

RESPONSE TO "STABILISATION OF THE STATUTORY CHILD PROTECTION RESPONSE"

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James Mansell's article analyses a problem that appears, in some form, in all child protection systems: how to manage the conflicting imperatives of avoiding child deaths and avoiding hurt to innocent families. His analysis of the factors that feed instability in the system is very persuasive and well evidenced. The identification of leverage points is also very useful. However, I think that he underestimates some of the difficulties of acting on these leverage points. The social and political factors that are currently causing the instability in the system will also be acting on any attempts to influence those leverage points. The power of these real-world factors makes it impossible to treat the problem as a mainly intellectual one.

For example, trying to control the fluctuating level of risk assurance by having a clearly specified level is theoretically possible but, in practice, could it be done? It is a strategy that has been implemented successfully in other areas of risk. For example, in the United Kingdom there is an official "acceptable number of deaths" from radon gas that determines the level of state intervention in reducing radon gas. However, the topic of child abuse is so emotionally charged that it is hard to believe that society would accept an equivalent statement with respect to an acceptable level of risk of abuse to children. It is also hard to imagine any politician being suicidal enough to make a public statement to the effect that he or she was willing to accept a specified level of child deaths from abuse. In reality, as the author points out, we all know that we cannot eradicate all deaths, but I suspect that it will remain politically essential to adhere to the policy line that this is the goal. Linked to this is the strong moral and political need to demonstrate a commitment to improvement. While practitioners need to feel that the expectations placed on them by society are realistic and feasible, it is important to avoid conveying complacency about our current level of competence. This is a difficult balancing act to achieve, and failure to manage it well is probably one source of instability in the current system.

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However, although I do not think that society is ready to hear a blunt statement about an acceptable level of deaths, I do think that they are poorly informed on the other side of the risk equation – the harm done to families by intrusive child protection investigations and the dearth of help offered because resources are being used up in investigations. Perhaps more public education on the way that professionals and policymakers have to balance risks and benefits would help to increase compassion in the public arena for the families harmed by the system and reduce the destructive power of their current concern with only one side of the equation.

The strategy of improving the feedback loop about outcomes has a lot of merit. It would enable workers and management to have more up-to-date and detailed knowledge of the consequences of their judgments and decisions for families. However, it needs to be recognised that such a strategy is not just an intellectual process, but highly charged emotionally. For a worker to find that their efforts to help children had, in fact, led to worse outcomes is distressing. Unless management recognises how painful the process may be and puts in place strategies for supporting workers, there is a real danger that workers will use one of the many strategies humans have for discounting information that is unsettling and disturbing. Consequently, they would fail to give appropriate weight to the negative findings and hence fail to learn the desired lessons from the feedback.

The author’s structured approach to decision making offers a potentially valuable way forward but, as the author notes, it is constrained by the fallibility of the basic data and this has consequences throughout the reasoning chain. For instance, using data on cases of abuse reported to the official agencies is, at the practical level, the most straightforward thing to do. However, we know from research on adult survivors of abuse that the incidence is far higher than the numbers known to official agencies at the time.

Dealing with the fallibility of the data is problematic. On the one hand, it is easy to go from a reasonable level of scepticism to an all-out cynicism that rejects all efforts to use a formal approach to the problem as pretentious. On the other hand, it is easy to fall into the trap of *over-confidence* in the data because it is presented in such a scientifically impressive way.

In conclusion, I agree with the author that understanding the dynamics underlying the problem is a necessary first step to improving the system. However, the analysis the author has offered, while illuminating, also illustrates the final point made in the article: that intervening in a complex, dynamic system carries risks of its own since the full repercussions of any action are hard to predict in advance. Unfortunately, masterly inactivity is not an option for those concerned with improving children’s safety and wellbeing.