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Empowerment and Protection

The development of policies and practices in risk assessment and risk management in services for adults with learning disabilities

SUMMARY

Agencies working with people with learning disabilities are required to address risk, particularly in relation to health and safety. Furthermore, community care legislation emphasises meeting individual need, which in itself requires an assessment of risk.

This paper provides a summary of a piece of research that looks at the development of policies and practices in risk assessment and management in community services for adults with learning disabilities. The research was funded through the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities and was carried out by **Andy Alaszewski, Helen Alaszewski and Alison Parker.**

The research highlighted the following:

- Although the literature suggests that people with learning disabilities and their family carers have conflicting and polarised views about risk, this research revealed a more complex picture.
- The senior managers who were interviewed highlighted risk as an important issue, although they tended to emphasise safety issues. Despite a recognition of the importance of furthering user autonomy, only three respondents described their policies as bridging empowerment and protection.
- The researchers suggest that it is not appropriate to develop a single prescriptive approach to the development of risk policies. However, they were able to identify the principles underlying sound risk policies and to describe examples of good practice.

BACKGROUND

Building Expectations: Opportunities and Services for Adults with a Learning Disability, stressed the importance of choice in the lives of people with a learning disability.

'It is essential that all those working with people with learning disabilities take into account the fact of change and the need for choice.' (Mental Health Foundation, 1996)

Following on from this, the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities has been exploring issues concerned with choice for people with severe, profound and multiple learning disabilities in its Choice Initiative (1997-2000), a programme of service development projects.

The issue of reasonable risk-taking is closely related to choice and is of great importance, if people with learning disabilities are to lead full lives in the community. However, literature in this area shows discrepancies in the ways in which risk is perceived. People with learning disabilities have been viewed as keen to take risks, while their family carers have been perceived as being protective and seeing risks as hazardous. Professionals, it has been suggested, have a more balanced view.

If reasonable risk-taking is to take place then sound principles need to be established and good practice needs to be identified and disseminated.

THE RESEARCH

The research was carried out over nine months in 1998. The aims of the research were as follows:

- To examine perceptions of risk from the point of view of people with learning disabilities, family carers and professionals
- To identify how the risk associated with providing support for adults with learning disabilities is defined and what policies are used by agencies to manage risk
- To assess whether risk policies enhance opportunities or limit choice and autonomy for adults with learning disabilities
- To identify examples of good practice.

There were two components of the research methodology:

- Focus groups were held to explore the views of people with learning disabilities, front-line staff and carers.
- Telephone interviews were used with senior managers in agencies in five contrasting geographical areas; there was also an invitation to send the researchers any supporting documentation on risk.

The research provided a snapshot of perceptions and views of a small number of people with learning disabilities, their families and professionals providing services.

THE FINDINGS

The focus groups

- As risk is an abstract term, it was broken down into its constituent parts and questions were framed in terms of threats and opportunities. In the responses a complex picture emerged.
- People with learning disabilities had a limited understanding of risk but perceived risk as dangerous. They were not as proactive in wishing to take risks as the literature in this area suggests.

- Family carers had clear views on risk. The majority saw risk in terms of hazard and were concerned about the vulnerability of people with learning disabilities. Many also recognised that risk taking could have positive benefits and were willing to place conditional trust in the judgement of professionals.
- Professionals were aware of their responsibilities and duty of care; they saw risk as part of everyday living and were concerned about empowering users to take reasonable risks.

The agencies

- Agencies saw risk as a topical and important issue.
- The majority cited external pressure, arising from legislation and joint commissioning in pushing risk up the agenda.
- Most reported having risk related policies, often written in the last two years. Where agencies did not have risk policies, most were in the process of writing them.
- Risk policies were often embedded in other policies, such as health and safety, and equated risk with hazard.
- All respondents considered the safety of service users to be the key objective.
- Enhancing the autonomy of people with learning disabilities was also accepted as a key objective by the majority.
- Only three respondents described their agency policy as bridging the protection and empowerment divide.
- In turning policy into practice, most agencies expected staff to anticipate hazards and only two managers felt that the emphasis was on making a rapid response.
- There was some evidence that agencies sought to learn from incidents, but little indication that systematic strategies had been developed.
- Staff were seen as accountable for their actions, usually through job descriptions, line management and supervision although there was a desire to avoid a 'blaming culture'.

THE IMPLICATIONS

- The research suggests that if people with learning disabilities are to enjoy full lives in the community, agencies need to develop risk policies which embrace both protection and empowerment issues.
- These twin aims need to be clearly stated in written policies.
- Agencies need to have a clear definition of risk, which looks at both consequences and probability.
- There needs to be a recognition that a comprehensive risk policy will have several components:
- Procedures for planning and assessment, which will start with the needs and wishes of the person with a learning disability.

- A decision making process, in which the person with a learning disability plays a key role.
 - Appropriate and clear ways of recording and communicating decisions.
 - Systems of accountability and procedures to learn from incidents.
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Further reading:

Alaszewski, A., Alaszewski, H. & Parker, A. (1999) *Empowerment and Protection: The development of policies and practices in risk assessment and management in services for adults with learning disabilities*. London: Mental Health Foundation.

Mental Health Foundation (1996) *Building Expectations: Opportunities and services for adults with a learning disability*. London: Mental Health Foundation.

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