# The New Zealand practice framework: Using knowledge to inform practice in care and protection

***Marie Connolly** discusses the way in which New Zealand child welfare has responded to one of the challenges of the 2004 Baseline Review of Child, Youth and Family by developing a care and protection practice framework*

### Understanding the relationship between knowledge and practice

Clarifying the links between theory and practice, and between practice and the outcomes we hope to achieve for children within systems of child welfare, is a complex endeavour. In recent years there has been a growing expectation that practice will be supported by a strong evidence base, and that we more fully understand the impact of practice on the lives of children. Understanding the effectiveness of interventions in child welfare also requires more recognition of the relationship between knowledge and practice, and examination of how we reinforce practice behaviours that support positive outcomes for children.

There are two types of evidence that have the potential to inform practice with children and families: external and internal evidence. External evidence is information gained through national and international research – the findings from studies that investigate what works in child welfare practice, how children and families experience systems of child welfare and how services impact on their lives. Internal evidence is information drawn from our own data sources – the gathering of practice data through information systems that help us understand the effectiveness of what we do. Both external and internal evidence contribute to the learning loop that supports and maintains good practice.

**Figure 1: The learning loop that supports and maintains good practice**
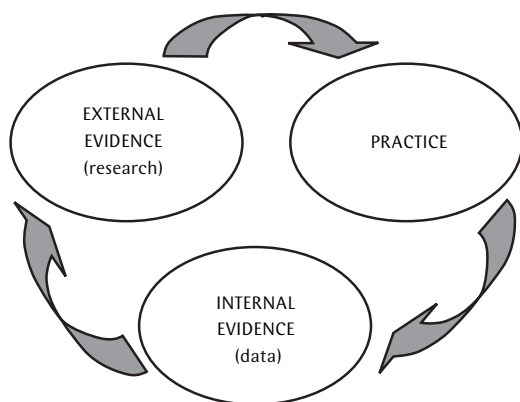


Within this learning loop the interaction of knowledge and practice reinforces practice behaviours that are based on knowledge about what works (external evidence) and supported by evidence of quality practice (internal evidence). An important step toward more fully understanding what informs practice has been the development of a practice framework that clearly articulates our practice knowledge base.

## *What is a practice framework?*

The Child, Youth and Family practice framework has been described as a conceptual map that brings together, in an accessible design, the Department's approach to care and protection practice with children and families. It illuminates and links together our practice philosophy and the underpinning principles of our work, the evidence that informs our interventions, and the outcomes we hope to achieve for children (for a more extensive discussion of the framework, see Connolly, in press).

**Figure 2: Overview of the framework's linkages**
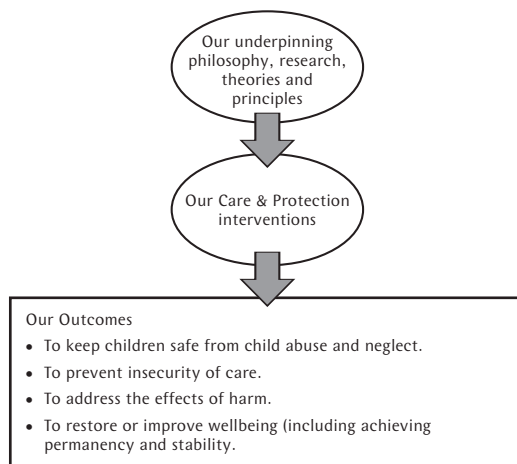


Hence the framework provides a logical flow from the theories and research that underpin practice → practice interventions → outcomes.

**The development of the framework was supported by a number of assumptions.**

1. By necessity social work is a values-based profession (Ronnau, 2001). While it was considered important to inform practice with a strong evidence base, it was recognised that the principles and values considered important to social work also be visible within the framework – principles of non discrimination, human rights and practice supporting participation and inclusiveness.

2. Social work practice is broadly underpinned by a social work code of ethical practice (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2004) and Child, Youth and Family's own code of practice (Child, Youth and Family, 2004).

3. In New Zealand we have a unique set of cultural conditions that will inform the way we think about practice in Aotearoa, and our work is likely to differ from practice in other countries.

4. Families are part of broader systems, and that our increasingly diverse society requires diverse and culturally-responsive solutions (Connolly, Crichton-Hill and Ward, 2006).

It was also important that the framework be grounded in the realities of practice, addressing the dilemmas and tensions that rest at the heart of care and protection practice. For example, a central tension in child care and protection practice is the balancing of child protection and family support. It was therefore considered important that the management of this tension be clearly visible in the framework.

We also wanted the practice framework to be accessible to social workers regardless of their experience or qualifications, to be a useful 'good practice' tool that clarifies our intervention logic and is linked to our evaluative mechanisms that help us understand the impact of our work. Importantly, we wanted the framework to be underpinned by a strong theoretical and evidence base, while at the same time maximise the benefits gained through best practice projects, such as the strengths-based initiatives developed in sites across New Zealand.

### The kete – weaving together strands of knowledge in care and protection

The practice framework uses a kete to illustrate the weaving together of the important principles and perspectives on which practice is based with the phases of the work undertaken in child care and protection. Linked to the outcomes we hope to achieve for children are a set of practice triggers that give flavour to the work.

*Figure 3: The care and protection practice framework*
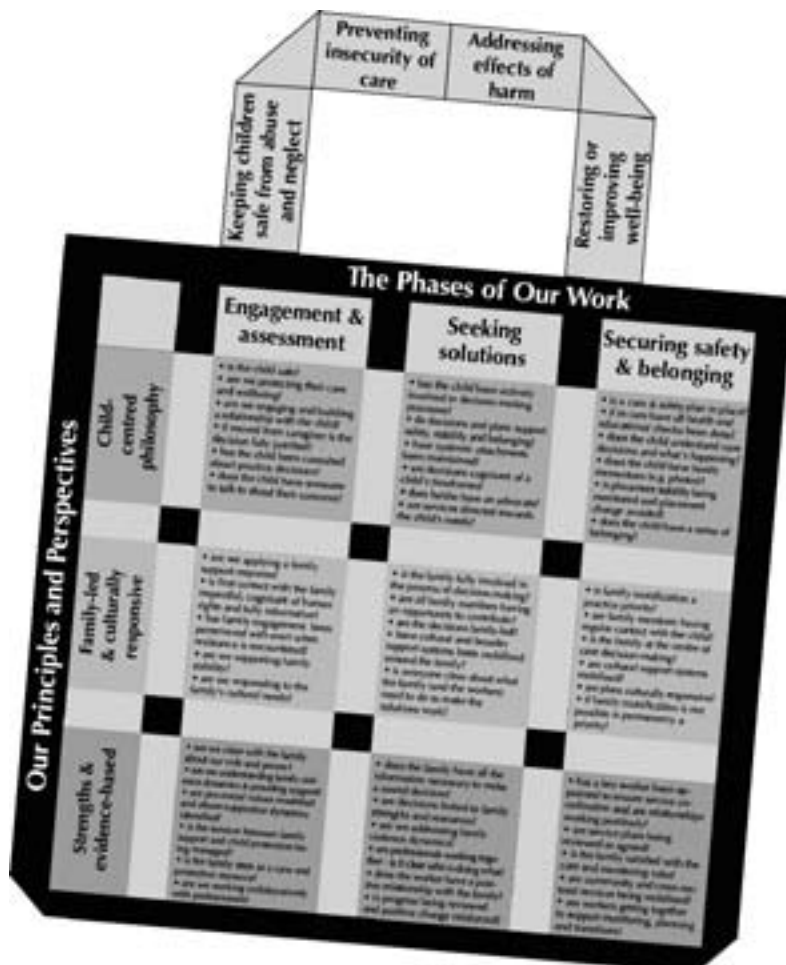
The perspectives that underpin the framework are child-centred, family-led and culturally responsive, and strengths and evidence based. In essence the framework reinforces the notion that no one strand is enough to support children and families. Rather, practice strength relies on the weaving together of these three perspectives throughout the phases of the work. Each strand is supported by a knowledge base of research and best practice, and each has its own set of practice triggers that are linked to the external evidence base.

### The strands of the framework: A child-centred philosophy

The child-centred strand of the framework is supported by literature focusing on the best interests of the child. This is of central importance if we are to ensure that the child's care and safety needs are adequately responded to throughout the phases of the work. Based on the principles of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), the child-centred strand of the framework reinforces the right of children and young people to 'special care and assistance' and the right to provision, protection and participation (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2005). The welfare and interests of the child are paramount, and children have a right to preserve their own identity, and to enjoy their own culture, religion and language (Ministry of Social Development, 2002). The importance of children being listened to and participating in decisions that affect them (Littlechild, 2000) is supported by the framework, as is the importance of attachment theory – that stability of care is critical to child wellbeing (Cassidy and Shaver, 1999; Bacon and Richardson, 2001).

While the framework supports a child-centred philosophy, it also reinforces the need for practice to be concurrently family-led and culturally responsive.

### The strands of the framework: Family-led and culturally responsive

In the same way the child-centred perspective is supported by external evidence and best practice literature, so is the family-led and culturally supportive strand of the framework. Practice in Aotearoa is strongly influenced by cultural imperatives that reinforce collective responsibility for children, and the centrality of family, including broader kinship and cultural networks, as key primary sources of protection for children and young people. New Zealand law also requires that family be strengthened and be supported to participate in decision-making through the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989. Research undertaken in the context of family decision-making models of practice indicates that given the opportunity, families develop rich and diverse plans to support the child (Thoennes, 2003) and respond positively when invited to take the lead (Burford, 2005; Titcomb and LeCroy, 2003). Writers have also argued that diversity in families requires culturally responsive solutions and reflexive social work practices that address the diversity of need (Connolly et al, 2006).

In addition, the framework is supported by research and best practice initiatives.

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### The strands of the framework: Strengths and evidence-based

Supporting evidence-based practice, the framework draws on meta-analyses of what works in practice, and what interventions best inform good outcomes for children (Trotter, 2004). Good outcomes are achieved in a practice context of role clarity, the reinforcement of pro-social values, collaborative problem solving, good relationship work and a supportive helping alliance. Essentially this reflects a strengths approach to practice, and the knowledge that people do 'rebound' from serious trouble and grow and develop through dialogue and collaboration (Saleebey, 1992). Research also indicates that coordinated systemic responses are needed to address multiple needs (Walton, 2001) and that coordinated services are more likely to provide more effective interventions (Bell, 1999). Research into the links between family violence and child protection practice is also of critical importance to the framework (Jasinski and Williams, 1998) to ensure practice vigilance when working in the context of intimidatory dynamics (Connolly, 1999). The practice framework reinforces the need to be cognisant of all three perspectives throughout the phases of the work – supporting the notion that no one strand is enough and that practice strength is reflected in the weaving together of these ideas.

### Weaving together the perspectives throughout the phases of the work

The kete in figure 3 identifies three phases of the work in child care and protection practice: engagement and assessment, seeking solutions, and securing safety and belonging. These three phases capture the essence of what is considered important as work progressed with children and families. They are different from the descriptions that have previously shaped the work. More familiar to the first phase of the work is 'intake and investigation'. However, shifting from 'intake and investigation' to 'engagement and assessment' provides opportunities for us to rethink what is important in the work, and link this to the underpinning supportive evidence. While investigations will, of course, continue to be undertaken, what is important is that we focus effort into engaging with children and families, so that our investigations become engaging investigations. What we aim for in providing services for children is safety and belonging. Given this represents the essence of what we hope to achieve, the framework reinforces this in the language that is used – services need to be directed toward safety and belonging. In this way we are beginning to use language to reinforce critical elements of the work, and to more strongly influence the way we think about what we do and how we do it.

A key mechanism for weaving together the perspectives throughout the phases of the work is the development of practice triggers. These provide challenges to practice – reminders that reinforce and balance the perspectives throughout the phases of the work. They do not function as a checklist. Rather, they infuse a particular flavour into practice, encouraging critical reflection in practice and supervision. In this sense they provide opportunities for practice dialogue. They frame our practice understandings, and our collective beliefs around what is important to the work.

### Conclusion

Developing the practice framework for care and protection practice provides an opportunity to rethink what is important to our practice

with children and families, and how we use knowledge to inform our work. Early signs suggest that the practice framework resonates well with practitioners. This is important because its success depends on its capacity to capture the hearts and minds of those who work directly with families.

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