



British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

## 'Keeping Children Safe in an Uncertain World'

Eighth National Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect

Queen's University, Belfast, United Kingdom

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> – Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2012

### 'The Risk Model'

creating a practical tool for social workers  
to assess the risk of significant harm to children



**Bruce Thornton**  
creating capacity in social care



Baspcan Congress 2012  
Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Notes of presentation to the workshop on  
the 'Risk Model' by Dafydd Paul,  
Cyngor Gwynedd Council, Wales.

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Good afternoon

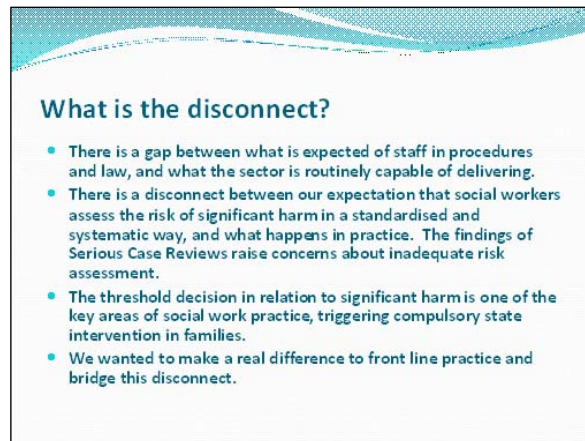
My name is Dafydd Paul.

I am a Registered Social Worker based in Gwynedd which is in North Wales in the United Kingdom.

I currently work as a Development Manager for the Director of Social Services, until recently a specialist within Children Services.

I am presenting work that was developed in Gwynedd with a colleague of mine, Bruce Thornton. Bruce is an independent consultant and trainer and he has co-authored this development.

Our format will be to run through a brief presentation of the work then a more informal workshop to respond to your enquiries.



The theme this afternoon is one of **disconnect**. I feel I spend most of my time in this **gap** between things that don't align.

Firstly... there is a gap between what is expected of staff in procedures and law, and what the sector is routinely capable of delivering.

Secondly, there is a disconnect between our expectation that social workers assess the risk of significant harm in a standardised and systematic way, and what happens in practice. This is identified in Serious Case Reviews, we see it when we work with social workers, managers and senior managers.

And why do we believe this is so important? When we work with families around change, assessing capacity and motivation, one of the first things we recognise is that we have implicit and explicit power over people. This of course masks people statements about motivation to change. These are often externally motivated due to fear of you exercising your full authority and removing children from families.

We recognise that the concept of significant harm is the pivotal, trigger or threshold for intervention. This authorises the state to intervene in family life without consent.

If 'significant harm' is so important, then our workforce should above all else, be **experts** in reaching those judgements.

And we know of course that that isn't the case.

We expect fear in the eyes of newly qualified social workers when we start to ask about 'significant harm.' We **however** see anxiety and unease throughout the sector, from social workers, their managers, their senior managers, chairs and decision makers in their organisations and even their legal advisors.

### **How did this all start?**

We were asked originally by a team manager – 'how do I undertake a risk assessment in the context of the Assessment Framework?'

Now Bruce is a very experienced person in these matters, so when we both saw fear in each other's eyes we knew there was something here that needed to be worked upon. Something that needed clarity.

We wanted to make a real difference to front line practice and bridge this disconnect.

So this work is about **supporting practice**, measuring our impact in it's **real life application**.

And before you sit comfortably thinking there are plenty of risk assessment models out there, I agree. We often meet managers and organisations who point out they use one model or another. Often highly complex models, that will have infinitely better academic rigour than our work. However, the disconnect is that we've been in such authorities where not a single risk assessment using the complex, corporate, approved model has been undertaken in the previous 12 months.

And of course the disconnect exists because assessments take too long to complete, are seen as too complex and time consuming.

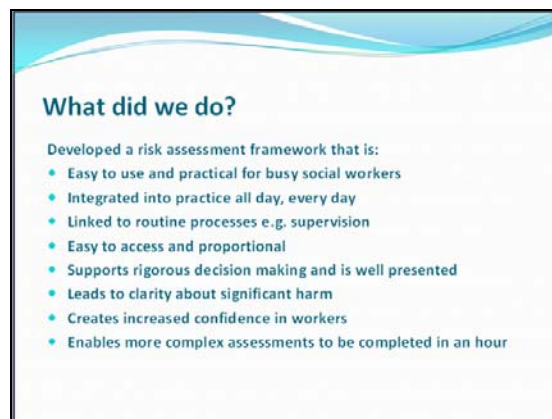
So what do they use instead of their corporate approved models? Nothing. No formal alternative, but a void left and variation across the workforce.

For every decision that reaches Court and a Judge will decide absolutely in relation to significant harm, there will be tens, possibly hundreds of small judgements taken in that specific case. And across caseloads in organisations, there are hundreds, thousands of judgements and decisions taken every year.

So how can we make decision making better – all the time ?

In wanting to make a real difference to practice, it was this disconnect that we aimed to bridge.

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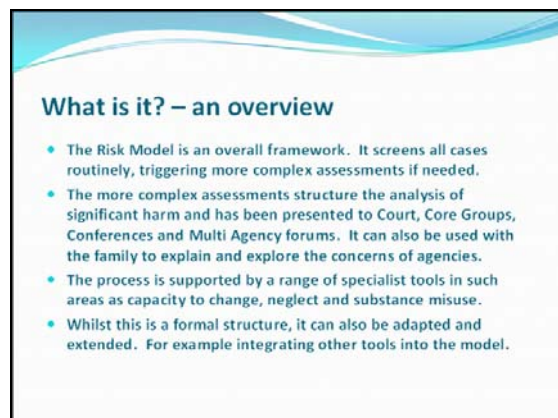


So , what did we do? Well the risk assessment framework we developed was based on the foundations of being:

- **Easy** for busy social workers to use
- Something **practical** for use day in, day out
- Fitted into the way people worked, for example:
  - We used the supervision process, embedded in social work practice as its gateway.
- It had to be **proportional** not forcing workers to undertake unnecessary work

- It assisted decision making, not only in those formal risk assessments for Court, but in the way people approach **every** decision or judgement.
- It forced individuals and organisations to face the question of ‘what is significant harm?’
- This leads to **clarity** – often managers and supervisor have to become clear in their own minds, before asking their workers about it.
- By creating a framework for decision making, workers become more **confident**
- Use time effectively – more complex assessments could be completed in an hour

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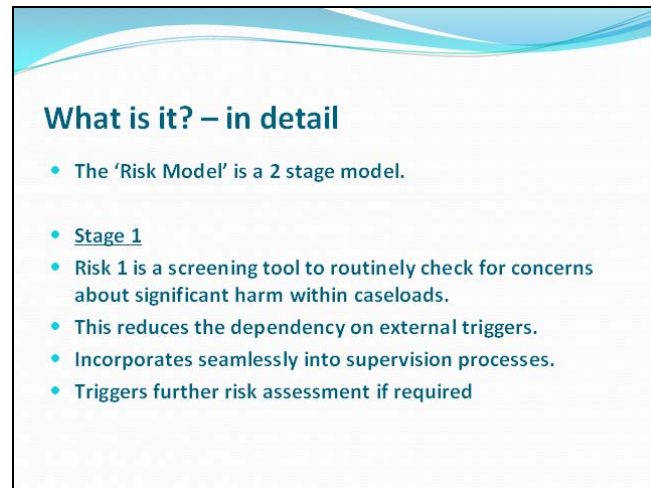
So what is the Risk Model?

- It's an overall framework with 2 stages
- It screens all cases routinely – so it screens all children
- But only triggers more complex assessments if this is considered appropriate
- The more complex assessment structures the way the analysis of significant harm is constructed. It has been presented formally in Court but also works with families to explain the concerns of agencies.
- The Assessment Framework is holistic, but individual families often have very specific areas of need. So if there is a specialist area that needs further focus, a range of specialist tools can be used. From a

library of tools, you could focus on areas such as capacity to change, neglect or substance misuse.

- And as a library and conceptual model, it can be extended by integrating other tools into the model.

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We've already stated that this is a 2 stage model. We use the terms Risk 1 for the first stage of screening all cases and Risk 2 as the second stage, the more detailed risk analysis.

Risk 1 is a screening tool or question to routinely check for concerns about significant harm within caseloads.

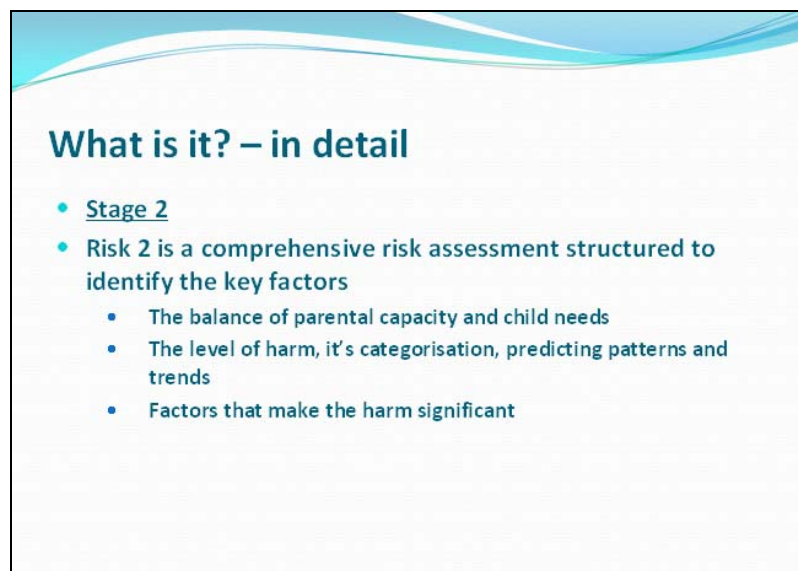
It is the simplest part of the model. Often overlooked due to it's simplicity. However, it is this stage that creates the greatest safeguarding benefits for the child, worker and agency

It reduces the dependency on external triggers. In practice you often notice that the Child Protection procedures are very dependant on other people or incidents to bring your awareness to the case. Without awareness or external triggers we see tolerance to high levels of concern. In particular cases of long term neglect. These are often overlooked.

Risk 1 integrates seamlessly into the supervision process. You just screen all cases in supervision. When we do this on courses, providing the worker remembers their cases, they know immediately the answer to the screening question. It takes minutes to screen the caseload, but it's benefits are immediate. Cases where there is uncertainty come to focus. You generate your own prompt for further enquiry.

If there is a need for further, more detailed assessment of risk of significant harm, a further stage, Risk 2 is triggered.

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**What is it? – in detail**

- Stage 2
- Risk 2 is a comprehensive risk assessment structured to identify the key factors
  - The balance of parental capacity and child needs
  - The level of harm, it's categorisation, predicting patterns and trends
  - Factors that make the harm significant

Where Risk 1 is a screening question, Risk 2 is a more detailed framework to analyse significant harm. Risk 2 is more substantial. It is the part of the model that draws most attention. It identifies a range of factors that when put together, generates the risk analysis . This includes evidence and judgement around parental capacity and the unmet needs of the child. It balances the relationship between these factors, and if there is an indication of harm, what category of harm it is. Risk 2 looks at patterns and prediction trends in order to forecast likelihood of harm recurring. The analysis concludes with those factors that make any harm that is identified, significant.





### What is it? – in detail

- Stage 2 – supporting tools
- Significant Harm Supplement: Additional analysis tool to support complex decision making for some cases.
- Pre birth Risk Assessment: A specialist risk assessment for unborn children.
- Supported by a range of specialist assessment and prediction tools.

Sometimes, getting at the significance of harm is more difficult than others. The model supports this by having an **additional tool** to surface aspects of significance. It balances substantiality of harm against the inference or meaning. By disciplining the analyst to take different perspectives on the information, this becomes clear. It is a little like walking around a house, observing all of it's sides. By having these perspectives, when you're asked to describe the house, you will have a description built in your mind.


We also have developed a version of Risk 2 specifically for unborn children.

We've already mentioned earlier, the library of other tools that can be used, if needed, to support the assessment. We find the three change tools particularly useful as the issues of change tend to have a close relationship with the judgement of significance of any harm identified.

### Influencing safeguarding practice

The Risk Model was awarded a Social Care Accolade (Wales) 2011 in the category of 'Supporting effective intervention with children and their families'. This has validated the work and generated significant interest. It is currently adopted in:

- Liverpool City Council
- Manchester City Council
- Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Trafford Council
- Tameside Council
- Gwynedd Council
- Anglesey Council
- Ceredigion Council



The Risk Model was awarded a Social Care Accolade in Wales last year. As you'd expect this has generated a lot of interest and we continue to look for opportunities to share our learning.

The Risk Model has been adopted in a number of authorities in England and Wales. As you all appreciate, influencing practice in this most difficult of arenas is challenging. The Munro Report invited us all to aspire for a different way of working. Despite everyone having too much to do, the authorities who are adopting the Model have a desire to empower social workers to improve the quality and consistency of decision making.

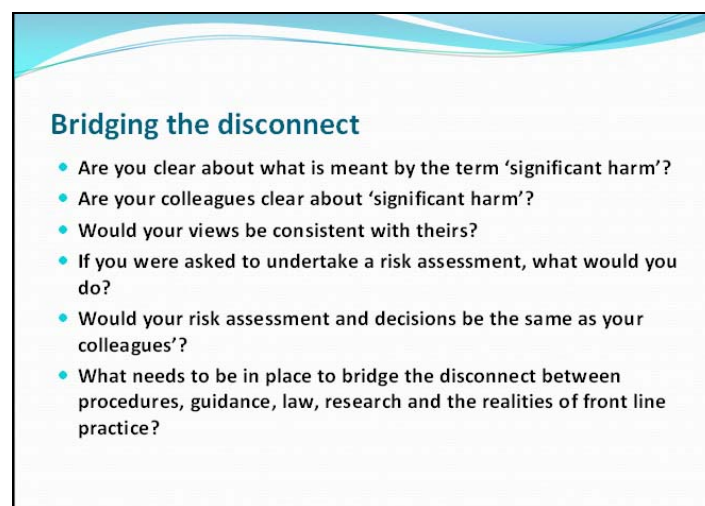
### Impact

- "Our Children's Services uses the risk model as part of a set of assessment tools. It has proved useful in practice for assessments in safeguarding and court work. Social workers and managers have found increased confidence and consistency in decision making. It also provides a standardised tool for recording the evidence base for assessments which presents well to managers and other agencies."  
Head of Safeguarding Support, Liverpool City Council.
- "Safeguarding officers who chair Child Protection Conferences indicate that where this new risk assessment tool is used, the quality of work is good with risks clearly identified."  
Ofsted 2011

We have two quotes here. One from a Senior Manager and the other from an Ofsted Report.

Having worked with a number of authorities on the Risk Model, our best experiences have been in the response of individual workers. Using Risk 2 in different forums such as Multi Agency meetings, social workers talk about lucidity and clarity of thinking over decisions. This is a relief for other agencies, seeing workers who are giving them confident, informed and well presented advice in structured reports. The confidence we observe in workers is very rewarding.

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**Bridging the disconnect**

- Are you clear about what is meant by the term 'significant harm'?
- Are your colleagues clear about 'significant harm'?
- Would your views be consistent with theirs?
- If you were asked to undertake a risk assessment, what would you do?
- Would your risk assessment and decisions be the same as your colleagues'?
- What needs to be in place to bridge the disconnect between procedures, guidance, law, research and the realities of front line practice?

If we explore some of the dilemmas the sector faces. Some of the questions we can ask ourselves are:

- Are you yourself, clear about what is meant by the term 'significant harm'?
- What about your colleagues?
- Would your views be consistent with each other?

On courses full of highly experienced managers, chairs and legal advisers when the question is asked 'what do you understand by the term 'significant harm' this results in nearly everyone looking at the floor !

What about 'risk assessment' – if you were asked to do one, what would you do? Would you reach the same conclusions as your colleague?

So we acknowledge a disconnect, what can we do to bridge this? We'll look at this in the workshop.

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**Contact:** There is some contact information for you in the copies of the slides and a reference to a website that has a lot of this information. I would encourage you to contact us.



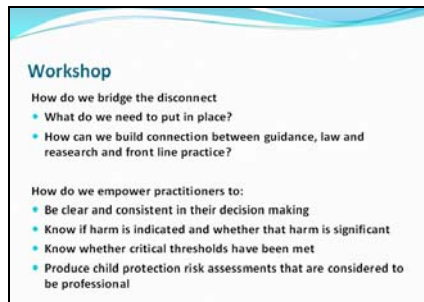
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Can I thank you for your attention and pass over to Bruce to lead us into some discussion.



## How do we bridge the disconnect

- What do we need to put in place?
- How can we build connection between guidance, law and research and front line practice?

## How do we empower practitioners to:

- Be clear and consistent in their decision making
- Know if harm is indicated and whether that harm is significant
- Know whether critical thresholds have been met
- Produce child protection risk assessments that are considered to be professional