The dissemination of research findings in children’s services: Issues and strategies

The dissemination of authoritative research knowledge is essential for professional development in children’s services, yet there is little evidence available to suggest how this might be best achieved. The previous article (Price et al., 2006) shows that when research findings are presented in a variety of ways, the products are valued by professionals but more needs to be done if success is to broaden. In this article by Roger Bullock two questions and four challenges facing social researchers are considered in the light of the changing nature of children’s services, new technology and the activities of a voluntary UK organisation concerned with adoption and fostering. Recommendations to improve the relationship between research, policy and practice are made.*

Introduction

At a recent Social Research Association (SRA) seminar in London, Nick Axford of the Dartington Social Research Unit gave a presentation on The Need for Better Dissemination and an Overview of Alternative Models (Axford, 2005a). In this, he noted that the report of the Commission on the Social Sciences (2003), entitled Great Expectations, argued that social research in the United Kingdom is not as influential as it might be, particularly because social scientists do not communicate well with users of research evidence. He then asked, how justified are these criticisms, especially in relation to children’s services, and what success has been achieved in addressing them? In closing, he raised two fundamental questions and identified four challenges to improve the current situation. The first of these questions was how does social policy develop? Such knowledge is essential if the dissemination of research findings is to be effective; otherwise efforts could be hopelessly off-beam.

Theories of change in social policy

Several authors have examined patterns of change in social policy, for example by contrasting ‘top-down’ from ‘bottom-up’ processes (Hill and Hupe, 2002). Others have stressed the conflicting expectations and concerns of researchers, policy makers and practitioners, the former seeking generalisations from the particular to the general, the latter the reverse (Locock and Boaz, 2004). These and other studies have led to several theories explaining how social policy develops and why some initiatives succeed while others fail. Two are especially significant for this discussion.

One model is that of Hall et al. (1975) in Change, Choice and Conflict in Social Policy. They argue that social policy initiatives are more likely to be successful if they are underpinned by legitimacy, feasibility and support, and even more so if these are backed by a positive ‘image’ based on appropriate association and scope, response to a perceived crisis, trend expectation and prevention, good information and a favourable wider political ideology.

In another model, more applicable to children’s services, Little and colleagues (Department of Health, 1995) argued that policy emerged as a result of the interaction of four independent factors: socio-legal concerns, pragmatism, user views and research knowledge. The balance between the factors varies, so that at any one time some are more prominent than others.

The important point is that in both these explanations, research is a significant factor but only in the context of others. Examples can be provided where research has been influential in shaping children’s services. The seminal study Children Who Wait (Rowe and Lambert, 1973) had a major impact on the Children Act 1975, making it more possible to

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adopt children from care (Thoburn, 2005). The ‘Pink Book’ studies on social work decisions in child care (Department of Health and Social Security, 1985) were influential in developing the Children Act 1989. The ‘Blue Book’ (Department of Health, 1995), which emphasised the provision of support to address children’s overall needs rather than a focus on the investigation of abusive incidents, ‘had a major influence on social work ever since’ (Berridge, 2005, p 111). Research has sometimes led directly to change, as with adoption allowances (Hill et al., 1989) and, arguably, it has helped to block proposed changes, such as the privatisation of social services during the 1980s and early 1990s (Berridge, 2005).

But wider scrutiny highlights areas where authoritative research findings have been less significant or even ignored altogether. In recent years, the cautionary impact of research has been weakened when ideological convictions have brushed aside uncertainties (Parker, 2005). Certainly, free market ideology and the discourse of ‘tough love’ are manifested in current government social policy, notably in a preference for new agencies and the introduction of more punitive measures to tackle social exclusion (Jordan with Jordan, 2000). Carolyn Davies (2003), then responsible for child care research programmes at the Department of Health, explains why the commissioned programmes had variable effects: those that produced recommendations that were costly and difficult to implement, such as the overview of children cared for away from home (Department of Health, 1998), had little direct impact whereas the adoption studies (Department of Health, 1999) had a delayed but major effect owing to a change of government and the Prime Minister giving it his personal attention.

Thus, research does not always have clear messages for policy and practice, neither is its influence necessarily benign. Writing about the desirability or otherwise of long-stay foster children returning home to their families, Sinclair (2005) argues that different but equally plausible inferences can be drawn from the same evidence. Meanwhile, Thoburn (2005) criticises the way in which the push to achieve adoption targets following the prime ministerial initiative led policymakers to ignore evidence showing the value of permanent foster family placements and the value of placing siblings together.

Clearly, the likely impact of research is difficult to predict: it is perhaps not quite as hit and miss as the moment a cue ball shatters a pack of pool balls – the image used on the cover of Michael Hill’s (2004) book The Public Policy Process – but it does resemble the parable of the sower: research will have an influence but it is hard to distinguish between fertile and stony ground.

Recent dissemination experiences at BAAF

Two examples of recent work at BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering) concerning adoption law illustrate these points. Around 2000, there was much talk of adoption reform but uncertainty that it would actually happen. However, as a result of the concern at the highest political level and the task assigned to the Performance Innovation Unit at the Cabinet Office, a review was initiated (Performance Innovation Unit, 2000). There followed a series of meetings at which BAAF, among others, advised on the questions that should be asked, the evidence to be considered and whom to consult. BAAF had already published several relevant studies, such as Lowe, Murch and colleagues (1999, 2004) on the framework for adoption and Thomas and Beckford (1999) on Adopted Children Speaking.

Funding soon followed from the Department of Health for BAAF to convene a group of stakeholders under the chair of Dame Margaret Booth to produce the Adoption Standards for England which, after some debate with the Department of Health, who wanted the first draft simplified, were published and well received. These set out what service users could expect from the adoption service in terms of standards and clear timescales which were then linked to performance indicators. In subsequent years, with the injection of
ring-fenced money, the number of adoptions rose, revealing a direct effect on practice in terms of both agency outputs and outcomes for children.

There then followed the Adoption and Children Act 2002, legislation that was necessary to modernise adoption in England and Wales and bring it into line with the Children Act 1989. The legislative process involved an enormous amount of work but it remains uncertain whether the new Act will have the same impact on the numbers and speed of adoptions as did the Standards. There are several reasons for this doubt: the children still awaiting adoption might have more complex needs than those already placed; the legislation may be too complicated and costly to implement properly; human rights issues may arise; and concerns might be expressed about whether adoption is too final a solution for many of the children who need a placement. In addition, the response of the courts and the capacity of some agencies for organisational change, for example with regard to implementing training, are as yet unknown. In short, the outputs of this seemingly major reform remain uncertain, the outcomes for children are unknown and the effects on the quality of placements, for instance in terms of meeting children’s needs, adopters’ responses and access to support, can only be surmised.

Two lessons can be drawn from the experiences just described. One is that the impact of research is not necessarily related to the amount of work involved; the other is that research is often more influential at the beginning of the reform process, as it fills a gap where no knowledge exists, but can be confounded later on by legal, financial and pragmatic concerns.

The relationship between research and practice
Nick Axford’s second question was how does professional practice develop? What causes it to change? In the previous paper, Price, Ravenscroft and Nutley (2006) showed that much less is known about this than is the case for policy, a surprising situation given the enormous practice changes that have taken place in children and family services since the Second World War. They highlight barriers of time, interpretation skills, access to resources, insufficient research summaries and the lack of relevance of much research to practice. Indeed, despite all the efforts of training and research dissemination, the authors imply that much practice change emerges from discussion with workmates and the examples of esteemed colleagues. But no one has produced much empirical evidence on this and there is, as yet, no established theory of how social care professionals learn (Carpenter, 2005). The authors argue that there is a place for research messages but there is a strong case for ‘multi-faceted dissemination strategies that target barriers to change’ (p 7).

The experience of BAAF is, again, one of varied success. Its publication and training operations have considerable experience at disseminating new knowledge but the factors making for effectiveness remain unclear. An example of a seemingly ‘successful’ initiative, at least in terms of user take-up and satisfaction, is the modular training pack produced to train a wide range of professionals, such as lawyers, guardians, social workers and medical staff, to implement the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The pack consists of a number of linked modules that both introduce key changes and explore their implementation in practice. It is available in paper form or online. Earlier plans to accredit learning directly have been devolved to local agencies and practitioners.

Another ‘successful’ project is the post-qualifying award in child care, in which BAAF revised the post-qualifying programme that was geared more to child protection than the specific training needs of family placement social workers.

Other perceived successes to date include the Adoption, Search and Reunion project based on published research on the impact of the searching process, combined with new responsibilities to provide an intermediary service to birth relatives under the new Act (Howe and Feast, 2003; Trinder et al, 2003). This project has developed an extensive website with information about the law,
the processes involved and an online database of ‘Where to find adoption records’. These developments are especially important as the UK has pioneered the importance of opening adoption records and the services needed to support this.

Other attempts to influence practice have been more complex. In 2002, a training course was developed for the carers of children who had been sexually abused (Hellett and Simmonds, 2003). It comprised direct work with foster carers, group work, current thinking about the causes and effects of child sexual abuse, what carers can do to help children and how children can learn to look after themselves. While the course was based on clear evidence and best practice principles, there has been some uncertainty about whether the publication of a pack by itself is enough if skilled, confident and experienced social workers are not available to run the proposed programme of groups. Making relevant and helpful material available is only one step to changing or improving practice.

Changes in the nature of dissemination

One of the difficulties in reaching conclusions about the effects of disseminating research findings is the rapidly changing nature of the available technology. As Axford (2005a) said:

*Yesterday’s research ended up in a thick monograph printed black on white; today’s can end up as a sexy, well-designed, multi-coloured package with enclosed CD and leaflets targeted at different audiences. Yesterday’s report was put out into the ether and left to fend for itself; today’s is accompanied by an army of supporters and a packed calendar of events. Yesterday’s prose; today bullet-points. This is a caricature, of course.*

But, he continued, is it progress? Yes, he says, in the sense that it reflects some of the lessons learnt, such as an awareness of the limitations of orthodox publication in the child care field. Several studies have found that this traditional avenue of dissemination can bypass many intended recipients. For example, a survey of 163 social workers from 27 area teams in England, mostly making day-to-day decisions about case work, found that specialist books, lectures, conferences and national policy guidelines were among the least used sources (Bullock et al, 1998a). As already mentioned, discussion with colleagues was the main source of information, suggesting the value of targeting channels of communication such as in-service training and supervision. Other studies cited by Price et al (2006) support these findings, suggesting that for reasons such as departmental culture and constraints of time and resources, successful dissemination is likely to entail a combination of interactive and informal media, ‘user-friendly’ presentation and brevity (Hagell and Spencer, 2004).

It is also clear that simply getting products to the desired audience does not necessarily make much difference to practice, confirming the distinction between ‘research knowledge’ and ‘using it’ made in the previous article. A substantial proportion of respondents in all the studies discussed said that they had read the research overviews but that it had not radically changed the way they thought about the issues or how they practised. This, again, shows that making research accessible is not sufficient; best practice models and a culture that supports the use of research have to be in place (Walter et al, 2004).

The further lesson concerns the restrictions of written text as a tool for communication. As Edward Tufte (1997) shows in his book *Visual Explanations*, the power of information design to explain messages is well harnessed in a range of fields, from advertising to the famous map of the London underground. Such methods are still unusual in dissemination in children’s services, although more common in training programmes. Other media are increasingly being used too, including websites and multi-media packages, as illustrated in the previous article (Price et al, 2006).

Much of the new activity in dissemination represents a concerted effort by researchers, policy makers and practitioners to engage with one another. One
problem with this, of course, is the tendency, on occasions, to ‘dumb down’ and reduce rich and complex messages to the lowest common denominator. Researchers often despair when, having painstakingly distilled and qualified their main results into a concise overview, they are asked to provide a couple of pages in summary for a government minister, busy professional or the media. There is no easy answer to this perennial tension but it can, at least, be acknowledged to avoid potential acrimony.

The changing nature of the audience
While dissemination methods change with technology, the audience also changes with new legislation and administrative arrangements. The child care audience is often perceived to be limited to social workers, carers and services users. But the Children Act 2004 has widened those responsible for the welfare of children. For example, in a local authority with a population of about 800,000, Morpeth (2004) found that the number of people working directly with children was nearly 15,000. This figure excludes doctors, A&E staff, police, solicitors and housing officers, who might find themselves dealing with child welfare issues in the course of their work, and many others who are closely involved, such as foster carers and volunteers. The details are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>8,382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom non-teaching</td>
<td>4,916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services (children and families)</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health visitors, assistants, school nurses</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth service</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connexions</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour support</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth offending teams</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School crossing patrol</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education social work</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education psychology</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMHS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School library</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, this audience is less likely to be approachable as a single group. In the past, the dissemination of research findings to teachers, for example, could be achieved via the local education authority. But the power to make decisions and most (two-thirds) of financial resources now reside with the governors of individual schools, making the dissemination task not only more difficult but also more likely to require repetition to keep everyone up to date.

This widening of the children’s services audience poses a challenge to an organisation like BAAF. There is some capacity to adapt to the new situation by virtue of the five advisory groups reviewing different aspects of adoption and fostering. The multi-professional nature of BAAF is especially significant here. The Health Group, for instance, has a track record of providing information, development and training to paediatricians and other health staff who may find themselves dealing with separated children. Similarly, the Legal Group has a long history of commenting on proposals for change and explaining developments and case law judgments to practitioners elsewhere.

BAAF therefore has an auspicious structure to link research, policy and practice but inevitably success has been greater in some areas than others. As noted before, it is easy to make progress on new issues where little is known, what Roy Parker once called ‘brush clearing’ exercises, but as better-quality evidence emerges, discussions become confounded by the other factors noted earlier, namely pragmatism, socio-legal concerns and user views.

Models of social research dissemination
Given this activity and structure, it is interesting to see how well an organisation such as BAAF fits into established models of research dissemination.

One model is that proposed by Nutley and colleagues (2003) who make a helpful distinction between two types of knowledge management. The first they call ‘knowledge push’ or ‘hard’ knowledge, in which the answer to the problem of research utilisation is to codify and transmit information, with knowledge viewed as an object. An example of this might be the Social Care Institute for
Excellence (SCIE, 2004) Practice Guide 3: Fostering – a guide for practitioners that includes case studies, good practice tips and research summaries. The second type of knowledge management is termed ‘knowledge pull’ or ‘soft’ knowledge; the solution here is to motivate colleagues to share relevant evidence, with knowledge seen as a process. Workshops, seminars and training events organised in relation to looked after children by Making Research Count (MRC), a national collaborative research dissemination initiative between several universities and local authorities (www.uea.ac.uk/swk/research/mrc), would fall under this heading. To date there is little empirical research about the effectiveness of either the soft or hard approaches and minimal discussion of how such effectiveness would be measured.

Another helpful distinction is between ‘made knowledge’ – information that an individual re-analyses and works through until they understand it implicitly – and ‘used knowledge’, which involves a more superficial or ‘good enough’ understanding. In the former the goal is to impart research findings; the latter seeks to inculcate research-based ways of thinking. The contrast may be illustrated in relation to an orthodox research study about the reunification of children separated from their families, Children Going Home (Bullock et al, 1998b). In response to a criticism by a colleague, Spencer Millham, that reading the draft report was like ‘receiving a Dead Sea Scroll for Christmas’, the authors decided to distil the main findings and distribute the resulting summary widely. They also developed a practice tool comprising not only results and guidance but also checklists of factors to be completed at certain points in a child’s stay away from home (Bullock et al, 2002). By highlighting the aspects of a case which are particularly relevant to the successful reunification of children with relatives, the instrument is designed to help practitioners test the findings and discover if they hold true in the context of their own work. The ‘True for Us’ exercises in Department of Health overviews work in a similar way (eg Department of Health, 1995, pp 97–115; 1998, pp 89–101). These encourage readers to translate the research findings to their own situation, often with colleagues.

A recent systematic review of empirical models of research utilisation in the social care field takes these analyses further (Walter et al, 2004). In the first model, characterised as involving ‘research-based practitioners’, it is the responsibility of the individual practitioner to keep up to date with research and to apply it to practice. He or she is assisted in this, for example, by training in critical appraisal skills from organisations such as Making Research Count, by best practice guides such as the aforementioned guide on fostering from SCIE and by summaries of new research, notably through the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Findings series, which, among other topics, covers children cared for away from home.

The second model of research utilisation identified by Walter and colleagues is termed ‘embedded research’. This is where research-informed practice is achieved indirectly by embedding research findings and methods in the systems and processes of social care, such as standards, policies, procedures and tools. Here, responsibility lies more with policy makers and managers. Practice tools, such as those mentioned above, fall under this heading but perhaps the prime exemplars in the field are the Looking After Children package, which comprises instruments designed to help assess the progress of looked after children in relation to the care they receive and to plan improvements (Parker et al, 1991; Ward, 1995), and the government’s Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families and the incorporation of these into an Integrated Children’s System. Subsequent developments have seen the approach extended to work with other children in need (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

In a third model suggested by Walter and colleagues, the goal is to develop a research-minded culture within social care agencies. This they term ‘organisational excellence’. The key here lies in the appropriate leadership, management
and organisation together with the collaborative creation of knowledge through local experimentation, evaluation and the development of practice. It also involves action-research projects and partnerships with intermediaries such as Dartington-I, Making Research Count and Research in Practice. A discussion of attempts to implement these last two models in a local authority is found in White and Harris (2004).

Of course, these models need not be mutually exclusive; indeed, the authors contend that a ‘whole systems approach’ may be a fruitful way forward. Increasingly, such an integrated approach can be seen in relation to adoption, fostering and residential care; for instance, in research disseminated by central government in the Quality Protects programme via Research Briefings: (the ‘individual practitioner’ model); in the promotion of instruments such as the Assessment Framework (‘embedded research’); and in the work of regional development workers to support councils in the production and implementation of Management Action Plans (‘organisational excellence’).

How does BAAF’s dissemination activity fit into these frameworks? Certainly BAAF is strong in terms of knowledge ‘push’, as its extensive catalogue of publications and training materials confirms. Its regional and country-wide structure and direct involvement of staff with agencies suggest equal strength in ‘knowledge pull’. Whether these initiatives meet the ‘used knowledge’ criteria is unknown as evaluations tend to rely on expressions of consumer satisfaction rather than measured changes in practitioner thinking and behaviour or child well-being. Nevertheless, some comfort may be gained from the fact that practice in adoption and fostering has changed considerably, for example with regard to the family placement of children with complex needs or behaviour disorders, and something must have caused this, so a contributory role seems justified. Certainly, practice tools such as the BAAF forms qualify as ‘embedded research’, but it is doubtful whether these are sufficient to create in the agencies a research-minded culture marked by partnerships, experiments and evaluations.

With regard to what happens subsequently, Knott and Wildavsky (1981) differentiate ‘seven standards of utilisation’, from reception – when policy makers receive relevant information – to impact – when the policy stimulated by information has tangible effects on citizens. To aid empirical analysis these may be collapsed into three categories: (1) immediate outcomes – the availability and use of research; (2) intermediate outcomes – the effect of the research on individual and agency practice; and (3) ultimate outcomes – the impact on the well-being of the service-users targeted. A final conclusion would seem to be, therefore, that BAAF, along with similar organisations, succeeds very well for the first, achieves variably in the second but is less certain about the third.

**Improving the relationship between research, policy and practice**

So how can the relationship between research, policy and practice be improved? This raises the question of what needs to be done to strengthen these deficiencies. Initially, it is clear that more of the same will not be enough and that something different is required if progress is to be made.

In order to make progress, it helps, at the outset, to acknowledge the incompatibilities or differences between the various camps, as highlighted by Davies (2003). A major difference is that whereas research attempts to be unbiased and removed from the emotional business of politics:

*The job of the policy-maker is to implement political decision-making, reconciling divergent views and resolving controversy with minimum pain rather than logic.* (p 378)

Another difference concerns objectives:

*Research tends to complicate issues in order to explain them, while the art of good policy-making lies in simplifying them to the point that action becomes possible.* (p 378)
A further tension relates to timing:

*Policy-making increasingly operates to short-term, demanding time scales, while good research can take many years to complete.* (pp 378–9)

A final potential irritant concerns the form of outputs from research:

*Policy-makers prefer short punchy reports with point-form findings and recommendations. Researchers on the other hand prefer long well-referenced reports with qualified conclusions rather than recommendations.* (p 379)

Similar disjunctions may be identified between research and practice.

From this starting point, it is possible to tackle the four challenges to researchers in the social care field that Axford posed if the dissemination and utilisation of research in children’s services are to improve. They are:

(i) how to deal with the shifting nature of policy-making and achieve the right focus;
(ii) how to innovate;
(iii) how best to evaluate efforts;
(iv) how to involve service user groups.

Taking the first of these, the shifting nature of policy-making and the resulting dilemma of where to focus dissemination activity have already been identified as a major challenge to organisations such as BAAF. In the past, the impact of research on social care for children was often the product of relationships forged with influential individuals in the respective government department, but changes in the distribution of responsibilities across Whitehall and the fact that most family support is undertaken by providers working independently of social services are to improve. They are:

- (i) how to deal with the shifting nature of policy-making and achieve the right focus;
- (ii) how to innovate;
- (iii) how best to evaluate efforts;
- (iv) how to involve service user groups.

From BAAF’s point of view, models from other disciplines are interesting but not always relevant as the technology of social work is much weaker. It once rested on the relationship between worker and client but this is less so now, raising the question what does a social worker actually do? Has practice been overtaken by bureaucratic requirements and services reduced to respectful consultation with users about uncomplicated pragmatic responses? BAAF has invested heavily in innovations using modern technology, for instance with regard to access to records, but this fundamental doubt questions whether it is enough.

A second challenge is for researchers to innovate. Is there anything to learn from dissemination efforts in other disciplines – medicine and engineering, for example? Would child care research be better presented in the light of emerging knowledge from linguistics, anthropology and neuroscience concerning how people process information? Or is there a role for communication design that creates a visual explanation of research findings, the argument being that this is a universal and efficient vehicle of communication (Kepes, 1944)? The ability to re-model information is a specialism seldom found in children’s services agencies but designers and journalists could play a useful role in the translation of research findings into dissemination products. Further, developments in IT also demand a search for the right relationship between tangible, paper-based products and more animated or interactive forms of media, such as DVDs and the web. The RiP Fostering Voices materials and development of the BAAF service Be My Parent to incorporate the use of the internet are good examples.

A third challenge is to evaluate dissemination efforts and to learn from successes and failures. Funders often...
expect researchers to demonstrate outcomes but evaluations of the impact of research are usually restricted to consumer views or output measures, such as fewer placement breakdowns. Evaluations that measure long-term outcomes for children, for example in terms of child development or psychosocial adaptation based on a robust research methodology, are unusual in the child care field. A rare example is the quasi-experimental design fashioned to test the effects of applying the aforementioned practice tool Going Home by getting one half of a local authority to use it and the other half to continue as before, reviewing the results 12 months later. There were small but significant beneficial differences in both outputs and outcomes for children but the methodology was inevitably complicated, leading the authors to conclude that ‘in the end, there was too much science for the social workers and too much social work for the scientists’ (Bullock et al, 1998a, pp 79–84).

The fourth and final challenge concerns the role of service users, a group that, surprisingly, is often absent from the social care literature about research utilisation (Walter et al, 2004; Axford, 2005b). The benefits of professionals working in partnership with users are well known, even in the sensitive areas such as child protection, and increasingly research findings are translated into forms that are accessible to children and families. Many BAAF publications are designed for users and an expertise has been developed to approach groups such as young, disabled and traumatised children and their carers.

But again, there has been little if any attempt to evaluate the benefits of such forms of dissemination and BAAF’s experience is variable. What is often assumed to be desirable and helpful can actually generate serious debates. For example, a recent (2006) BAAF Position Statement, Attachment Disorders, their Assessment and Intervention/Treatment, has been criticised by some carers looking after children who present challenging behaviour for questioning the value of ‘holding therapy’, a technique that they see as useful. In another case, after considerable effort had been made to respond to the wishes of adoption applicants who had not been approved, an independent review mechanism was instituted. Although seeming to meet an expressed wish, the take-up turned out to be much lower than expected.

Conclusions
So what can be concluded from this discussion and application of ideas to a voluntary organisation concerned with adoption and fostering?

The dissemination of authoritative knowledge is an essential component of professional development. Yet the dissemination of research findings in children’s services continues to be problematic. The target audience is too wide to justify a single approach and different strategies might be needed to influence policy as opposed to practice. Without better knowledge about how policy and practice change, how people learn and methodologies to measure influence, it is hard to be certain about effects. While technological change has increased the range of dissemination methods, these gains have been offset by other developments, for example the widening of the children’s services audience and the increasing salience of other issues, such as human rights and costs.

As a voluntary organisation, BAAF finds itself in the front line of policy and practice development, acting as a centre for information regarding the care of separated children. As such, it has developed a range of activities designed to convey knowledge and influence service developments. Evidence of its success, however, is limited but what exists suggests some encouraging results.

Given the pressures of maximising effectiveness and giving value for money facing children’s services, it is likely that more dissemination efforts will be made across the board. Studies of dissemination, such as that by Price et al (2006), are contributing to a growing body of knowledge about how this can best be done. Indeed, in a recent overview, Walter and colleagues (2005) were able to identify what is established with some certainty. To summarise, they have found benefits
in tailored efforts, interactive partnerships, social influence and facilitative approaches and multifaceted interventions. Moreover, they are also able to identify conditions favourable to the implementation of evidence-based practice, namely good translation of messages, ownership among users, enthusiastic facilitators, sensitivity to context, credibility, leadership, support and integration.

We should be grateful to the pioneering thinkers cited in this article for their contribution to the process of narrowing the gap between the desired and actual outcomes for children and families in need.

References


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**Useful websites**

CEBSS (Centre for Evidence Based Social Services): www.cebss.org

Dartington-i: www.dartington-i.org

DeMo Communication Design: www.de-mo.org.uk

ELSC (Electronic Library of Social Care): www.elsc.org.uk

ESRC Society Today: esrcsocietytoday.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/index.aspx

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: www.jrf.org.uk

MRC (Making Research Count): www.uea.ac.uk/swk/research/mrc/welcome.htm

RiP (Research in Practice): www.rip.org.uk

RuRu (Research Unit for Research Utilisation): www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~ruru/home.htm

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