research in practice

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

University of Sussex

Goldsmiths University of London

Knowledge Briefing

PSDP - Resources and Tools:

Enabling evidence-informed practice

Department for Education

Funded by the Department for Education

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

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Introduction

Evidence-informed practice supports knowledgeable and ethical professional decision-making and practice. Decisions need to be informed not only by the best available research evidence but also by:

the wishes and views of the people social workers work with

ethical principles

the local context.

Research evidence is a valuable resource, but it needs to be critically reflected on in the light of concrete practice situations and context (Munro et al, 2017).

Evidence-informed practice is therefore about weaving together different forms of general knowledge (e.g. research evidence, theory and ethical principles) and local knowledge (e.g. practice wisdom, professional expertise and people's lived experience) in relation to specific practice challenges in the local context (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017).

Evidence-informed practice views the relationship between general knowledge and specific practice challenges as more complex than the commonly-used phrase 'using' evidence or knowledge in practice would suggest. It is thus distinct from traditional 'evidence-based practice' or 'research-based practice' approaches that talk about the 'application' or 'transfer' of research evidence to practice.

It is important that practice supervisors and social workers understand what we mean when we talk about different kinds of knowledge, and how they can be meaningfully integrated or woven together with practice.

Practice supervisors have a responsibility to support supervisees to make knowledgeable and ethical decisions, and social work organisations need to assist all staff in this.

Social workers may not feel confident enough to engage in thinking about how different forms of knowledge can inform practice and busy practice contexts may limit the time available to engage in this.

This briefing, therefore, explores what evidence and evidence-informed practice is, how it can inform decision-making and how practice supervisors can support others to make knowledgeable and ethical decisions. It will address the following questions:

What is evidence-informed practice?	What factors support evidence-informed practice?	What different forms of knowledge (besides research evidence) inform professional decisions?	How can practice supervisors support knowledgeable and ethical decision-making and practice?

Practice supervisors who read this briefing and engage in the suggested reflection points will:

- have a more nuanced understanding of evidence-informed practice and the challenges involved
- have a clear idea about what different forms of knowledge should be considered in decision-making, and when reviewing decisions and work with children and families
- feel more confident to ask social workers questions to support forming professional judgements that integrate different types of knowledge
- be confident to promote activities for evidence-informed learning in their teams
- be able to advocate for a practice environment that supports joint learning for knowledgeable and ethical practice.

Evidence-informed practice is essentially learning with others about children and families, and about how social workers can make decisions and act in knowledgeable and ethical ways in practice.

Decision-making in social work

The effectiveness and appropriateness of rational-analytical decision-making approaches (Taylor, 2016; Kirkman and Melrose, 2014) in social work has been questioned by many scholars (Munro, 2019; Nyathi, 2018; Munro et al, 2017) and this briefing adopts a holistic position (Whittaker, 2018; Munro et al, 2017).

This holds that decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and complexity cannot be objective (Munro et al, 2017) and always involves 'a dynamic interplay of intuitive, emotionally informed judgements and analytic evaluations' as mutually interdependent aspects (Whittaker, 2018 p15, our emphasis; Collins and Daly, 2011).

Thus, decision-making in practice is a process that includes sense-making (thinking), self-regulation (feeling) and managing the encounter (doing), and involves both intuitive and rational reasoning (Cook, 2017).

Points for reflection and discussion in your team:

You might want to reflect on, or discuss with your team, the following questions:

What is your experience and understanding of how professionals make decisions?	Thinking about objectivity and uncertainty in social work decisions, how do you feel about the statement by Munro and colleagues that social work decisions cannot be objective? Can you think of examples that confirm or question this view?

What is evidence-informed practice?

Social workers frequently make decisions, from on-the-spot-decisions in an encounter with people to make professional judgements about needs, risks and safeguarding plans. Knowledgeable and ethical decisions need to be informed by research evidence and other forms of knowledge.

Generating research evidence in social work is complex, as many different factors affect people's lives. When working out the implications of research for practice, for example about the effectiveness of a social work approach, it 'is not simply a case of taking an intervention off the shelf and applying it to a child and family' (Munro, 2011 p92), because an intervention 'that works in one situation may not work in another' (Wilson, 2013 p156) and the context needs to be considered.

The challenge is that practice is full of dilemmas and uncertainties and there are 'rarely clear solutions' (Sidebotham et al, 2016 p238). Uncertainty is unavoidable in (child and family) social work, as we cannot be certain about what has happened and what will happen (Munro, 2019). Therefore, social workers can only make 'carefully considered professional judgement[s]... on a case by case basis' (Sidebotham et al, 2016 p238). This means that social workers need to deliberate and reflect on the different perspectives, dilemmas and uncertainties (Munro et al, 2017).

Munro and colleagues express this well in the following quote:

> 'When social workers form judgements on children's safety, they draw on a wide range of evidence as they think and reflect on what to do. This may include some information from research but this forms – and should form – only a small part of the total evidence. They may also draw on what they themselves have seen and heard, on their local knowledge, on theories, on observations that others, including family members, have reported to them and on the opinions of others. All of these become "evidence" when used to support a conclusion.'

Social workers need to be able to fuse these different perspectives, including research and theoretical knowledge with 'a common-sense grasp of the situation, formal rules with creativity, standards with improvisation and reason with intuition' (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017 pp48-49). In other words, social workers need to creatively weave together professional knowledge with the views and knowledge of children, young people and families.

They do this by being mindful of procedures and standards that need to be followed but apply them creatively in the interest of the child and family and combine their rational reasoning with reflections on their intuitions and emotions. Therefore, besides considering research and theory, decision-making in social work needs to critically draw on emotions, subjective and relational knowledge (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016).

Furthermore, in the absence of certainty about what is going on or what to do, ethical considerations need to underpin practice and decision-making (Smith, 2011). It is thus 'misleading to talk about evidence-based practice' as this implies that practice is driven only by factual knowledge (Forrester, 2019a) when in fact practice should be guided by all these different perspectives and evaluated against social work values.

Practice supervisors need to support social workers to draw on these different perspectives and knowledge forms in supervision and discussions about work with children and families. The next section therefore provides a useful table of these different knowledge forms.

Diverse forms of knowledge for knowledgeable and ethical practice

Knowledge is produced in different ways (e.g. researching, analysing, experiencing, etc.) and takes on different forms (from explicit, codified, conscious and written down to tacit - implicit - unconscious).

It is always situated and tightly linked to situations in which it is created and put into practice. So rather than being 'out there', knowledge is embodied, embedded, embrained, encultured and encoded (Blackler, 1995). The word 'embrained' refers to the way in which we remember knowledge whereby different forms of knowledge (conceptual, factual, propositional, experiential, etc.) are memorised in connection with an experience.

It is important to recognise that some forms of knowledge can be talked about (e.g. research findings in an article), whereas others remain hidden (unconscious motives). Knowledge can also be transformed from one form to another. For example, theoretical knowledge can turn into practice wisdom over time so that a social worker is no longer aware of it. But talking with others about the more hidden forms can support social workers to become aware of it (Giddens, 1984). This is particularly relevant when considering emotions and everyday understandings about why and how things are done in an organisation.

All knowledge ultimately shapes the way individuals and collectives perceive and understand the world and influence peoples' activities (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017, Eraut, 2012). It is therefore important to highlight again that, for knowledgeable and ethical practice to emerge, social workers need to combine the different types of knowledge and relate them to practice situations, professional challenges or the analysis of children and families' circumstances.

Tov, Kunz and Stämpfli (2016) and Staempfli (forthcoming) suggest that the following seven knowledge forms (see table 1) should inform professional decisions and practice in social work:

Type of knowledge	Examples	Perspective
Academic and scholarly explanatory knowledge of social problems	Research and theory to inform and understand, for example: research on child welfare inequalities or on parenting in poverty.	What might be going on in this situation?
Academic and scholarly knowledge of interventions	Research on what works and evaluations of social work interventions, for example: key systemic principles of motivational interviewing that are shown to be effective for certain groups and in specific contexts.	How can social workers best support or safeguard people?
Ethical knowledge	Social work values and ethical principles, for example: Code of ethics and its principles (BASW, 2014).	What are the core values, which need to be considered in this situation?
Organisational and contextual knowledge	Legislation, guidelines, procedures and knowledge related to local communities and resources.	Which contextual factors shape professional actions?
Experiential knowledge	Practice wisdom, experience of similar situations, observed practice and emotions.	What does this situation remind me of? What previous experience is relevant here?
Skills	Social work skills, such as skills in forming relationships, use of good authority, collaboration, etc.	Which skills are needed in this situation?
Expertise by experience	Wishes, views and experiences of the child, young person, parent, carer.	What are the views and wishes of children and families?

Table 1 – Seven forms of knowledge that underpin knowledgeable and ethical social work practice (adapted from Tov, Kunz and Stämpfli, 2016 and Staempfli, forthcoming)

Points for reflection and discussion in your team:

What different forms of knowledge and values do you consciously consider when making professional judgements?

What exactly do you do and what steps do you take when making decisions?

What helps you to weave together or combine the different forms of knowledge?

In your supervision with social workers, which perspectives do you encourage them to consider and which ones might you be paying less attention to? Why?

How much do you draw on research findings when discussing practice or making decisions? What helps or hinders this?

You may want to discuss with your team how they make decisions and which perspectives they consider and why. This will help you to understand what support social workers may need to draw on different forms of knowledge and perspectives.

The key to supporting knowledgeable and ethical practice and decision-making is to focus on activities that enable the weaving together of these different forms of knowledge. This is discussed in the next section.

From knowledge 'use', 'transfer' or 'application', to 'integration' and 'co-production'

It is important to understand the relationship between knowledge and practice not in terms of 'use', 'transfer' or 'application' but rather as a two-way process of blending or integration (Thompson, 2017) or as a dialogue between practice and theory (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017).

This shifts the focus from 'knowledge' that people have, to something that they do ('knowing', Blackler, 1995) and to how social workers engage with knowledge (King Keenan and Grady, 2014).

Therefore, for practice supervisors, it is helpful to focus on the existing practices in your organisation that allow practitioners to co-create and share knowledge and relate it to practice (Hopwood and Nerland, 2018). In other words, practice supervisors and leaders should support spaces for social workers to engage with knowledge, values and practice.

Research and theory do not tell a social worker what needs to be done to address a complex situation a family or child is facing. To make considered professional decisions in relation to practice situations and children and families, practitioners need to identify and reflect on available knowledge.

At the same time, they need to learn about a family and think about which actions might lead to positive change for children and families. This can only be done in discussion with children and families, and involves the weaving together of their wishes, views and experiences with an understanding of relevant research and theory alongside the application of social work values (Hopwood, 2014).

This co-production in interactions with people who use services and others means that both social workers and children and families are 'knowers and knowledgeable', an approach which is empowering and aligns with anti-oppressive practice (Hopwood and Nerland, 2018 p17). It leads to actionable knowledge that can inform practice and '[help] get things done in practical situations' (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017). This relies on social workers having a good grasp of co-production.

The co-creation of actionable knowledge is essentially a shared learning process (Hopwood and Nerland, 2018 p3). In fact, Eraut (1994) sees learning and 'using knowledge' not as separate but as the same thing. This contrasts with the idea of being able to directly use, transfer or apply of knowledge. Learning thereby involves understanding different types of knowledge themselves; interpreting these to draw out how they can inform understanding of children, families and practice and; drawing explicit knowledgeable conclusions that can be put into practice in specific situations (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017).

Points for reflection and discussion in your team:

Considering these last points about co-production of knowledge and learning in discussion with others:

Which activities in your team or organisation (would) enable the identification, understanding and interpretation of research and theory?

Which spaces (would) enable social workers to come together to discuss their cases and help them integrate the different strands of knowledge?

When and where else do you, or could you, engage in such activities?

What opportunities can you create and support in your organisation that enable identification, understanding and interpretation of research and theory?

Who could you buddy up with to start creating such spaces? How can you ensure that social workers can prioritise these, when faced with pressures of every-day work demands?

Evidence-informed practice is challenging and a balancing act. It is also impacted by a range of barriers and opportunities at both individual and organisational levels.

What factors influence evidence-informed practice?

The way you and your organisation enable and arrange space and time to engage with learning will largely influence individuals' ability to engage in evidence-informed practice (Grootenboer et al, 2017).

As a practice supervisor, you can play a positive part in supporting such activities and practices, as effective approaches are supported by 'positive leadership, supportive resources and ongoing training' (Gray et al, 2015 p670).

Supporting knowledgeable and ethical practice thus relies on a practice environment and an organisation that values and enables learning (Markauskaite and Goodyear, 2017). The following sections therefore focus on key principles for successful evidence-informed practice approaches. We distinguish between individual and organisational aspects.

Individual factors

Practitioners need skills to identify, access, understand and interpret research. This starts with skills related to information technology (digital literacy skills) (Gruber and Harteis, 2018; Fenwick et al, 2012). Evidence also points to social workers needing to build their knowledge and skills in understanding and interpreting research evidence (Gray, et al, 2012).

For example, children and families' social workers primarily understand evidence to be the information they gather (Collins and Daly, 2011). To address these challenges, it helps to offer opportunities for social workers to have access to research briefings, to be given time to read these, to have regular group case discussions in which social workers can discuss their relevance in relation to the practice challenges.

Importantly, research also suggests that continuous professional development (CPD) and educational engagement helps social workers to develop their understanding of the role of research as evidence (Collins and Daly, 2011). However, making considered professional decisions is not just about research (Munro et al, 2017).

Judgements are affected by a professional's emotional state (Nyathi, 2018; Cook, 2017; O'Connor and Leonard, 2014) and emotions can help or hinder decision-making (Cook, 2017) but the role of emotions in decision-making is not necessarily recognised (O'Connor, 2019).

Dealing with highly-emotional situations that involve high risk and uncertainty in a pressured environment, in combination with a need to arrive at decisions quickly, impacts on social workers' thinking and reasoning (Nyathi, 2018). In such an environment, social workers are more likely to rely mainly on their emotional responses to make decisions and this 'may also lead to biases' (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014) but relying too much on intuitive reasoning is not safe (Thompson and Thompson, 2018).

Relying on biases may reinforce stereotypes that are unconsciously held. On the other hand, evidence shows that when emotions and intuitions are appraised and self-regulated appropriately, then self-awareness can usefully inform decisions (Nyathi, 2018, Cook, 2017).

This is crucial for anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Therefore, recognising 'the emotional content of practice is key to safe and effective decision-making' (Turney and Ruch, 2018 p126; O'Connor, 2019). This is supported first by sharing and deliberating emotions to examine them, and by considering both analytical and intuitive ways of thinking and reasoning (Munro et al, 2017).

Intuitive thinking is related to emotions, gut feelings and hunches, while analytical thinking is about understanding and assessing the relevance of different types of knowledge in relation to practice situations (from experience and practice wisdom to theoretical, research and ethical knowledge).

Organisational factors

There are a number of factors which make it difficult for social workers to practice in an evidence-informed way that are linked to organisational structures, cultures and practices (Gray, et al, 2012).

These include, limited agency resources (e.g. staffing, library resources and information technology), inadequate training to influence the skills, knowledge and attitudes of practitioners (Gray et al, 2015; Gray, et al, 2012), supervision that does not focus on diverse forms of knowledge and their integration with practice (Gray, et al, 2012), and limited available time and workload pressures (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014) that make it challenging for practitioners to access research (Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2008).

Research has shown that when evidence-informed practice is adopted across a whole organisation and incorporates a range of approaches, it is likely to be more successful (Gray, et al, 2012). Rather than just focussing on enabling access to research, it is important to pay attention to the kinds of activities that enable co-production, discussion and learning about practice and knowledge (Jang, 2013).

Such learning activities can be best supported by establishing regular learning spaces for social workers to come together to engage in discussions about the concrete practice situations and challenges they encounter, and about relevant knowledge that helps understand and address these. This harnesses the perspectives of all involved, widens their understanding of knowledge and practice, and helps make knowledge relevant to practice.

Points for reflection and discussion in your team:

At the organisational level, which points resonate with you and why? Which good practices in relation to knowledgeable and ethical practice and decision-making can you identify in your organisation? Which areas need improving? How can you identify solutions to these? Who might be an ally? Who else has a passion for evidence-informed practice? Who can you talk to about ideas you might have or develop?

At an individual level, which points resonate with you and why? Thinking about the skills, knowledge and attitudes of yourself and social workers in your team, which ones are well developed, and which ones need to be enhanced? How are these recognised in staff appraisal? What opportunities to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes can you think of? Which formal (CPD) and informal (e.g. practice discussions) opportunities already exist to continuously develop the skill set of team members?

Thinking about the role of emotions in decision-making, which points resonate with you and why? How far do you and social workers in your team share emotions that come up at work? How do you enable making sense of these? How do you in team case discussions or individual supervision enable discussion of and reflection on emotions? How do you balance intuitive and analytical ways of decision-making?

Moving from reflection to action: How can you, as a practice supervisor promote learning and knowledgeable and ethical decision-making and evidence-informed practice? Which ideas in this briefing so far could help you to promote learning in your team? What concrete actions can you take? Which barriers can you not address alone? Who could you work with to address them and how? Could you, or together with others, form a group to become champions for knowledgeable and ethical practice in your organisation and create a bottom-up action plan?

Learning in groups needs to support social workers to purposefully weave together different forms of knowledge and perspectives, including ethical principles, research and theory with practice to co-create practical solutions to professional challenges. This has the potential to support the development of actionable knowledge and knowledgeable practice, and enables social workers to defend their judgements. Concrete activities for this are suggested in the next section.

Supporting learning for knowledgeable and ethical decisions and practice: your role as a practice supervisor

Practice supervisors can engage in shared learning with their supervisees and team by creating spaces for the following activities and questions. These are adapted from the key situation reflective learning approach that seeks to help integrate the different knowledge forms (table 1) with practice.

1. Identification of different forms of knowledge relevant to a situation, child or family

Academic and scholarly explanatory knowledge of social problems and knowledge of interventions:

- Have you got access to academic and scholarly knowledge, published in journals or professional literature?
- How can you ensure that social workers have time to search for and read relevant research?
- Have you and your team got the relevant skills to search? If not, how could you organise relevant skills training (librarians are usually good at helping people to search databases)?
- Could you as a team engage in a search of Google scholar or knowledge websites and learn from each other how to do this? Social workers who have read an article, or attended training, could look through materials to identify any relevant knowledge pertinent to the situation under discussion.

Ethical knowledge:

- To identify ethical knowledge, you may want to suggest that social workers consult the British Association of Social Workers' code of ethics and discuss how specific ethical principles could help in decision-making.

Organisational and contextual knowledge:

- Ask social workers to gather relevant legislation, guidelines and procedures and knowledge related to local communities and resources that are relevant to a child, family or practice situation.

Experiential knowledge:

- How about role playing a situation a social worker has encountered to bring to the fore the emotions and the thinking that guided their actions? You might also want to ask social workers to consider the practice of others they have observed in similar situations.

Skills:

- Suggest social workers think about the skills that they need for the specific practice situation.

Expertise by experience:

- Consider what a child, young person or adult has told you about their wishes, view or feelings about their situation, and what their preferred way to go forward is.

2. Understanding of knowledge

Once social workers have gathered relevant knowledge, it is key to develop an understanding of this knowledge. For example, in relation to academic knowledge you may want to ask questions like:

- What do the authors say?
- How have they arrived at their findings and conclusions?
- What was the context of the research?
- What are the differences between the context of practice in the research and in yours?

In relation to ethical knowledge, social workers could examine their own personal and professional values and consider tensions with ethical principles from relevant professional standards.

3. Interpreting this understanding in relation to a specific situation, child or family

Key to making knowledge actionable is to explicitly think about how and why it is relevant to a concrete practice situation, and to the context in which it takes place. This also involves making connections between the different forms of knowledge.

For example, most social workers think about the legal and experiential knowledge when making decisions. Perhaps you could enable discussions about the dilemmas that arise from these in connection with, for example, children and families' expertise, ethical principles or current research? This would help to interpret the different perspectives in relation to a situation.

4. Supporting social workers to think through how they will put this new understanding into practice

Based on the developed understanding of knowledge and its relevance, ask social workers what they can do to put it into practice. How, for example, are they going to check their understanding with young people and families?

Perhaps making concrete action plans could help social workers to draw conclusions from their new understanding.

It is also helpful to consider the gained understanding in terms of quality. Ask social workers by which actions could you see that they have acted knowledgeably and ethically?

Finally, review and reflect on practice and draw out learning for future similar situations.

5. Supporting the creation and maintenance of a learning environment

Evidence-informed practice takes time and effort. So organisations need to support practitioners by providing physical spaces in which they can meet, as well as time for both deliberation and the integration of research and theory, because cutting 'corners in drawing on research will undermine the enterprise' (Munro et al, 2017, p150).

This means that knowledgeable and ethical practice is not just about practitioners' ability to engage in the activities outlined above. It relies importantly on the creation of environments within which practice supervisors can support social workers to engage in the suggested learning activities.

It is a shared responsibility in the service of children and families. Thus, to enable these activities, it is important to focus on how to create or maintain supportive networks (Scurlock-Evans and Upton, 2015).

Practice supervisors should consider the ideas and principles of communities of practice (CoPs) as a way to support learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). A CoP is a group of people who come together because of their passion to learn about something and form a community that engages in shared learning activities (Wenger, 1998).

CoPs have repeatedly been linked to knowledge co-creation and sharing and the literature is full of examples (e.g. Barbour, et al, 2018; Hennessy, et al, 2013) where CoPs are examined as a strategy for thinking together about real-life problems. What gives life to CoPs is people who genuinely care about these issues and engage in learning about them together (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2016), and they can be supported through a number of principles (Staemplfi et al, 2016).

Considerations for practice supervisors

Evidence-informed practice that brings about knowledgeable and ethical professional decisions is supported by learning and discussion to weave together different knowledge forms and practice.

Practice supervisors can support social workers to engage in the shared learning activities suggested in this briefing, which may enable them to discuss, reflect on and analyse practice situations, as well as children and families.

Importantly, practice supervisors should seek to influence the practice environment that allows children, families and social workers the space and time to develop their responses to the challenges they are facing.

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Practice Supervisor Development Programme
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Author: Adi Staempfli,
Lecturer in Social Work,
Goldsmiths, University of London

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