"It Just Feels Risky": Intuition vs Evidence in Child Sexual Abuse Cases. Proposing an Empirically Derived Risk and Protection Protocol

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Abstract : Social workers in the UK and professionals globally are faced with a particular challenge when dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the community. In the absence of a conviction or incontestable evidence, staff can often find themselves unable to take decisive action to remove a child from harm, even though there may be a credible threat to their welfare. Conversely, practitioners may over-calculate risk through fear of being accountable for harm. This is, in part, due to the absence of a structured and evidence-based risk assessment tool which can predict the likelihood of a person committing child sexual abuse. Such assessments are often conducted by forensic professionals who utilise offence-specific data and personal history information to calculate risk. In situations where only allegations underpin a case, this mode of assessment is not viable. There are further ethical issues surrounding the assessment of risk in this area which require expert consideration and sensitive planning. This paper explores this entangled problem extant in the wider call to prevent sexual and child sexual abuse in the community. To this end, 32 qualitative interviews were undertaken with social workers dealing with CSA cases. Results were analysed using thematic analysis and operationalised to formulate a risk and protection protocol for use in case management. This paper reports on the early findings associated with the initial indications of protocol reliability. Implications for further research and practice are discussed.

Keywords : sexual offending, child sexual offence, offender rehabilitation, risk assessment, offence prevention
Conference Title : ICSVPR 2022 : International Conference on Sexual Violence Prevention and Response
Conference Location : New York, United States
Conference Dates : October 06-07, 2022