



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: Safe uncertainty

## Introduction

The concept of 'safe uncertainty' is widely used in systemic practice and is also considered to be useful for social work with children and their families. The concept was coined by Barry Mason (a systemic family therapist) and is particularly helpful in assessing risk.

This visual tool helps practitioners critically analyse their work with families and explore what factors may be influencing their perceptions of risk (and how much uncertainty we can tolerate). It can helpfully be used in supervision to aid critical reflection.

Ideas around the concept of 'risk' and 'certainty' are discussed, and the theoretical concept of safe uncertainty explained. There are then a series of reflective questions to help practice supervisors consider how they can support social workers to assess risk within their work and in supervision discussions.

## Managing risk: the quest for certainty

In English local authorities, ideas about good supervision are shaped by the paramountcy of the individual child's safety and welfare. However, Featherstone et al. (2014, p.5) argue that 'radical individualisation of childhood limits the range of potential responses, creating a system which seeks an impossible actuarial certainty about risks to the relatively few.' Arguably, if practice focuses on wider systemic and contextual factors, it may broaden the range of ways we can creatively view the issue of risk. There is also a plausible perspective to consider, in relation to perceptions of risk. Munro (2004, p. 1077) suggests as follows:

Factors such as risk and safeguarding within social work with children and families are, arguably, a socially-constructed phenomenon. These factors are also compounded by issues of structural inequality and unconscious bias. For example, the prevalence of black children open to children's services (Owen and Statham, 2009) and / or children living in deprived areas (Bywaters et al., 2014, 2015) suggests that risk and safety may be perceived differently when factors such as race, culture and economic status are taken into account.

'This concern with risk has led to the protective duties of social services becoming increasingly dominant... the growth of scientific knowledge and its associated technologies has led us to see the natural and the social world as understandable and predictable. Where previous generations would have attributed tragedies and failures to 'fate' or God, we increasingly believe that we can control our environment and make it risk-free.'

Through the political agenda, media influence and public expectation, these ideas have become a social reality, accumulating from factors such as language and social perceptions evolving over time to understand these concepts. With this seems to have come an increasing anxiety over several layers of society, a factor which was perhaps highlighted in the aftermath of the death of Peter Connelly in 2007.

The responsibility constructed from this anxiety is high and, it could be argued, has been met by even higher scrutiny over compliance and performance. This has perhaps rendered the process of supervision as responsible for mitigating this and essentially leads us to consider the expectations of the supervision process in relation to risk.

Mason (1993, p38) suggests that a more helpful way to explore issues of risk and certainty in child protection work would be to develop a different kind of inquiry 'away from trying to find the "true way", while keeping central the safety of the child'. He developed the concept of 'safe uncertainty' to help social workers working within frontline child protection, to usefully reflect on what they are doing, and develop more practice confidence towards taking a position of 'authoritative doubt'.

## Safe uncertainty: the concept

The challenge of social work is to practice within a context of uncertainty, making us strive for positions of 'safe certainty'. That said, we can safely say with all certainty that there is no certainty!

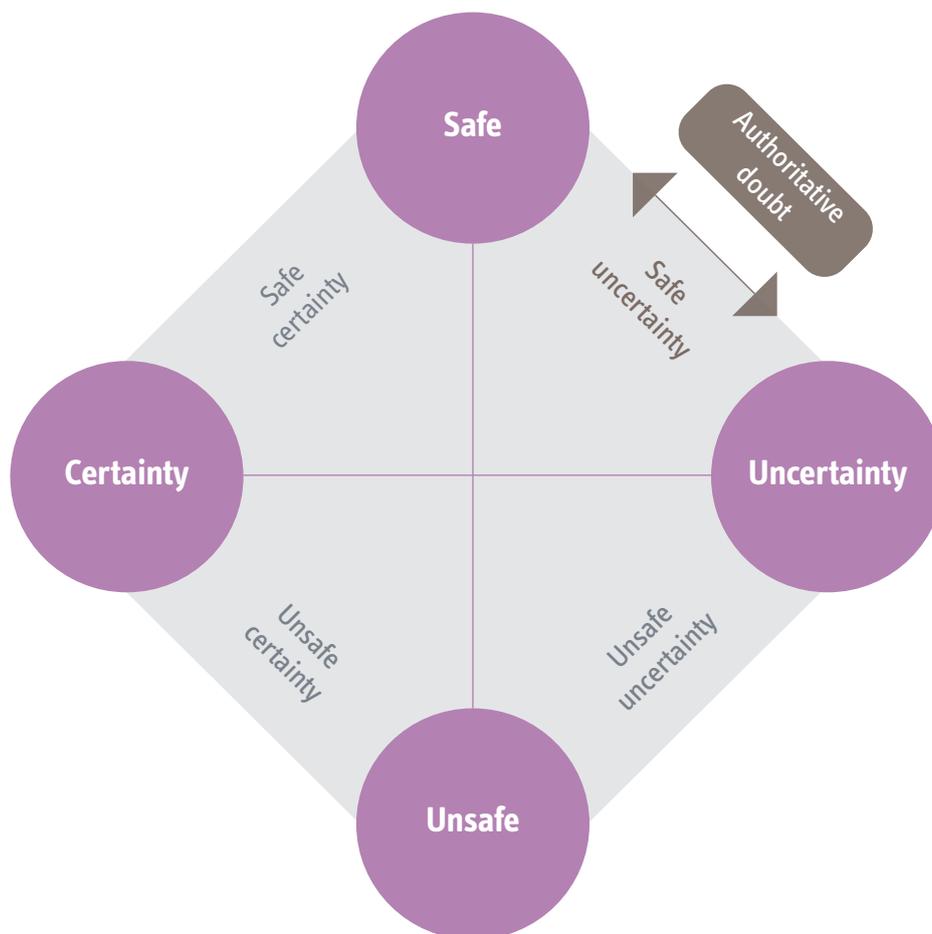
Mason (1993) recognises that as humans we all, at times, seek a sense of certainty and that some degree of certainty can help us move forward in our lives. However, he also suggests that sometimes this can lead to paralysis and lack of creativity. If we are to recognise that social work is not an exact science, we also need to embrace the existence of uncertainty within this.

The model of safe uncertainty is founded on the core systemic concepts of 'first' and 'second order' positioning. The former position is one of knowing and expertise and the latter embraces a position of 'not knowing', curiosity and uncertainty.

Mason (1993, p191) even warns against the notion of seeking to 'understand' because this arguably is to reach a position of 'premature certainty' and can lead to misunderstanding through closing down other possibilities. He also challenges the concept of establishing 'solutions', arguing that even this suggests a fixed and certain position. Mason (1993, p195) explains as follows:

'For useful change to happen we sometimes need to become less certain of the positions we hold. When we become less certain of the positions we hold we are more likely to become receptive to other possibilities, other meanings we might put to events. If we can become more open to the possible influence of other perspectives, we open up space for other views to be stated and heard.'

He suggests that holding a position of 'authoritative doubt' in social work is to encompass both expertise and uncertainty. This is illustrated on the model for safe uncertainty below:



The four quadrant model describes four themes, as follows:

<b>Unsafe uncertainty</b>	<b>Unsafe certainty</b>	<b>Safe certainty</b>	<b>Safe uncertainty</b>
Hopeless, having a problem and feeling there is no solution.	Having a problem but being clear what is causing it and what will solve it.	That the problem can be solved or is solvable, that risk can be eradicated.	Is not fixed and is always in a state of flow and exploration with multiple explanations for the problem and the solution.

## Some questions for supervisors and social workers

Safe uncertainty is not a technique or a skill but an ever-evolving state of being, and the concept of authoritative doubt invites practitioners to own their expertise in the context of uncertainty. Within supervision, the model above can be used as a framework to help people position themselves and reflect on their practice with children and families when they are faced with issues of certainty and uncertainty.

You might bring this model into a supervision session and explain to the social worker what the concept is, by talking through each quadrant.

By focusing on what factors are at play, you could explore how they or other workers in the system, perceive or manage risk, and what needs to happen to move to a position of safe uncertainty. The questions below are designed to prompt your thoughts together, in conversation, whilst interpreting the model, and to help you consider how it may relate to your practice:

When reading about the concept of safe uncertainty, which families or social work examples came to mind? Where would you place these on the matrix? What might you need to consider in order to hold a position of safe uncertainty?

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When you think about holding a position of authoritative doubt, can you think of a situation or a child and family where you have achieved this? What were the factors that contributed towards this? What needed to happen in order to confidently hold this position?

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How might the GRRRAACCEEESSS (gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality - Burnham, 2013) affect how risk is viewed? How might conscious / unconscious bias on the part of the supervisee and / or the organisation be a factor to consider?

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Think about a child and family where the pull towards reaching a position of safe certainty is strong? What might be driving this? How might you take a position of 'not knowing'? What would need to happen to help you to do this?

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## Other ways you can use this tool

Share it with your team, draw the model on flip chart paper and then have a discussion with them about the idea.

Use it in group supervision to help the group apply this to their work with a family, explore risk, multiple truths about the family and hypotheses about what may be happening, and how they can reach a position of authoritative doubt.

Invite social workers to use the model to reflect on their work with a family, either to prepare for supervision, or to help guide an assessment or review of their work.



**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.**

## References

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