APSW Association of Professors of Social Work

research in practice

Knowledge and Evidence Briefing 3

Everyday social work with children and families

August 2021

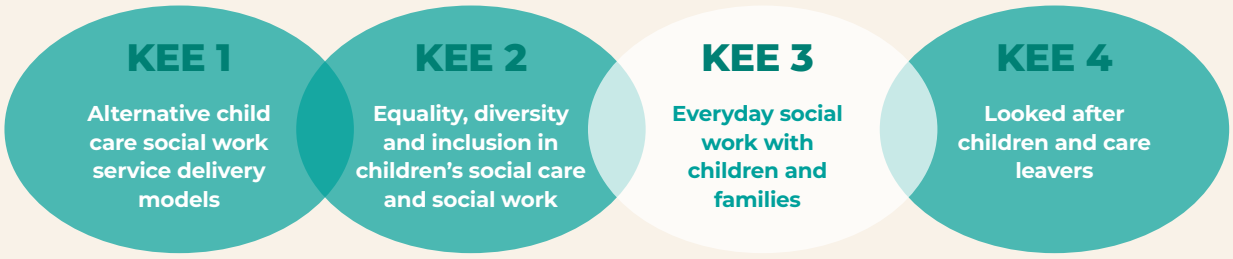
This event focused on the activities of social workers in their direct engagement with children and families. It was facilitated by Professor Jonathan Dickens and Dr Laura Cook from the University of East Anglia. Key points from each presentation and the chat contributions are outlined below. Recordings, slides and references are available at https://apsw.org.uk/kee-recordings.

About the KEEs

In May and June 2021, the UK's Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) delivered four on-line Knowledge and Evidence Events (KEEs) to highlight key research messages about children's social care and social work. The KEEs were intended to spark debate and, in doing so, positively inform the work of the 'once-in-a-generation' review of children's social care commissioned by the Department for Education.

Each of the four KEEs featured presentations by professors of social work and social policy. All had experience as frontline practitioners within children's social care and social work, and as researchers, educators, managers and leaders within children's social services in the UK and internationally.

The four KEEs focussed on:



Within each KEE there was the opportunity for those attending to contribute comments via the chat function. There was keen interest in the KEEs with hundreds of people attending from a wide range of roles in children's social care.

You can watch the full recording of each event by clicking on 'View event blog' on the APSW website.

APSW and Research in Practice have developed four short briefings linked with each KEE session. Each briefing highlights key messages from speaker's presentations, the chat contributions and identifies overarching themes. Reflective questions (suggested by the presentations) which focus on improving practice with children and families and links to additional resources you may find useful are also provided. The briefings are relevant to anyone working in children's social care.

Key messages from across the KEEs

A number of key messages were highlighted in all four KEES. These are reproduced here so you can have these in mind as you read this briefing.

Good practice makes a difference and children's social care practitioners make a difference.

Practice must be morally and socially just.

Compassionate and curious relationships are crucial in children's social care.

Continuity and stability in services and child/family-professional relationships are essential.

We need to embrace courageous creativity over compliance.

It is important to focus on how children's services can live with and manage uncertainty and risk.

The importance of adopting systemic perspectives that avoid blaming individual practitioners.

The impact of poverty and social/economic inequality on the everyday lives of children and families.

Fragmentation of services should be avoided.

Assessment and decision-making in children and families social work: beyond the collection of facts

Danielle Turney
Professor of Social Work,
Queen's University Belfast

Professor Danielle Turney has researched and published for many years about the process of assessment. Assessment is a core activity throughout the social work process and is central to creating an understanding of the issues facing and immersing children and families.

Key points

What is this assessment for?

- Assessment is more than 'collecting the facts' – it is a process of sense-making.
- Sense-making is an emotionally-informed, as well as cognitive, process and has intrapersonal, interpersonal and social dimensions, working in and with relationships to understand and respond to needs, strengths, risks and stressors.
- Child welfare decisions are frequently made in conditions of uncertainty, drawing on complex, incomplete and sometimes contradictory information.

What supports good assessment?

- A knowledgeable, highly skilled and confident workforce who are able to navigate complexity and uncertainty. Managers are able to contain practitioners, enabling them to work with uncertainty.
- Respectful and relationship-based practice that enables families to tell their story.
- Organisational cultures that support critical and analytical thinking, enable learning and avoid the 'blame game'.
- A clear framework for reflective 'clinical' supervision and other forms of case-based consultation.
- Resources – time and staffing, as well as services.
- Good intra-organisational and inter-professional working relationships.
- Information management and recording systems that 'work with' practice and are not unnecessarily time-consuming.

In summary

- Assessment is a (relational) process not an event.
- Good assessment can contribute to better outcomes for children and their families. Poor assessments may expose children to risks of further maltreatment and/or placement breakdown.
- Effective assessment requires the ability to understand the individual (child/family/community), their history, and significant environmental/contextual factors; i.e. to understand 'the story' and – crucially – what it means.
- Things change, so keep thinking: reflect, review and, if necessary, reconsider.
- Political and organisational context matters. Culture and leadership impact on assessment practices and on practitioners' capacity for critical and analytical thinking and empathic understanding.

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Learning from research that gets to practice with children and families

Harry Ferguson
Professor of Social Work,
University of Birmingham

Harry Ferguson has been theorising and conducting empirical studies into social work practice since the early 1990s. He has led a major study of social work practice in long-term casework with children and families and the impact of the organisational cultures within which the work takes place.

Key points

- Social workers were often seen as helpful and were appreciated, but there were hostile relationships with some families receiving an 'involuntary' service, which could be full of conflict and even hate. It could be a huge challenge for social workers not to retaliate; most did not.
- The importance of reliability and making time to turn up, regularly, and to demonstrate a consistent attitude of empathy is key to relationship building.
- Therapeutic change occurred through skilful use of relationships.
- Effective practice included relieving day-to-day burdens, especially on mothers.
- Supportive social work within child protection could enhance life skills and recovery.
- The centrality of the home visit. This is not just about 'interviewing'/talk, but getting down to child's level: play, touch, movement. We need to take account of the way the senses, feelings, distractions, atmospheres in the home impact on this encounter for the worker.
- Good supervision was vital for support with thinking about practice and relationships, and dealing with emotions.
- There is value in thinking spatially about the context of meetings with children and families: the importance of place and space. For example, the positive opportunities of meetings beyond the home and office in parks, on walks and in cars.
- Social work is a mobile practice and travel time is important as a thinking and practice space.
- Relationship-based work made more satisfied, proud social workers.

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The impact of emotions in everyday social work practice

Gillian Ruch
Professor of Social Work,
University of Sussex

Social work with children and families is an emotional as well as an intellectual activity, requiring emotional as well as intellectual intelligence. We need to recognise that the work has an emotional impact on social workers as well as on children and families. These are issues which have been considered and explored by Gillian Ruch in her research, writing and teaching over many years.

Key points

- The emotional and relational dimensions of social work must remain central at all times.
- The vicious circle of anxiety and risk must be carefully managed.
- Relationship-based and reflective practice must go hand-in-hand.
- Social workers need to listen to children first and talk second.
- Social workers can only listen to the extent that they have been listened to.
- What children and families identify as important – containing, compassionate and consistent relationships – also applies to social workers.
- Organisations need to provide listening, learning and reflective workplaces.
- Children's services do not always promote child-led engagement.

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Themes and threads in the chat contributions

The importance of, and tools to assist, communication with children and also with adolescents.

The terminology of 'assessment' and 'intervention' rather than 'help' and 'care' is limiting and unhelpful.

Records and reports should be less 'writing about' and instead 'writing with and to' and a part of getting alongside children and families.

Social workers should 'show their workings out'. Good assessment and decision-making should be transparent.

Deep listening is aided by co-production with children, young people and families.

It is too easy to slip into risk management and punitive social work.

Travel time can create opportunities for reflection and processing.

Social workers need time and permission to be creative in their encounters with children and families.

Meeting children and families outside the home and office gives a greater understanding of the areas and environments in which children and families live. But meeting in public spaces presents issues of confidentiality.

Concerns about turnover and short career spans of social workers were seen as reflecting organisational cultures – we need to create cultures which support social workers.

'Involuntary social work' in child protection engenders powerful emotions and conflict and challenge. This makes supervision especially important, as the emotional impact of the work can deplete empathy and resilience.

Reflective practice needs to be supported by reflective, supportive and challenging supervision.

Reflections and the big messages from KEE3

Good practice makes a difference – social workers do make a difference.

The importance of getting to know and understand families and children – listening, asking, finding creative ways to engage (outside the house; play).

The 'care and control' tensions are always there; no clear line between support and protection or safeguarding.

The importance of empathy and recognising the intense emotions involved – children's, families' and practitioners'.

Reflective supervision and good support are essential – it is vital to understand individual practice in wider context.

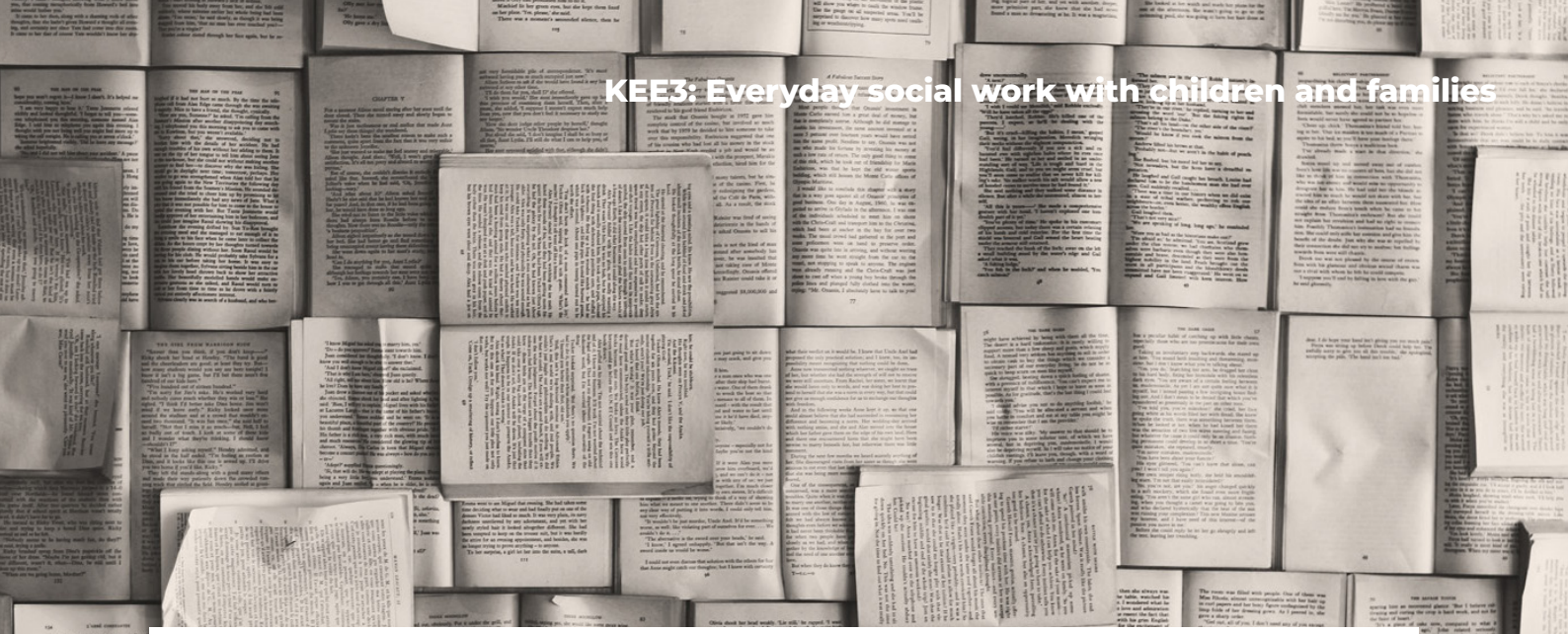
Reflective questions inspired by KEE3

How can leaders in children's social care promote an organisational culture that promotes social workers' capacity for critical and analytical thinking and empathic understanding?

Are play resources currently used in your organisation to communicate with children and young people? How might greater use of these be encouraged? What could be made available to help social workers engage with older children and teenagers too?

How can practitioners be supported to engage in assessments which are a relational process, not an 'event'? How might you contribute to this process in your role?

Reflective and emotionally containing supervision enables practitioners to process their emotional responses to the challenging and complex situations they work in with children and families. Is this a key priority on your organisational agenda? What conversations need to happen to get this on the agenda? How can leaders role-model their commitment to reflective practice and supervision in your organisation?



Additional open access resources which may be helpful

Grounded professional judgement in assessment and decision-making

In this podcast Professor Danielle Turney discusses her research and the importance of being able to demonstrate grounded professional judgement in practice with children and families – https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/adults/content-pages/podcasts/risks-rights-and-the-role-of-the-state-grounded-professional-judgement/

Listening to children

This practice tool draws on Professor Gillian Ruch's research about communicating with children – https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hearing-childrens-voices.pdf

The tool asks you to watch this short film 'Hearing from Jenny' in which Jenny Molloy talks about her own experiences of working with social workers as a child. Scroll down the webpage to find the film – https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/children-and-families/hearing-marginalised-voices/

Reflecting on practice with children and families in a pandemic

Professor Harry Ferguson explores to create thinking spaces when working from home in this blog – https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/news-views/2020/april/social-work-from-home-creating-thinking-spaces/

You can also read about his recent research which highlights creative and innovative ways of working with children and families initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic – https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2020/august/how-social-work-and-child-protection-are-being-creative-and-helping-children-and-families-during-covid-19-and-can-do-so-beyond-it/