



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Promoting evidence- informed practice in supervision

Introduction

Supporting practitioners to make evidence-informed decisions in their work with children and families is crucial. Social work requires decisions about children and families to be made within a context of complexity and uncertainty, where there are rarely clear solutions (Sidebotham et al, 2016).

To mitigate this uncertainty, social workers need to draw upon different forms of evidence and knowledge, and reflect on different perspectives and opinions. This enables them to be more confident and competent in their practice and to form conclusions that are ethical, unbiased and supported by evidence.

However, busy practice contexts may limit the time available for social workers to engage in thinking about how different forms of knowledge can inform practice (Staempfli, 2020). Practice supervisors therefore have a key role to play in supporting practitioners to reflect in supervision on how they can use a range of evidence in their everyday practice to provide an excellent service to children and families.

This is one of two linked tools developed to support practice supervisors in promoting evidence-informed practice in supervision. This one provides you with an opportunity to reconnect with evidence-informed practice frameworks in order to think further about what it means and how, during supervision, you can support practitioners to work in an evidence-informed way.

We have also developed a second, shorter tool ('A visual tool to explore evidence-informed practice in supervision'), which provides information and prompt questions to help you discuss evidence-informed practice when reviewing work with children and families in supervision.

We hope this tool will support you to:

Feel more confident to help supervisees reflect on different forms of evidence to inform decision-making and reflection in supervision.

Promote an evidence-informed approach to practice with the team you supervise.

Section one: introducing the evidence-informed practice triangle

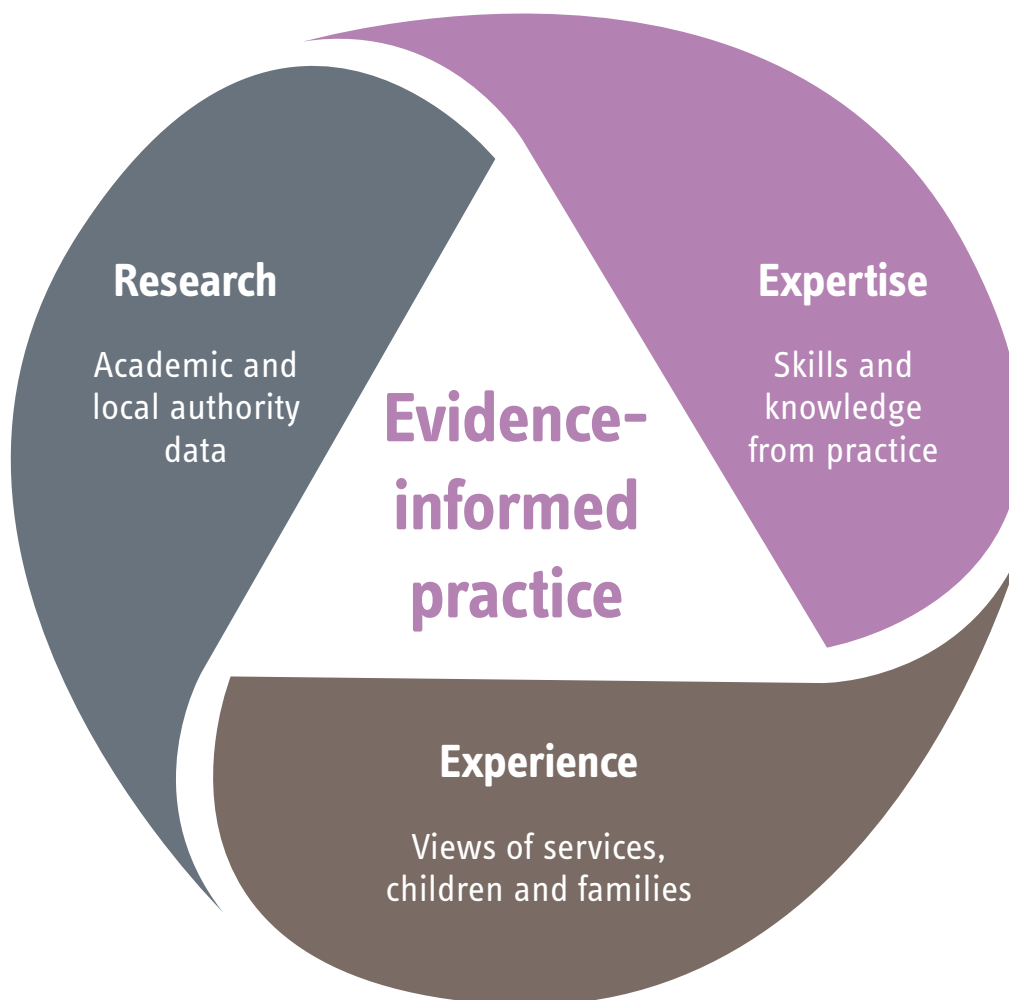


Figure 1: Evidence-informed practice triangle (Research in Practice, 2003)

The evidence-informed practice triangle in figure 1 presents three key forms of evidence that should inform professional judgement:

a. Research evidence (including national and local data).

b. Practice expertise (skills and knowledge from practice).

c. The views and experiences of the people practitioners work with.

a. Research evidence

‘Good professional practice is informed by knowledge of the latest theory and research’
(Munro, 2011, p. 23).

The use of research in social work practice is a clear expectation of the Professional Capabilities Framework and the [Post-qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practice supervisors](#).

Research encompasses theoretical perspectives as well as all forms of qualitative and quantitative data, when gathered rigorously. It includes academic research and evaluations done at a national level, and data and research produced locally. Both are valuable sources of evidence.

Using research evidence in front-line social work is complex because many factors affect the lives of children and families. A single piece of research rarely provides a definitive answer or solution. Evidence reviews, where various pieces of research and theory are synthesised, are an efficient and effective way for practitioners to gain knowledge around a particular topic, and thereby to inform their decisions. When used alongside other forms of evidence, research provides a basis for generating hypotheses and interrogating decisions.

Applying research to practice is not straightforward. It requires social workers to consider the meaning of the findings in relation to the specific contexts of particular children and families. An effective intervention in one situation may not be effective elsewhere because of, for example, different socio-economic, cultural or organisational factors (Wilson, 2013). It's therefore important that practitioners take account of the other forms of evidence illustrated in the framework.

b. Practice expertise

There can be a tendency to think that knowledge from research is more valuable than other forms of evidence. However, professional expertise gained from practice, as well as learning from the experiences of children and families are key components of evidence-informed practice:

‘Skills in forming relationships, using intuitive reasoning and emotions, and using knowledge of theories and empirical research, are equally important components in effective social work.’
(Munro, 2011, p. 44).

Experiential knowledge and wisdom evolve over time and both social workers and practice supervisors cumulatively draw on their professional skills, value base, ethical principles and practice experience when working with children and families.

Working within a context of highly-emotional situations that involve high risk and uncertainty can play a significant role in the ways in which social workers reason and act (Munro, 2011). In such situations, social workers are more likely to rely on their emotional responses when making decisions, which may lead to bias and reinforcement of stereotypes.

Practice expertise require social workers to use both intuitive and logical thinking in their work, with different balances occurring between these depending on the task being carried out (Munro, 2011). It involves practitioners working with a family gathering information, deciding what is relevant, critically appraising the information and applying it to a particular situation. Thus, reflection and critical thinking are key for evidence-informed practice (Turney, 2014).

Practice supervisors play a crucial role in developing practice expertise through creating a safe environment for critical challenge and appraisal of practitioners' observations, and in enabling social workers to reflect on their reasoning and decisions.

c. **The views of children and families**

'Skills in forming relationships are fundamental to obtaining the information that helps social workers understand what problems a family has and to engaging the child and family and working with them to effect change'.
(Munro, 2011, p. 88)

As exemplified in the above quote, the experiences and views of children and families are at the heart of effective, evidence-informed social work practice. Treisman argues that 'every interaction is an intervention' and that the relationships and connections that are formed can 'support people to develop and flourish' (Treisman, 2018, p. 19).

The relationships social workers develop with families generate feedback to the family system, which can help them to understand more about the issues affecting them and how they can work on these. Social workers need to draw on the evidence from such interactions to learn more about the effectiveness of their work with children and families.

For example, a core component of routine social work practice is asking children and families about their experiences. However, this alone is not sufficient. Social workers also need to ensure that children and families are not marginalised. In order to do this well, social workers need to have a good understanding of working *with* children and families and of co-production (which emphasises doing things *with* children and families as opposed to doing things *to* or *for* them).

Co-production recognises that all children and families have their own sets of skills, knowledge and experiences. In particular, practitioners need a good understanding of the lived experience of black, Asian and ethnic minority children who are ‘disproportionately represented in the child welfare system’ (Bernard, 2020, p. 2), as well as the impact of inequality and poverty on the lives and experiences of children and families (Morris et al, 2019). This understanding is especially important when social workers want to find out from children and families how things like racism, poverty and structural inequality shape their lives.

Information can be gathered from children and families in a number of different ways:

- > informally either during or at the end of a visit
- > in a more structured way through things like:
 - > questionnaires
 - > interviews
 - > focus groups
 - > graffiti walls
 - > drama and arts activities
 - > social media
 - > journals
 - > compliments and complaints.

(Godar, 2015; Martin, 2014).

Active listening is one of the key skills needed to gather the views of children and young people. Listening is not just about the listener hearing what is said, but also about how they make it clear that they are listening, and agree together what outcomes or actions will take place as a result. In other words, listening is a collaborative, two-way process (Preston and Trend, 2020, p. 5).

It is important to reflect in supervision on the kind of relationships social workers are building with children and families, and on any barriers which might prevent them from being able to draw on and learn from the family's experiences and views. This requires a safe space for social workers to reflect on any challenges they face in working with the family (e.g., disagreements or difficulties engaging with the family, etc.), and what the underlying reasons might be. These are important pieces of information that form part of the evidence base for thinking about how to work with the family.

Task one

Please spend a few moments reflecting on what the information in this section has made you think about in relation to conversations about evidence-informed practice in your own supervision discussions.

You might find it helpful to take notes, or to think about what you might like to stop, start or continue doing in your discussions in order to promote evidence-informed practice.

**Section two:
introducing a more
detailed framework
for thinking about
evidence-informed
practice**

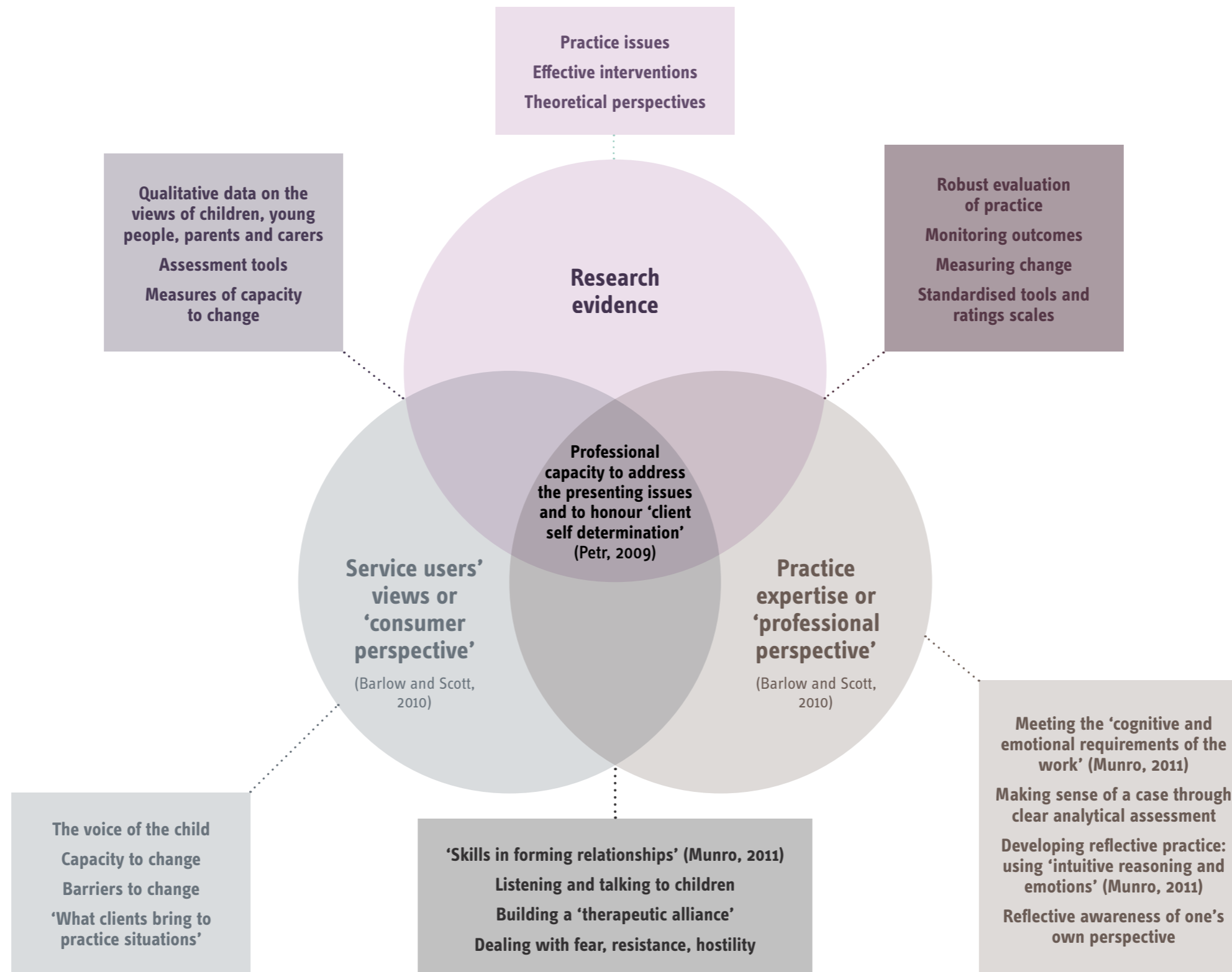


Figure 2: Detailed evidence-informed practice framework (Bowyer, 2011, adapted from Barlow & Scott, 2010)

Task two

Having looked at figure 2, spend a few minutes reflecting on the different aspects of evidence included in this framework. You may find the following reflective prompts useful to consider:

> How does figure 2 challenge you to consider new areas of evidence or knowledge in supervision discussions when thinking about practice with children and families?

> What areas in the framework stand out to you? Why?

> Which areas of the evidence-informed practice framework are you most comfortable discussing in supervision?

> Which areas might you now start to ask about in your supervision discussions?

Other ways you can use this tool

Talk about the evidence-informed practice triangle at a team day or meeting to initiate a discussion about its principles.

Talk with other practice supervisors as part of action learning, to find out from each other how you can use the evidence-informed practice triangle in supervision.

Talk about the ideas in this tool in one of your supervision sessions to discuss with your manager how evidence-informed practice is integrated at an organisational level, and the impact this has on you and your team, as well as on children and families.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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