

Case Synopsis

Child M lived with her mother, father and older sibling. She was 6 weeks of age when she was admitted to hospital following a choking incident. On examination she was seen to have two small bruises on her forehead. Further medical investigation identified a potentially life-threatening bleed on the brain, along with additional bruising to the thigh and a fractured humerus. The examining paediatrician concluded, in his professional opinion, the injuries had been caused by aggressive handling, commonly known as “shaken baby syndrome”.

Child M’s elder sibling had previously been on a child protection plan due to concerns in relation to domestic abuse in the family home. At the time of the injury to Child M, the child protection plan had been discontinued and a child in need plan was in place. Due to no ongoing concerns in relation to the care and protection of the sibling, the plan was for the case to close.

Due to the plan to close the case in relation to Child M’s elder sibling, a referral and pre-birth assessment had not been completed for Child M, therefore, whilst sibling was open to Children’s Social Care at the time the non-accidental injuries occurred, Child M was not.

Review Methodology

This review was carried out using a ‘systems approach’ via an Appreciative Inquiry model. An Appreciative Inquiry model is used in order to understand what has happened, within a participative framework that embraces professional curiosity and challenge, and focuses on what works well and what is valued. Key learning themes that were identified through the Rapid Review meeting were explored through a facilitated event undertaken with multi-agency middle managers. The event examined the identified learning through a systems approach to discussing multi agency best practice rather than specifically examining actions of individual organisations in this particular case. This approach supports systemic learning and practice improvement and focused on the following identified learning themes:

- Communication, information sharing and joint working;
- Holistic assessments;
- Evidence based decision making;
- Fixed-thinking and Seeking / undertaking Safeguarding Supervision; and
- Making change happen.

Learning Themes

The cross-cutting theme of ‘Fixed-Thinking’ was highlighted in aspects of multi-agency working which impacts upon professionals’ ability to understand risk, evaluate and integrate new information and reflect and challenge themselves on how this changes working hypotheses. Four key inroads to unlocking fixed-thinking have been identified.

Unlocking Fixed-Thinking



Father Inclusive Practice

The extent to which fathers are engaged within the safeguarding process can have a considerable impact upon the understanding of risk for the child and family. Professionals can have fixed-thinking in terms of the role of fathers in a family and in their role in parenting children. Fathers can be overlooked both as a resource for their children as well as in terms of their own vulnerabilities and how these might impact upon the child and the family dynamics as a whole.

Child M’s Father was an integral member of the household; he was not an ‘absent parent’, yet his vulnerabilities and how these might impact upon parenting were absent from professional understanding and analysis.

When working with vulnerable children and their families, it is important to consider which agencies may hold relevant information that could help to develop an in depth understanding the role of the father in the family, his lived experiences, strengths and vulnerabilities and how these might potentially impact upon parenting, protection and risk for the child(ren). Professionals should seek to:

- Understand who holds information about the father.
- Explore what other services are or have been involved with Father, what information they might hold, what assessments have been completed and how this might impact upon parenting, risk and the life of the child(ren).
- Give one to one time to the father in a family – Taking the time to speak to and work with a child’s father on his own is as important as one to one time with a child’s mother.
- Evaluate the engagement of a child’s father.
- Record the father
- Identify what father’s needs are and how these impact upon his parenting capacity.

Self-Reported Information

When working with families, much of the information and insight into the family comes from them directly and is ‘self-reported’. Professionals need to ensure that they triangulate what parents are saying by establishing the facts, gathering evidence, and communicating well with all involved. There is a need for all professionals to have a conscious and healthy inquisitiveness, not taking information at face value but clarify, reflect back what they are being told and verify information. It is important to make it clear in recording the origin of a piece of information and if it self-reported, this avoid the risk of it becoming assumed as fact through the passage of time. Wherever possible, check out details of self-reported information by asking who, where when and confirm/validate the information.

Child M’s mother told professionals that there had been previous social work involvement with her eldest child but the case was closed. This led to new professionals being unaware there was ongoing social work involvement. Professionals should seek to:

- Understand where a piece of information originated from.
- Clarify and verify the accuracy of the information wherever possible.
- Find out more information to better understand the information you are being told.
- Reflect upon the self-reported information and what this means in the context of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.
- Consider whether there is a need to change the plan or the approach to working with the family in light of this information .

Evidence-Based Decision Making

Professionals need to take time to hypothesise in order to be able to adapt their thinking and respond to changes in family circumstances and risk. When professionals encounter new information, a new development or a practice dilemma, they need to take time to hypotheses about what is happening, how this situation or new information changes their working assumptions, what the impact could be and what this means in terms of adapting or reviewing the existing plan.

For Child M, the elder sibling’s case was due to close and therefore, with no ongoing concerns for the sibling, a pre-birth assessment was not considered.

Understanding the potential impact of new information or changes in a family with existing vulnerabilities is fundamental. Being open to allowing new information in and re-evaluating a working hypothesis; allowing professional thinking and understanding to adapt in light of changes is essential to fully understand and respond to risk. Professionals should articulate within their records where they have received new information, an incident / development or a practice dilemma and how they consider this impacts upon their decision making, what factors they have taken into account and why they are reaching a specific decision. This promotes evidence based decision making and avoids hindsight bias. Professionals should seek to:

- Understand what impact or implications any new information / developments / changes might have for the child and family
- Reflect upon new information and developments in the context of past / historical information or concerns and current strengths and vulnerabilities
- Reflect with colleagues and families
- Use a decision making tool to show your workings out as to what information was received, what did it tell you, what possible options are there and which option has been selected and why.

Creating Opportunities for Multi-Agency Reflection

Nurturing professional curiosity and challenge are a fundamental aspect of working together to keep children and young people safe. For many agencies, the use of effective supervision is a means of improving decision-making, accountability, and supporting professional development among practitioners. Supervision is also an opportunity to question and explore an understanding of practice in specific cases.

Group supervision and multi-agency reflective discussions can be even more effective in promoting curiosity and safe uncertainty, as practitioners can use these spaces to think about their own judgments and observations. It also allows multi agency partners to learn from one another’s expertise, discipline and experiences, and the issues considered in one case may have similarities to other cases.

- Create and allow time and space to reflect, ideally as a multi-agency ‘team around’ when thinking about a specific case.
- Ask managers and colleagues who may bring a fresh perspective to a particular challenge or dilemma for alternative hypotheses.
- Present cases from the child, young person, adult or another family member’s perspective to help see things in other ways - What does it feel like to be this child living in this household today? How would the child describe it?
- Invite a multi-agency colleague along to case supervision

Unlocking Fixed Thinking

Fathers

The extent to which fathers are engaged within the safeguarding process can have a considerable impact upon the understanding of risk for the child and family. Professionals can have fixed-thinking, in terms of the role of fathers in a family and in their role in parenting children. Fathers can be overlooked; both as a resource for their children as well as in terms of their own vulnerabilities and how these might impact upon the child and the family dynamics as a whole.

When working with vulnerable children and their families, it is important to consider which agencies may hold relevant information that could help to develop an in depth understanding of role of a father in the family, his lived experiences, strengths and vulnerabilities and how these might potentially impact upon parenting, protection and risk for the child(ren). Professionals should seek to:

Who is currently working with the father?
 What information do they hold?
 Do they know about your involvement?
 Is the father involved with professionals that are different to the rest of the family?

There is a need for a cultural shift from traditional practice regarding gender and parenting.

Has father been involved with other services in the past?
 What relevant information do they hold?
 What assessments have been completed, and how is this relevant to or impacts upon, parenting, risk and the life of the child(ren)?

Actively seek fathers out and explain why you want to talk to them.

Does father attend appointments / meetings?
 If not, have you asked why?
 Do you ask where father is when not at an appointment?

Know who holds information about the father.

What does the involvement of other agencies look like?
 What does this tell you about father in the context of your involvement?

Do you have consent to share information?
 Have you contacted other professionals to gather and share information?
 What is their contribution to the plan?

Taking the time to speak to and work with a child's father on his own is as important as one to one time with a child's mother.

Recording fathers

Is he visible in records?
 Does the record give an understanding of his role in parenting?
 Does the record detail his strengths, vulnerabilities and risk factors?

Father Inclusive Practice

Engaging fathers

Early identification and involvement of fathers promotes continued engagement.

Do you understand father's background, social history and lived experiences?
 What are his strengths and vulnerabilities?
 What are his wishes and views?

What is his perception of the family dynamics, strengths and risk factors?
 What is father doing to promote his child's well-being?

Does father have any unmet need that is impacting upon his child(ren)?
 Does he recognise this?
 Is he engaging with services to meet his own needs?
 If not, have you asked why?

Do you take dedicated time to speak to and work with the father?
 Have you asked about his role in parenting and being dad?
 How does he feel about your involvement?
 What does he want from your service?
 How much time does he spend with his child(ren)?

Give 1:1 time to the father

Be conscious of who you talk to / direct questions to during appointments. Engage fathers in the conversation.

Evaluate the engagement of father. What is this telling you?

Unlocking Fixed Thinking

Self-Report

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Self-reported information can become assumed fact through the passage of time.

Professionals should have a conscious and healthy scepticism.

Who is reporting the information?
 Is it first-hand information?
 Did it originate from a professional / organisation or can it be tracked back to self-reported information?

Have I understood this information correctly?
 Help me to understand more about this.
 Is there someone I can talk to about this?

Where?
 When?
 Who?
 Why?
 What?
 How?

Avoid over-optimism and making assumptions based upon self-reported information.

Clarify

What is the context of the information?
 Gather more details.

Verify

Self-reported Information – Clarify. Verify and Reflect

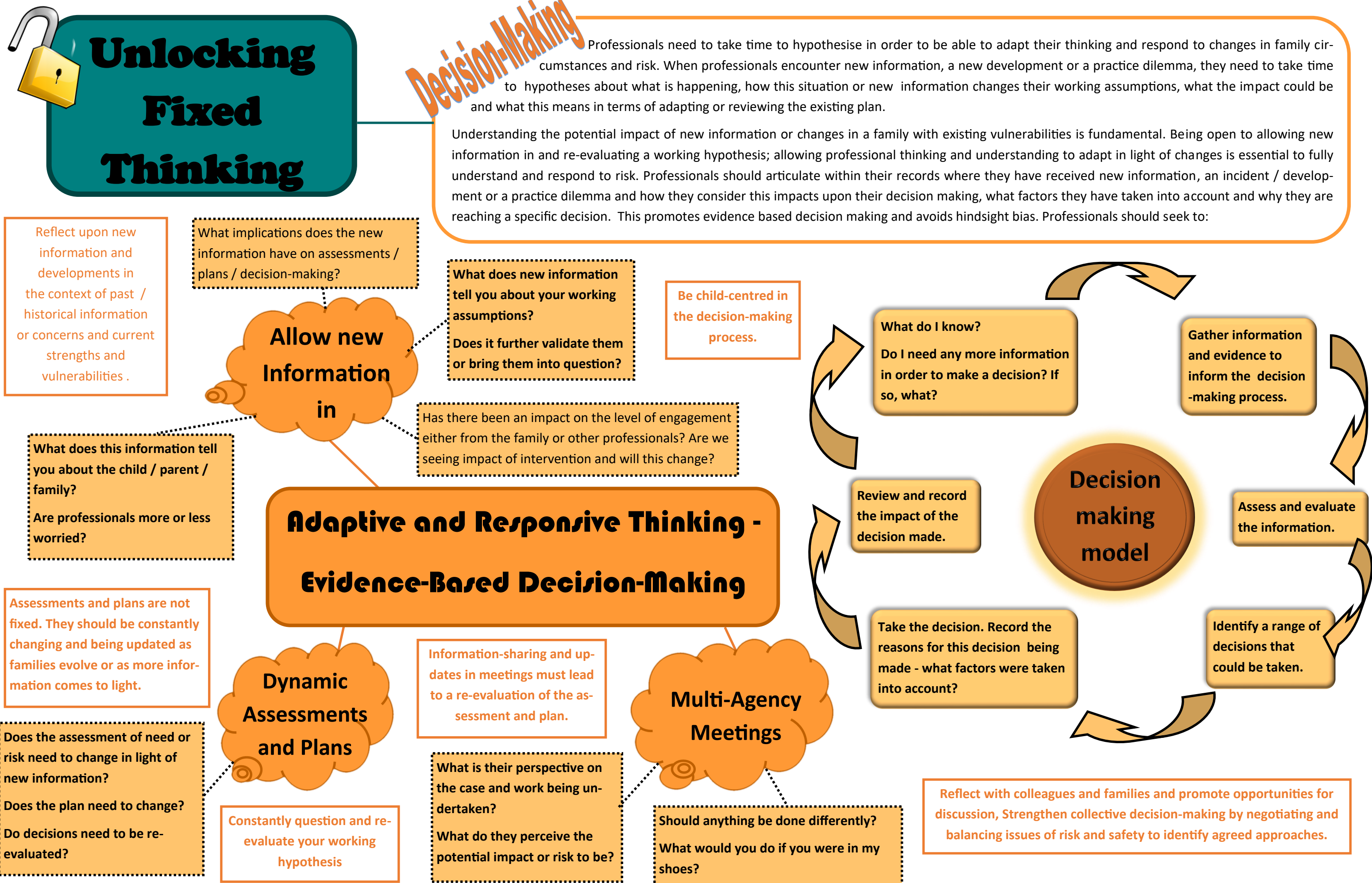
Reflect

Who can confirm accuracy of information?
 Has consent been sought to share information with others or gather further information in order to confirm?
 Triangulate the information you have received.
 Establish the facts.
 Gather further information.

Professionals should have the opportunity to reflect; themselves, with colleagues / managers and with multi-agency professionals.

How does this new information impact upon my understanding of strengths, vulnerabilities and risks?
 What is the impact of this information on the child?
 Do I need to change my approach to working with the family in light of this information?

Ensure origin of information is recorded clearly in the child's record.



Unlocking Fixed Thinking

Multi-Agency Reflection

Nurturing professional curiosity and challenge are a fundamental aspect of working together to keep children and young people safe. For many agencies, the use of effective supervision is a means of improving decision-making, accountability, and supporting professional development among practitioners. Supervision is also an opportunity to question and explore an understanding of practice in specific cases.

Group supervision and multi-agency reflective discussions can be even more effective in promoting curiosity and safe uncertainty, as practitioners can use these spaces to think about their own judgments and observations. It also allows multi agency partners to learn from one another's expertise, discipline and experiences, and the issues considered in one case may have similarities to other cases. Professionals should seek to:

Create opportunities for reflective discussions / group supervision with the team around the child.

What are the perspectives of multi-agency colleagues?
How do they differ from my own?

Invite a member of the 'team around the child' to your supervision.

Create a culture and ethos of multi-agency challenge and support.

What is working well?
What am I worried about?
What do I need to do?

Explore working your hypothesis - has any new information come to light that might impact upon this?

What do I know?
What do I still need to know more about?

How effectively are we working as a team to improve outcomes for the child?

Multi-Agency Approach

Creating Space - Opportunities for Multi-Agency Reflection

Effective Supervision

Challenge your judgement and observations.

Challenge your working hypothesis

Reflect on relationships-based practice.
How effective is engagement?
Are we seeing an impact or is there a need to alter the plan?

Reflect on your work. What have you done and what has the impact been on the life of the child / their outcomes?

Ask your manager for their reflections on your work.

Am I asking the right questions?

Ask for fresh perspectives / alternative viewpoints

Allow time to reflect both individually and as a team around the child.

Challenge yourselves and each other - how effective are you in improving outcomes for the child?

Question yourself and each other

What does it feel like to be a child living in this family?

Learn from one another's discipline, expertise and experience.

Am I listening to my colleagues views?

Is there anything I can or should be doing differently?

Nurture professional curiosity and challenge.

Reflective Cycle

Action Plan

Description -
What happened?

Views, thoughts, feelings

Evaluation -
How did things go?

Analysis

Conclusion
- What else could you have done / do?