

## **Response to framework for assessment of children in need**

### **Introduction**

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation draft of "Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families", not least because research findings from projects funded under its Disabled Children and Young People's Programme over the last 5 years have confirmed the negative experience of repeated assessment by different professionals from a variety of agencies for disabled children and their families.

Our response to the consultation draft is influenced by: the findings of these research projects and other projects relevant to children and families more generally; our involvement in the Quality Protects (Disabled Children) Reference Group convened by JRF in collaboration with the Department of Health (this group brings together researchers, professionals and parents from voluntary organisations, universities and the statutory sector); our involvement in the ADSS/Barnardo's network on supporting disabled children and their families.

Our response sets out the general comments relevant to the following areas:

1. Assessing Need for Disabled Children and their Families (work by Triangle)
2. Assessing Need for Black Children and their Families (work by REU)
3. General Comments on Assessment and Disabled Children
4. Whose Assessment Is It?
5. Assessment, Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
6. Diverse Family Structures
7. Fathers
8. Putting the Framework into Practice
9. Making the Framework Accessible to Children and Families
10. Specific Comments on the Consultation Draft (by chapter and paragraph)

We would be happy to provide you with further information. We are currently awaiting the publication (in mid-November) of a JRF Foundations document which summarises the findings of research projects funded by JRF on disabled children and their families over the last 5 years, as well as the Findings from projects on implementing a keyworker scheme, and on what practitioners need to know about supporting families with 2 or more severely disabled children. A list of findings and current projects relevant to the Framework is given at the [end](#) of the response.

### **1. Assessing Need for Disabled Children and their Families**

We are aware of the draft chapter produced by colleagues Ruth Marchant and Mary Jones at Triangle on the particular issues confronting disabled children, their families and professionals in relation to appropriate assessments. Having seen a draft of this chapter we are convinced that it is vital that it should be included in the final version of the Framework. Separate publication of this chapter will undermine its significance in the eyes of practitioners in social services departments and other agencies.

## 2. **Assessing Need for Black Children and their Families**

We have not seen a draft of this chapter. Even so, it would seem vital to incorporate this chapter within the overall Framework and also to strengthen the references to the particular needs of black and minority ethnic children generally elsewhere within their document. The JRF has supported some work on [ethnic minority families](#) (Beishon, Madood and Virdee, 1998) and has also published the findings of a nationwide survey by Chamba et al. ([Findings 539](#))

This survey, funded by JRF, researched the experiences of almost 600 minority ethnic families with a disabled child (with severe impairments). The findings confirm the particularly difficult circumstances in which many black and minority ethnic children and their families live.

## 3. **General Comments on Assessment and Disabled Children**

In our response, we have tried to highlight particular sections or paragraphs within the framework which would benefit from some amplification or qualification, and where possible have given suggestions for how this might be done. However, it may be helpful here to make some general points under which those that follow are to some extent subsumed.

(i) **A social perspective on disability and disabling barriers.** In many places in the Framework there are references to the effect of the child's disability and the need to make assessments of this and its impact on the child's quality of life and development. However, a social perspective on disability (the social model) would emphasise the particular circumstances in our society in which disabled children grow up. For example, a disabled child's access to friends or to participation in leisure activities or to attend a local school may not be directly affected by their physical impairment so much as by the inaccessibility of the facilities available to him/her (i.e. disabling barriers). Thus, a child who uses a wheelchair would not be deemed to have a "learning difficulty" under the terms of the Education Act if their local school were fully wheelchair accessible. Several of the comments we have made about the draft Framework derive from this social perspective. Following from this, there is an urgent need to encourage (through the Framework, training and support) those undertaking assessments to differentiate between the child's impairment and the social circumstances or

environment in which they live.

(ii) As Marchant and Jones have underlined, disabled children frequently experience assessment as a process that focuses on what is wrong with them. This form of assessment appears to identify the child as the source of difficulty, and it is not surprising that such assessments can be experienced as negative and disempowering for the children and their families. Assessments, and assessors, should focus on the situation, aiming to identify key disabling barriers that impact on disabled children's welfare and rights, and also to identify ways of removing these disabling barriers.

(iii) Although disabled children may well have more contact with the medical world than other children, they also have more difficulty in getting basic health care and other support needs met because of physical and attitudinal barriers they face in accessing routine dental, optical, GP and hospital care (e.g. inaccessible buildings, inflexible systems, discouraging attitudes of professionals).

#### **4. Whose Assessment Is It?**

Whose assessment is it? There is a well documented tendency for assessments to be conducted on the basis of what services are already available in the local authority area, rather than on the basis of what supports will meet the needs of the child/ren and family. For example, a family's need for support may become translated - possibly totally incorrectly - as a child's need for "respite" (Morris 1998).

#### **5. Assessment, Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

We warmly welcome the child-centred approach put forward in the Framework. However, this could be significantly strengthened by the addition of key references to a child's right to have her/his views taken into account as stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (particularly Article 12). It seems a shame (especially given the recent Government report on progress in implementing the Convention) that the Convention does not feature at all, where it could and should figure centrally. Related to this, it is perhaps pertinent to point out that the current document does not contain any reference to whether the children or families have a right to request an assessment.

#### **6. Diverse Family Structures**

We were pleased to see that the consultation document goes some way towards recognising the importance of family diversity. In addition to points stated above about minority ethnic families and families with a disabled child or disabled children, we would also suggest that the

Framework address other types of diversity in family structure. Lone parents and step-families experience particular difficulties, yet these are not referred to. The Framework could usefully highlight the fact that certain types of family experience greater difficulties as a direct result of the family structure (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). ([Foundations SPR6108](#))

## **7. Fathers**

There is only one specific reference to fathers (paragraph 5.27) - and this appears to be focused on child protection, rather than on the active role that most fathers want to or are playing in their children's lives. Evidence from several research projects around fathers (to be summarised in a JRF Foundations in April 2000) has underlined this. Also, research by Deborah Ghate on fathers and family centres (due for publication next year) has examined the barriers to men's involvement in family centres. The findings point to the importance of referral and assessment processes in facilitating, or impeding, the involvement of fathers.

## **8. Putting the Framework into Practice: training and resources**

Inevitably, there will be questions about how the Framework will be used in practice. Here, issues of appropriate training and adequate resources will be key. Appropriate training and support for assessors will be vital if the concerns we have raised about the usefulness of the assessment framework for disabled children, minority ethnic children, and children from different family structures are to be met. No doubt, other organisations, agencies and practitioners will also have concerns about the lack of resources available to implement the Framework. Resources will be required to enable assessments to be undertaken in the manner advocated and, crucially, to provide appropriate services and supports in response to the needs of children and their families (if provision is truly to be needs-led and child-centred rather than service-led).

## **9. Making the Framework Accessible for Children and Families**

It will be important to produce the key elements of the final Framework in forms that are accessible to children and their families (as suggested in one of the bullet points on page 87 of the consultation document). If the Framework is to make a real improvement in the way that children in need and their families are supported, then it will be vital for these families to know what they should be able to expect from the assessment process. Obviously, any guides produced would have to be accessible (e.g. for disabled people, minority ethnic groups) and appropriately disseminated.

## **10. Specific Comments on the Consultation Draft**

### **CHAPTER ONE, Children in Need**

**Page 1, 1.1**

It might be useful to include statistics on the numbers of disabled children in this paragraph, and (or) in the diagram on page 5.

**Page 10, 1.31**

The child-centred approach could be strengthened by a link to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and children's rights to have their views taken into account.

"Acute housing problems" - Although it may be desirable to check that attention is not diverted from the child to other issues (as stated in the document), it is equally important not to convey the impression that acute housing problems do not have a huge impact on children's welfare and rights, and on families' support capacities. Research by Oldman and Beresford (1998) ([Social Care Research Findings 76](#))

has demonstrated the enormous impact that inadequate housing has on disabled children and their development.

**Page 11, 1.33**

"Disabled children ) developmental dimensions". A child's development will be affected not only by their impairment but also by their personal experiences, including their experience of disabling barriers and social exclusion. Thus, assessment standards around developmental milestones need to be used with caution. The impact of experience and disabling barriers needs to be carefully differentiated from the impact of the child's impairment.

**Page 11, 1.36**

"Ecological approach" - this would seem to be a useful paragraph within which to introduce a reference to the impact of disabling barriers in society on the child's development and well-being.

**Page 13, 1.42**

It would be good to make a reference specifically to disabled children in the penultimate sentence, perhaps along these lines. "Similarly, according to the age and development of the child, listening to what children have to say and working openly and honestly with them is valued by them and produces more effective outcomes. Learning to listen to and communicate with disabled children, including those with communication impairments, is critical if their assessments are to be of value. This will be discussed further etc."

The JRF has supported several projects that have involved children (including young children, children with severe impairments, children who do not use speech to communicate, etc) in

research and consultation. Work is underway at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (Alison Clark/Peter Moss, Institute for Education, University of London) on how very young children can be consulted. JRF has also published two guides on involving disabled children (Ward 1997) and children with communication and cognitive impairments (Morris 1998) ([Findings 378](#)) in projects. These and other sources of knowledge on how to consult with and listen to children and young people need to be made use of.

**Page 13, 1.45**

In view of research findings around the resilience of children born to parents with learning difficulties and the factors that encourage resilience in them, we would suggest that in the second sentence of this paragraph you should insert after "resources" "available to the family" since we know that this is a critical factor (Booth and Booth 1997). ([Findings SP 113](#))

**Page 14, 1.46**

"The multi-agency approach to assessment and provision of services": It would be helpful to include other agencies in the listing here, in particular housing, which does not generally have a lot of contact with the child directly but can be a key service provider, both for the child and for the family - particularly where a family includes disabled children or adults.

**Page 14, 1.48**

"The precise nature of these needs" - It might be helpful to revise this to: "the precise nature of these needs including, for disabled children, needs arising from their social environment or disabling barriers within it rather than specific to their impairment".

"The priority for action and/or resources" - It is not clear whether the resources to be asked about are those of the service providers or those already within the family.

**Page 15, 1.51**

"The process of assessment should be therapeutic in itself" - Although ideally this should be the case, research and experience suggest that it is often not the case for disabled children and their families; might it be sensible to introduce a qualifying statement to that effect?

**Page 15, 1.52**

"Grounded in evidence-based knowledge": If it would be helpful to include some reference here or elsewhere in the document to the JRF research Findings - which are available free of charge - and how people can access them, we would be very happy for you to do this. Several of the JRF Findings from research will have direct relevance to agencies and those undertaking assessments.

**CHAPTER TWO, Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need**

## **Page 18, Assessment Framework Diagram in Figure 2**

It would be helpful to strengthen the assessment framework by having in the centre that the responsibility or the duty on the local authority is to safeguard and promote not only the welfare but also the rights of the child.

## **Page 19**

"Self care skills" - Perhaps this final sentence might be re-phrased: "Special attention should be given to the impact of a child's impairment and other vulnerabilities and on social circumstances affecting these in the development of self care skills (for example, inaccessible or inappropriate bathroom facilities will impede a child's development of toileting skills)".

## **Page 23, 2.11**

"The impact of multiple caregivers" - There is a clear issue here for some disabled children who experience multiple caregivers and who are therefore at increased risk of abuse. Might it be worth inserting a sentence to this effect?

## **Page 24**

Family and Environmental Factors: "housing" - It is absolutely vital to include some reference here to disabled children e.g. is the housing accessible and suitable to the needs of any disabled children within it? Have the family been trying to secure adaptations of some kind and if so for how long, etc., etc?

## **Page 25**

"Family's social integration" - It might be useful to include a sentence about the social isolation and exclusion of disabled children, especially disabled teenagers, who may be unable to attend local schools because of the schools' inaccessibility and who are often unable to access local leisure facilities and/or local transport or visit potential friends in their own homes, again because of inaccessibility (i.e. because of disabling barriers external to the child/young person; not because of the child/young person's impairment).

"Access to community resources" - It might be useful to refer to the fact that knowledge of resources available in the community will not help a mother with a disabled child if those community resources are inaccessible or will not accommodate a disabled child, as is often the case with pre-school playgroups, nursery provision etc.

## **CHAPTER THREE, The Assessment Process**

### **General Comments on Gaps in Chapter 3**

a) Rights and Access to Information - There seems to be a major omission: nowhere is there

a reference to whether parents/carers and children have the right to request an assessment. Following on from this, it would be very helpful if the guidance could ask local authorities to produce a 'user friendly' guide for parents/carers and children so that they can clearly understand the assessment processes and what they might expect or be entitled to.

b) Challenges and Complaints - There needs to be some indication of the point at which there can be an intervention or challenge by a parent or child on the assessment framework and the procedure being followed by officers. Integration of this form from the outset in the processes and procedures will help to solve problems early, and will also mean that families do not have to go through lengthy and complicated Social Services complaints procedures.

c) Reassessment - Currently there are children, particularly in the looked after system, whose assessment of need was done some years ago. The children have grown older, their circumstances have changed, but officers are still working to an out-of-date assessment. Thus, some indication of expectations around the frequency of assessment for children receiving services on a long-term basis would be helpful.

**Page 32, 3.9**

"Interviews with child and family members, as appropriate" - It would be important to insert "including disabled children who may not communicate primarily through speech". (See comments on paragraph 3.40)

**Page 38, 3.30**

"Children's needs for explanations of what is happening may sometimes be overlooked" - It would be important to add: "They should be informed clearly and sensitively even where they do not communicate through speech and may be unclear how much of what is being said is being understood".

**Page 41, 3.35**

"Families do not want to be subjected to repeated assessments" - The evidence from research is that repeated assessments by different professionals can be a particular problem for families with disabled children and it might be worth highlighting this. Note, this point should not be confused with the point made above about the appropriateness of reassessments where children are in the "looked after" system or receiving services on a long-term basis.

**Page 42, 3.36**

"Are there communication issues" - It would be useful to insert after "through the use of interpreters or signers" an additional phrase: "or through careful preparation and consultation with those close to a disabled child or other specialist in this area", since not all communication issues relate to use of sign or other recognised languages.

**Page 47, 3.49**

"Children in transition" - It might be good to reference here or elsewhere the recent review conducted by Jenny Morris for the Foundation entitled "Hurtling Into the Void" which looked at the issues confronting disabled children and their families at the point of transition into adulthood (Morris, 1999). ([Findings 919](#))

**Page 47, 3.49**

"They (or their parents) have specific communication needs" - It might be good to re-frame this along the following lines: "They (or their parents) have specific communication needs, for example they do not use English as a first language or they do not communicate through speech and the professionals involved with them are not skilled in their preferred means of communication".

"They are children whose problems )" - Evidence from a recent JRF project (the Findings of which will be published in mid-November) has clearly demonstrated the cumulative impact on a family having more than one disabled child, since assessment and other criteria frequently failed to take account of this situation. It would be good to reference this here or elsewhere (Tozer, 1999). ([Findings N99](#))

**Page 49, 3.51**

Some further commentary on issues around assessment for young people, particularly young disabled people, would be helpful here or elsewhere. A copy of the Findings from Jenny Morris's recent research review on transition is attached for information (Morris, 1999). ([Findings 919](#))

**Page 49, 3.53**

We particularly welcome the references to "Services should be provided to parents to enhance their ability to fulfil their parenting responsibilities" since all too often, highlighting the needs of young carers is done in such a way that it undermines the entitlements of disabled parents or siblings to support.

**Page 50, 3.59**

The assessment procedure may adhere to the model set out on p.18 and it may be carried out in a thorough and rigorous way. However, when officers begin to produce a realistic plan of action (as suggested in 3.59), the real world will impinge. Action planning is key to the success of the assessment process and we would suggest that much more emphasis should be placed on its importance within the Framework. Action planning takes place within the restricted resources available to officers when dealing with a particular family; often the resulting plan owes more to these restrictions than to the perhaps excellent assessment

which preceded it.

Also, the identification of intervention/s, which precedes the development of the action plan, should include actions that have been suggested but rejected on the grounds of cost or unavailability of service. This would clarify the decision-making process for the children, the family and senior managers reviewing case notes when assisting with long-term planning.

Action plans are often drawn up by officers who do not have the responsibility to implement them. Experience indicates that staff involved in children's care, such as foster carers and those working in children's homes, have not always been provided with details of assessment and/or the proposed action plan.

Communication between different departments in social services and between different agencies is key to the accurate implementation of the assessment and action plan. Thus, it might be useful to insert a reference to "reviewing communication procedures after the action plan has been developed".

## **CHAPTER FOUR, Inter-disciplinary and Inter-agency Assessment**

### **Page 58, 4.25**

Some reference to useful documentation around obtaining informed consent of children, particularly disabled children, would be useful here (for example, Ward 1997, Alderson 1996, or work by Marchant et al). ([Findings 539](#))

### **Page 63, 4.53**

It would be useful to strengthen this paragraph in relation to disabled children and their families perhaps as follows: after the first sentence insert "This is particularly true for disabled children and their families about half of whom are living in housing unsuitable for them and their child. Research has shown that families often experience a lack of information about their entitlements in this area and a lack of understanding on the part of housing and other professionals. Not enough resources in terms of financial assistance and availability of technical advice are made available to families of disabled children who face housing difficulties".

## **CHAPTER FIVE, Resources to Assist Effective Assessment**

### **Page 68, 5.7 (also paragraph 3.5)**

"Assessment Records" - The issue of parents and young people's access to records and to the decision-making criteria is a key area of conflict between families and social services officers. Guidance needs to be more detailed to protect both families and staff and to clarify their relationship with regard to ownership of records and access to them. It needs to be made

explicit under what circumstances and what timescales parents, children and young people have access to the records.

Following from this, it might be useful to insert: "unless exceptional circumstances prevail, children and their families should have access to assessment records and in particular, to the criteria for assessment which has been applied in their particular case. Children and parents should also be given a named officer with whom they can discuss concerns about the assessment. This officer should be someone independent from the assessment process". A similar insertion could be made in paragraph 3.5.

### **Page 76, 5.27**

As mentioned earlier, there is concern that insufficient attention is paid to fathers in the draft Framework - not least to the positive, active role that many fathers are currently playing or would like to play in their child/ren's development and family life. Forthcoming research by Deborah Ghate for the Foundation will help to identify ways in which family centres can support the positive involvement of fathers, and ways in which referral processes (and assessments) can facilitate this also.

## **CHAPTER SIX, Developing Arrangements for Implementation**

### **Page 82, 6.3**

It would be good to include a reference here to the vital role that accessible transport can play in improving the quality of life of disabled children and their families, and the responsibilities of public transport planners and providers to address this issue.

The specific reference to housing and leisure in this paragraph are welcome.

### **Page 83, 6.7**

The assessment procedure also offers an opportunity for recording unmet need and it would be helpful if the department could give Social Services staff provision to do this within the guidance. Currently officers assess the needs of a child very much within the context of the resources and services they know are available within their area. They may also know that there are other services available in other areas which could better meet the needs of this child but because such a service does not exist within their local authority, this need is not recorded or highlighted. Clearly, this results in a deficit of information in terms of planning.

Assessment procedures offer a valuable opportunity to record not only what is provided but also, in an ideal situation, what could be provided to support a child and family and this could be very helpful in long term planning for the authority and its partners.

### **Page 87, 6.24**

"Produce appropriate explanatory information for children and families" - There is now a growing knowledge about the kind of information that is accessible to disabled children and their families and to children from black and minority ethnic communities. It would be good to make it clear that there are particular issues here around accessibility.

It would also be good to place considerably more emphasis elsewhere in the Framework on the need to produce accessible information on assessment aims and procedures for children and families - not just as a bullet point in a box near the end of the document.

**Page 88, 6.33**

We look forward to seeing the commissioned training materials to assist the implementation of the Assessment Framework - and hope that these materials identify the particular, as well as shared, difficulties that families with one or more disabled children, from minority ethnic backgrounds, or with diverse family structures experience.

In the meantime, we are concerned that some important evidence for practitioners is not contained within this guide and would suggest, at the very least, that some document like Jenny Morris's Findings (which references many other pieces of research about supporting disabled children and their families) might usefully be included as a resource. ([Findings 919](#))

**Page 89, 6.35**

It would be helpful to make an explicit reference to elected members here. The strengthening of the involvement of elected members is a key feature of Quality Protects and has enabled this initiative to be seen as a corporate rather than a social services responsibility. It is therefore regrettable that elected members are only mentioned in the Box on page 87.

**Page 90, 6.37**

The summary is useful but could be expanded to include: monitoring of the resources allocated to assessment, both within social services and within other agencies; monitoring of the resources required to maintain inter-agency cooperation since this is not cost-free; monitoring of timescales on assessments and revised assessments; and perhaps monitoring of the involvement and understanding of elected members.

**Page 90, 6.39**

Obviously, reviewing and deciding how to take forward required changes is best done on an inter-agency basis, but it may be more helpful to give this responsibility to existing partnerships such as Area Child Protection Committees rather than establishing separate inter-agency mechanisms. These bodies are chaired by social services, involve a wide range of agencies including the voluntary sector and would seem to be best placed and have some of the required expertise to take forward the work suggested here.

## REFERENCES

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### **Forthcoming publications**

- JRF Foundations on supporting disabled children and families (Jenny Morris)
- Findings on supporting families with 2 or more severely disabled children (Rosemary Tozer)
- Findings on lessons learned from putting research into practice in implementing a keyworker scheme in two local authority areas (Bryony Beresford et al)