



# Assessing parental capacity to change: The missing jigsaw piece in the assessment of a child's welfare?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a framework for assessing parental capacity to change, for use by social workers when a child is experiencing significant harm or maltreatment. It reports on part of the work of a knowledge exchange project involving the University of Bristol and three local authorities in South West England. The availability of assessment models addressing capacity to change, in both social work practice and the academic literature, was found to be limited. At the same time, the importance of such an assessment is significant, in terms of the lives of children affected. Two particular approaches were examined, the assessment of actual attempts to change parenting behaviour, and how behaviour change theory can help understand barriers or facilitators to change such as individual motivation, or habits and automatic responses. The development of an assessment approach is outlined, based on these two key features. It is argued that this type of assessment helps fill an important gap in social work theory and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Where a child has been maltreated, the parents' potential, to make changes that address the identified problems, is significant in relation to the child's future wellbeing. A range of work has been undertaken across many countries to explore parental change; much of it focuses on helping parents to change, i.e. methods of working, interventions/treatment models and professional skills (Marcenko, Brown, DeVoy, & Conway, 2010; Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Trotter, 2015; Turnell & Edwards, 1999). There is also a limited contribution from the risk assessment field (White, Hindley, & Jones, 2014). Neither of these areas of work offer in-depth assistance to the practitioner in assessing parents' capacities to change. And yet capacity to change is of huge importance for social workers in considering that most difficult of decisions, to remove a child from his or her parents' care.

This paper reports on the development of an approach to assessing parental capacity to change, to which we have given the name C-Change. The approach was the outcome of a knowledge exchange project involving the University of Bristol, and three local authorities in South-West England. In the following pages, we first identify the context of assessments of parental capacity to change in social work practice; then we set out how we approached the problem, our understanding of key terminology, and how the academic literature has contributed to the development of such assessments. Finally, we present an outline and justification of the approach we developed.

## 2. The policy and practice context

There are significant tensions in social work practice in respect of supporting and promoting parental change. In England, as in many parts of the world, legislation and government guidance require social workers to support families and to enable children to remain in the care of their own parents if it is safe to do so. At the same time, however, they must initiate court action with a view to removal of the child (via a Care Order) where the harm or potential harm is significant and the parents are in some way responsible. In English law, this is codified, using what may appear to an international readership as rather obscure legalistic terms. The harm must be attributable to "the care given to the child, or likely to be given to him (sic) if the order were not made, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give to him" (s.31, Children Act, 1989, UK Government).

In circumstances of such harm, to keep a child in his or her own family safely, the parents must resolve the problems that led to the children being at risk in the first instance, and generally do so through positive engagement with services. This point, whilst seeming self-evident, is underlined by a range of research and practice experiences. In England, reviews of child deaths from maltreatment have often shown that services encountered difficulties working with the parents (Brandon et al., 2008). Data from child deaths in the USA paint a similar picture: in those families where fatalities occurred, the likelihood of parents using a range of services was lower, and a number of families refused meetings with professionals altogether (Douglas & Mohn, 2014). In a study of a parent aide programme in Texas, Harder (2005) found that parents, who had dropped out of the programme, were more likely to

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re-abuse their children than those who completed the programme. In England, there have been widespread concerns about some parents (albeit a minority) actively covering up their inability to make changes, a phenomenon that has been labelled 'disguised compliance' (Brandon et al., 2008). In planning the knowledge exchange project reported here, concerns of this kind suggested that social workers might benefit from deeper understandings of parents' abilities to change.

### 3. Our approach to the topic

In developing the C-Change approach, we explored a range of background literature, aiming to identify the most effective methods of assessing parental capacity to change. Due to funding constraints, this work was purposive, drawing particularly on existing reviews. We used an international review of literature in the child welfare and associated fields, focusing on parental engagement and readiness to change, which was a precursor to the funding for the present project (Platt, 2012). We undertook a detailed examination of a recent review of research related to capacity to change assessment commissioned by the UK Government's Department for Education (Ward, Brown, & Hyde-Dryden, 2014). We searched for conceptual and empirical work on frameworks, or typologies, of factors affecting behaviour change. And we reviewed relevant questionnaires or other measures that would be applicable in practice.

Regarding theories of behaviour change, there is a large number of such theories, and our work aimed to identify categorisations of key factors affecting behaviour change rather than to review all theoretical models. Because of the variety of individual difficulties presented by parents involved with social work services, we were seeking an integrated, or ecological, framework that drew upon a range of well-regarded theoretical models. Not only would such a framework present a range of factors worthy of assessment by social workers in individual cases, but it would also support existing strengths within the profession, where assessment using an ecological framework is accepted as a fundamental aspect of practice. Our review was purposive, in the sense of i) building on currently accepted principles for assessing children's needs, parenting capability, and family and environmental factors (Turney, Platt, Selwyn, & Farmer, 2012); and ii) exploring conceptual analyses of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect parental engagement and capacity to change. We searched using Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Social Care Online, using various combinations of the following terms: theory, behaviour, change, integrated, ecological, child, welfare, parent, assessment. Some of the searches revealed an unmanageably large number of references, that were not relevant to our search, but when varied combinations of terms in Google Scholar produced repeated hits of the same papers sorted for relevance, we considered that a point equivalent to 'data saturation' had been reached. We supplemented database searches with advice from colleagues regarding available integrated models of behaviour change.

Regarding the search for questionnaires, scales and measures, we searched Children's Bureau Express, Child Welfare Information Gateway, Google, Google Scholar, SCIE On-line and a sourcebook, Simmonds and Lehmann (2013). We used combinations of assess, support, sustain, maintain change, recurrent maltreatment, standard tools/measures/question, change, intuitive judgement, decision, structured, professional + judgement, monitor, evaluate, report, assess progress. These searches were further refined using the terms child and parent. Again, this approach was supplemented by recommendations from academic and practitioner colleagues.

Following this literature-based work, we designed a method of assessing parental capacity to change, applicable to a social work context where statutory powers of intervention are used in relation to children's welfare. The method (C-Change) was written up in the form of a practice handbook (Platt & Riches, 2016), developed in consultation with practitioners and managers from the participating local authorities. Training was provided to 129 social workers and managers, who then worked with the University team to pilot the method, and provide

data as part of an initial evaluation. A detailed report of the evaluation will be published elsewhere. The present paper explores the practice method rather than the pilot evaluation results.

### 4. Definitions of terms

Understanding the capacity of humans to change established patterns of behaviour is an area of interest globally (Cane, O'Connor, & Michie, 2012). Unfortunately, in the social work context, a wide range of terminology has grown up, used at seemingly equivalent conceptual levels. Scott and King (2007), for example, in a US-based literature review of client reluctance, identified key concepts as "treatment engagement, treatment motivation, denial, resistance/ambivalence, treatment responsiveness and treatment readiness" (p. 403). The problems of such a wide range of terms, and indeed a wide range of definitions, have been identified by many authors (Drieschner, Lammers, & van der Staak, 2004; Staudt, 2007; Yatchmenoff, 2005). And, at a fundamental level, it is worth noting that the use of the term 'treatment' itself is less common in England, where 'therapy' or 'intervention' is often preferred. For present purposes, we will focus on concepts of current concern in the UK at the time of writing, namely parenting capacity and parental capacity to change.

As Ward et al. (2014) indicated, 'parenting capacity' is a commonly used phrase in the UK, deriving from English legislation (Children Act 1989) governing state responsibilities towards children needing formal care or protection. It can be defined as a parent's overall ability to parent a child, across the range of needs the child may present. That is, a parent should provide basic care, safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, guidance/boundaries, stability, and so forth (Department of Health, 2000). Ward and colleagues adopted the term 'parenting capability' to avoid confusion with 'capacity to change', a convention that we will follow in this paper.

We define 'parental capacity to change', in the child welfare context, as the combination of attributes, capabilities, motivations, contextual factors and so forth, that may enable a parent to make changes for the benefit of the child(ren), and to demonstrate that they can address critical difficulties that would otherwise have a severe impact on the child(ren)'s welfare.

The concept of 'readiness to change' was also of considerable influence to us (Day, Casey, Ward, Howells, & Vess, 2010). Readiness has been defined as "the presence of characteristics (states or dispositions) within either the client or the therapeutic situation, which are likely to promote engagement in therapy and that, thereby are likely to enhance therapeutic change" (Ward, Day, Howells, & Birgden, 2004). Whilst this is a helpful concept, our choice has been to use the term 'capacity to change' for two particular reasons. The first is pragmatic, in that it has gained currency in both social work practice and in the policy context in the UK. The second is a more subtle judgement, that capacity to change implies an engagement with actual change, rather than preparation for change. We acknowledge, however, that both concepts have merit.

### 5. The importance of assessing parental capacity to change

A starting point regarding the importance of our topic is the substantial research evidence, across English-speaking countries, that parental cooperation with services (and by implication their engagement with a change process) has a significant effect on decisions such as taking children into care, or initiating child protection investigations (Holland, 2010; Littell, 2001; Masson et al., 2008; Platt, 2007). Unfortunately, understanding cooperation or engagement is insufficient on its own, and does not necessarily indicate whether the parents can change things sufficiently to keep the child safe. As Ward, Brown, and Westlake (2012) research into families involved with children's social work services in England showed, social workers may sometimes mistake superficial engagement by parents for a genuine desire to change. It is essential, then that the element of change is factored in to the decision-making.

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