



*Take a risk, take a chance, make a change
and breakaway: Protection practices with
mothers in cases of child sexual abuse*

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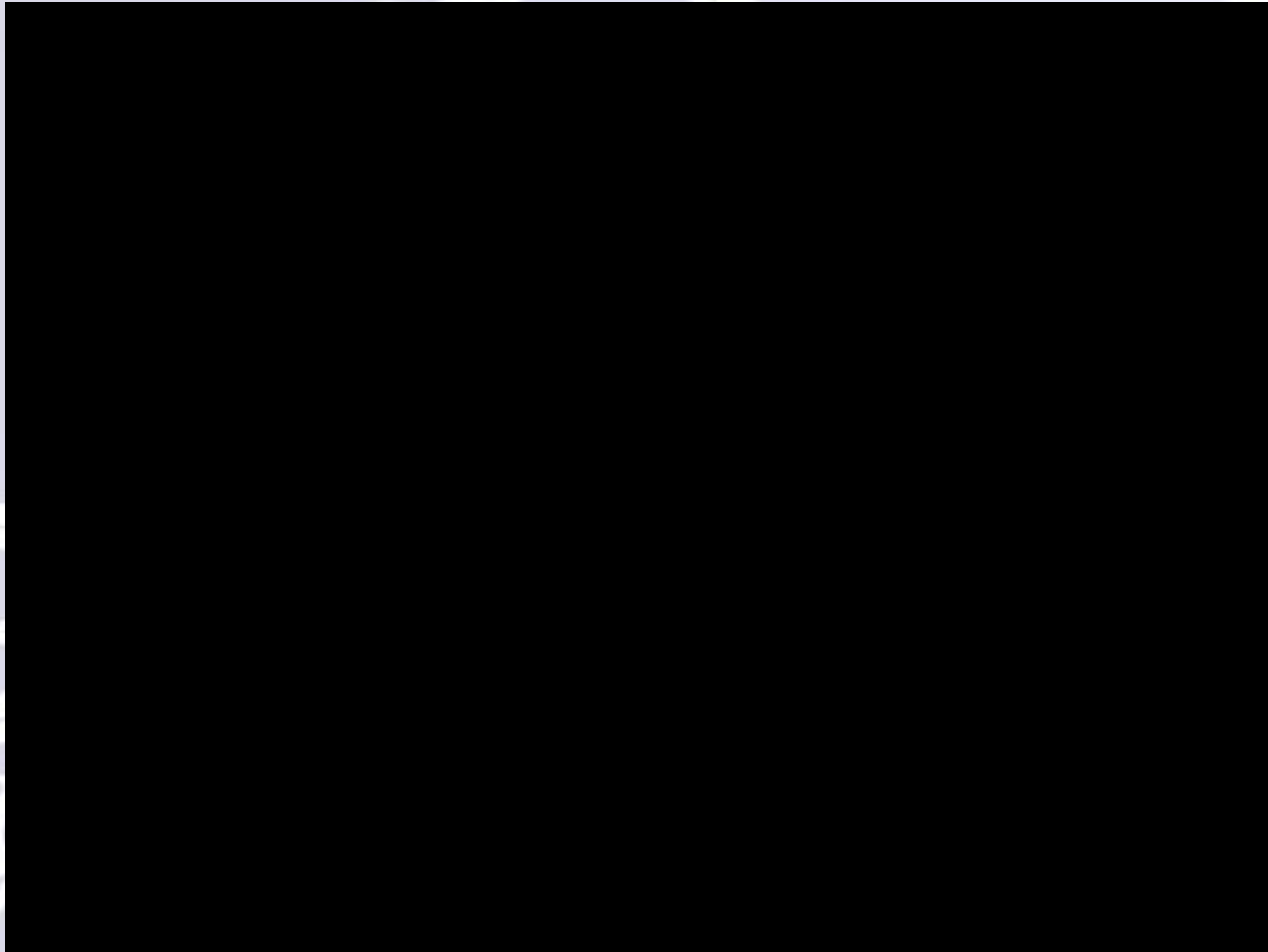
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Failure to Protect

- Mothers are explicitly expected to:
 - Recognize the abuse,
 - Understand its effects on their children,
 - Stop all contact with the abuser.

Forgiving the Unforgivable: Video excerpt to spark discussion



Child protection and risk

- Child protection practice involves protecting children with little time and even less tolerance for risk.
- We propose a shift in thinking about child protection practice in situations of sexual abuse by opening up space and dialogue around risk tolerance with non-offending mothers.
- By embracing a tolerance for risk during disclosure and investigation, we are hoping that we might interrupt hasty and decontextualized assessments that mothers are failing to protect.

Today

- Our workshop is divided into 4 sections:
 1. Discussion of risk aversion in CPS practice.
 2. Review of recent calls for risk tolerance in CPS practice.
 3. Proposal to take risks *with* non-offending mothers in cases of child sexual abuse.
 4. Reflecting on risk, non-offending mothers and CPS practice

Risk Aversion in CPS Practice

Tragic child
deaths

Public Inquiries

Organizational
reforms facilitating
quick decision
making and
reducing
uncertainty

Risk and Standardized Practice

- “Increasingly detailed procedures and guidelines [including prescribed time frames for assessment and intervention], strengthened managerial control to ensure compliance, and steady erosion of the scope for individual professional judgment through use of standardized protocols, assessment frameworks and decision making aids” treat risk as identifiable and preventable (Munro 2004: 533).
- The increased “emphasis on the need to collect, share, classify and store *information*” has come at the expense of “coherent causal accounts... [of clients] in their social context” (Parton, 2008: 259).

Risk and Rational Actors

- ***Rational actors*** are assumed capable of weighing and avoiding risks and able to take in information relevant to risk and act in acceptable or expected ways.
- To do otherwise is to be considered an ***irrational actor*** who is vulnerable to blame and likely to be subjected to regulatory interventions.
- ***Rational actors*** are thought to be potentially constrained by lack of information “or their lack of self-efficacy in feeling able to do something about a risk” (Lupton 1999: 23).

Risk, Rational Actors and CPS

- Non-offending mothers are considered rational actors.
- Risk reducing interventions have tended to centre on:
 - Education around identifying and responding to risk
 - Monitoring capacities to integrate and translate knowledge of risk into acceptable protective efforts/actions.
- The *'right choice'* involves expressing *belief* in her child's allegations; choosing to *support* her child over the alleged abuser; ensuring *no contact* between the child and the alleged abuser; and, *collaborating* with police and social work professionals to ensure the best-interests and well-being of her child (Krane 2003).
- In this scenario, there is little room for ambivalence.

Risk and Social Actors

- Notion of the *rational actor* doesn't recognize context, power and opportunity in individual experiences and negotiations of risk (Kemshall 2006, 2010; Lupton 1999).
- BUT how risk is experienced and negotiated is dependent on the social and personal constraints and circumstances of the individual's particular situation, social locations and time.
- Thus, the *rational actor* is replaced with the *social actor*.
- Gender, age, race, ethnicity, or sexual identity as well as the effects of linguistic constraints, geographic isolation, citizenship status, colonization, cultural or community loyalties and poverty, for example, shape understandings of risk, risk decision-making and experiences of risk regulating interventions.

Risk, Social Actors and CPS

- This critique is particularly relevant in CPS practice in Canada and the U.S. given the overrepresentation of visible minorities and Indigenous people and the multiple social problems -- i.e., unemployment, poverty, substance misuse, mental health issues and domestic violence -- that figure prominently in clients' lives (Sedlak, McPherson and Das, 2010; Trocmé et al. 2005; Trocmé et al. 2010).

Risk, Uncertainty and CPS

- Reforms to CPS have been driven largely by “high-profile cases of low-probability events [that distort] decision making” (Macdonald and Macdonald, 2010: 1180).
- These kinds of reforms cannot help us to *accurately assess* and *respond to risk* in the vast majority of cases.
- Preventing risk to children *is* uncertain and risk can *never* be completely removed from people’s lives in CPS (Munro, 2010; Titterton, 2005).

“There is no option of being risk averse since there is no absolutely safe option.”

Munro (2011b: 43)

Embracing Risk for Innovation

- Engage with uncertainties in identifying and responding to risk.
- Infuse child protection agencies with the most skilled, well trained and caring professionals capable of engaging in critical thinking and drawing on practice wisdom and common sense (Lawrence, Martínez and Sewell 2011: 6).
- Elevate and celebrate direct practice:
 - Know *what* information to collect,
 - Know *how* to collect it,
 - Know how to create a *relationship* with a parent who will disclose relevant information,
 - Know how to ask challenging questions about very sensitive matters,
 - Know how to base understandings on parents' and children's experiences, worries, hopes and dreams (Munro, 2011).

Taking Chances with Mothers

- Practice fluidity and flexibility in assessment and decision making.
- Engage in meaningful relationships with mothers.
- Use professional skill and judgement.
- Generate complex understandings of mothers as social rather than rational actors.
- Embrace “timeliness” (Munro, 2011).

Timeliness

- Munro (2011) proposed slowing down the investigation and decision-making around a child's safety and placing the emphasis on *quality of assessment* rather than *efficiency in response time*.
- Assessments of allegations and protection – or failure to protect – are understood as dynamic and gradual versus static and fixed in the moment.
- The assessment of protection during an initial investigation is seen as a beginning – rather than a final – determination of a mother's capacity to offer protection.

Fluid categorizations

- Instead of relying on fixed categories – i.e. protective or ambivalent or failing to protect – innovation recognises the potential for evolution or change.
- Protection can be thought of as a process based on:
 - An understanding that a non-offending mother's circumstances and needs vis-à-vis the protection of her child may vary over time, and
 - A recognition that she may need time to come to terms with her child's sexual abuse and all that it entails.

Narrative

- Requires professional skill, practice wisdom & critical reflection.
- Ought to occur at the onset of an investigation.
- Involves actively listening for a mother's reactions to her child's disclosure and the emotional, relational, and material consequences.
- Grasps the uncertainty and confusion that are all too frequently part and parcel of the “*normal circumstance of the chaos and impact of [her] child's disclosure*” (Bolen and Lamb 2004:185).
- Sees the range of maternal reactions – i.e. disruption, ambivalence and/or distress – as *expected* responses to child sexual abuse.
- Demands understanding the emotional and material factors that shape her experience of the disclosure and its immediate aftermath.

Informed protection plans

- Complex understandings drawn from narratives are integrated into assessments and immediate protection plans.
- Rather than evaluating a mother's protective efforts as acceptable and socially sanctioned or risky and flawed, her efforts are understood as being situated within her particular opportunities and context.
- Informed protection plans require really *knowing a mother in contextual detail*.

Non-judgemental

- Inviting a mother's narrative requires listening without judgement while taking into consideration what supports would assist her in the protection of her child.
- Most mothers act or come to act protectively (Bolen & Krane, 2013).
- To refrain from really understanding who the mother is and what she needs at this moment in time is to run the risk of alienating her as a needed resource to protect (Krane 2003).
- Involving her deeply in the assessment and development of a protection plan is to live up to child protection's guiding principles of family autonomy and least intrusion.

Flexible, contextualised protection

- We propose developing realistic, suitable, and attainable protection plans that are flexible and consistent with non-offending mothers' actual contextualized lives.
- Protection plans can be revisited, revised and renegotiated.
- Means tolerating a degree of risk and uncertainty.
- Instead of scrutinizing non-offending mothers for their willingness and ability to comply with prescribed notions of protection, we propose collaborating with non-offending mothers to make joint decisions around protection that are based on information derived from their narratives.

Embracing Risk for Innovation

- We propose:
 - Spending time;
 - Taking account of complexity; and,
 - Recognizing the potential for protection to be an ongoing, changing process.

Risking Relationships

- Research tells us that fostering helping relationships – *wherein CPS clients feel safe enough to offer honest accounts about their circumstances without fear of being judged as posing a risk or failing to protect* – is essential to successful outcomes.
- **BUT** such relationships are complicated by:
 - Client worries that CPS workers are representatives of an organization believed to hold absolute power (Dumbrill 2006), and
 - Client experiences of coercion to comply with protection plans that seem to be disproportionate to the nature and seriousness of the incident under investigation (Dale, 2004).

Tolerating Risk in Relationships

- Research tells us that CPS clients appreciate workers who
 - listen attentively,
 - communicate clearly,
 - encourage cooperation and demonstrate caring and empathy without judgment.

(Dale 2004; Maiter et al 2006; Spratt and Callan 2004).

- This commitment to developing genuine helping relationships has been noted by parents to be undertaken by workers who go “*beyond the procedural requirements of their work*” (Spratt and Callan 2004: 214).

Risk Tolerance versus Risk Aversion

- Views meaningful relationships as part of – as opposed to going beyond – everyday practice, requires significant organizational change.
- Requires tolerating uncertainty around risk.
- Means providing organizational support for practicing in a manner that is in opposition to a worst case perspective.
- Requires supporting practices that carry some uncertainty and allow for fluidity and flexibility in assessment and protection planning.
- Rests on understandings of non-offending mothers as social actors whose protective decisions are contingent on time and circumstance rather than evidence of flawed or risky choices.

Reflections

- How are we influenced by pervasive images of mothers and motherhood?
- How do these images infiltrate and influence CPS practice?
- How might we develop an awareness of our own (privileged) positions and social locations?
 - How might such an awareness shape practice?
- How comfortable are we in taking risks with mothers?
 - What might be needed in order to practice with uncertainty?
- Where and how do we draw the line(s) between *too risky* and *practicable uncertainty*?

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