

Book Reviews

Costs and Outcomes in Children's Social Care: Messages from Research

Jennifer Beecham and Ian Sinclair

London, Jessica Kingsley, 2007, pp. 144,

ISBN: 9781843104964, £16.99 (pbk.)

In social care services, there is a continuing focus on measuring service volume, activity, quality and service outcomes, along with professional drivers for evidence based practice. In this 'evidenced-based' environment, the knowledge derived from both research and participative practices can be used to assist professionals in their practice. Therefore, this collection of research reports provides a timely and accessible source of knowledge with particular relevance to services for children and families.

The book has a focus on research that investigated planning and commissioning in children's services. The authors draw upon 14 research studies, 13 of which were part of a Department of Health research programme examining the *Costs and Effectiveness of Services for Children in Need*, which pre-dated the *Every Child Matters* initiative. Through analysis of the findings of these research studies, the authors examine the costs of service provision and consider how far services are effective in improving outcomes for children.

The book is made up of seven chapters, the first of which offers a broad introduction and includes the national policy context for the studies and the core questions that were addressed. Thus whilst each of the research studies was different, the core concerns were closely related; with key questions focussing on what money is spent on and what makes a service 'work'. The second chapter is particularly helpful in enabling the reader to appraise the research methods for themselves, as it details the research

design and how some of the complex issues of assessing costs and making economic evaluations were addressed. Thereafter, chapters three through to six use the knowledge gained from the research studies to explore particular aspects of costs and outcomes in children's social care. For example, 'the ideal and the reality' of service delivery; service costs and variations in cost, early intervention and preventative services; and services for children who may need care, are in the care system, or are care leavers. In the concluding chapter the authors summarise the book and the studies reported therein, suggesting that there are some key questions that arise from this work. In particular they recommend further development in the forms and quality of future research and inquiry. They also raise questions about different aspects of the efficacy of preventative, early and late intervention services. Finally the authors discuss the 'operating challenges'. Whilst conceding that more evidence is needed, they stress the importance of promoting quality of provision above structural change.

This large size, soft-back book is written and structured in a very clear and accessible manner. Within the chapters, there are helpful 'summary boxes' that not only provide summaries at the end of each chapter, but also highlight important aspects. Whilst the 'messages' are aimed at a wide audience, they are particularly relevant for local policy-makers, commissioners and managers in social care services for children. That said, practitioners and students will also find this book useful as one element of the knowledge base that can support and evidence the development of good practice with children and their families.

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Social Work: a Companion to Learning

Mark Lymbery and Karen Postle (eds.)
London, Sage Publications, 2007, pp. 320
ISBN 9781412920025, £20.99 (pbk.)

Like much of the public sector, social work seems to have been subject to a relentless process of regulation and reform in recent times and this looks set to continue for the foreseeable future. Of course, practitioners on the ground welcome changes which will improve conditions for professionals and outcomes for service users and their families. However, at times, the phenomenal rate of upheaval can make practising social workers feel unsure as to their role and can make social work seem daunting to those seeking to join the profession. Re-configurations, cross-sector working arrangements and new management and performance regimes have all had to be absorbed by practitioners, leaving many confused as how to maximise the contribution they make. In this edited volume, the contributors set out to assist the trainee and practising social worker to make sense of the changing shape of British social work.

In keeping with the strong sociological basis of social work practice, the book begins by mapping important aspects of the *context* of social work. For example, Jordan describes the 'external forces' which shape the interaction between service user and service provider, and the importance of practitioners actively engaging in the political dimensions effecting experiences. This chapter sets a critical tone which is sustained throughout much of the book. The authors attempt not just to inform but also to challenge the reader. So, for example, Hugman's account of the underpinning values of social work is at pains to emphasize the need for ongoing critical engagement with complex moral questions. The opening section proceeds with discussions of the roles of 'sense of self', user involvement and research in practice. The rise of interprofessional

education is also presented and critiqued. Finally, an argument for greater international learning is presented.

Part three looks at the social work profession's legal basis. It details some of the skills and responsibilities required of practitioners. Although overall I appreciated the book's concise approach, I felt an exception might have been made for some of this section. Certainly the twelve pages on 'assessment, planning, intervention and review' would need to be augmented by further reading by any social work student. Despite this, I felt that section two provided a reasonable plea for ongoing good practice whilst acknowledging the constraints on practitioners. The discussions of partnership and practice-learning present important but familiar material. However, I found Rafferty & Steyaert's discussion of the role of technology raised new and important questions.

Part four begins with a discussion of the organisational context of social work and the importance of continual professional development. Although the distinctiveness of the book's substantive sections started to seem a bit tenuous by this point (perhaps inevitably) I enjoyed the user perspectives on partnership working and the slightly controversial suggestion that social work supervision borrow from models developed in the health sector. Key concepts such as 'managerialism' are then discussed and the volume finishes with both a glimpse into the future and a re-statement of the importance of seeing the service user at the centre.

Overall, there is no doubt that this book will contribute to the learning and reflections of students and practitioners alike. Indeed, many of the issues raised and discussed have a relevance to those working in the 'caring professions' more generally. At the same time, much of the content feels like a starting point rather than a definitive guide. This is not surprising given the constraints of word length and the breadth of material

covered. Overall this volume has much to recommend it.

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Intervention and Support for Parents and Carers of Children and Young People on the Autism Spectrum: A Resource for Trainers

Barry Wright and Chris Williams
London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007, pp. 256, ISBN: 9781843105480, £29.99 (pbk)

The number of children identified as having an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) has increased dramatically over the last couple of decades. It is now estimated that between 0.7-1% of children in the UK have a condition on the spectrum and this has led to increasing demand on services to provide assessment, post-diagnostic support and advice to parents.

The Autism Spectrum, its complex diagnostic classifications and myriad behavioural manifestations can be confusing even to experienced practitioners - so providing clear, concise and useful information to parents and carers is a challenge. Yet helping parents through the initial shock and confusion in the post-diagnostic period can help them to develop their own confidence and skills to manage the challenge of bringing up a child with an ASC.

This book aims to provide an 'off the shelf' manual for practitioners intending to run post-diagnostic groups for parents and carers of recently diagnosed school-age children with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and related conditions.

The authors assume that group facilitators will have significant experience and knowledge of the autism spectrum. For

those who feel they need additional background reading they suggest that the manual should be read in conjunction with their previous publication *How to Live with Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Practical Strategies for Parents and Professionals* and the relevant sections of this sister publication are referenced frequently throughout the book.

The book describes in detail how to set up and deliver the group programme. The course consists of 11 sessions. The initial sessions cover the characteristics of children with autism spectrum conditions, how they perceive the world and how problem behaviours may relate to particular autistic characteristics. The final sessions aim to help parents develop a problem solving approach to managing these behaviours. The authors suggest group sizes of 5 to 20 participants with 12 to 15 being their ideal group numbers.

The authors suggest that with minor adjustments the programme could also be used to train educational staff or care workers who are providing support to children with autism spectrum conditions.

Each chapter deals with one session and includes all the resources needed to run the session. There are figures for overhead projector acetates, handouts and suggested homework activities. The early sessions have more emphasis on information delivery but also include activities for the participants to consolidate learning points: so, for example, in the session on language and communication, participants are invited to mime various activities in small groups and then consider how much non-verbal communication aids comprehension in typically developing children (and adults).

The last 3 sessions of the course are the most ambitious and, I suspect, the most appreciated by the course participants. They focus on specific behavioural strategies that can be useful in managing problematic

behaviours and include desensitisation, reinforcement schedules, externalising, distraction, consistency, time out, traffic lights and visual timetables. There is also a session devoted to the use of visual guides and social stories, two particularly helpful approaches for children with social-communication disorders. These latter sessions on behavioural management do call for additional therapists to work with individual families on developing their own profile of useful strategies.

The manual ends with the obligatory 'pre-' and 'post-' group evaluation forms and the results of evaluation of their own groups which have been running since 1999.

Running parent groups is a time consuming but rewarding activity and this manual will be extremely valuable to anyone planning their own group. The sessions are well structured, providing psycho education but also opportunities for parents to share experiences with other families who have faced similar difficulties. This latter aspect of group work is something that parents often particularly value.

My only hesitations about the programme were its length, 11 sessions at 2 hours per time is a very significant commitment, and I also felt that some of the handout material was quite lengthy and might be off-putting to any parents with specific literacy difficulties. Having said that, the course is very comprehensive and the authors stress that it should be approached flexibly and sessions adjusted to meet the needs of each group.

Having run similar groups in the past, I can only say I wish this resource had been available to me at the time - it would have saved a great deal of preparation time and provided a highly practical guide to a novice group facilitator. Therefore, if you are regularly involved in providing services to children with autism spectrum conditions and their families or are thinking of running

a group for parents to help them understand and manage their children's difficulties, then this book may be for you.

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What are SSRG's objectives?

- to provide a network of mutual support and a forum for the exchange of ideas and information on social and health care services;
- to promote high standards in social and health care services research, information, planning and evaluation;
- to develop an informed body of opinion on social and health care services activities;
- to provide a channel of communication for the collective views of the Group to central and local government, other professional bodies and the public;
- to sponsor relevant research and identify neglected areas of research;
- to encourage and, where appropriate, sponsor high quality training in research techniques.

Who belongs?

SSRG is open to anyone who subscribes to the objectives of the Group. Members are drawn from a wide range of professional groups and organisations sharing a common interest in the work of the caring services.

How is it organised?

SSRG operates at two levels, nationally and regionally. National SSRG comprises a committee of elected and selected officers, elected members, co-opted members and regional representatives whose principal tasks are to promote the objectives of the group at national level, and to co-ordinate its activities. Regional Groups, of which there are eleven, including Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, exist to provide a focus for members' activities in their local area.

What does it do?

National SSRG publishes a Journal and a Newsletter which are distributed free to all members, and a wide range of other publications on issues in the social and health care services. It maintains working links with central government departments, the Association of Directors of Social Services and other professional bodies and organises an annual three day workshop on a topical theme in social and health care services research, and occasional day conferences, for which members receive generous discounts of fees. It also co-ordinates the work of Special Interest Groups which provide members with an opportunity to contribute to the formulation of SSRG responses to national policy initiatives and current issues in the social and health care services.

Regional Groups organise regular meetings focusing on the research, planning and development of the social and health care services, seminars featuring guest speakers on important topics, and occasional day workshops. The Regional Groups also provide mutual support for members and a forum for the exchange of ideas and information.

Equal Opportunities Policy

It is the policy of SSRG that no SSRG member, job applicant, employee or any other person working with, or in contact with, the organisation receives less favourable treatment, nor is disadvantaged by conditions or requirements imposed, on the grounds of their age, colour, disability, gender, ethnic origin, marital status, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, responsibility for dependents, political affiliation or membership of a trade union. It is the aim of SSRG to actively promote this policy, and to ensure that the contribution of research, information, planning and evaluation in social, housing and health care services is sensitive to this issue.

Research, Policy and Planning is the Journal of SSRG