



Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment

*A briefing for
practitioners*

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This briefing for practitioners is one of the pilot materials developed as part of the research in practice Change Project 'Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment'. The briefing is intended for practitioners engaged in assessment and is designed to be read on its own or alongside the other resources produced by the Change Project Development Group.

The briefing is neither a toolkit nor a set of instructions on how to conduct an assessment. Rather, it aims to set out, in an accessible format, the issues that the Change Project has identified as essential to support the kind of thinking needed to produce sound, analytical assessments that lead to plans and interventions capable of making a real difference to the lives of vulnerable children and their families.



For more information about the Change Project and to see the other pilot materials, go to: www.rip.org.uk/analysis

Why is analysis and critical thinking in assessment an important issue?

Good assessments of individual children and families are crucial to ensuring that the right children get the right service at the right time. We can never be absolutely certain we are 'getting it right' in the assessments we make about vulnerable children and their families. But sound professional judgement, supported by analysis and critical thinking, can help us to be more confident that the judgements we make are of the best quality possible.

There is a growing body of opinion that practitioners have not been well served in recent years by the wealth of guidance and regulation that has been issued to address perceived failings in the assessment process. Although designed to improve assessment practice, there has perhaps been too much emphasis on compliance with regulations and rules at the expense of supporting practitioners in developing and using the analytical skills that support sound judgement.

What does a good assessment look like?

It would be difficult and indeed undesirable to produce a model assessment that might act as a template for all assessments because children's lives and the difficulties they face vary so widely. Instead this section aims to identify some of the key features of good assessments undertaken in a range of circumstances and settings, and to provide a framework to support effective thinking in practice. It suggests that the judgements made in any assessment, regardless of the context in which the assessment is happening, will be enhanced if they are based on this framework. The pilot resources include two case studies, and worked examples have been produced to demonstrate how the framework can be applied. They are available at www.rip.org.uk/analysis.

The first case study, about Danny, has been used as an example in the Change Project core publication. You may want to look at the relevant section. This briefing uses the second case study, about Nasim, as an example to illustrate the practical application of the framework.

A good assessment is likely to:

- > show an understanding of family history and context – this issue of context is key
- > be specific about the individual child and family's needs
- > state clearly why the assessment is being done, and what it hopes to achieve

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- > include evidence to support the decision (eg research, experience, observations)
- > include clear statements about what the practitioner thinks should happen rather than using flowery and ambiguous language
- > be logical, focused, concise and jargon-free.



A full list of qualities can be found in the Change Project core publication on [pages 22-23](#).

The Anchor principles: a five-question framework for analytical thinking

The framework for thinking developed by the Development Group as part of this Change Project consists of five questions. These are referred to as the Anchor principles because they provided a way of ensuring that assessment is firmly anchored to analysis at all stages. The framing questions are:

- > What is the assessment for?
- > What is the story?
- > What does the story mean?
- > What needs to happen?
- > How will we know we are making progress?

What is the assessment for?

It is essential to have a clear understanding about the purpose of the assessment from the outset. It is easy to see the reasons for undertaking an assessment in terms of bureaucratic processes but this does not provide a helpful starting point for analysis. So, in relation to the Nasim case study, a statement like:

Nasim's parents are anxious about their son's development and are finding his behaviour difficult to understand and manage. They are overwhelmed and exhausted by the practical tasks of caring for him and their other children...

may be a more helpful way of beginning the process of thinking about the case than:

Nasim is presenting symptoms of ASD. An assessment of special needs should be undertaken.

If you are clear about the purpose of the assessment from the outset it is easier to begin thinking about what the key issues might be, what more you need to know and how you might direct conversations with the family. You can also begin to think about what you know, from your own practice or from research, in relation to those key issues. For example, you might want to consider any research messages about the impact of caring for a child with special needs on adult relationships, on family finances or on the emotional development of siblings. You may want to think about your experiences of working with families with a child with special needs and the impact of those special needs on family life.

What is the story?

'Telling the story' is a skill and one that often comes naturally to practitioners. Stories are told in context and, for practitioners, that story has to reflect the unique circumstances of each child and their family in the context of the difficulties they are facing. Those difficulties will be reflected in the reason for the assessment. If you describe the reason for the assessment in bureaucratic process terms – for example, 'A core assessment to inform planning meeting' – the nature of the child's difficulties will be lost, making it much harder for you to address those difficulties effectively. Similarly, if you collect information as a questionnaire rather than as a story, you are likely to end up with a list of unconnected and possibly irrelevant facts rather than a clear and accurate account of the child and family's circumstances. Without such an account of family circumstances you have no firm basis for your analysis.

Helping a child and family to tell their story can be a therapeutic process in itself. It is important to remember that this is their story, so there may be a variety of interpretations that you will need to ensure you discuss with the family. An assessment should not contain any surprises that you haven't already discussed, and should be written in language that they can understand.

What does the story mean?

As you put together the family story you will already be developing ideas about what it all might mean. Once the story has been put together, the real task of sense making and analysis takes place. You will be asking yourself – 'Here is the story, what does that story tell me about the child's needs?'

In trying to formulate needs, it's easy to think: 'Here is the problem – what is the solution?' However, this approach misses out the crucial stage of fully understanding and analysing the story, leading to responses and interventions that are service-led rather than needs-led.

It may therefore be more helpful to think: 'This is the story or situation – what does this tell me about need?'

The more **specific** the descriptions of need are, the better the chances of fully understanding the precise needs of the individual child and, ultimately, responding effectively. It should be remembered too that often the best way of meeting a child's needs is by meeting the needs of their parents – and using the same very specific approach to describing their needs.

To have the best chance of understanding a particular child's story, analysing that child's individual needs and finding a service that meets those needs, it is best to **avoid**:

- > Describing need in **universal** terms, for example: *Nasim needs to reach his full potential* – all children need to achieve their potential. This approach therefore loses the focus on the individual and their specific needs, making it much

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more difficult to find an effective service.

- > Describing need in **service** terms, for example: *Nasim needs to be referred to CAMHS* – the problem with this approach is that it doesn't mention what role the service is expected to play, or which needs it is expected to address. Other and perhaps more pressing needs may be lost sight of. It also risks referring the child to a service because it already exists, rather than as a response to assessed need.
- > Describing need in terms of an **assessment**, for example: *Nasim needs to have a special needs assessment* – this may well be part of an effective service response, but there must have been emerging concerns that have led to the current assessment. In Nasim's case this is about his mother's anxiety and exhaustion. It is therefore important that these concerns are made explicit to prevent them being overlooked.

Description of needs that are expressed in universal terms, in terms of the need for a service, or in terms of the need for an assessment, are all unlikely to be analytically robust, and run the risk of producing one-size-fits-all assessments and one-size-fits-all responses, neither of which will produce positive outcomes for children.

What needs to happen?

Analytical thinking in assessment – working out what the story means – involves making clear links between the difficulties that are presented, your interpretation of those difficulties and the ways in which your interpretation of those difficulties connect to the outcomes you think it is reasonable to expect, and plans you have made to achieve those outcomes. Making stronger connections between needs and plans encourages the delivery of more focused responses, a more precise use of evidence about what works and, ultimately, better outcomes. Simply listing agencies the family might be referred to does not constitute a plan unless it is clear what action is expected from the agency, how the referral is linked to the meanings given to the story, what needs the agency is expected to address and what the referral is meant to achieve.

Outcomes should be SMART: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**greed, **R**ealistic and **T**imed.

So, in the case of Nasim, you might specify outcomes in relation to the need for his parents to understand why he behaves as he does and to feel more able to manage his behaviour. For example:

- > *Parents can describe triggers/reasons for Nasim's behaviour*
- > *Parents have strategies in place to manage Nasim's behaviour*
- > *Parents report head banging and rocking has reduced.*

The task is then to decide what work needs to be undertaken to achieve

these outcomes, bearing in mind any relevant research message about what might help achieve them. Your final plan will involve deciding who in your local professional network is best placed to undertake the work, any practical arrangements that need to be in place to support your plan, and timescales for reviewing progress.

How will we know when we are making progress?

If interventions are not making a difference, then we need to know why so we can implement a more effective strategy. This is why setting clear outcomes at the previous stage is so crucial, as these are the criteria against which progress will be measured. To review progress, you need to look at whether an outcome has been achieved and, if not, to ask yourself – ‘Why not?’ Asking yourself the following questions might help identify possible reasons for the lack of success:

- > Is the meaning given to the story flawed?
- > Has my initial theory been disproved?
- > Has new information emerged which changes the meaning I initially gave to the story?
- > Is there a gap between the need and the service provided?

Plans need to be adjusted in light of answers to these questions.

Once this process has been completed any new circumstances that have emerged since the original plan was made need to be considered. This may result in new needs, new outcomes and new interventions being added to your updated plan.

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Grounding your assessment in a solid evidence base

The most useful assessments outline clearly the thought processes that have led to conclusions and plans. The Anchor principles can help with this and will be further enhanced by reference to a solid evidence base. An evidence-informed approach to assessment practice will strengthen your analysis by helping you to think about alternative ways of working with a family, questioning the impact that your own beliefs and values might have on your decision-making, and backing up your conclusions. Evidence-informed practice emphasises the importance of using a combination of research evidence, practitioner experience, and service user views to make decisions about cases.

Research knowledge can inform the meaning you give to the story, but it is important that assessment show how you have applied it to the particular situations you are working on. Generalised or 'stock' phrases are unlikely to reflect the needs and circumstances of the individuals involved. Research will very rarely provide definitive answers in a particular case, but when combined with your experience of similar cases, observations of the individual situation and views of the child and family, it can contribute to a stronger, more robust analysis.

Thinking processes

You will already be using a variety of thinking skills when conducting an assessment. You may not always use these consciously, but being aware of different modes of thinking can be helpful in developing your skills further. Being aware of different kinds of thinking will also contribute to the way you make sense of situations and formulate plans. Some different modes of thinking employed by practitioners are listed here:

> Analysis

Trying to make sense of a mass of often complex, confusing or incomplete information by working through it logically.

The idea of constructing a story is an example of analysis as it involves picking out relevant facts and linking them together to form a coherent picture.

> Intuition

Draws on your life experience and practice knowledge. It is a way of thinking that is essential to social work practice as it is quick and can be used to demonstrate empathy and establish rapport. Intuition can be an important part of assessment practice if it is tested and checked thoroughly.

Listening to Nasim's parents describing his behaviour and quickly picking up that he might be on the autistic spectrum could be an example of intuition.

> Critical thinking

Weighing up the different options in an open-minded way and being able to explain why one interpretation is more convincing and/or should be chosen above any others.

You may wonder if Nasim's behaviour is the result of poor attachments and rejection explained by his mother's mental health difficulties. On the other hand, you may feel that his parents' obvious concern, his mother's continued breast feeding and their apparent success in parenting their other children make an explanation of autism more likely.

your new hypothesis might be that his parents need to understand why it was hard for them to be interested in the reasons underlying their son's difficulties.

> Hypothesising

Thinking about a range of possible ways of explaining the meaning of the story. Testing out a range of hypotheses increases the likelihood of finding the best way to respond to the situation. Hypothesising and testing are ongoing processes.

Formulating needs is one way of hypothesising. The original hypothesis is that Nasim's parents need to understand why he behaves as he does. This hypothesis is based on a belief that the parents are committed to their son. Implicit in this hypothesis is the idea that if they could understand his behaviour their anxiety about him would be reduced. It would then be easier for them to move on to managing his behaviour better. It may be that, in working with the parents to help them understand Nasim's behaviour, you discover his parents seem to have little interest in finding explanations. This might lead you to conclude that you were wrong in your original hypothesis. You might begin to question their commitment and

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Added to this is the concept of reflection, which can take one of two forms:

- > reflection on action – looking back on what you have done and thinking about how it went, and what you could have done differently
- > reflection in action – thinking on your feet, and applying learning from previous situations to your current case.

Supervision

Regular, good quality supervision is essential to your development as an effective, reflective practitioner. It is important that you are aware of what to expect from supervision. Supervision should be an opportunity for you to reflect on your practice, to examine your assumptions and to test out your ideas. Supervision should allow you to question your approach to a case and explore alternative ways of looking at the situation with your supervisor. Supervisors should also be able to support your thinking around a particular case. Effective supervision practice that takes this more reflective approach will help to develop competence and confidence in your ability to analyse and think critically.

Recommendations for practitioners

- > Use the Anchor principles to provide a framework for thinking in your assessments.
- > Identify the purpose of the assessment from the start.
- > Focus on the notion of a story – what is going on in this situation, what does the story tell me about the child's needs and how are those needs impacting on the child and family?
- > Develop clear outcomes that link directly to the needs you have identified and can be measured to assess progress.
- > Ensure that you make clear links between the purpose of the assessment, the story, the needs you have identified, the outcomes you have specified and the plan.
- > Ask yourself how your beliefs, values and assumptions could impact on the case you are working on.
- > Be explicit about where the knowledge you are using in your assessments comes from (research, observation, practitioner experience). Make sure this knowledge is effectively analysed and applied to the individual case.
- > Talk to your supervisor about how they can support you to reflect on your cases. (You may wish to refer to the briefing for supervisors for more details about reflective supervision.)



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This briefing is part of a series of materials that make up the Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment pilot resources.

These resources will all be published at www.rip.org.uk/analysis from January 2011 for Partner agencies to download. From February 2011, we will be inviting a group of agencies to pilot these materials in their own organisations, and use the learning from these pilots to feed into the final resource.

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