Improving the protection and wellbeing of children in Europe: enhancing the curriculum

Theory and practice in child wellbeing and protection

BE THE DIFFERENCE
Disclaimer:
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Learning outcomes

- Demonstrate an understanding of core theories relevant to child protection and wellbeing
- Apply a broad knowledge of theory in professional intervention with children and families
- Develop and apply a knowledge of theories of child development and attachment in assessment and intervention
- Understand and apply relevant research in informing practice
The relationship between theory and practice

“To practice without theory is to sail an uncharted sea; theory without practice is not to set sail at all.”

What is meant by the word “theory”?

Pilasis (cited in Coulshed and Orme 1998, p10) offers a range of different meanings attributed to “theory”. These include:

- theory as general rules or laws testable against observable evidence
- a hypothesis or tentative explanation to be researched
- a system of principles for understanding things more clearly
- not practical i.e. idealistic, unattainable in practice

Theories which explain why child abuse happens can serve three main functions:

1. Explanations give a greater sense of control
2. They can direct interventions
3. It can inform the development of policy

Theory for child welfare and protection

- Practice with vulnerable children and families should be “Informed by knowledge of the latest theory and research.”


This can include:

- An understanding of theoretical frameworks;
- knowledge acquired from research, and:
- the kind of practice/personal knowledge that can flow from critical reflection on our experiences and what we have learned through them

“Getting to the end result was basically a fluke, because I never used the theory to get there, commonsense was more what I used than theory to get to the place I wanted to be. It was then a surprise that it was theory.”

“Elaine had also stated that she thinks John does not like her and is always acting up but her daughters do as they’re told. Consequently John has spent time staying at his grandparents to give Elaine a break.”

- What kinds of theory might Elaine be using here to explain John’s behaviour with her?
- What are the consequences for John?
- What might you consider as an alternative theory for his behaviour?
Doing

Knowing

Being

Knowledge & understanding

Skills and abilities

Ethics, values, personal commitment
families are inherently complex systems

evidence from research cannot simply be applied by a practitioner to any given situation in child protection to predict risk

knowledge of child development and attachment needs to be situated with a framework or skills and values to promote relationship-based practice that keeps the child or young person at the centre of our thinking.


- Break into small groups
- Discuss: Which of these theoretical frameworks do you find most helpful in your practice?
- Feedback: why do you think you like these particular frameworks
Key theories – applications and limitations exercise

Considering the case study, each group is to consider the family’s needs from a single theoretical perspective:

- **Psychological** – biological theory, attachment, psychodynamic theory, learning theory, cognitive approaches
- **Social psychological** – individual interactionist, family therapy, social ecological approaches
- **Sociological** – social cultural, social structural feminist, child rights
Exercise continued

- Each group feed back to the others how they used their particular theory stance to create a tentative explanation for the Cox family’s experiences and needs.
- Discuss what you found to be helpful and unhelpful about your theory stance.
Thinking systematically

My World Triangle

- Being healthy
- Learning & achieving
- Being able to communicate
- Confidence in who I am
- Learning to be responsible
- Becoming independent, looking after myself
- Enjoying family & friends

What I Need from People Who Look After Me

- Guidance, supporting me to make the right choices
- Knowing what is going to happen & when
- Understanding my family's history, background & beliefs
- Everyday care & help
- Keeping me safe
- Being there for me
- Play, encouragement & fun

How I Grow & Develop

- Support from family, friends & other people
- Local resources
- Enough money
- Comfortable & safe housing
- Work opportunities for my family
- Belonging

My Wider World

The whole child or young person: Physical, Social, Educational, Emotional, Spiritual & Psychological development
The missing side of the triangle

- What are some of the social and environmental factors which may have had an impact on John’s development and wellbeing?
- How might you begin to address such issues in care planning?
“An ongoing process of gathering information, structuring it and making sense of it, in order to inform decisions about the actions necessary to maximise children's potential.” (p36)

Children and assessment

“Assessment is an intervention, not a neutral act...”

Attachment Theory

A biological theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main)
A means of survival (danger and protection)

A regulatory theory
“The dyadic regulation of emotion” (p27 Howe 2005)

A lifespan theory
Attachment through adolescence and adulthood

How familiar are we?
“Put simply, attachment behaviour is activated whenever children feel distressed and insecure, and need to get into close proximity with their main caregiver.”

Secure Base

- Parents provide this through the adult/child relationship
- Includes understanding of child’s wish for proximity, attention and responsiveness, not as naughty/demanding but as developmental expression of need.
- Child needs a *Coherent Story* of early attachment, incorporating good and bad, so the child can make sense of their story.
Internal Working Model

- Established in early relationships
- A theory of mind – a meta-representation
- A theory of reality
- A search for rules; organising experience
- A template for understanding people and the world
- A “working” model – subject to revision

Arousal–Relaxation Cycle
Fahlberg (1991)

Need → Displeasure

Trust
Security
Attachment

Quiescence

Satisfy Need
The Positive Interaction Cycle
Fahlberg (1991)

Parent initiates positive interactions with the child

Self worth
Self esteem

Child responds positively
Stages of Attachment

- **Pre-attachment** (Birth – 2 months)
- **Attachment-in-the-making** (2 – 7 months)
- **Clear-cut attachment** (7 months – 2 years)
- **Goal-corrected partnership** (2 years onwards)

Secure Attachment

Child:
Active exploration when attachment figure is present, upset at their departure, shows strong interest in interacting on their return.

Attachment Figure:
Positive, sensitive, encouraging, close physical contact.
Insecure Avoidant Attachment

Child:
Little distress on separation, avoids contact on return, may ignore, react to stranger as to parent.

Attachment Figure:
Typically cold, angry, rejecting.
Insecure/Ambivalent Attachment

Child:
Anxious before separation, upset during it, ambivalent during renewed contact, both seeking and resisting contact. At home these children cry more, show more distress and are negative about physical contact.

Attachment Figure:
Behaviours appears warm, but they are less sensitive to the baby’s signals, responding at inappropriate times.
Insecure Disorganised/Disoriented

Child:
Contradictory behaviour patterns e.g. gazing away while being held, lack a defensive strategy to protect themselves from feelings of anxiety, some just freeze through separation and reunion.

Attachment Figure:
In the child’s eyes the carer is experienced as either frightened or frightening and therefore not available as a source of safety or comfort.
I am…

- Loved, loveable, loving, wanted, competent, valuable, good, etc.

Or

- Unloved, unlovable, ineffective, bad, unwanted, etc.

Internal Working Model
Other people are...

- Loving, available, consistent, reliable, helpful, etc.

Or

- Rejecting, unpredictable, neglectful, unavailable, frightening, etc.
Internal Working Model

The world around me is...

- Safe, predictable, generally good, etc.

Or

- Unsafe, unpredictable, frightening, etc.
Applying attachment theory
Focusing on John (aged 3) from your case study

- What might have compromised Elaine and Brian’s parenting capacity when John was forming infant attachments?
- And how might those issues impact upon John’s emerging attachment strategies?
- What are the possible consequences of the impact in terms of John’s current and future development?
Attachment theory to inform interventions

You have considered psychological, socio-psychological and sociological theory in an attempt to understand what it is like to be John and what the consequences will be if nothing changes.

Now develop a care plan for John that seeks to protect him from further harm and create opportunities for John to overcome the impact of adversity experienced so far.
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Confidence in who I am

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Reference list


Reference list (cont’d)