



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Evidencing defensible decision-making on records with ‘the child at your shoulder’

Introduction

Writing is a key activity in social work, primarily the maintenance of comprehensive records on automated electronic systems. Practice supervisors are tasked with making sure that social workers keep these records up to date and that the information they contain evidences defensible decision-making and high standards of service delivery. Practice supervisors are also asked to regularly provide management oversight comments on children's files.

How to use this tool

In working through this tool you will:

Reflect on the purposes and functions of keeping records and of management oversight commentary.

Consider the role you play as practice supervisor in ensuring that records provide both a coherent narrative and evidence of defensible decision-making.

Look back at examples of your own management oversight commentaries, using the ideas presented as a lens through which to review your work.

Each section of the tool considers a different evidence-informed perspective about keeping records in children's social care.

When looking back at examples of your management oversight commentaries, we suggest you choose a different child's record for each different section of the tool.

If you are able to, we recommend that you pair up with another practice supervisor so you can feedback on each other's work when doing these exercises (reviewing your own written work is valuable for learning and development but you can learn even more if you get feedback from a peer). When doing this, it's important to establish ground rules around things like confidentiality first so you feel comfortable when sharing your written work and when providing feedback on your colleague's.

At the end of this tool we invite you to review your learning and identify how you can provide evidence of defensible decision-making when writing in a child's file.

Questions for you to consider:

- > What are the hallmarks of good, professionally written records in children's social care?
- > When you are auditing children's files, what are the key things you look out for or pay attention to?
- > Are you able to review whether or not issues around aspects of identity like race, class, age, sexuality and so on are addressed in a child's file?
- > What does excellent record keeping look like?

What is the purpose of keeping a record of involvement with a child and family?

O'Rourke (2010) suggests there are three main reasons to keep records in social work practice:

- > To provide evidence that policy, procedures and practice have been followed and that the service is professional and competent.
- > To give a rationale that explains why actions were taken.
- > To provide a clear picture of the person's journey and views about what they would like to happen.

The concept of defensible decision-making helps us think further about the role of record keeping when justifying why certain actions were taken. Where defensible decisions have been made, evidence in the records shows:

- > all reasonable steps were taken (to safeguard and protect children and young people and engage families)
- > reliable assessment methods were used
- > information was thoroughly evaluated
- > decisions were recorded and carried through
- > processes and procedures were followed
- > practitioners and managers were investigative and proactive.

(Kemshall, 2003 in Earle et al, 2017 p35)

Written records provide social workers and practice supervisors with opportunities to monitor and analyse their decisions (eg Wilkins, 2017) and can therefore be used to identify anti-oppressive practice whereby equal opportunities, diversity and social inclusion are promoted.

Records should be inclusive and accessible as they may be accessed by the child at a later stage in their life (Bowen, 2020). Poet and care-experienced writer, Lemn Sissay, argues that a child's 'file is an anagram of life'. Written records can be a critical element in supporting the 'coherent autobiographical memory' which provides 'crucial foundations for us all to thrive.' (Brown, Grimm and Clunie, 2020 p1-2)

This perspective requires a shift away from seeing records as primarily a vehicle for professionals to 'gather, share and monitor information' between themselves (Payne 2008 in Hoyle et al, 2019 p1862) and towards thinking about the very significant role that case files play for children and young people in shaping their understanding of their childhoods and of their family's involvement with social care. Sissay wrote a powerful account of his childhood using his own case file records (*My Name is Why*, published in 2019) and has reproduced many pages of them [on his blog](#).

As Brown, Grimm and Clunie have described, 'a secure sense of self and the capacity for self-love and self-understanding, structured around coherent autobiographical memory, are crucial foundations for us all to thrive'. In seeking that narrative, care-experienced people often apply for their care records 'in search of answers to address gaps and inconsistencies in the knowledge they hold

about their childhoods... to build – and where necessary to reconstruct – coherent narratives of childhood and personal development.' (Brown, Grimm and Clunie, 2020 p1-2)

Speaking from their own experiences and those of the [Who Cares? Scotland](#) group they are part of, the two lead authors describe how this process of accessing written records is often 'frustrating, alienating and re-traumatising' and can result in the discovery of 'files which are disordered, incomplete and fragmentary, which contain very significant, unexplained and often inconsistent redactions, which use unprofessional and stigmatising language.' (ibid p2)

They assert that supporting these 'crucial foundations' should be understood in the broader context of corporate parenting duties: 'any good parent should support their children to understand who they are, where they've been and to have the pride and confidence needed to stand tall in a challenging social world.' (ibid p3)

They advocate for a complete 'shift in power as regards the production and control of information' (ibid p1) that sees care records (as far as possible) co-produced and available throughout an individual's involvement with child and family services as 'part of a broader process within which children and young people are supported to shape, reflect upon and understand their lives, alongside loving carers and supportive professionals.' (ibid p10)

Given the challenges of safeguarding children and young people, this aspect of record keeping can easily become lost. So we must keep reminding ourselves that to take a 'relational approach' to what we write in a child's file and write records with the child in mind.

Questions for you to consider:

- > O'Rourke (2010) suggests there are three main reasons we keep records in social work practice. Have a look at these again and think about how they influence the way recording is approached within your organisation, both in your teams and by you personally. What do you think you think works well? What might you like to do differently?
- > It's understandable for the balance to shift towards providing evidence that policy, procedures and practice have been followed. How can you avoid this tendency and encourage your team to do so, too?
- > How might thinking about the purpose of records as providing 'coherent narratives of childhood and personal development' read by the child in later life influence what you write and how you audit children's files?

Reviewing what you have written on a child's file:

Spend a few minutes looking at examples of your own management oversight comments on a child's file, using Kemshall's (2003) defensible decision-making principles as a lens through which to review what you have written, and imagining you're reading these comments for the first time:

- > If you were the child reading this in later life, would these comments contribute to a 'coherent narrative' that makes sense from that point of view?
- > How defensible to an external reader is the recorded decision-making?
- > Can you identify any areas of 'defensive recording' (in which you focus less on the importance of your comments for the benefit of the child and more on providing evidence that policy and procedures have been followed)?

When they look at written records, Ofsted inspectors frequently highlight difficulties in understanding 'the sequence and progression of actions and decisions' (Stanley, 2019):

- > How does what you wrote help an external reader to clearly understand the sequence and rationale of the decisions that were made over time?
- > Looking back now, how might you change what you have written? What might stay the same?

Writing records with ‘the child at your shoulder’

In 2016, Brighton and Hove City Council initiated a new approach to record keeping called ‘Me and My World’. This was developed to support the council’s relationship-based practice model with children in care and social workers were encouraged to write review reports *directly to the child*. Question prompts in the recording template were designed to act as nudges to encourage social workers to, ‘focus on relationships, identity and life story rather than statutory processes’ in their reports (2020 p10). For example:

- > What family and kinship members are significant to me? What do we do when we spend time together and how do I feel about it?
- > What’s important in making me who I am? Have I experienced any racism or discrimination in my life?
- > Who are my friends and what sorts of things do I enjoy doing with them?
- > How am I getting on at school? Do I like going? What teachers have been important to me this year?
- > How do I manage my feelings? What is the impact of my early life on how I feel about myself and my relationships with others now?
- > What do I think is going well? Is there anything I would like to change?

A recent review of ‘Me and My World’ (Watts, 2020) identified that there can be a tendency to write in a way which results in ‘routine homogenised case files’ (2020 p8) or, what the review of Sissay’s book in the [New Statesman describes as](#), ‘the clunky, typewritten drone of officialise that “click clack clacks” through the files monitoring

a child in the care system’). Writing directly to the child encouraged a ‘simple, direct writing style’ (Watts, 2020 p5) which avoided the ‘mental shortcut’ (Kirkham and Melrose, 2014 p18) of professional jargon and helped practitioners to experience more empathy for the child’s perspective and situation.

Social workers who took part in the research identified that writing directly to the child helped them to focus on recording significant events and providing explanations and updates about what happened and why. These findings echo Balkow and Lillis's argument that writing directly to the child will alter 'both the content and form of what is being expressed' (2019 p17).

Rather than writing in 'a form and a voice with a presumed distant, although specific addressee - a manager, a judge etc.' (Balkow and Lillis, 2019 p 17), writing directly to the child instils a more personalised and child-centred response in the author which in turn prompts them to structure the recording differently.

The review highlights the importance of imagining the child reading or listening to what you write. Workers at Brighton and Hove emphasised the importance of this and the need to: 'bring to mind the living breathing child' (p42) when writing anything about them.

This approach has the potential to influence the way in which we approach all written records in children's social care. Imagining the child at your shoulder when writing up management oversight when a case is closed may well prompt a move away from writing 'case closed' and towards providing a succinct explanation of what changed to make this possible.

Questions for you to consider:

- > How might writing more directly to the child influence what you write and how you approach this work?
- > What aspects of the ideas presented in the section above might you want to use when you and your team are writing records about children?
- > If writing to the child enables workers to empathise more with them, what role can supervision play in helping social workers to understand and express any feelings that may arise from this empathy?

Reviewing what you have written on a child's file:

Spend a few minutes with 'the child on your shoulder' looking at examples of your own management oversight comments and imagine you are reading them for the first time:

- > How well does what you have written outline the unique needs and decisions made about an individual child?
- > Does what you write in a child's file differ depending on the child? Or are there stock phrases you use more generally? What do you think about this?
- > Can you hear the child's voice and views in what you or others have written in this file?
- > Looking back now with the child at your shoulder, how might you change what you have written? What might stay the same?

Using summary, evaluation and analysis (SEA) to structure how you write up oversight commentary

The comment below reveals the challenge facing practice supervisors when writing management oversight comments on a child's file:

'It can be hard to write in depth about the evidence base for a professional judgement or decision in a case note when there is a concurrent demand to make notes succinct.' (Bowen 2020 online)

The task, then, is to ensure there is a coherent narrative which:

- > provides evidence about what decisions have been made and why
- > distils key information into concise evaluative summaries spanning a number of interventions with a family over a period of time
- > focuses on the unique qualities of the child, addressing their social location and other aspects of social identity
- > is coherent and succinct.

This is challenging for any writer, regardless of experience. Using the acronym SEA (summary, evaluation and analysis) can help you to structure your writing to meet these requirements.

Ofsted inspectors are trained to use these principles in order to produce brief, analytical records of inspection visits, and they can be helpful for structuring management oversight comments on a child's file, too.

How to apply the SEA principles

Begin with a **summary** that presents a brief overview and update about what has happened with a child and family, illustrating why certain decisions were made. To be effective, summaries should follow the **3 Cs and be** comprehensive, concise and coherent (Hunter College online), condensing information to include only those elements which, in your professional judgement, are most important.

The next stage is **analysis**, which presents your professional judgement of significant factors about a child and family in order to answer questions about 'how' or 'why' certain decisions have been made. This may also include an analysis of 'what we don't yet know' as well as 'what we do know' (Brown and Turney, 2014). The aim is to produce a brief yet 'cogent narrative that connects risk and protective factors with the perspectives and motives of caregivers' (Pecora et al, 2013, p155).

The entry on a child's file should conclude with an **evaluation** that provides information about how agents of social care plan to work with a child or family, highlighting:

- > 'what should or shouldn't happen now?' (Johnstone, 2017 p18)
- > plans on how to progress
- > what work is being undertaken and by whom.

Questions for you to consider:

- > Can you identify any advantages of using the SEA principles to guide you each time you write on a child's file?
- > How can the organisation support you to continue to develop skills in writing succinct, evaluative and analytical management oversight summaries?

Reviewing what you have written on a child's file:

Spend a few minutes looking at examples of your own management oversight comments on a child's file, using SEA as a lens through which to consider what you have written. Imagine you are reading your comments for the first time:

- > Can you identify elements of summary, evaluation and analysis in what you have written?
- > How might following a structure of summary, analysis and evaluation change what you wrote?
- > Could aspects of what you have written be briefer or more evaluative? How so?
- > Looking back now, how might you change what you have written? What might stay the same?

Getting in the zone to focus on writing

It can be challenging in busy work environments to find the space and time to focus on written records. One way to address these pressures is to create habits and routines that help you to change the way you think about management oversight commentary. It may be useful to:

1. Set aside regular time slots in your diary to write

Some practice supervisors do this by making time in their diaries daily to focus on writing on a child's file. Despite the fact that this slot may often be taken up by having to attend to other things, practice supervisors who work in this way say that setting aside a small amount of time devoted only to writing commentary and oversight is helpful. Taking time out to reflect, plan and write can feel like 'going against the flow' but it is important to focus on this as an antidote to the fact that: 'busyness' or too much "doing" can get in the way of, or become a substitute for, thinking.' (Brown and Turney, p14)

2. Think about where you can write so you encounter minimal distractions and interruptions

Consider where you might be able to most effectively focus on writing. This may mean booking out a private room or 'pod' to allow you to work uninterrupted. Some practice supervisors flag to their teams that they are going to concentrate on a particular task for a period of time and ask that any queries are put on hold as they do. In the busyness of children's social care contexts, there are implicit pressures to always be available to respond to pressing needs or tasks. However, this is not conducive to the focused attention that writing commentary on a child's file requires.

3. Give yourself time to think and plan before and after writing

It is useful to take some time to plan what you are going to write before you do it, even if only for five minutes. Think about how you might structure what you write to ensure you include a brief summary, analysis and evaluation. Some practice supervisors find it useful to quickly jot down key points or make quick notes as mind maps, allowing them to organise their thoughts in preparation for writing. Having finished writing, leave time to go back and review what you have written.

Questions for you to consider:

Balkow and Lillis (2019 p19) observe that for many social work professionals, writing is ‘an interrupted and fragmented activity which takes place at the margins of work (the official workload day)’:

- > Spend a few moments reflecting on your experience of writing management oversight summaries. When and where do you tend to do these? Are you able to focus or are you often interrupted?
- > What routines or habits would you like to introduce for you and your team to focus on writing within the ‘official workload day’?
- > How can you get into the zone for writing to give you the best chance of focusing with the least interruptions?
- > Do you have any ideas about ‘quick wins’ or ways of freeing yourself up to focus on writing, given the challenges of finding adequate space and time?
- > Are there any top tips you can pick up from other practice supervisors about how they manage the challenges of writing?

Reviewing your learning: where to from here?

Task one

For this final activity, please spend a few minutes reminding yourself of what you thought as you read each section of the tool and considered your own written work in tandem.

Task two

How does this reflection inform your overall learning? Please use these questions to deepen your understanding:

When writing on a child's file as a practice supervisor:

> What do you need to stop doing?

> What do you need to keep doing?

> What do you need to start doing differently?

In order to ensure that what you write clearly tells the story of the child's journey and involvement with children's social care, as well as providing evidence of defensible decision-making (in terms of scrutiny, quality assurance and legal processes, and to the child and family themselves):

> How might thinking about writing as a craft that takes time, effort and practice influence the way in which you approach this task, and support others to do so?

> How might your organisation support you to continue to develop your professional writing skills?

Finally, here are ten top tips for reviewing what you write on a child's file:

1. Is what you have written clear and concise?
2. Have you summarised the key information succinctly?
3. Have you avoided jargon and used straightforward language?
4. Was the child 'at your shoulder' when writing?
5. Have you communicated a clear sense of this individual child and their unique circumstances?
6. Have you included information about what the child and family wants to happen and what they have said?
7. Have you clearly outlined the reasoning behind any decisions taken?
8. Have you included your professional judgement, and how and why you reached it?
9. Have you noted areas of strength and progress as well as what still concerns you?
10. Have you made reference to what you don't yet know or understand?

Other ways you can use this tool

You could work through the activities with a practice supervisor you trust, sharing ideas and reflections as you go.

You could share these ideas with your team at a meeting or away day to prompt discussion about how team members can support each other to further develop their case recording skills.



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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