

# The Assessment Framework

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A framework has been developed which provides a systematic way of analysing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the wider context of the community in which they live. From such an understanding of what are inevitably complex issues and inter-relationships, clear professional judgements can be made.

*(Preface to the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, p.viii)*

In this chapter the following are considered:

- improving outcomes for children
- the Assessment Framework – the legislative and policy context
- exploring the Assessment Framework, its domains and dimensions
- underpinning principles of the Framework and their use in practice
- relating the Assessment Framework to the Common Assessment Framework, the Integrated Children's System and other practice developments
- using questionnaires, scales and recording tools
- implementing the Assessment Framework – findings from research
- assessment frameworks in England and other countries.

## **Introduction**

The four nations of the United Kingdom have all expressed their commitment to improving children's outcomes. However, in order to achieve this ambition, it means that special

attention has to be given to helping those children who, for whatever reason, are likely to experience difficulties in doing well (HM Government 2004). A critical part of the contemporary improvement agenda in England includes a range of government policies directed, for example, at reducing child poverty, promoting social inclusion and increasing the provision of early years and out-of-school services. These policies aim to enhance opportunities for groups of children growing up in circumstances of deprivation and disadvantage. At the same time, just as important are the government policies aimed at ensuring improved services are available to individual children and their families when children have additional needs. This requires early and sensitive identification of any difficulties and timely, proportionate and well co-ordinated provision of services.

As a result, in England, the Government has placed increasing emphasis on the responsibility of the children's workforce, when there are concerns about a child, to assess what may be happening and its impact, and then to take appropriate action. In order to assess, make decisions and plans, and deliver services, it has been recognised that all practitioners working with children require a common core of knowledge and skills (HM Government 2005). Most importantly, this common core has to be underpinned by a set of common values, a common language and consistency of approach, which make sense to children and family members and enables them to have confidence in the practitioners they meet. Equally, shared knowledge and skills are essential in facilitating good communication and joint working between practitioners across different agencies.

It is for these reasons that the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (the Assessment Framework), a practice approach for assessing children's needs developed for national use, has gained increasing prominence in child welfare policy and practice since its introduction in England and Wales (Department of Health *et al.* 2000; National Assembly for Wales and Home Office 2001). This chapter describes the Assessment Framework and its use, set within the context of developments in child welfare legislation and policy. It is mostly focused on England but includes reference to developments in other nations of the UK and internationally.

## Focusing on assessment to improve outcomes

Assessment is a continuous process whereby problems are identified and appropriate responses decided upon.

*(Department of Health and Social Security 1981, p.2)*

A prevailing theme, found in current government guidance across the UK, is that improving outcomes for children and enabling all children to achieve their full potential requires effective intervention. This in turn must be based on a sound understanding of what is happening to a child. This is not a new theme. The quality of professional and clinical 'diagnosis' of problems has long been acknowledged as fundamental to the effectiveness of interventions by those agencies with responsibility for working with children and families, whether in health, education, children's social care or youth justice services. It is a continuous thread that can be found running through policy and professional discussions

since the reforming post-war legislation of the 1940s. For example, in the early 1980s the Department of Health and Social Security (1981) commissioned a report on what were called 'observation and assessment services', because of concerns about their effectiveness. It was echoed again in the Department of Health's statement of national objectives for children's social services, one of which was headed 'Better Assessment Leading to Better Services' (Department of Health 1999a, p.3).

A second thread has been the importance of early identification of any likely impairment to development. In this respect, early identification has been associated with prevention. This means either dealing with a likely problem through early intervention to prevent it occurring or taking action to prevent the development of more complex or intractable difficulties at a later stage. This theme was reflected in a 1970s monograph on child development, where the caption of a photograph of a child having a hearing test reinforces the message, 'Early detection means early treatment' (Kellmer Pringle and Naidoo 1975, p.56). A scheme to tackle antisocial behaviour by ten-year-olds in the 1980s was called *Catch 'em Young* (see Cleaver 1991). Research findings on the effectiveness of interventions have continued to emphasise how important it is to identify the onset of difficulties as early as possible in a child's life and to take action quickly, in order to increase the potential for making a difference (see, for example, Hagell's 2003 research and practice briefing about understanding and challenging youth offending).

Horwath has described in the first chapter how the Government has responded to the reports of working parties (Department of Health and Social Security 1981), national inspections (Social Services Inspectorate 1986) and child abuse inquiries (Department of Health 1991; Department of Health and Social Security 1982) that commented critically on the quality of assessment practice in children's residential and community settings in the 1980s. An area of particular concern to policymakers was how child protection issues were identified and assessed. Despite successive governments issuing and updating guidance on the processes and procedures which should be adopted in circumstances of child abuse and neglect, there was increasing evidence that some social services practitioners were experiencing difficulties in assessing and forming professional judgements about serious child abuse concerns. Findings from different sources suggested over-preoccupation with meeting the requirements of procedures and formal systems, insufficient skilled direct work with children and families, and an absence of structure and focus in undertaking complex assessments. In response, as discussed in Chapter 1, policymakers in the Department of Health took the unusual step, at the time, of producing practice guidance to assist social workers undertaking comprehensive assessments when child abuse had been identified (Department of Health 1988). However, despite this guidance, assessment practice remained variable and, too often, child protection plans were not informed by comprehensive assessments (Katz 1997).

At the same time, findings from research, inspections and the audit commission, following the implementation of the Children Act 1989, suggested that practice in children's social services was too narrowly focused on child protection and incidents of abuse at the expense of a wider group of children in need in the community and their families. When problems were identified by other agencies, referrals were too often funnelled through the child protection system, although only 15 per cent of those referrals to children's social

services were subsequently registered as requiring a child protection plan (Department of Health 1995). Children whose health and development was at risk of being impaired without the provision of services were being excluded from appropriate assessment, planning and services.

By the mid 1990s researchers were drawing attention to the impact that parental problems can have on children as well as the increased vulnerability of children growing up in conditions of poverty, social exclusion and poor community resources (for example, Bradshaw 1990; Holman 1998; Utting 1995). Moreover, it was being recognised that disabled children were particularly vulnerable to socio-economic disadvantage (Gordon *et al.* 2000; Lawton 1998). These families were not getting access to the services they needed (Aldgate and Tunstill 1995; Cleaver *et al.* 1999). As part of a strategy to refocus children's services so that they would be more broadly based to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families and deliver improved services, the Government decided that in England and Wales a national assessment framework should be developed to assist practitioners in meeting one of the key children's social services objectives: 'To ensure that referral and assessment processes discriminate effectively between different types and levels of need and produce a timely service response' (Department of Health 1999b, p.20).

### **Legislation underpinning the assessment of children in need**

The primary legislation in England and Wales which defines the state's responsibilities towards children in need and their families remains the Children Act 1989, although there have been subsequent amendments and extensions. More recent major legislation, the Children Act 2004, does not repeal or replace the Children Act 1989 but strengthens the earlier provisions in a number of ways as outlined in Chapter 1.

Local authorities have been given general powers in the Local Government Act 2000 to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their area and improve the quality of life of local residents. To this end, they have a duty to develop community strategies together with other local bodies. However, in the Children Act 1989 there is a specific duty laid on every local authority to identify the extent to which there are children in need in their area (Schedule 2.1). Assessing need is therefore emphasised within the legislation in two respects: at a population level for planning purposes by the local authority (Schedule 2.1) and, equally important, at an individual level (Schedules 2.3 and 2.4, and section 47) (see discussion by authors in Ward and Rose 2002). Local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need and, in so far as is consistent with that duty, promote the upbringing of such children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to their needs (section 17(1)). Relevant partner agencies have a duty to co-operate with the local authority's children's services in the exercise of these responsibilities (section 27, strengthened by section 10 of the Children Act 2004).

But who are children in need? The Children Act 1989 marks a change from previous child welfare legislation by defining need broadly and in developmental terms and, furthermore, links need to the provision of services (Department of Health 2001). Children

in need are defined as children unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health and development without services, or whose health and development will be significantly impaired without services, or children who are disabled (section 17(10)). Children in need, therefore, include those children suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. Local authorities made aware of children in such circumstances have a duty to make enquiries, that is to assess what is happening to them, in order to enable them to decide whether they should take any action (section 47(1)). The concept of need thus encompasses a wide spectrum, from children who may have relatively straightforward or short-term needs through to those whose needs are urgent, serious, complex and possibly life-threatening, including those at risk of significant harm. Critical to this definition is that their development will be impaired without the provision of services. Disabled children are included in their own right in recognition of the special developmental needs they may have. The duty to safeguard and promote their welfare applies to all the children within this wide spectrum. Aldgate and Statham discuss the significance for practice of the twin aims of safeguarding and promoting children's welfare in their report, *The Children Act Now: Messages from Research* (Department of Health 2001). They note that, within the legislation, safeguarding children has two elements (p.41):

- a duty to protect children from maltreatment
- a duty to prevent impairment of development.

Thus the legislation requires practitioners when assessing concerns about maltreatment to take account of the needs of a child rather than focusing only on the presenting problem.

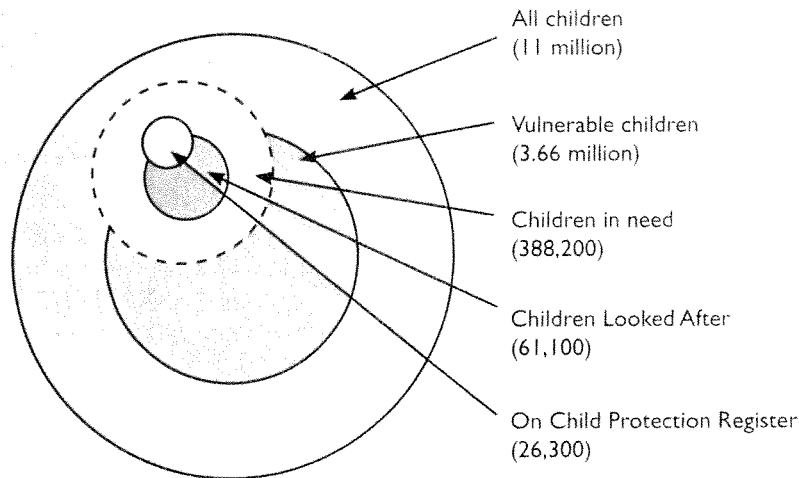
Identification of need requires skilled assessment by practitioners who will be in a position to help a child and family gain access to appropriate advice or services. Here, the Children Act 1989 marks two further important changes. First, the appropriate response may require services to be provided not just for the child but for the whole family, or for particular members of the family or any other person with whom a child has been living. Second, services may be provided by a single agency or by a number of agencies working co-operatively together.

### **The extent of need**

At the last full Children in Need Census (CIN), based on a sample week in February 2005, 385,300 children in England were reported as receiving support from children's social care services (Department for Education and Skills 2005). An estimate in 2008 suggested that the figure had fallen by 13 per cent to 335,600 children (Mahon 2008). Government statistics recorded 34,000 of those children as being the subject of a child protection plan (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008). However, these children are part of a far larger group of children who are vulnerable either because of intrinsic reasons, such as some aspect of their health, or because of issues in their wider world, such as family conflict, bullying or poverty, which may have an impact on the progress they can make. There are over 3.6 million children calculated to be in this group of vulnerable children, as represented in Figure 2.1, who may be at risk of difficulties or have additional needs

that may prevent their achieving the five priority outcomes identified for all children (Cm 5860 2003). These outcomes are listed in Chapter 1.

In circumstances where children may be vulnerable, parents need access to good information about services and sources of support. Vigilance is also required by agencies, such as health, early years and education services that have daily or regular contact with almost all children. This is necessary in order to identify children with any difficulties and additional needs as early as possible and consider what additional support may be required.



From Department for Education and Skills (2005)

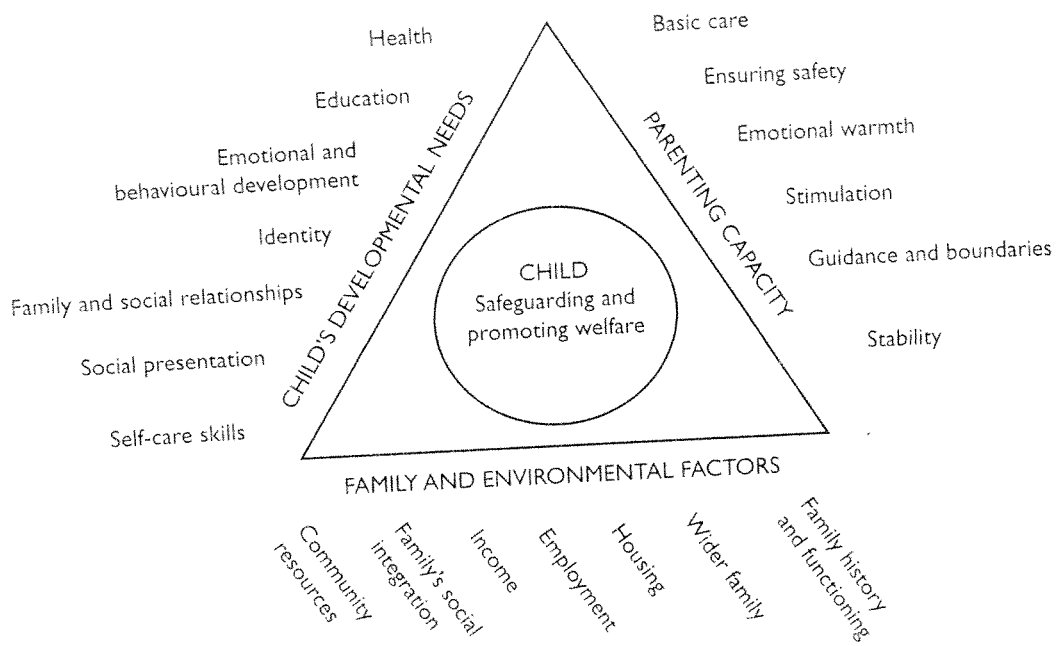
**Figure 2.1:** Representation of the extent of children in need in England at year ending 31 March 2004

### A framework for assessing children's needs

The Assessment Framework has been constructed as a guide or map to help practitioners across all disciplines organise their thinking about what is happening to a child when there are concerns or a family is asking for help. It also assists practitioners to make sense of the information they gather. It gives expression to the emphasis in the Children Act 1989 on the importance of children's development, and promoting and safeguarding their welfare by preventing development from being impaired. It is designed to capture those aspects of the inner and outer world of children that may influence their development and their current wellbeing as well as their future well-becoming in adulthood (Ben-Arieh 2002). Its purpose is to enable practitioners to explore these aspects with a child, family members or others who may be involved and come to an agreement about what is happening and what help is needed.

The Assessment Framework has been conceptualised as a triangle made up of three domains representing the key aspects of a child's inner and outer world:

- a child's developmental needs
- the capacity of parents or carers to support their child's development and respond appropriately to his or her needs
- wider family and environmental factors that may have an impact on a child's development and on the capacity of their parents or carers to support the child's development and respond to the child's needs. (See Figure 2.2)



From Department of Health *et al.* (2000)

**Figure 2.2:** *The Assessment Framework*

In emphasising the importance of all three domains, the Framework is recognising that, alongside a developmental perspective to children's progress, there is also an ecological perspective to their development (see discussion in Part 1 of *The Developing World of the Child*, Aldgate *et al.* 2006). Many writers have argued that, to understand and help children and families, practitioners need to focus not just on what is happening within the family but also take account of 'the outer world of the environment, both in terms of relationships and in terms of practicalities, such as housing' (Schofield 1998, p.57; see also Jack 1997; Jones and Ramchandani 1999; Prilleltensky and Nelson 2000; Stevenson 1998). They suggest a systems approach to the child's world is required that involves systems beyond the immediate family and includes wider networks of relatives, friends and neighbours, the local community, resources and culture, and policies and structures at a societal level. The relationships between these systems and their impact on a child and family can then be explored. Families do not exist in a vacuum and such an approach

allows the family's own perceptions and interpretations of their experiences and difficulties to be given appropriate prominence.

Jones and Ramchandani (1999) explain why the 'developmental ecological' perspective is particularly useful. The developmental perspective

stresses that the child becomes increasingly organised, integrated, yet more complex as an individual as he or she grows up. There are many influences on this process, amongst them genetic, physical, psychological, and family influences as well as wider neighbourhood and cultural influences. (p.2)

The ecological perspective, Jones and Ramchandani suggest, is important because it

considers the child within their environment surrounded by layers of successively larger and more complex social groupings, which have an influence on him or her... As well as this, both the child and their parent influence the outcome of events via their personalities and social functioning. (Jones and Ramchandani 1999, p.2)

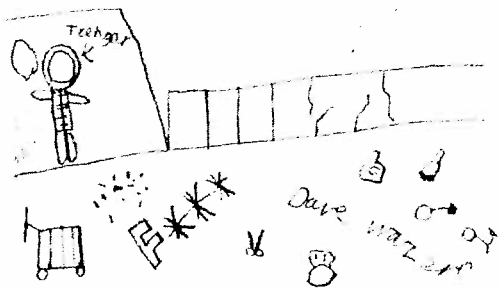
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This approach builds on work by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and others, and has been successfully applied in understanding, for example, the interplay of factors in child maltreatment (see Belsky and Vondra 1989) and in the development of antisocial behaviour (see Capaldi and Eddy 2000). It recognises that, in each domain, there is a range of factors that may influence a child's development or the parents' or carers' capacity to be appropriately receptive, attentive and responsive (Simmonds 1998). Child development is seen as a process which involves interactions between a growing child and his or her social environment (Jones and Ramchandani 1999). The same factors may have a positive or negative impact, depending on the child and circumstances. That is why the interactions and transactions between internal and external factors, between factors within one domain or in relation to another, always need to be carefully explored and understood.

Such interactions are vividly described in accounts by Easterhouse residents bringing up their children on the Glasgow estate in Scotland (Holman 1998). Anita, a widow with seven children, writes:

I dread to think what the future holds for my kids if I don't get away from Easterhouse soon while they are still young. I know in my heart that they will either turn to drugs or end up in prison. My kids keep asking to move. They are lovely kids and intelligent and I would dearly love to see them making something of themselves. Maureen is very clever for her age, eight, and I don't want her growing up in this environment. But what can I do with no money? My children don't stand a chance. (Quoted in Holman 1998, p.96)

As Utting (1995) in his report on family and parenthood concludes: 'Living on low income in a rundown neighbourhood does not make it impossible to be the affectionate, authoritative parent of healthy, sociable children. But it does, undeniably, make it more difficult' (Utting 1995, p.40). Jax, aged 11, from another part of Scotland, illustrates below how play areas can become dangerous and unusable wastelands for children:



'I live near this football court. It's got lots of spray paint swears, trolleys, lots of glass.'

(Jax, aged 11 years)

The dimensions in each domain are derived from knowledge based on theory, research and professional experience in which practitioners may have confidence (Rose and Aldgate in Department of Health 2000; Seden 2000). They are defined in government guidance and explored in detail in the following chapters of this book and in *The Developing World of the Child* (Aldgate *et al.* 2006).

### The Framework as a triangle

There are many ways in which systems and their inter-relationships can be represented diagrammatically, each emphasising different features. Some writers such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Stevenson (1998) have used circles; others such as Belsky and Vondra (1989) and Jones and Ramchandani (1999) have used squares and flow diagrams. A triangle was chosen as a symbolic way of capturing the key domains, helping the practitioner to keep them in mind and think broadly about a child's world, but always with the child firmly at the centre. Furthermore, as Jack and Gill (2003) remind practitioners, it is a way of ensuring that the influence of wider family and environmental factors on families' lives is not neglected in the equation but given equal weight. Buckley and colleagues also reinforce this view: 'a visual representation of the process that is easy to recall [helps] to ensure comprehensive gathering of data on all relevant aspects of assessment' (Buckley *et al.* 2007, p.46).

### Using the Framework in principle and practice

Assessing, planning, taking action and reviewing progress are processes at the foundation of practitioners' work with children in need and families. These activities are underpinned by a set of principles (Figure 2.3) and a set of expectations which are subject to regular monitoring. The principles are important in helping practitioners to understand the key features of the Framework and to consider how they will approach assessment with a child and family. These principles apply equally to all practitioners who may be working with children in need and families, irrespective of agency and specific roles and responsibilities. They are set out more fully in the *Framework for the Assessment of Children*

## Each process:

- is child-centred, ensuring the child is always kept in focus
- is rooted in child development, which includes recognition of the significance of timing in a child's life
- is ecological in approach, locating children within their family and wider community
- ensures equality of opportunity for all, working sensitively with the diversity of children's circumstances
- involves working actively with families, children and young people
- builds on strengths in each of the three domains, as well as identifying difficulties
- is inter-agency in approach, recognising the contribution of multi-agency working to helping children and families
- is a continuing process and not just a single event
- involves action and services being provided in parallel with assessment, according to the needs of a child and family
- is informed by evidence.

**Figure 2.3:** Principles underpinning processes of assessing, planning, intervening and reviewing

*in Need and their Families* (Department of Health *et al.* 2000, pp.10–16). In order to ensure that, in practice, work with children in need and families is proportionate and timely, the assessment process has been divided into two stages – an *initial assessment* to be completed within seven working days of referral which may be followed by a *core assessment*, if a more in-depth, detailed assessment is required, for completion within 35 working days.

### *The social worker's contribution to assessment*

Putting these principles into practice immediately highlights some important features of assessment activity. Most obviously, they emphasise that assessment is not a paper exercise. It cannot simply be done by gathering information and views from sources such as agency records or other professional staff. To understand how well a child in need is doing and what may be the strengths and pressures faced by the family requires the social worker (the lead professional) to see and know the child and family. This involves speaking to and communicating with children, as explored in Chapter 7, as well as with adult family members and other practitioners who have contact with the child and their family.

Assessment in this sense is a relational activity. The social worker who wants to understand what is happening becomes a critical part of the equation and influences the outcome of the process (see discussion by Jones 1998, pp.109–110). The development of trust and confidence between the social worker and family members is essential, so that a clear understanding is achieved by all concerned about the purpose of the social worker and other practitioners' involvement, why information is being sought, with whom it will be shared and what will happen next. (This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.) This may take time. Sometimes, the severity or immediacy of a child's situation will accelerate the pace, scope and formality of the way the contact proceeds. However, even

in difficult circumstances of severe child maltreatment including sexual abuse, Jones and Ramchandani (1999) and others have observed that the sensitivity and quality of early or initial contact can influence later working relationships positively. Thus, the way the social worker uses him or herself in working with the family is a significant factor in the effectiveness of assessment activities and can influence the effectiveness of help subsequently provided.

As discussed in Chapter 8, the corollary of being involved in direct work with children and families is that it has an emotional impact on practitioners, to which agencies, through their managers and supervisors, are required to be alert. Situations may be stressful or cause anxiety or fear, especially in circumstances where resistance, hostility and violence are exhibited by a child's adult carers. Writers such as Reder *et al.* (1993), Ferguson (2004) and Cooper (2005) have explored the way such experiences may influence practitioners' perceptions of what is happening to a child and how the focus can move away from the child who may even become 'seen but unseen' (Cooper 2005, p.8).

### *Sharing information in the best interests of children*

A critical feature of assessment, expressed in the principles, is that it is likely to be in a child and family's best interests if information is gathered and shared on a multi-agency basis. Individual staff in contact with a child and family will not necessarily know about every relevant aspect of their lives. When there has been a request for help or concerns about a child's welfare have been registered, gathering sufficient information may be a cumulative process, piecing together with the family what is happening and involving other practitioners. Assessment is very often an inter-agency activity. A child and family are likely to have contact with a number of different agencies in the normal course of their lives, as considered in Chapter 5.

Different practitioners will have their own professional perspective of a child and family, for instance as the result of providing day care to a toddler at a nursery or developing a relationship with a young person attending a youth club, but they will also have an important contribution to make to understanding other aspects of a child's world. They may have observed, heard or had matters reported to them that have wider implications concerning a child's welfare. A youth justice worker, for instance, undertaking a programme on offending behaviour, may learn about the difficult living arrangements of a young person, or that a child is regularly avoiding school, which may be important to share with school staff or other practitioners involved.

It is essential in this respect that all practitioners hold the whole child in mind, think about what is happening in the child's world, record it and identify other agencies that may already be or need to be involved. Avoiding what is often called 'a silo approach' is imperative. Sharing information in the best interests of the child, however, requires that the family is fully informed, understands and, unless a child's safety would be compromised, has given appropriate consent.

### *The importance of family history and functioning*

In making sense of complex circumstances or where there are concerns about the likelihood of harm, a critical task of social workers and other practitioners is learning about a family's history and what has happened in the parents' lives, previous patterns of family behaviour and response, and the continuities and discontinuities experienced by the family. The exploration of family history and functioning is often given too little attention in training and in practice. Such exploration can provide insights and make connections for both family members and practitioners, and its contribution to understanding the child's world and the potential for change is underestimated. As Munro observes, 'the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour' (2002, p.105). The scales and questionnaires accompanying the Assessment Framework materials may be useful for practitioners in this work, such as the *Recent Life Events Questionnaire* or *The Family Activity Scale* (Department of Health and Cox and Bentovim 2000), as well as using the *Family Assessment* (Bentovim and Bingley Miller 2001) to understand more complex family situations. These evidence-based tools are referred to again later in this and other chapters.

### *Analysing information and making decisions*

As discussed earlier, a principle of assessment is ensuring that proportionate and timely help is provided when it is needed. Between the points of gathering information and delivering effective help, social workers and their managers need to make sense of information, form judgements about what is happening, make a series of decisions and agree a child's plan on which they and others act (see Chapters 3 and 4, and discussion by Hollows 2003; Jones *et al.* 2006). In reality, much of this work is happening in parallel. These are perhaps the most important activities in the assessment process. Sometimes assessment is only understood as gathering information. Analysing information, and all that is entailed in that process, is seen as a separate activity. Assessment requires both activities to take place so that judgements can be formed and decisions made. Horwath, in the opening chapter, has already noted the difficulties that practitioners continue to experience in analysing information and she explores the analysis of information in detail in Chapter 4.

In order to be clear about what is involved, Hollows (2003) advocates separating out professional judgement from decision-making, even though in reality the two activities often become intertwined. She quotes a useful distinction made by Goldstein and Hogarth (1997): judgement being the way people 'integrate multiple, probabilistic, potentially conflicting cues to arrive at an understanding of the situation' and decision-making as the way people 'choose what to do next in the face of uncertain consequences and conflicting goals' (Hollows 2003, p.61). Increasingly, different approaches and tools are being developed to assist practitioners with this difficult part of assessment, for example the National Children's Bureau toolkit *Putting Analysis into Assessment* (Dalzell and Sawyer 2007) and the workbooks on *Assessing and Promoting Resilience in Vulnerable Children* (Daniel and Wassell 2002). Writers stress that practitioners should be helped to develop 'a critical and reflective mindset' (Dalzell and Sawyer 2007, p.11). Emphasis is also placed on the importance of available, quality supervision for practitioners at the front-line who are

making difficult and complex decisions about children (Hughes and Pengelly 1997; Jones *et al.* 2006).

As detailed in Chapter 4, once decisions have been made about what to do next, a plan can be developed with the child and family. The process follows the same pattern even if the situation is straightforward and only a single agency is involved. However, planning is likely to become more elaborate and formal according to the complexity and severity of the circumstances and the level of inter-agency involvement. The completion of an assessment will form a baseline for the subsequent review of the child's plan and how well the child is progressing in order to determine whether the desired changes are being achieved.

### **The Assessment Framework and current practice developments**

The Assessment Framework has underpinned the practice outlined in a range of government guidance on different aspects of children's welfare since it was introduced in England. The inter-agency government guidance on safeguarding, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government 2006), has a key chapter on 'Managing Individual Cases' which sets out how the Assessment Framework should be followed when undertaking assessments on children where there are safeguarding concerns. At the same time, development work has continued in line with the Government's overarching policy of *Every Child Matters* to provide a coherent approach to work with children in need through the Integrated Children's System (Cleaver *et al.* 2008) and to ensure early identification and early intervention where there are concerns about children through the *Common Assessment Framework* (Children's Workforce Development Council 2009). The Assessment Framework provides the underlying model for both these practice developments. This means that practitioners from different disciplines and different agencies are now sharing a common language and a common approach in identifying when children may be experiencing difficulties, and this continues throughout work with a child and family. When a child is in need, the Integrated Children's System provides practitioners with a more structured and systematic approach by integrating the processes of working with the child and family from the first point of contact through to the final review. This is referred to as 'guided practice' in Australia (Scarf Australia 2001). The Assessment Framework is now a core element in translating *Every Child Matters* into changes in practice.

### **Using questionnaires, scales, recording and other tools to improve practice**

The implementation of the Assessment Framework has been accompanied by an unprecedented range of resources commissioned by the Government to ensure widespread understanding and familiarity with the approach and to help managers and practitioners integrate its use into front-line practice. As discussed earlier in the chapter, effective assessment requires direct work with children and families. In some situations, practitioners and families are finding it helpful to use a more structured and systematic approach to talking about particular aspects of families' lives, such as the hassles parents may be experiencing

or an adolescent's feelings about his wellbeing. Well-tested questionnaires and scales can offer a positive way of practitioners and family members working together on these issues and provide a baseline of information against which to measure change (see, for example, the use by community-based projects of standardised tests in their practice, described in Aldgate *et al.* 2007). Some of the tools that have been developed are listed in Table 2.1.

These resources allow detailed and practical exploration of different aspects of a child and family's world and to do so in circumstances that may be more comfortable and even fun for children, such as when a computer is used to assist a child to tell the practitioner his or her story, as *In My Shoes* (Calam *et al.* 2000). In addition, Barnardo's has produced a guide and resources, *Say It Your Own Way*, to help practitioners facilitate children's participation in assessment (Hutton and Partridge 2006).

It has to be remembered that there is a third domain of the Assessment Framework, concerned with wider family and environmental factors. A model has been developed for analysing the impact of the local community on parents and on children in *The Missing Side of the Triangle* by Jack and Gill (2003). It ensures that very specific and practical questions are asked about both community strengths and pressures from the perspectives of children and of parents or carers, and the cumulative impact of these experiences is carefully assessed.

### **Findings about how the Assessment Framework is working in practice**

Since the Assessment Framework was introduced in 2000, it has been subject to considerable scrutiny. There have been a number of critiques of the conceptual framework examining whether it is fit for purpose and whether it will help to improve practice (for example, Calder and Hackett 2003; Garrett 2003). They have also looked at the context in which the Government intended it to be used, including the distinction made between initial and core assessments, the timescales laid down for their completion, the exemplars issued for recording assessments electronically and the effect on social work practice in different circumstances (see Booth *et al.* 2006; Holland 2004; Millar and Corby 2006). Challenging questions have been asked, such as by Millar and Corby:

*Does the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families...embody an ethos of bureaucratic regulation with stultifying effects on social work, or is there evidence, as was anticipated in the guidance accompanying the Framework's introduction, that it has potential for therapeutic social work? (Millar and Corby 2006, p.887)*

Inevitably, most published studies so far are based on fieldwork undertaken in the first year or so of the introduction of the Assessment Framework, and reflect what might be called the 'settling in' period. The messages drawn from recent research findings, some more positive than others, must therefore be regarded as tentative.

Table 2.1: Evidence-based assessment tools for use with children and families

Tool	Purpose
<b>The HOME Inventory: A Guide for Practitioners – the UK Approach</b> (Cox 2008)	Assesses a child's experiences in the home environment which influence their development, including the quality of parenting. It covers all children up to early adolescence, including those who are looked after or disabled.
<b>The Family Assessment</b> Assessment of family competence, strengths and difficulties (Bentovim and Bingley-Miller 2001)	Enables professionals to develop a systematic and evidence-based approach to observing, describing and assessing family life and relationships, parenting and the impact of family history.
<b>The Family Pack of Questionnaires and Scales</b> (Department of Health and Cox and Bentovim 2000) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home Conditions Scale</li> <li>• The Family Activity Scale</li> <li>• The Parental Daily Hassles Scale</li> <li>• The Recent Life Events Questionnaire</li> <li>• The Adult Wellbeing Scale</li> <li>• The Alcohol Scale</li> <li>• The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire</li> <li>• The Adolescent Wellbeing Scale</li> </ul>	Provide an economical and effective way of gathering information about children's emotional and behavioural strengths and difficulties, parenting, adult mental health and alcohol difficulties, life events and family activities.
<b>The Attachment Style Interview</b> (Bifulco <i>et al.</i> 2003)	Provides an assessment of the attachment style of adults, the quality of a couple's marital/partner relationship and their patterns of support and relating.
<b>In My Shoes</b> (Calam <i>et al.</i> 2000)	This is a computer-assisted interview for communicating with children and vulnerable adults about their experiences, thoughts, feelings and wishes, including traumatic or abusive experiences. It is particularly helpful to support participation of younger children, disabled children and those with communication difficulties.

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In parallel, several studies have also been undertaken specifically to find out how the Assessment Framework has been implemented, as well as its impact on practice (for example, Cleaver *et al.* 2004; Horwath 2002; Platt 2001, 2006; Rose *et al.* 2007). It was recognised, from the development stage, that the introduction of the Assessment Framework, together with the principles underpinning it, was part of a much more fundamental change in working with children and families. It would require a major review and revision of local policies, procedures and practices, as well as protocols for inter-agency working (Department of Health *et al.* 2000). A study of early implementation was undertaken by Cleaver and colleagues in 24 local authorities (Cleaver and Walker 2004). In a summary, Cleaver acknowledged the challenge of bedding in the new approach and identified 16 essential features from the study which contributed to successful implementation (Department of Health and Cleaver 2003). A detailed case study in one authority for a period of over two years (Rose *et al.* 2007) confirmed the complexity of integrating the approach into front-line practice in the real world of children's services and highlighted the management commitment required.

Inspections of children's services are an additional source of information about how the Assessment Framework is working in practice. Some inspections have focused on how effectively assessments are being carried out by practitioners in agencies with safeguarding responsibilities for children. A Joint Chief Inspectors' report (*Safeguarding Children: A Joint Chief Inspectors' Report on Arrangements to Safeguard Children*, 2002, pp.46–58), undertaken shortly after the Assessment Framework was introduced, commented on how demanding agencies had found implementation. Whilst practice varied, it recorded a number of concerns about the quality of assessments: 'Too few [core] assessments demonstrated an engagement with the social history of the family, a reflection on the evidence, synthesis and analysis, and a concluding assessment of need and risk of significant harm' (Joint Chief Inspectors 2002, p.51).

Three years later, a second Joint Chief Inspectors' report on safeguarding children (Commission for Social Care Inspection 2005) found evidence that the use of the Assessment Framework was improving and making a difference. For example, when used to inform care plans for new placements, the higher quality information was found to lead to better outcomes for the children (p.62). The third Joint Chief Inspectors' report in this series (Ofsted *et al.* 2008) recorded increasing numbers of referrals leading to initial assessments, further improvement in timescales for completion but still considerable variation in the quality of assessment practice (p.69). Government statistics for the year ending 31 March 2008 showed continued improvement in completion rates of initial and core assessments within the timescales, 71 per cent and 80 per cent respectively for 2007/8 (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008) compared with 65 per cent and 74 per cent respectively two years earlier in 2005/6 (Department for Education and Skills 2006).

Horwath (2002) and Platt (2006) have continued to be interested in how the Assessment Framework is being used when concerns about children are identified, particularly where there is risk of child maltreatment and neglect. Neglect is the most common category of abuse, constituting 45 per cent of all children registered as requiring a multi-agency, co-ordinated child protection plan (Department for Children, Schools

and Families 2008). This is important because some commentators have interpreted the Framework as leading to 'the splitting of assessment from protection' and have suggested the Assessment Framework model is 'not an appropriate tool for [child protection] investigative work' (Davies 2008, p.33). Whilst in the early stages of its introduction Horwath (2002) found there were indeed tensions to be resolved, for instance about information-sharing in circumstances of neglect, Platt (2006) was able to conclude in his study that 'initial assessments...provide a form of practice that offers benefits in terms of balancing child protection and child welfare approaches, and in terms of relationships with parents' (Platt 2006, p.267).

Implementation has highlighted practice issues where practitioner confidence has often been lacking, particularly applying knowledge of child development, incorporating analysis into assessment and undertaking direct work with children. This has led to subsequent government initiatives to support the development of effective practice, some of which have been referenced in this chapter and which also include addressing the support and training needs of supervisors of practitioners. Further studies are now required to evaluate how assessment practice is changing and whether it is improving as the Assessment Framework becomes embedded.

### **Use of the Assessment Framework in the UK and internationally**

An unexpected feature of the Assessment Framework has been the widespread interest shown by other countries and the use that has been made of it by organisations such as the Council of Europe and the World Health Organisation (WHO) Europe. It has been found to have relevance for practice in work with children and families that transcends differences in systems and culture. A recent report by the Council of Europe on parenting in contemporary European societies develops the concept of *positive parenting* and uses the Assessment Framework to demonstrate how the content and context of parenting can be combined in the one model, thus moving away from emphasis on a particular parenting style (Daly 2007). The Council of Europe report notes that the Assessment Framework is being used effectively in many countries, including Australia, Canada, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, Sweden, Ukraine and the United States of America (Daly 2007, p.19). To these countries can also be added Malta, Croatia and the Republic of Ireland as well as the other nations of the UK: Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Scotland, in parallel with England and Wales, has developed the *My World Triangle* for use in assessing a child and family's circumstances as an integral part of its practice model within the Scottish Government's overarching policy, *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government 2008). The *My World Triangle* has drawn on the domains of the English triangle but has framed them from the point of view of a child:

- how I grow and develop
- what I need from people who look after me
- my wider world.

This gives a different perspective on the same set of factors, reminding practitioners of the importance of understanding a child's experience and perceptions, and the wide range of influences that contribute to how well a child is developing.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has introduced a new standardised assessment process for children in need within all Health and Social Services Trusts based on the Assessment Framework. This followed a careful review of existing systems and practice (Bunting 2004). The new Assessment Framework, UNOCINI (*Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland*), was prepared from an extensive consultation process, including front-line staff in trusts and other agencies. It has been designed to help practitioners achieve a sufficient understanding of the needs of children in Northern Ireland to ensure that effective and safe decisions are made about their needs and how these needs might be addressed (UNOCINI 2008). The Framework uses the same language for assessing and understanding children's needs and aims to improve communication between different disciplines and agencies. It is underpinned by similar policy intentions to those of other UK nations of earlier identification of needs, so that children receive services that make a positive difference to the quality of their lives.

Development work since 2002 in the Republic of Ireland has resulted in a model for assessment, designed and developed by Buckley and Whelan at Trinity College Dublin and Horwath at the University of Sheffield with Irish practitioners, that is now being widely used (Buckley *et al.* 2007). The assessment tool uses the same three areas of a child's life as in England as the focus for gathering information and analysis but also makes explicit 'additional considerations' as part of the tool, such as adult problems of domestic violence and substance misuse that may affect children's needs and parental capacity. Buckley and her fellow authors comment positively on the standardisation of practice that such a framework can bring, the promotion of transparent, evidence-based practice which is child-centred and reinforces multidisciplinary co-operation and collaboration (Buckley *et al.* 2007, p.46).

Barnardo's in Australia has incorporated the Assessment Framework into its family casework model (*SCARF – Supporting Children and Responding to Families*) and this was evaluated by Fernandez and Romeo (2003) and Tolley (2005). Tolley recorded two major benefits to service delivery:

Firstly, workers became confident in using a common language, that is, they mean the same thing when they speak about such notions as strengths, needs, risk of harm, or good enough parenting. Establishing a common language has had the effect of improving communication and reducing the chance of erroneous decisions in case management. Secondly workers using SCARF reported that they paid more attention to the effect their work had on the needs of the children rather than looking at its impact on the parent or carer. (Tolley 2005, pp.16–17)

The Assessment Framework has thus begun to provide a much needed international language about the challenge of improving children's outcomes and a common, standardised approach that can be used to develop child focused practice.

## Conclusions

The Assessment Framework was introduced in 2000 and since then has become part of the children's services policy and practice landscape in England. It is underpinned by theory and research about children's development in the context of family and community, together with an explicit set of principles. The Framework as a model to assist practice is proving to be robust and to have widespread relevance across disciplines and agencies concerned with children and families. Moreover, it has been found to have relevance cross-nationally as well, with numerous examples of the Assessment Framework being incorporated into other countries' child welfare systems. There are encouraging signs, albeit more on a reported basis from service managers and less as yet from recent research findings, that assessment practice is improving and that a common language used by practitioners in different settings is resulting in better inter-agency communication. There are still challenges to be addressed, such as improving analysis for making decisions and planning, increasing direct work with children and providing sufficient expert supervision for practitioners. And Horwath (2002) reminds us that the Assessment Framework requires knowledgeable, confident and competent practitioners, committed to its underpinning principles, to achieve the desired improvements in work with children and families.

## Acknowledgements

The drawing and commentary by Jax is part of a response by children and young people to consultation with them about their experiences of services in Highland (Highland Children's Forum 2006). I am grateful for Jax's permission and that of Highland Children's Forum to use it in this chapter.

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