and open to scrutiny and challenge. Simply advising a family that a child is considered at risk does not help the family to understand how the child is at risk or to mobilize their resources to reduce the risk. Effective child protection practice requires an articulation and publication of the criteria utilized in estimating risk. The use of a risk assessment model, especially one that encourages the involvement of the child and family in the process, provides transparency to child protection decision making and empowers families to make changes to improve the care and protection of their children. By understanding the various risk factors and seeing how they apply to a child, families are better able to take action and participate in services that will reduce identified risks. A visible, articulated risk assessment model can also be a tool through which families can seek to hold child protective services accountable for their actions. By knowing how child protection decisions are made, families can seek to change assessments and decisions by providing additional information, correcting errors, and challenging interpretations and conclusions. This level of openness and accountability is not possible when risk assessment is an informal process undertaken differently by each individual practitioner.

Risk assessment is one essential part of a comprehensive child wel-

theless, risk assessment represents responsible child protection practice. It supports decision makers in difficult practice settings. It can help to protect children. It can also empower families. Those who argue against the use of formalized methods of risk assessment generally fail to understand risk assessment within the child protection context, support assessment procedures unique to individual practitioners, and minimize the consequences of assessment error. More importantly, they provide no practical or effective alternative.

Marilyn Callahan Replies

ROSS DAWSON is wrong in his assertion that risk assessments are research-based instruments that promote competent, consistent, and open investigations into child maltreatment. He ignores the research indicating that risk assessments are not reliable in predicting whether a child in a given situation will be harmed in the future. He contends that workers trained in these instruments, even those with little experience in child welfare, will make consistent judgments. Although risk assessments provide an illusion of objectivity, each question requires workers to make subjective and complex judgments. Risk assessments can never substitute for experience and training, and it is dangerous to use them as a panacea for staffing problems.

Mr. Dawson states that families are better off with risk assessments because the criteria used to make assessments are written and available to them. However, research demonstrates that clients view risk assessments with considerable apprehension, as they have no part in selecting the many criteria used to judge them and find it difficult to defend themselves against numerical scores that seem scientific.

As a final point, Mr. Dawson argues that those opposing risk assessments offer no alternatives. I recognize the importance of making solid assessments in child welfare but am concerned about the wholesale adoption of risk assessment tools without appreciation of their serious limitations. There are other avenues to pursue concurrently. One includes elevating the job of child protection worker to the most prestigious one in the field, well paid and supported, available only to highly qualified applicants. Implementing the narrative-based, women-centred approaches suggested by mothers themselves, particularly in the vast number of situations where raw need rather than risk is the key issue, is another. Action-based research within child welfare agencies could be directed to evaluating present risk assessments, comparing them with other approaches, and generating new directions. Finally, we could speak up frankly, as police and physicians have, indicating that all risks cannot be prevented and that risk assessment is fruitless if the resources required to make a difference in the lives of those "at risk" are not available.

**DEBATE:
RISK ASSESSMENT IN CHILD
PROTECTION SERVICES**

**No: "These Tools . . . do not Reduce Risk
for Children"**

Marilyn Callahan

THE IMPORTANCE of trying to protect children from harm cannot be overstated. Risk assessment tools attempt to accomplish this aim by predicting whether or not, without intervention, a child will be maltreated in the near future. They consist of questionnaires that workers complete to investigate initial complaints of child maltreatment and to determine whether children in care can return home safely. Although these tools may be helpful in rationing resources and regulating child welfare practice, I argue here that they do not reduce risk for children and in fact may increase it.

Although risk assessment tools are common in many jurisdictions, their widespread use is not a measure of effectiveness as much as an outcome of decisions made many years earlier. From its inception, child welfare has been intent on saving children from the "individual shortcomings of parents" (MacIntyre, 1993, p. 16; Swift, 1997) through case-by-case investigations. When physicians "discovered" what they called "the battered baby syndrome" in the 1960s (Kempe & Helfer, 1968), a medical and psychological model of conceptualizing child abuse and later child neglect (Polansky & Polansky, 1975) took firm hold. The introduction of mandatory reporting legislation and child abuse "hotlines" followed soon after. These resulted in a sharp rise in complaints to be investigated (Armitage, 1998; English & Pecora, 1994).

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Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 18, Number 1 (2001) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 18, numéro 1 (2001)

In spite of calls for sufficient staff with more time and community work approaches to tackle environmental factors, efforts to manage the crisis have focused on practices borrowed from the corporate sector, including hiring professional managers and specifying worker competencies, training, procedures, and monitoring mechanisms (Embry, Buddinghagen & Bolles, 2000). At the same time, child welfare legislation changed, making more specific the reasons for removal of children from their parents, and the introduction of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* demanded a higher standard of "proof" in court (Swift 2000). In the media, individual cases of child abuse and neglect became symbolic of government mismanagement. Risk assessment instruments, developed over the last two decades, are an understandable strategy in light of this history and present context.

Risk assessments, however, do not reduce the likelihood that children will be harmed. First, their application during an investigation can result in parents covering up their troubles, feeling even more anxious about their abilities and further isolated in their neighbourhoods. Over the past six years, I have carried out research examining the experiences of over 100 mothers and youths in care, many of whom had been investigated or fear investigation by child welfare workers (Callahan & Lumb, 1995; Callahan, Field, Hubberstey & Wharf, 1998; Rutman, Callahan, Lundquist, Jackson & Field, 1999; Weller & Wharf, 1996). Although many of these mothers recognize that they need help desperately, they feel that they will lose their children if they are honest about their situation during an investigation. Mothers state that risk assessments focus on their deficits and not what they are doing well, blame them for things beyond their control, and force them to answer questions posed by people with different values and unrealistic expectations, whom they may never see again and do not trust. They believe that a major part of their mothering work is to protect their young children from an unsafe child welfare system (Callahan, 1999). Some have been children in care themselves.

Mothers have developed strategies to cope with risk assessments, including admitting just enough so that workers will see their child as likely in need of protection if services are not given, lying about their situation, moving frequently and finding other ways to avoid watchful neighbours and workers, and accepting services even if these are unhelpful so that they appear to be changing. A recent review of risk assessments in Britain came to a similar conclusion: that they alienate parents and squander parents' resources (reported in Colclough, Parton & Anslow, 1999).

A review of nine risk assessment instruments widely used in Canada and the United States (Michalski, Alessio & Trone, 1996) confirmed the

observations of these mothers. Of 59 items commonly contained in risk assessment instruments, the majority (44) deal directly with evaluating parents and assessing conditions often beyond parents' control (such as home living conditions, adequate housing, provision of basic needs, financial adequacy, whether the case has been opened previously, and whether abuse has been reported). Further, these instruments ask workers to identify family strengths only after they have looked at all possible areas of weakness. As mothers suspected, there are no items related to the risks that might be involved for children if they are removed from their families, including availability of suitable placements and other resources.

A second concern about risk assessment instruments is that they are based upon middle-class White perspectives that further disadvantage clients of child welfare (Brissett-Chapman, 1997; Krane & Davies, 2000). Completing a risk assessment requires workers to make judgments about parents on many variables, using a 5-point scale. For example, one item asks workers to evaluate whether parental expectations are "realistic" and whether parents use punishment, neglect, or support to help children achieve these expectations. Yet parental expectations and strategies to achieve these are affected by culture, time, class, gender, and other variables. Aboriginal social workers, working in their own communities where participants are well known to each other, find that implementation of risk assessment is highly divisive and inhibits the development of community approaches to child welfare based upon Aboriginal traditions (Brown, Haddock & Kovach, in press). However, First Nations may be reluctant to question the appropriateness of risk assessment as this may impede the chances of their taking control of child welfare.

A third concern about risk assessments is that, although they appear to be "scientific" instruments, there is no research-based evidence that they actually predict risk (Camasso & Jagannathan, 1995; Doueck, English, DePanfilis & Moote, 1993; Michalsky et al., 1996; Pecora, 1991; Wald & Woolverton, 1990). Moreover, the research problems in testing these instruments are enormous. For instance, each assessment tool may contain many items, but trying to isolate how scores on the variables interact in a particular situation is extremely difficult. Does a high score (unfavourable) on alcohol and drug abuse overshadow a low score (favourable) on child's response to parent? Under what conditions? Research poses ethical problems as well. It is difficult to leave a child in a situation that scores high on risk variables to see whether harm actually occurs to that child. After a lengthy review of the literature on the most common risk assessment models, Lyons, Doueck, and Wadewitz (1996) concluded: "The current level of predictive

validity for the models evaluated would not allow for major dependence on them for case decision making" (p. 153). Yet children are regularly removed from their families, a highly traumatic and risky event, on the basis of scores on these instruments.

Fourth, risk assessments waste resources that could be properly spent on the few families that require intensive investigation and the many families that require assistance and support. Most complaints to child welfare authorities do not constitute dangerous situations for children, yet risk assessments are used routinely to carry out investigations (Sullivan, 1998; Weller & Wharf, 1996). They also take considerable time and effort to complete. In egregious situations of serious abuse and neglect, risk assessments are no substitute for experienced workers with knowledge of the family, the community, and recent research. Risk assessments also tend to impede innovation and the development of knowledge based upon emerging practice. As they beam workers' gaze onto specific and negative characteristics of their clients, contextual issues and other ways of practising fade from view.

While risk assessments proliferate in child welfare, they are also gaining ground in policing, public health, corrections, mental health, and other fields (Fischer & Poland, 1998; Robertson, 1999). Where we used to discuss "needs" of various individuals in the welfare state, we now focus upon the "risks" they pose to civil society in the neo-liberal one (Beck, 1992). Rose (1996) suggests that risk assessment, imported from the market and business, permits governments to reduce their responsibility while appearing to take action. Thus government employees completing risk assessments can be held individually responsible for outcomes, as has happened recently to child welfare workers. The risk assessment tool itself, structural barriers to parenting and family life, and inadequate government programs are not held to account.

I have argued against the use of risk assessment tools because they alienate parents from workers and make their parental job more difficult, because they support existing divisions in society, because they do not predict risk, because they work against progressive social work practice, and because they contribute to a climate in which risk, rather than need, and self-management, rather than collective response, become the order of the day. Other intriguing approaches to making assessments about child safety have been proposed by Krane and Davies (2000) and Weller and Wharf (1996). These bear examination.

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Ross Dawson Replies

IT IS SUGGESTED that, instead of using a structured approach to risk assessment, we should hire more social workers to undertake community work and "tackle environmental factors." This is not a realistic alternative. While we wait for solutions to structural inequities such as poverty and inadequate housing, children are seriously harmed and die from abuse and neglect. They are harmed mostly by parents. Structural inequities do not by themselves cause child abuse. In some cases they may contribute to the potential for abuse, just as drug, alcohol, and serious mental health problems may contribute. It is also suggested that, if we simply provided more resources and supports to families instead of assessing risk, children would be safe. Yet all too often the parent who abuses a child does so even when receiving a myriad of support services. Several studies have found as many as 40 per cent of abused children are re-abused during the provision of intensive at-home services. The safety of children needs to be assured while we wait for the utopian society of unlimited resources, which lacks structural inequities. Risk assessment assists in determining which children are most at risk and what services are required to reduce that risk. Risk assessments are not questionnaires. They are not used to investigate. They provide a structure for collecting and analyzing important information to help assess risk after it has been determined that a child has been abused or neglected. They do not impede relationships with clients. In fact, they help build relationships. Risk assessments are completed with the client's participation, the results are shared with the family, and a plan is developed with the family to manage and reduce the identified risks. Many, many clients engage in this process and develop positive working relationships with social workers because the process is open, clear, and understandable. Clients much prefer this over an approach of unpublished guesswork known only in the minds of individual practitioners.

The research regarding risk assessments, their validity, and their effectiveness continues and is far from settled. There are different studies with different results. Many raise important cautions which guide future development and research. Others have demonstrated positive findings. It is important to note that these criticisms and cautions have accompanied the development of all assessment tools. No answer lies in

"downing tools." Rather, the research and development needs to continue. Meanwhile, it is very clear to those who must make important decisions about risk every day that waiting for the final research report or the just society does not protect children. A structured approach to assessing risk does do so.

DÉBAT : L'ÉVALUATION DU RISQUE DANS LES SERVICES DE PROTECTION DE L'ENFANCE

Oui : «L'évaluation du risque fait partie
intégrante de la pratique»

Ross Dawson

L'ÉVALUATION DU RISQUE, qu'elle soit formelle ou non, fait partie intégrante de la pratique du service social individualisé dans le domaine de la protection de l'enfance. Elle entre en jeu dans pratiquement toutes les décisions relatives à la protection de l'enfance. Tous les ans, des milliers de cas de violence envers les enfants sont signalés aux autorités compétentes. Au Canada, plus de 100 000 signalements sont faits et évalués annuellement. Ces signalements déclenchent une série de mesures visant à assurer la sécurité et la protection des enfants, y compris une enquête, une évaluation du risque couru par l'enfant et le déploiement d'un éventail d'interventions pour assurer son bien-être. Auparavant, les lois sur la protection de l'enfance ne prévoyaient d'interventions qu'une fois l'enfant maltraité. Maintenant, les lois de la plupart des territoires obligent les services de protection de l'enfance à intervenir s'il y a risque pour l'enfant d'être maltraité. En retour, l'élargissement de cette protection juridique des enfants exige des travailleurs sociaux préposés à la protection de l'enfance qu'ils évaluent non seulement le risque actuel, mais futur, qu'un enfant soit maltraité.

Il y a trois raisons convaincantes pour lesquelles les services de protection de l'enfance devraient utiliser des méthodes formelles d'évaluation du risque.

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Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 18, Number 1 (2001) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 18, numéro 1 (2001)