

No magic ‘bullet’ but a very promising approach to improving child protection practice – researchers report on a major child protection initiative.

Today (6 July 2017) the Department for Education publishes a major report on an important child protection initiative. Following detailed research, the report, **‘Evaluation of Signs of Safety in 10 pilots’**

by Mary Baginsky, Jo Moriarty, Jill Manthorpe, Jennifer Beecham and Ben Hickman presents new information about one of the UK’s main changes to social work practice.

Signs of Safety has become one of the most widely adopted research-based programmes aimed at improving practice in child protection services in England. First developed in Western Australia in the 1990s, it was taken up in parts of North America, Australasia, and Europe, including the UK. Ten English local authorities received substantial funding from the Department for Education’s Innovation programme between autumn 2014 and spring 2016 to develop or extend their use of Signs of Safety with the help of its founders, Professor Eileen Munro, Dr Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy. The Social Care Workforce Research Unit, at King’s College London, has evaluated this change. Their study is one of the most extensive evaluations of Signs of Safety conducted anywhere in the world.

The researchers addressed three main questions:

- how is Signs of Safety – a new way of working - being taken up by social workers?
- what are the outcomes for children and young people?
- what are the costs of implementing Signs of Safety across children’s services?

The research team found that social work managers and social workers in the 10 local authorities were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of Signs of Safety in supporting children. They reported that Signs of Safety had provided fresh opportunities for social workers to involve families to a much greater extent than had been the case previously. There were challenges of course around taking up a new way of working at a time when many of the local authorities faced difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers at the same time as receiving higher numbers of concerns about children. Local authorities were also facing budget constraints, and several were in the middle of major reorganisation.

Dr Mary Baginsky, lead author of the evaluation, observed: ‘The evidence showed that the Signs of Safety framework was workable where authorities made the necessary commitment of trust in their staff at all levels, backed up by resources and time. However, there may be scope for other tools to be incorporated to support practice. Our conclusion was that, while Signs of Safety is not a ‘magic bullet’ for the challenges that face children’s social care, it has the potential to help improve services for children and young people’. She added that participants in this evaluation envisaged that it would take five years to achieve the cultural changes that were needed for Signs of Safety to make a significant impact.

The research team based its conclusions on evidence from interviews and surveys with over 50 strategic leaders, 470 social workers and 270 families at two points in time, as well as analysing case files and local authority statistics.

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