

ANALYSIS, CRITICAL THINKING AND PRACTICE WISDOM IN ASSESSMENTS

Introduction inspections, serious case reviews, audits and academic study have all criticised a lack of critical thinking (CT) and analysis in assessments. This guidance aims to promote both. In addition, it addresses the role of practice wisdom (aka intuition) which can be useful so long as it is used *with* CT and analysis, not instead of these. These are complex subjects that cannot be fully covered in a brief guide. You should read around the subjects.

Definitions there is a surprising degree of overlap in, and arguments about, definitions of these three. The following might be helpful.

Practice wisdom the valuable stuff that you learn as a practitioner through the subjective experience of doing social work every day. You learn the patterns and clues, even subtle ones, which indicate good and bad child care. This also helps you judge what will and will not keep children safe. Practice wisdom is used every day, mostly unconsciously and intuitively. Don't ignore this wisdom. But do NOT rely *only* on this. Instead, consciously test any 'intuitive' thoughts or decisions by using CT and analysis at appropriate points (including 'social work at the desk' see below).

Critical Thinking unlike intuition and unconscious use of practice wisdom, CT is deliberate and thorough thinking about what to believe about a situation and, therefore, what to do about it. CT can be used consciously to check whether any questions or views based on practice wisdom really do apply in a particular case. *People get better at CT with practise.* For social workers, CT involves understanding and then evaluating arguments and information that **children**, parents, families and professionals use to explain a child's progress or lack of progress. This includes using CT to test your own position. By deliberately challenging and weighing up the evidence for and against each person's argument, you can provide evidence and reasoning for your opinions and actions. NB see below re research and 'evidence'. CT is one of the few social work tasks that can be done at the desk! An hour doing so can mean two purposeful and productive visits that help a child rather than many unfocused, unproductive ones that do not.

Analysis in truth, there's much confusing overlap with definitions of CT. It might help to think of CT as the 'working out' that sifts out irrelevant information and poor 'evidence' leaving you with information and evidence that stands up. The analysis is your final position having used that good information and evidence to carefully consider the relevant issue. Write down the evidence that supports your view and why it doesn't support the opposite view eg "Mum denied she took heroin. However, the 7 yr old described Mum' giving herself 'medicine with needles'. I noted she is thin, sniffing and there were bent, dirty spoons and lighters in the room.

What counts as research and evidence to use in CT and analysis another tricky question. Research, information from families, colleagues and your own observations can all count. Keep up to date with research. But, don't re-invent the wheel! The Framework for Assessment, plus Working Together and its additional guidance refer to a lot of research that will help decide, on balance, whether a child's needs are being met, including the need for protection. Astute workers will note the move away from talking about 'evidence-based' practice to 'evidence-informed' practice. This is because there is no *absolute* evidence that one social work theory or way of doing practice always produces the best outcomes for children. Similarly, except in some (usually serious) physical abuse cases there is no absolute definition of what counts as evidence of 'good enough parenting', or 'significant harm'. So, ultimately, social work analyses and decisions are based on 'the balance of probabilities'. Do NOT dismiss the importance of your own observations of children and families. These count as good evidence so long as you have used CT to test them and used them properly to analyse the case. And, *importantly*, you use research as part of this. So a process for reaching an evidenced, reasoned view would look like this

USING PRACTICE WISDOM, CRITICAL THINKING AND ANALYSIS IN CASEWORK PRACTICE - in life, this isn't a simple linear process. The process goes to and fro before a final position is reached.

