



PSDP - Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: Promoting evidence-informed practice as a middle leader

Introduction

Effective work with children and families requires practitioners to be confident in critically appraising evidence from a range of sources to support or challenge their decisions. This means that practice supervisors have a key role to play in supporting practitioners to use evidence. However, they cannot do this on their own and so the support of middle and senior leaders is crucial in developing a culture of evidence-informed practice within the organisation. Practice leaders and managers play an important role in building an organisational culture that promotes and champions evidence-informed practice at all levels (McGeown, 2020).

This knowledge briefing has been written for managers of practice supervisors. It has been developed to help you think about evidence-informed practice at both the organisational level and in relation to your supervision of practice supervisors.

We hope the information contained within it will help you to:

- > Think further about the different forms of evidence your organisation can draw on to learn more about the effectiveness of the services you provide, and how these can be improved.
- > Reflect on the important role you play as a middle leader in promoting evidence-informed practice.
- > Understand the key role practice supervisors play in promoting evidence-informed practice in supervision, and reflect on the ways in which you can support the ones you line manage to do so.

The first part of this knowledge briefing presents information about what evidence-informed practice in social work draws on. It asks you to evaluate how your organisation uses evidence currently, and to think about the ways in which you can develop this further in relation to practice and service planning, and delivery and design.

The second part contains practical ideas and suggestions about how to promote evidence-informed practice as a middle leader, with reflective prompts and challenge questions for you to consider.

It's important to acknowledge at the outset that this is a difficult task for any organisation to achieve given that organisational structures, cultures and practices can sometimes make it challenging for professionals to practice in an evidence-informed way.

Examples of organisational factors that can have an adverse effect on the use of evidence include:

- > limited resources (e.g. staffing, library resources and IT systems)
- > limited or ineffective training on the use of evidence and / or other key topics that are not grounded in the best available literature
- > knowledge and attitudes of professionals
- > supervision that does not focus on diverse forms of knowledge and its integration with practice
- > workload pressures.

(Staempfli, 2020, p. 13)

Despite the challenges, you can exert real influence in this area as a middle leader in supporting and motivating the practice supervisors you line manage to integrate evidence-informed practice in their decision-making and in supervision discussions, as well as using evidence to inform strategic planning and service development.

We have developed a knowledge briefing for practice supervisors called '[Enabling evidence-informed practice](#)', published on [the PSDP website](#). You may find it useful to read alongside this knowledge briefing (and to share with the practice supervisors you line manage).

Section one: thinking about how evidence-informed practice shapes social work with children and families

Have a look at the evidence-informed practice triangle in figure 1, which presents three key forms of evidence that should inform professional judgement and decision-making in social work practice. This model can also be used to support managers in understanding how these different forms of evidence support the development of a culture that values the continuous use of:

a. Research evidence (including national and local data).	b. Practice expertise (skills and knowledge from practice).	c. The views and experiences of the people practitioners work with.
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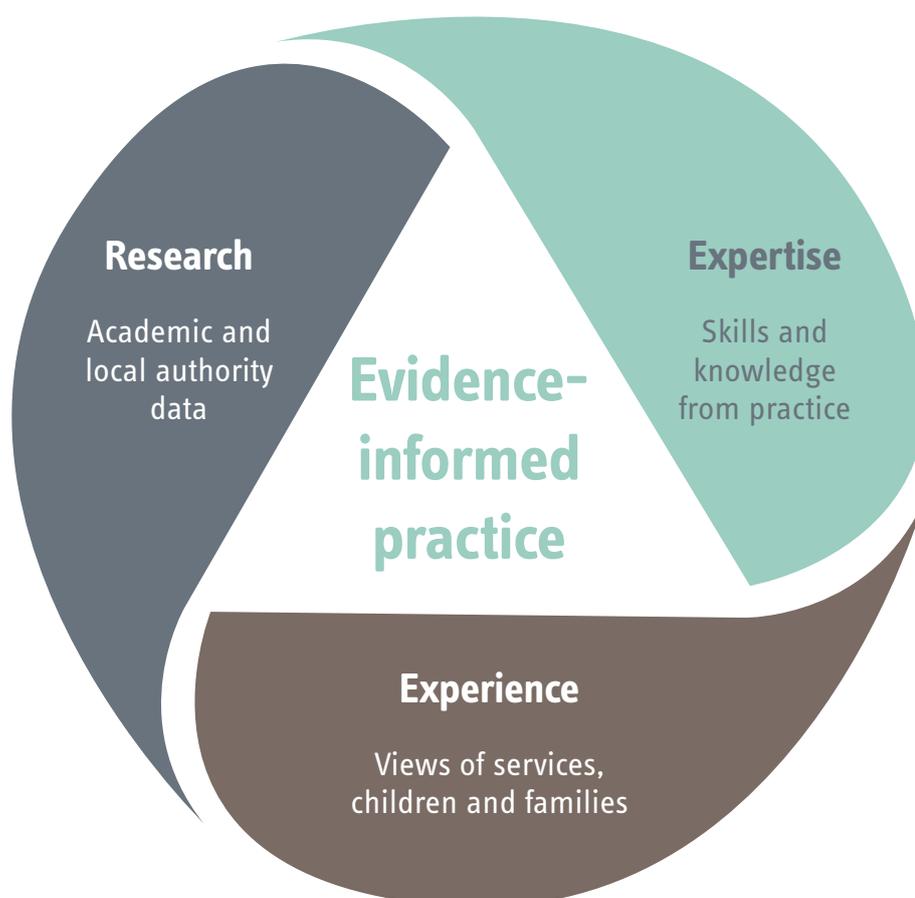


Figure 1: Evidence-informed practice triangle (Research in Practice, 2003)

a. Research evidence

‘Good professional practice is informed by knowledge of the latest theory and research’
(Munro, 2011, p. 23).

The use of research in social work practice is a clear expectation of the [Professional Capabilities Framework \(PCF\)](#), the [Post qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practitioners](#) and the [Knowledge and skills statement for practice leaders](#).

Research encompasses theoretical perspectives as well as all forms of qualitative and quantitative data, when gathered rigorously. It includes academic research and evaluations done at a national level, and data and research produced locally. Both are valuable sources of evidence.

Not all research is focused on ‘what works’, important though these studies are. A broad range of research evidence is needed to be able to understand what works best within the local and national context. A randomised control trial (RCT) might be seen as the ‘gold standard’ of evaluation in determining the efficacy of an intervention. However, this alone does not address ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions like:

- > How do young people communicate with their social worker?
- > Why might parents find it difficult to engage?

Qualitative data can help to answer such questions through greater understanding of processes related to service delivery.

The use of research evidence (national and local) needs to be interwoven throughout an organisation’s culture and ethos. The workforce needs to know how to access high quality evidence (and to understand what it looks like). Some of the barriers for staff in accessing and using research include:

- > Lack of access to academic articles and research papers.
- > Insufficient capacity and time to search for and read relevant articles.
- > Not having the necessary skills to appraise the relevance and quality of articles.
- > Challenges in interpreting and using the information in relation to a specific child or family.
- > Access to standardised tools and rating scales.
- > Local authorities not sharing their research and data.

(Broadhurst et al., 2017, Staempfli, 2020).

b. Practice expertise

Working within a context of highly emotional situations that involve high risk and uncertainty can play a significant role in the ways in which social workers reason and act (Munro, 2011). In such situations, social workers may be more likely to rely on their emotional responses when making decisions, which could lead to bias, unethical or discriminatory practice, and poor assessment decisions.

Practice supervisors play an important role in facilitating reflective discussions with their supervisees to help with balancing intuitive and logical thinking. Similarly, it is important to create opportunities to critically reflect on and learn from practice within the wider organisation (outside one-to-one supervision discussions). Creating a safe environment for reflection is crucial to ensuring that analysis and critical thinking are key components of all assessment and decision-making processes (Turney, 2014).

Practitioners, supported by their supervisor, develop a range of skills and experiential knowledge over time. One of the key professional skills is in building and sustaining relationships with children and families in situations where there may be fear and perceived hostility. Social workers are more likely to succeed when they take a, 'facilitative and relational approach to difficult conversations' (Taggart and Mason, 2020, p. 6), which requires confidence and experience. Working in this relational way promotes the sharing of power and the building of trust within professional / service user relationships.

Social workers need support from their practice supervisors so that they are able to tolerate and work with often difficult emotions. In turn, managers of practice supervisors have a key part to play in supporting them to carry out this containing role. Managers of practice supervisors are also in a position to promote an ethos within the organisation that recognises and addresses the possibility of vicarious trauma within the workforce (Wilkinson, 2018).

c. **The views of children and families**

The experiences and views of children and families are at the heart of effective social work and of evidence-informed practice. When children and families feel heard and their experiences are understood, they are more able to accept challenges, work towards positive change and enact their own solutions (McGeown, 2019). The active participation of children and families can also strengthen relationships and generate change within teams and the organisation. Their feedback and experiences should inform all aspects of service delivery, policy and planning within the organisation.

The relationships social workers develop with families generate feedback to the family system, which can help them to understand more about the issues affecting the family, and how they can work on these. Social workers need to draw on the evidence from these interactions to learn more about the effectiveness of their work with children and families.

It is important to gather information and feedback from children and families on a regular basis. This can be done informally, for example through practitioners routinely asking children and families about their experience of working with the organisation. It can also be done on a more structured basis at an organisational level such as through regular feedback questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, graffiti walls, drama and arts activities, social media, diaries, journals, and compliments and complaints (Godar, 2015; Martin, 2014).

Listening to the views of children and families is not just about the listener hearing what is said, but also about how they make it clear that they are listening, and agreeing together what outcomes or actions will take place as a result. In other words, listening is a collaborative, two-way process (Preston and Trend, 2020, p. 5). Listening to feedback from children and families using services can help the organisation to understand how it can ‘provide better services for families’ (Godar and Holmes, 2017, p. 9).

Co-production recognises that all children and families have their own sets of skills, knowledge and experiences. It is important to promote a strengths-based culture within the organisation that works *with* children and families, and that utilises the skills, knowledge and experiences of individuals and communities (Martins, 2014). In particular, there needs to be a good understanding of the lived experience of black, Asian and ethnic minority children who are ‘disproportionately represented in the child welfare system’ (Bernard, 2020,

p. 2), as well as the impact of inequality and poverty on the lives and experiences of children and families (Morris et al, 2019).

It is important, both in your own supervision with practice supervisors and their supervision with practitioners, to reflect on the kind of relationships that social workers are building with children and families and any blocks which might prevent them from being able to draw on and learn from the family's experiences and views.

This requires a safe space for social workers to reflect on any challenges they face in working with the family (e.g., disagreements between the social worker and family, difficulty engaging with the family, etc.), and what the reasons underlying these might be. These are important pieces of information, and form part of the evidence base for thinking about how to work with the family.

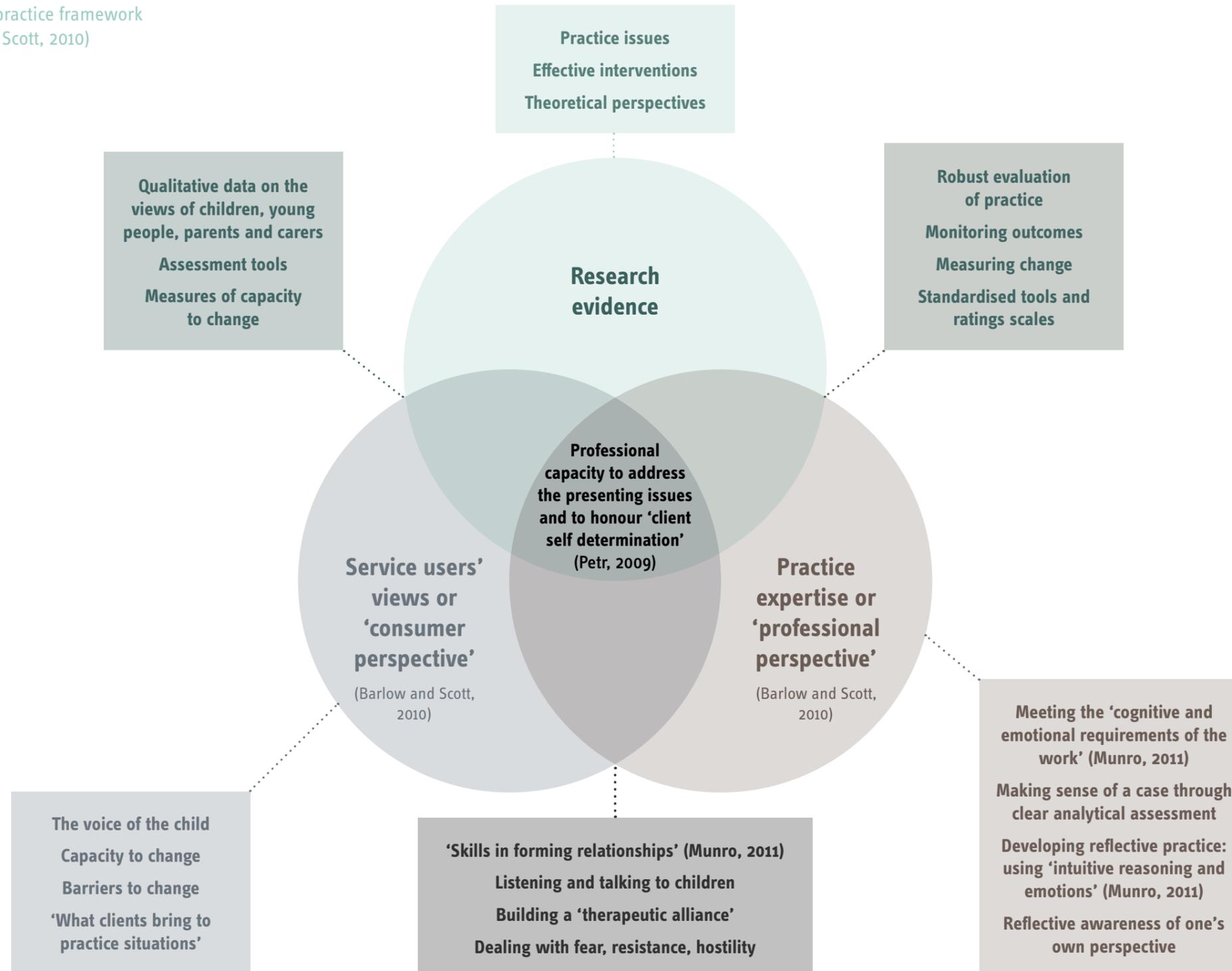
Introducing a more detailed evidence-informed practice framework

Although helpful in differentiating the different sources of evidence the evidence-informed practice triangle in figure 1 does not capture the interconnected nature of the three domains.

Please have a look now at figure 2, which illustrates the interconnected nature of different forms of evidence and how these interconnections support knowledgeable and ethical professional decisions when working with children and families.

As you do so, it is useful to reflect on the ways in which this model of evidence-informed practice challenges you to consider how you use and gather evidence about the effectiveness of practice with children and families within your organisation.

Figure 2: Detailed evidence-informed practice framework
(Bowyer, 2011, adapted from Barlow & Scott, 2010)



Thinking strategically about evidence-informed practice

So far we have considered evidence-informed practice in relation to the quality of practice with children and families. However, the challenge for middle and senior leaders is to ensure that there is a focus on use of and learning from evidence at a number of levels within the organisation:

> **Service level:** e.g. choosing between different evidence-based programmes; building business cases to justify investment; adapting and designing 'evidence-inspired' innovative local services.

> **Systems level:** e.g. design structures and systems; ensuring a culture of continuous learning and development; guide practitioners in working with families; monitor outcomes and impact.

> **Practice level:** e.g. developing and supporting practice wisdom; promoting practitioners' creativity; developing practitioner confidence in using research and evidence-based programmes.

(Godar and Holmes, 2017)

Evidence-informed practice is a key factor in outstanding practice (Ofsted, 2014) and therefore features in the [Post-qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practitioners](#). The use of evidence needs to happen at every level, from frontline practitioners up to strategic and political leaders. Please have a look at figure 3 which illustrates this point.

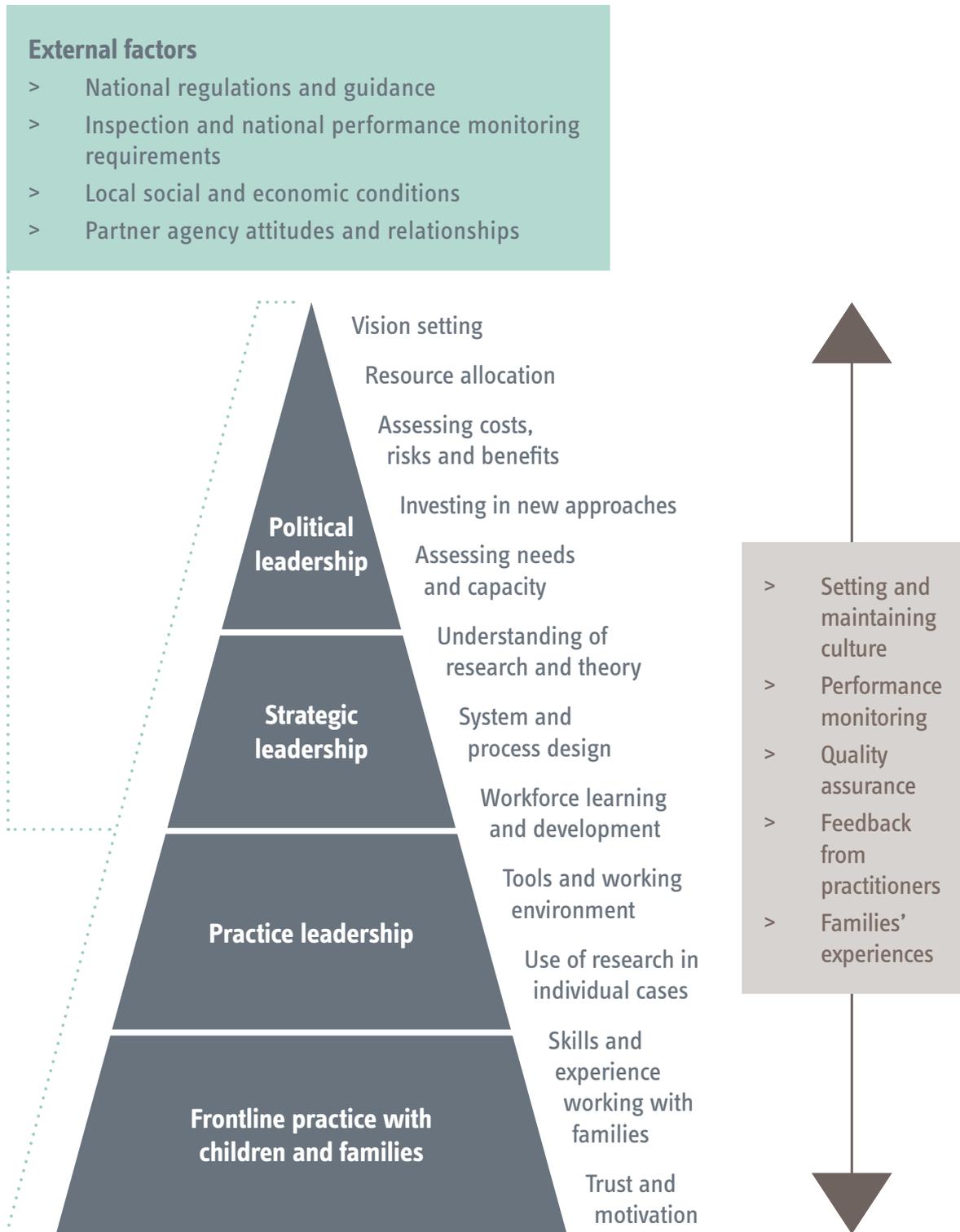


Figure 3: Roles in using evidence to design and deliver services and support to vulnerable children (Godar, 2016)

Reflective tasks to consider at the end of section one:

Having read the information in this section please spend a few moments reflecting on what it has made you think about in relation to the way in which you promote evidence-informed practice in your role as a middle leader.

It might be helpful to reflect on each of the domains of evidence-informed practice presented in figures 1 and 2, and to think about the actions you might take to promote these:

- > What thoughts struck you as you read the information?
- > Did you spot any gaps in evidence-informed practice within your organisation?
- > What areas of evidence-informed practice do you think your organisation is particularly strong in? How might you build upon this strength?
- > Did you have any ideas about ways in which you can promote evidence-informed practice in the areas of the service you are responsible for?
- > One of the key ways in which evidence-informed practice can be embedded in an organisation is ensuring that it is a central element of supervision discussions and that practice supervisors feel skilled and confident to have these discussions. How might you support and motivate practice supervisors to do so?

Having reflected on the questions on the previous page, what conclusions do you draw about:

- > How you, as a middle leader, use evidence, both at a strategic and supervisory level?
- > How you might promote evidence-informed practice more widely with the practice supervisors you line manage and in any areas of service delivery you are responsible for?
- > How you use local contextual evidence, research evidence and academic evidence, the experience of families, and feedback from practitioners and partners to inform practice and service delivery?
- > What you and your organisation do well?
- > What might be improved?
- > Can you identify any barriers and facilitators to gathering, promoting and using different forms of evidence across the organisation?
- > Do you have any thoughts about how you can / plan to encourage and embed evidence-informed practice across your organisation from what you have read so far?

Section two: how can you can support evidence-informed practice as a middle leader?

In this section of the knowledge briefing we explore practical ideas and suggestions about ways in which you can promote and embed evidence-informed practice as a middle leader and manager of practice supervisors. These are grouped together in relation to:

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| a. Research evidence (including national and local data). | b. Practice expertise (skills and knowledge from practice). | c. The views and experiences of the people practitioners work with. |
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Given that the work of practice supervisors in supervision contributes greatly to embedding a culture of evidence-informed practice, we have also included an additional area for you to consider:

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| d. Supporting practice supervisors to embed evidence-informed practice in supervision discussions. |
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a. Research evidence (including local and national data)

Managers of practice supervisors have an important role to play in creating an environment where barriers to accessing and using research can be overcome, particularly when developing practice supervisors' expertise in using and promoting research evidence in their teams. This might mean:

- > Ensuring staff having open, web-based access to research and are clear about how to access this. Useful resources include: [What Works Centre for Children's Social Care](#), [Early Intervention Foundation](#), [Youth Endowment Fund](#), [Cochrane / Campbell Collaboration](#), [NICE](#), [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory](#), [Rees Centre](#), [Coram](#), [SCIE](#). [Research in Practice](#) also have many open-access resources for local authorities and Trusts who are not currently members.
- > Encouraging the purposeful and professional use of Twitter and other social media forums where practice and research are widely shared.
- > Developing ties with higher education institutions.
- > Encouraging the development of communities of practice (you can read more about how to do this in our 'Developing a community of practice' tool, available from the [PSDP website](#)).
- > Creating opportunities for staff to develop their skills in using and appraising research. This open access [toolkit](#) developed by IRISS provides useful information about finding and using different forms of research evidence. The tool '[Assessing the applicability of research to work with a family](#)' can also be helpful in encouraging practitioners to think in more depth about research which might inform their approach to working with a specific child and family.
- > Having designated 'evidence champions' or research leads to highlight new research findings and to share research through, for example, regular research bulletins, 'lunch and learn' sessions, and twilight learning sessions.

Challenge questions for you to consider:

- > Are there champions within the team / organisation that promote the use of research evidence and disseminate research findings (at a national and local level)?
- > What opportunities are there for individuals, teams and multi-partner agencies to share and use learning from research and practice?
- > How do you promote the use of information from research, evaluations and audits (within the team and the wider organisation) to improve service delivery?
- > Are there strong ties with local higher education institutions? How do you encourage staff to utilise the resources and services they offer?
- > Are research materials readily accessible to all members of the organisation? How do you ensure that staff have sufficient time to keep abreast of the latest research knowledge?
- > Are there learning opportunities for staff to develop their skills and knowledge around gathering, appraising and applying evidence in their everyday practice?

b. Practice expertise (skills and knowledge from practice)

Continuing professional development across the workforce is key to supporting practice expertise. Managers have a crucial role in ensuring that there is:

- > Access to reflective supervision to support professional judgement.
- > Access to ongoing training and coaching to embed the use of specific approaches in practice.
- > Broader skills development in communicating with children and families to understand the nature of the social work role.
- > Retention strategies which build resilience in the workforce and encourage relationship-building with children and families.
- > An organisational culture that supports reflection and learning.

(Godar and Holmes, 2017)

In addition to these points, Wilkins (2017) argues that it is also important to consider ways in which discussions about practice and professional skills / ways of working can be discussed in a variety of ways and forums within the wider organisation. In doing so, Wilkins challenges us to move beyond thinking about one-to-one supervision as the only place in which practice can be discussed within an organisation.

Such opportunities might include:

- > developing opportunities for group or peer supervision
- > action learning sets to focus on a particular practice area or skill
- > coaching
- > [Schwartz Rounds](#)
- > practice weeks
- > learning audits
- > observations of practice.

Regular observations of practice provide an excellent opportunity to focus on / promote a culture of learning about practice skills and knowledge. As a manager of a practice supervisor you play a key role in challenging and encouraging practice supervisors to undertake regular observations of their supervisees working with children and families, and to provide feedback.

The following tools from the practice supervisor's section of the website support this:

- > ['Practice observation'](#)
- > ['Helping social workers prepare for practice observations'](#)

And you can read further about Wilkin's ideas on creating more opportunities to talk about practice within the system in '[A 3D model - forms of support for social workers](#)'. Whilst this tool was originally developed for practice supervisors, the content is relevant for higher levels of management too.

Challenge questions for you to consider:

- > What steps have you taken to show that you recognise and value social workers' expertise? Is this reflected in the social work recruitment and retention data?
- > What opportunities are there for staff to develop their expertise and practice skills in, for example:
 - > using specific tools in direct work with children and families
 - > dealing with families' fear and perceived hostility
 - > critical thinking and analysis
 - > listening and responding to children and young people?
- > How do you ensure that the skills developed through training are transferred into practice? You may find this [booklet](#) which explains the key principles of training transfer useful in thinking further about this issue.
- > How do you promote and encourage the wellbeing of staff and build resilience across the workforce?
- > How do you promote a culture that supports reflection and learning? The knowledge briefing 'Leading a learning organisation' in this section of the website provides further information about how to promote a culture of reflection and learning in your organisation.
- > Do you give clear expectations and model the use and value of evidence-informed practice across the organisation?
- > Can you identify a range of ways within the organisation where practitioners can share and learn from practice scenarios with each other?
- > Do observations of practice happen? Are practice supervisors able to prioritise this work, give skilled feedback and share learning?

c. The views and experiences of the people practitioners work with

Managers have a key role to play in ensuring that there are systems and processes in place to regularly gather feedback from children and families, and importantly, that the information is utilised to promote a culture which enables the organisation to continuously adapt and learn.

At the practice supervision level, it is important that practice supervisors (and their supervisees) understand the importance of engaging with children, families and the community as a core element of social work and evidence-informed practice. However, at a more strategic level it is essential to draw on the views and experiences of children and families to shape operational targets, policy, and service delivery and design. A notable example of where this has been done well comes from Camden Council, which co-produced a [family-led approach to child protection enquiry](#) alongside community members who had experience of children's social care.

Challenge questions for you to consider:

- > At the organisational level, how are the views and experiences of children, young people and families gathered? Are there other creative ways that this could be done to meet the needs of children and families?
- > Do you know if practice supervisors routinely ask about the views and experiences of children and families (from their perspective) in supervision? How is this information used by supervisors?
- > Are these views regularly recorded on a child's files and included as a central element of an assessment process? Are they used to inform learning & development activity, or service adaptation?
- > Are some voices heard more than others? Are you inclusive and do you involve diverse groups of children and families so that all voices are heard in planning and designing services? Do you collect data on participation, for example who was invited, how many gave their views, ages, sex and gender, ethnicity etc.?
- > What support and training is available to develop professionals' skills in engaging and communicating with children and families?
- > Is the content and format of meetings and other feedback forums informed by the views and needs of children and families?
- > How have the views and experiences of children and families informed service delivery? Is there scope for expanding their involvement?
- > How do you harness this learning from practice supervisors so that the organisation can benefit from this?

d. **Supporting practice supervisors to embed evidence-informed practice in supervision discussions**

It is important that you create space within your supervision conversations with practice supervisors to discuss evidence-informed practice and the value of asking questions, to draw out and evaluate the applicability of different forms of evidence in relation to each individual child and family discussed.

You are in a position of considerable influence here and can create ripples of change which promote evidence-informed practice through:

> modelling this within your own reflective supervision discussions with practice supervisors

> having this as a standing agenda item at team or service meetings to explore learning from and ideas about embedding evidence-informed practice

> actively encouraging practice supervisors to take the same stance in their own supervision discussions.

We have developed two tools to support practice supervisors using evidence-informed practice in supervision ('Promoting evidence-informed practice in supervision' and 'A visual tool to explore evidence-informed practice in supervision'), available from the [Promoting evidence-informed practice](#) section of the PSDP website.

It might be useful to explore the following questions with the practice supervisors you line manage:

- > What is your experience of including the different elements of evidence-informed practice in supervision?
- > Are there any barriers to doing this?
- > How could these be overcome?
- > If you have used any of the 'Promoting evidence-informed practice in supervision' tools for practice supervisors, how confident do you feel in (a) using the different forms of evidence outlined in the tools, (b) promoting the use of the tools with supervisees and (c) critically appraising the evidence with your supervisee?
- > What would help you to improve your skills in these areas?
- > How do you build in cultural and diversity awareness and competence into your supervision sessions? Is this covered sufficiently in practitioners' use of evidence and information from children and families?
- > How do you keep up to date with the latest research? How do you disseminate findings from research, evaluations, audits and feedback from children and families to your team? Are there sufficient opportunities for group discussions?
- > How does your team gather feedback from children and families? How is the feedback used to improve service delivery? Is there scope for making changes to this process?
- > How do you and members of your team share learning around evidence-informed practice with professionals in partner agencies? Are there further opportunities for doing this?

These are important questions to ask and will signal to practice supervisors how important their role is in relation to promoting evidence-informed practice.

Reflective tasks to consider at the end of section two:

Having read the information in this section, please spend a few moments to reflect on what it has made you think about in relation to the way in which you promote evidence-informed practice in your role as a middle leader.

Time is precious as a middle leader, but a little time put aside for ‘thinking’ reaps rewards. For this reason we suggest that you put aside 20 minutes (at a time when you can make space) to work undisturbed.

Spend the time reflecting and making notes or sketch notes about what you want to do to promote a culture of evidence-informed practice. Please also make sure that you spend time thinking specifically about how you can support practice supervisors to promote evidence-informed practice.

As part of this activity you could find it useful to think about what you might want to stop, start or continue doing, in order to promote evidence-informed practice as a middle leader.

You might then wish to make a brief plan which outlines:

- > Something you will do in the next week.
- > Something you will do in the next month.
- > A longer term strategic goal.
- > How you’ll keep these goals on the agenda (and create other slots of thinking time to work on them).

In conclusion

Learning from different forms of evidence is not just a key component of effective social work, it's also an essential element of robust quality assurance. Arguably, this should be 'a shared, whole-system task across wider children's services... informed by professional expertise and involving practitioners in analysing the quality of practice' (Bowyer et al, 2018, p. 3). It is 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 in Staempfli, 2020).

It is important that there is a strong culture of evidence-informed practice that is led by, encouraged and modelled by managers. This needs to incorporate all the domains which make up evidence-informed practice, alongside a high-quality learning and development culture (McGeown, 2020). It involves having systems and processes in place to gather feedback and information from a variety of sources. Embedding a constant feedback loop focusing on practice and development can inform continuous learning and improvement across the organisation (Bowyer et al, 2018), as well as at an individual level.

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