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# Safeguarding Children: A Compelling New Model

**ABSTRACT**

This is a story about having an important idea – using AI to learn about what works well in safeguarding children – and acting on it. This article describes what took place when we acted boldly, without authority, permission or commission, inviting a whole system to come together to co-create a completely new model for reviewing the cases of children in need of safeguarding. We acted to influence and inspire a traditional system to think and act differently.

In our unique backgrounds in Social Care (operational management, research, inspection and evaluation) we had been directly and collectively involved over many years in the traditional processes of looking for mistakes and telling folk to stop making them. In the UK this includes requirements about ‘Working Together’ across agencies to protect children and young people from harm. When things go wrong an external expert is commonly commissioned to review each agency’s work and make recommendations about the things that must change. Repeated reviews of this kind report similar findings: e.g. about improving communication, introducing new procedures and new training for staff.

We all know that when you go looking for something, you’ve a good chance of finding it. Instead of waiting for children to die<sup>1</sup> and then asking ‘why’ and ‘whom shall we blame?’ we want to encourage people to look differently: to focus on the things that successfully enable children and young people to be and feel safe

**The party not to miss**

We borrowed a room, ordered some food and invited professionals with national and local safeguarding roles to a meeting with the following call:

Traditionally, we have sought to learn about safeguarding children by focusing on the things that go wrong and trying to put them right. This initiative will capture a growing and compelling movement that focuses on the things that work well, building on our knowledge and experience of exceptional practice, to create more of the things that really help children and young people to be and feel safe. We will work together, including everyone, to discover more about, and learn from, our safeguarding successes; to imagine and realize our deepest aspirations for the future.

1 Department of Health, Home Office, Department for Education & Employment. (January, 2000) ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’, *A Guide to Inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. Chapter 8.



Figure 1: I often think that if a child could see us now they'd say, 'what on earth do you think you're doing?' Member of a local Children's Safeguarding Board

**'I've been involved in countless case reviews... and never been satisfied with the outcomes... we never seem to learn anything new; they haven't made the slightest difference.' Local Children's Safeguarding Board member**

It became the party not to miss. We told ourselves that the people who matter will come and they did: those creating government policy, researchers and evaluators, managers and practitioners from the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Together we explored what happens when we start looking at and building on the things that worked well – even in the midst of terrible tragedy. We shared the ideas of an Appreciative Inquiry panel: a sub-group of a Local Safeguarding Children's Board which is experimenting with conducting appreciative case reviews.

This panel found that when mutual fear and suspicion are removed, then not only is learning accelerated, but also practitioners' contributions are affirmed and they can focus more clearly on what needs to change.

### Exploring experience and looking to the future

We posed some appreciative questions for people at our meeting:

1. Tell a story from your own knowledge/experience about an astonishing safeguarding achievement.
2. What is working really well in safeguarding children at the moment, something that you really value?
3. What would you like to see more of in the future?
4. We have been learning from Safeguarding success for a year and everything we wished for in 2008 is now happening. What does it look like?

Participants identified that children remain safe when:

- We focus on a shared safeguarding outcome that everyone agrees from the outset.
- Practitioners and families all have a voice to co-create their own solutions.
- Practice and behaviours that work well are recognised, complimented, valued and repeated.
- We recognise that each family's route map to safeguarding their children is different.
- We understand that changing one small thing (e.g. behaving with respect) will have far-reaching impact and even greater knock-on effects.

Participants dreamed of a changed safeguarding culture in which case reviews would bring together all relevant parties into a shared, facilitated process to evaluate the things that worked and the things that need to be done differently. They would take place in a short time frame of between 2 and 3 days with everyone present together, with the shared understanding that 'If something goes wrong in my case, I am not blamed.

'If we could do everything we are capable of doing, we would astound ourselves.' Thomas Edison

'Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness.' James Thurber

### Deeper learning leads to action

Peter Senge et al write that:

*Our actions are most likely to revert to what is habitual when we are in a state of fear and anxiety. Even as conditions in the world change dramatically, most businesses, governments, schools, and other large organisations, driven by fear, continue to take the same kinds of institutional actions they always have.*<sup>2</sup>

They go on to say that 'reactive learning', i.e. learning in response to circumstances that we have neither created nor have control over, is limited. Conversely, deeper levels of learning, where 'thinking and doing' become integrated, have been found to take place when people:

*See the larger whole and their connectedness to this wholeness...then the source of our actions can change dramatically.*<sup>3</sup>

By bringing stakeholders from each level of responsibility together, everyone saw the whole. As a group we stood on the 'cliff top' seeing the extra-ordinary view of possibilities before us; as if through a wide angled lens, we could now visualise conducting case reviews with the whole system in the room: children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners from every agency, learning and growing together, replacing fear with insight, blame with affirmation. This was deep learning.

There was a sense of boldness that comes from having a new idea you know to be right, combined with an inner conviction that it is vital that the world knows about it and acts together to make it happen.

### Insights into our boldness

We share a conviction. It is that people who are valued and respected, supported and enabled, will best achieve the crucial business of safeguarding our children. We believe that in this way morale will be strengthened and with it the commitment and capacity to enhance the quality of the work undertaken with children and their families. With the colleagues who joined us to inquire further, we discovered that practitioners need to be able think and act with fluidity, using procedures as a route map to sign post each unique, diverse and complex journey to enhance safe parenting. A social worker shared this quote from a parent with us: 'No-one has ever said anything about my parenting that's positive before.'

When every parent involved in a safeguarding process is able to say that their parenting skills have been recognised, affirmed and built upon; that they have been given a voice, journeyed together, sharing roles and responsibilities; owned and celebrated the fact that their children are safe, then our job will be done.

Our conviction compelled us to act and we did this by freeing ourselves from conventional ways of working. Following our dream meant going ahead, not waiting for others to 'get it' or to commission us, or even to pay us. We were clearing a path, offering others something to think about, be inspired by and to aim for. The fact that we found sympathetic colleagues who were already

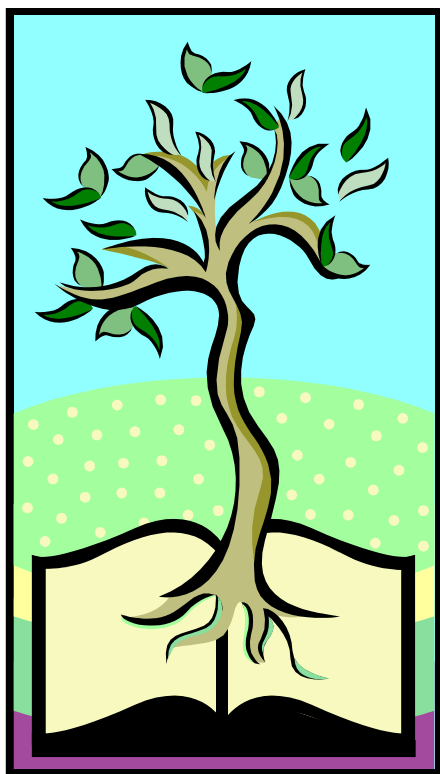


Figure 2: Deeper learning leads to growth

<sup>2</sup> Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. (2005) *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

'Every profound innovation is based on an inward bound journey, on going to a deeper place where knowing comes to the surface.' W. Brian Arthur, Economist, Santa Fe Institute

'We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.' Plato

heading in this direction in different ways confirmed our belief in the value of this work.

Making this happen involved us gritting our teeth through the anxiety of wondering whether anyone would join us. The supportive voices of colleagues buoyed us up, reminding us of the importance of what we were creating: 'Just amazing and brilliant material. I so wish I had been there! The experiences and ideas have major policy implications.'

The conclusions of participants confirmed for us that we are on the right path:

- We understand that changing one small thing (e.g. behaving with respect) will have far-reaching impact and even greater knock-on effects.
- I am going to share these ideas and conversations with my director and other colleagues.
- This should be taken to Regional safeguarding officers and shared more widely with LCSBs, government, the voluntary sector, Ofsted and all stakeholder agencies. What about using the National Safeguarding Conference?
- This approach should be extended into the Serious Case Review process. Case Reviews should use this approach and then be evaluated. Can we find some research funding?
- This was a very enjoyable and stimulating day. I think it's a very positive idea and easy to do. Small steps will take us a long way.

#### **A new model for safeguarding**

At the end of our meeting someone said: 'People are walking out of here looking very different – they are standing taller.'

And now the people who care have inspired us to design a whole new appreciative model for undertaking children's case reviews, which incorporates 'deep learning' from the successful safeguarding of children and young people. We intend to trial the new model in collaboration with Local Children's Safeguarding Boards.

As we have renewed our resolve to continue our 'inclusive learning inquiry', the UK Government has announced a major review both of local safeguarding board arrangements and the way that Serious Case Reviews are undertaken with a view to improving their impact. At best, this provides an opening door through which to take our ideas, our growing body of knowledge and experience of appreciative work in this area, and our bold convictions.

It felt very bold to embark on this journey, exhilarating and terrifying all at once. It is a big journey, big for the present, big for the future: everyone's futures. As we journey forward we do so with an ever-growing conviction that it is the right journey to make, and we are leading gladly, dreaming of the time when we will follow.

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## Purpose of AI Practitioner

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