

# THE PRACTITIONER

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## Critical Thinking: Common Errors in Decision-Making

Everyday child welfare professionals must make decisions. The stakes are high as most of those decisions are in no way benign, but rather, have far reaching consequences for families, communities and at the greatest level—life and death. So, how can decision-making errors be lessened especially considering the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in the work? One way is to study what has gone wrong in the past.

Eileen Munro, a noted expert in child protection, outlined common errors in practice decision-making. Her research concluded that “errors in professional reasoning in child protection work are not random but predictable on the basis of research on how people intuitively simplify reasoning processes in making complex judgments. These errors can be reduced if people are aware of them and strive consciously to avoid them.”

The following is a list of common decision-making errors:

- ◆ **Failure to Revise Assessments**— this was the most frequent error found. Continuing assessment was infrequent or nonexistent. Once a decision was made about placement or permanency, that decision was pursued exclusively, even in the face of new information.
- ◆ **Errors in Communication**— People sometimes hear each other incorrectly; they make mistakes when writing up their records; they may express themselves in vague terms that leaves room for misinterpretation by others.
- ◆ **Overlooking Past Information**—Becoming absorbed in present issues and failing to place those issues in the context of long-term history.
- ◆ **Use of Facts Readily Accessible**—Information easily remembered tends to be vivid, emotionally charged and the first information or last information gathered. Dull information such as written reports are often overlooked.



**Supervision Practice Idea:** To reduce overconfidence in first judgments, ask for supporting information to support the opposing view or option.

## DFCS, LOST AND THE CIA: IS HINDSIGHT 20/20?

What does the television series LOST and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have in common with child welfare practice? Hindsight bias! All three provide good examples about the hindsight error. Hindsight is a common phenomenon in which the predictability of an event is exaggerated after the event has already happened. Hindsight errors occur when a completed process or outcome is fully revealed and it appears to be an obvious outcome. It is the tendency of observers to overestimate what could have been anticipated with foresight.

In the television series LOST, information is revealed backwards; you already know the outcome and then you see what led up to it. Clues in scenes that seemed benign when originally viewed suddenly become clear and obvious in context of the end result. The recent terrorist episode aboard a Christmas day flight was blamed on the CIA who “failed to connect the intelligence dots”. In hindsight, the dots were clear and obvious! Likewise, in child welfare practice, case reviews often reveal what seem to be clear and obvious mistakes in judgment and decision-making.

To learn from our mistakes we must review cases to determine errors, lessons learned and ideas to improve future practice. In supervision, try to keep hindsight bias in check by unfolding the case through the eyes of the case manager. Look at information in the context of the timeline that the case manager experienced it. Create teaching opportunities by identifying from that perspective what information could have triggered different outcomes and when those triggers occurred in the life of the case.



# Skill Building : Analytical and Intuitive Decision-Making

There are two primary decision-making categories: analytical and intuitive. Analytical reasoning skills are the use of tools, policies, and concrete application of factual information. Analytical reasoning can be developed through educational pursuits, reading articles, books and attending trainings. Intuitive reasoning is a gut reaction developed through experience. It is an unconscious recognition of patterns. Intuitive reasoning occurs very rapidly. Both skill types are needed in child welfare practice.

The following is a list of situations to test out your analytical and intuitive reasoning. Using your intuition first, rank the scenarios on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 equals the most risk and 10 equals the least risk. Compare your answers with your peers and discuss similarities and differences in both types of reasoning results.

A. \_\_\_\_ A 5-year-old has been locked in his room every day after school for 6 weeks as a punishment for bad behavior.

B. \_\_\_\_ A 4-year-old child often has bruises and welts as a result of discipline by his mother for lying and behaving just like his "no-good father."

C. \_\_\_\_ The parents of two youngsters, ages 4 and 5, both spend most of their time out of the house due to job responsibilities and often don't return home until 7 or 8 p.m. The children are able to let themselves into the apartment and a neighbor "keeps an eye" on them.

D. \_\_\_\_ Parents give Valium to a 2-year-old to keep him quiet in the evening because he tends to run around and pester them at night.

E. \_\_\_\_ A child of 4 is not allowed to eat with the rest of the family and is rarely spoken to by his parents.

F. \_\_\_\_ A 5 year-old child has told her teacher that her daddy takes her on "special walks" in the woods and they "play with their private parts."

G. \_\_\_\_ Three children ages 7, 5, and 3 are seen running around a swimming pool while the parents sleep on the couch in the apartment. Parents have a known history of cocaine use.

H. \_\_\_\_ A 3 week-old baby who was born with a positive toxicology screen for opiates, is otherwise healthy. The mother has a history of codeine abuse but refuses treatment.

I. \_\_\_\_ A father strikes his 4-year-old for knocking over a glass of milk. The child sustained a serious eye injury from the heavy ring the father was wearing. The injuries have been medically treated, and the child has just returned to school.

J. \_\_\_\_ The parents fight frequently due to financial problems. The father is in the habit of hitting the mother in front of the three children who hide and cry.

(Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare Office of Human Development services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, April, 1979, We can help: A curriculum on child abuse and neglect: Leader's manual, Washington, DC revised June 1991)

Expertise refers to the superior achievement of "one who has acquired special skill in or knowledge of a particular subject through professional training and practical experience." Research has shown that the mere possession of knowledge does not an expert make! Expert knowledge has to be mentally organized so that it can be readily accessible, activated and appropriately applied in different situations.

Want to develop more expertise in child welfare critical thinking? In his book, *Source of Power: How People Make Decisions*, author Gary Klein describes several keys in developing decision-making expertise including:

## On Becoming An Expert

1. Engage in purposeful decision-making practice with specific goals and outcome measures;
2. Gain more on the ground experience—Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, states that 10,000 hours of experience is necessary to gain expertise.
3. Get good supervision and feedback on your performance; and
4. Review your experiences and identify lessons learned from your mistakes.