

In conversation with Professor Jane Aldgate, Professional Advisor, *Getting it right for every child* team and Professor of Social Change, Open University

What is *Getting it right for every child*?

JA: *Getting it right for every child* is a new approach to the way we identify and meet the needs of all children that puts their wellbeing at the heart of all we do with and for them. It includes a set of core components that govern the way we will work, individually and together, with all children. It is built on common principles and values all of which are equally valid. It uses a common coordinated framework for assessment, planning and action across all agencies to address children's needs. This approach comes from a rights perspective that recognises that children have the right to be consulted about decisions that affect them (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; Children (Scotland) Act 1995). The way in which help is offered is equally important. The *Children's Charter* (2001) makes it very clear that children want a child-friendly approach from practitioners. All children, young people and their families should get the help they need when they need it in order to protect them and secure good outcomes for them.

Getting it right for every child is also a major change programme that will require the development of a common understanding and language, services to be streamlined and a focus on improving outcomes for children. It will only be achieved by changing culture, systems and practice across all services for children.

Where does *Getting it right for every child* sit in relation to children's services?

JA: *Getting it right for every child* starts in the universal services of health and education for all children because this is where early identification of problems is most likely to be noted and where early intervention is most likely to be provided. But it is no less relevant for children who are at risk and are in need of protection because protection and prevention should be twin aims at any level of help. It is founded on proportionate and timely help, so where immediate help is needed in cases of serious harm, child protection procedures and practices can be employed to identify immediate risks and concerns. What is important is that when action is needed, it is provided within the context of a single child's plan and is child centred and provided as early as possible.

What is the theory and research base for *Getting it right for every child*?

JA: The knowledge and theory behind *Getting it right for every child* is rooted in what we know about children's development and what helps children flourish. Contemporary theory acknowledges that what happens to a child in one part of his or her life will have an impact on other areas so it is important to look at the child's whole ecology (see, for example, Aldgate *et al.* 2006, *The Developing World of the Child*, Jessica Kingsley Publishing). We also know that what happens to children in their early years can have a profound affect on them subsequently, although with the right help at the right time children can recover from early adversity and become resilient as child psychologists

like Rudolph Schaffer have suggested (see Schaffer (1998), *Making Decisions about Children*, Blackwell). It is sometimes more difficult for children who have experienced prolonged abuse and neglect to recover completely but it is possible. We also know that the building of resilience in children helps them overcome adversity and vulnerabilities (see Daniel and Wassell 2002, *Assessing and Promoting Resilience in Children*, Jessica Kingsley Publishing).

Another source of knowledge that has influenced the development of *Getting it right for every child* is the substantial body of research through which children and their families have been very clear about the services they want and the way in which they would like practitioners to behave towards them. They want services to work together and coordinate help so that they are not passed round from one agency to another or have to tell their stories several times over (*For Scotland's Children* 2001). Families can often work in partnership with practitioners in child protection if they are treated with dignity and respect (see, for example, Department of Health 2001 *The Children Act Now- Messages from Research*, TSO).

You are a great exponent of evidence based policy, what influence has this had on the development of *Getting it right for every child*?

JA: *Getting it right for every child* has been shaped by Scottish Government policy over several years. It is supported by the strategic pillars of Scottish Government children's policy: Curriculum for Excellence, the Early Years framework, Equally Well and a host of other related policies and of course, the Concordat with local government. The foundation for the ideas were laid down in *For Scotland's Children* (Scottish Executive 2001), which introduced the idea of integrated working between services and that every child should have a named professional in the universal services of health or education who could be a point of contact for families. The review of child protection *It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright* (Scottish Executive 2002) introduced the idea that we are all responsible and accountable for children's safety and stressed the importance of sharing of relevant information between agencies.

Other policy documents, including, for example those relating to education (2006), children's health (2005), the impact of parental substance misuse (2003), Children's Hearings (2004), looked after children (2006), poverty and inequality (2008), the Early Years Framework (2008), anti-social behaviour (2009) all add to the picture of the Government's concern for all aspects of children's wellbeing.

Given the plethora of existing policy and guidance, why do we need *Getting it right for every child*?

JA: *Getting it right for every child* is the means by which practitioners use their skills and knowledge to promote children's wellbeing and put these policies into practice. We need *Getting it right for every child* because we know from research that some children fall through gaps in services and get passed from one agency to another. Children with complex needs are often not identified as early as they might be. Processes designed to get help to children are duplicated and one child may have several plans and many workers. Above all, agencies do not always share relevant information that might help identify children's vulnerabilities and strengths and what needs to be done. Although some excellent practice and systems exist across the country, these are not universal. *Getting it right for every child* requires changes in all agencies in culture, systems and practice (see *A Guide to Getting it right for every child*, Scottish Government 2008).

Tell me more about wellbeing and *Getting it right for every child*?

JA: Children's wellbeing is at the heart of *Getting it right for every child*. Wellbeing is a term used by many practitioners and researchers. It can be used in many different ways. The *Getting it right for every child* definition resonates with UNICEF's 2007 definition of wellbeing and welfare:

The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies in which they are born.

It also adopts an approach favoured by many contemporary psychologists that pays attention to strengths and building resilience. This gets away from measuring success or failure to looking at how children are 'progressing' (Kelly 1974; Aldgate et al. 2006).

The *Getting it right for every child* concept of wellbeing is translated into eight wellbeing indicators which are at the heart of the practice model. These are that every child should be: **safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active respected, responsible and included**.

Promoting the wellbeing of children throughout childhood relates to the aspirations for the future that all children should grow to be: **confident individuals, effective contributors, successful learners and responsible citizens**.

How does protecting children fit with the *Getting it right for every child* approach?

JA: Those working in services concerned with protecting children from harm have developed clear procedures and practice to identify and respond to children at risk. These can be utilised alongside the *Getting it right for every child* practice model in the same way that any specialist assessments, for example about a child's health or educational needs might contribute to a child's plan. Child protection procedures are helpful in identifying what needs to be done, by whom and who is accountable but are not the whole picture.

The *Getting it right for every child* approach to risk is to see risk and need as two sides of the same coin. If a child is at risk, then that child will have needs that must be met. This is what the research about a child's ecology tells us. Assessing and managing risk are part of the same system. Risk assessment tools are useful but if they constrain practitioners to only identifying immediate risk and do not identify the impact of those risks on a child's wellbeing in the broader sense, the child's needs may not be met. Risk assessment includes not only looking at immediate risk and what needs to be done straight away to keep a child safe but also planning to manage those risks and attend to children's needs to ensure all of their wellbeing is addressed. This is why the child's plan is so important. Practitioners need to draw on their knowledge and up to date evidence about the impact of harm on a child in the short and long term. They also need to be well informed about best practice to provide a friendly and efficient service to children at risk of harm. For a more detailed discussion of the *Getting it right* approach to risk see Aldgate and Rose (2008) on the website www.scotland.gov.uk/gettingitright

So what are the core elements of *Getting it right for every child*?

JA: The evidence base that underpins *Getting it right for every child* has helped to shape its 10 core components. These core components can be applied in any setting and any circumstance. They are at the heart of *Getting it right for every child* and provide a benchmark from which practitioners may apply the approach to their areas of work:

1. A focus on improving outcomes for children young people and their families based on a shared understanding of wellbeing
2. A common approach to gaining consent and sharing information where appropriate
3. An integral role for children, young people and families in assessment, planning and intervention
4. A coordinated and unified approach to identifying concerns, assessing needs, agreeing actions and outcomes, based on the Wellbeing indicators
5. Streamlined planning, assessment and decision making processes that lead to the right help at the right time
6. Consistent high standards of cooperation, joint working and communication where more than one agency needs to be involved, locally and across Scotland
7. A Lead Professional to coordinate and monitor multi-agency activity where necessary
8. Maximising the skilled workforce within universal services to address needs and risks at the earliest possible time
9. A competent and confident workforce across all services for children, young people and their families
10. The capacity to share demographic, assessment, and planning information electronically and within and across agency boundaries through the national eCare programme where appropriate

Together the wellbeing indicators and the core components make up the *Getting it right for every child* approach to meeting the needs of children and young people. The aim is to have a network of support for every child. The approach is underpinned by common values and principles and shared models, tools and practices that are designed to support work with children and young people. The values and principles of *Getting it right for every child* build from the Children's Charter and reflect legislation, standards, procedures and professional expertise.

Getting it right for every child has developed a practice model that all practitioners can use either on a single agency or multi-agency basis to assess, plan, take action and review a child's progress. For more details see Scottish Government *A Guide to Getting it right for every child* 2008: www.scotland.gov.uk/gettingitright

Can *Getting it right for every child* really work?

JA: Early indications from the Pathfinders are showing some positive results. In Highland, where there has been an all systems change, there has been a reduction of meetings, fewer referrals to the Reporter, more plans but fewer child protection registrations, more consistency and common understanding across agencies and children and families reporting they feel more included.