Developing a Framework for the Assessment of Vulnerable Children and Their Families

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Aim of presentation

- Discuss the development of the Assessment Framework in the ROI
- Highlight how it incorporated process issues such as engagement, reflection, gendered practice and analysis
Problems identified in child protection and welfare services prior to development of frameworks

- Disparities about thresholds for service
- Neglect of neglect with primary emphasis on problems with a more vivid manifestation
- Problems with multi-disciplinary work
- Lack of focus on children
- Weakness in integrating information
- Need for higher profiling of family support services and evidence of their importance
What research says about assessment frameworks

- Frameworks establish the foundation stones for practice (Connolly 2007)
- Assessment ‘both a head and a heart activity’ (Horwath, 2007)
- Supervision and training are essential elements (Millar & Corby, 2005, Crisp et al, 2007)
- Requires strong leadership and a clear plan for intervention (Cleaver and Walker, 2004)
Assessment tools have been criticised for having a ‘narrow, normative and prescriptive view of the world’ (Garrett, 2005)

Concerns about computer based data (Munro, 2004)

Service users view the participatory elements positively (Platt, 2006)

Assessment can have a therapeutic function (Millar & Corby, 2005)
Recent relevant Irish research findings

- Importance of hearing the child’s perspective on parenting capacity (e.g. living with domestic violence) (Buckley, Whelan and Holt, 2006)

- Sensitivity to the intimidating perception of child protection and welfare services (Hayes, 2007)
Methods used

- Literature review on parenting capacity and assessment frameworks
- Consultancy
- Preparation of draft framework
- Piloting
- Evaluation
- Final revisions
Outcomes from consultancy

- Framework should be informed by practitioners, rather than top down
- No assumptions about service users willingness or motivation to engage
- Gender sensitive
- Needs to include risk
Assessment process

- Process of assessment needed to be clearly spelt out – more than a concept, less than a set of tools
- Emphasis on planning and reflection
- Required to differentiate between concurrent and sequential phases
- User friendly document
Outcomes of the pilot study

- Framework largely successful in its aims
- Need to show concurrent as well as sequential activities
- Under use of evidence for decision making
- Deficiencies in documented information about children
- Need for more communication between statutory and voluntary agencies regarding use of the framework
Shaping of Assessment Framework

- One document including the tool, no additional scales or measures
- Qualitative assessment
- Based on principles
- Time lines to be agreed on a per case basis
- Core assessment
- Role of coordinator/manager
The Finished Product

Framework for the Assessment of Vulnerable Children & their Families
Assessment Tool and Practice Guidance
Symbols: the spiral

The 3 Dimensions of a Child’s Life: The Spiral

- Parenting Capacity & Impact on Parenting Capacity
- Individual Child & Immediate Safety & Child Developmental Needs
- Extended Family & Community & Additional Needs
Assessment Domains

- Child’s needs – specified, including safety needs and any additional needs experienced by children with chronic illness or disability or children from ethnic minorities
- Capacity of caregiver to meet specific needs and consideration of any social factors impacting on their capacity
- Capacity of extended family and community to strengthen parenting capacity or compensate for any weaknesses
Collaborating
Multidisciplinary Contributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Care Worker (Community and Emotional)</th>
<th>Early Years/Early Years Staff</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- History of placement</td>
<td>- Physical health of child</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Interview with parents</td>
<td>- Development and learning of child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Child’s health status, including mental and social needs</td>
<td>- General appearance of child</td>
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<td>- Child’s support needs, their family</td>
<td>- Child’s way of playing</td>
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<td>- Child’s emotional status</td>
<td>- Child’s ability to perform tasks</td>
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<td>- Child’s needs and skills</td>
<td>- Child’s fine and gross motor skills</td>
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<td>- Child’s ability to cope with responsibilities and services</td>
<td>- Child’s ability to express emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Child’s affect and adaptive behavior</td>
<td>- Child’s ability to follow rules and give appropriate feedbacks</td>
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| Social Worker (Health Service Learning)                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| - History of placement                                       | - Information regarding past and present education within the family |
| - Interview with parents                                     | - Information regarding good and bad interactions within the family |
| - Child’s health status, including mental and social needs   | - Information regarding the interaction of other disciplines with the family |
| - Child’s ability to cope with responsibilities and services | - Family’s patterns of functioning |
| - Child’s emotional status                                   | - Parent’s role and capacity |
| - Child’s ability to express emotions                        | - Parent’s involvement in the family |
| - Access to the family home                                   | - Teacher’s role and interaction with family |
| - Child’s physical and emotional well-being                  | - Ability of network of nurses |
| - Current and future health and well-being                   | - Relationship of network of nurses |
| - Child’s history of illness                                  | - Care of sick child or illness |
Key questions:

- What facts, observations and opinions do you have to support the information gathered?
- What does this mean in relation to the child’s safety, welfare and development?
- How do practice experience, research findings and literature inform this part of your assessment?
- Should an intervention be made now? If so what?
- Where is the parent/carer within the change process?
Knowing the child
Practice Guidance

- Linked to tool with coloured tabs, symbols and index
- First part offers elaboration on different phases of assessment
- Second part provides summaries of research on relevant topics
Areas for reflection

- Engaging families
- Considering caregivers’ incentive to change
- Promoting participation
- Reflecting on information using the key questions
- Using the evidence
- Recording
What’s different?

- Centred in on the child as opposed to child centred
- Guides through the entire process rather than information gathering
- Encourages workers to reflect at all points
Training issues

- Child development
- Knowledge base on factors that affect parenting
- Multi-disciplinary working
- Assessment skills
- Influences on decision making
Supervisory issues

- Acknowledge and address coping mechanisms adopted by staff

- Accept that bias and distortion are inevitable from time to time, including groupthink, fixed ideas, over-optimism and over-pessimism

- Encourage workers to self challenge
Organisational issues

- Promotion and support of multi-disciplinary collaboration to encourage skill sharing
- Development of structure and context – not just an add on
- Promotion of a positive image of the system
Loose ends

- Difference between initial and full assessment?
- ‘One size fits all’ approach
- Expectation that the assessment framework will make decisions on its own
- Challenge involved in bringing different professionals on board