



## Assembling the Pieces: Research, Policy, and Practice in Child Welfare<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Public child welfare agencies are busy places. They have clients to serve, mandates to fill, and crises to manage. As agencies deliberate how best to respond to these competing demands, they are inundated with different types of information that could be used to inform decisions, including research evidence. Using research evidence in child welfare holds great promise for improving outcomes for children and families.<sup>1</sup> It may also lead to more efficient uses of resources. Benefits from using research evidence may result in more informed decision-making, increased use of evidence-based practices, and ongoing evaluation for accountability, client satisfaction, and program improvement purposes. We know research evidence is not the only source of information needed, but research is critical for ensuring a high functioning system of policies and programs serving children and families.

In December 2014, we convened a small group of agency leaders, technical assistance providers, membership organization leaders, researchers, and funders for a day-long meeting to discuss where research evidence fits into the mix. The group had frank conversations about the challenges they face in using research evidence, its potential value, and strategies for using it in more strategic and more routine ways. They also considered ways to make future research more relevant, and they left eager to share some of these ideas.

This brief and the associated video are the products of that meeting. Our hope is that these materials will help advance the conversation about what it takes to make valuable research use commonplace and offer some concrete strategies for doing so.

### A Swirl of Information

Child welfare agencies are bombarded with evidence. Some of this evidence, such as agency data and client reports, comes from within. Some of it, such as advice from peers, technical assistance providers, research partners and the Internet, is sought from others. And still other information is pushed in—from vendors promoting an assessment tool, advocates endorsing a new services approach, or researchers encouraging a new program or practice. Information can come from research, professional expertise, peers, testimony, and agency data.

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However, little guidance is available about how to synthesize large amounts of often disparate information. Individuals and groups rely on internal decision-making processes that have developed over time to use information from different sources such as team meetings and their own judgement to make difficult decisions in difficult circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The question remains, however: *Where does research evidence fit into this larger picture; and how can agency leaders and program managers use it to help promote the well-being of children, youth, and families?*

### **What Is Research Evidence?**

Before we talk about strategies for improving the use of research, we need to clarify what we mean by research evidence. Research evidence is *information gathered with a purpose in mind and according to widely accepted methods*. Research evidence in the social sciences is generated from processes that are explicit, systematic, and open to scrutiny. They are diverse in method and subject matter. They draw on different sources of information such as case record reviews, randomized clinical trials, surveys, qualitative interviews and observations, electronic records, fiscal records, and data gathered about the organizations and children. In addition to evidence-based programs and research-informed risk assessments directly related to individual and family well-being, research evidence on particular topic areas, such as brain development, developmental transitions, and staff retention, can also have great value.

It's important to know that researchers, decision-makers, and practitioners think about research evidence in different ways so conversations between these different groups benefit from defining the terms used. For example, scientists generally characterize research as systematic investigations that are objective and focused on generating or applying new knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, policymakers and practitioners of child- and youth-serving agencies sometimes think of research evidence as broader,<sup>4</sup> and they do not always distinguish research from other forms of information.<sup>5</sup> These differences can interfere with conversations, expectations, and understanding. Thus it is important to establish shared definitions for key terms. **In this brief, we define research evidence as a type of evidence derived from applying systematic methods and analyses to address a predefined question or hypothesis. This includes descriptive studies, intervention or evaluation studies, meta-analyses, and cost-effectiveness studies conducted within the agency or by outside research organizations.** Research evidence may be generated and gathered by child welfare agencies, university researchers, client groups, research organizations, think tanks, government agencies, consultants, foundations, and others.<sup>6</sup>

But there is more to research evidence than definitions. Research can be used in different ways and serve a variety of purposes. Research evidence can be descriptive; it can describe the nature or extent of a problem, inform thinking about why an issue occurs, and shape how responses to challenges are framed. It also can be evaluative; it can comment on the quality or effectiveness of an intervention and provide estimates of the costs and benefits of using a specific program or way of working. At other times, research is packaged as a tool for conducting intake assessments, as a training manual, as a way

to provide a synthesis of a body of evidence, or as practice guidelines. All of these forms constitute research evidence.<sup>7</sup>

### **Opportunities to Do Better**

Given the array of ways research evidence may be used to better serve children, youth, and families, all participants in our convened group agreed that research is currently not adequately leveraged. We focused on making headway on acquiring, processing, and applying research evidence.<sup>8</sup> We also discussed another avenue for improving research use—the production of research that speaks to the key concerns and questions of decision-makers; however, that is not the focus of this brief.

*Relationships Expand Access to Research Evidence.* According to Weiss, access to research evidence happens by one of two problem-solving routes.<sup>9</sup> In the first route, “the research antedates the policy problem and is drawn on need. Policy makers continually make decisions and engage in deliberations. To aid these efforts, they may search for information from existing research to delimit the scope of the question, better understand the situation, or identify a promising policy response” (p. 427). One example of this is searching for an evidence-based practice to improve behavioral health outcomes for children in foster care. In the second route, research is “the purposeful commissioning of social science research to fill a knowledge gap” (p. 428). For example, use of discretionary grants from government agencies often have random assignment evaluation requirements attached to them for the purpose of generating new research evidence. With the rising importance of electronic records, acquisition may also take the form of administrative data to generate evidence and business intelligence (e.g., which neighborhoods should we focus on for foster parent recruitment?).

Studying the acquisition of research evidence involves examining the sources that users turn to for research evidence, and the social and infrastructural networks they use to connect to it. Improving the acquisition of research evidence thus implies strengthening relationships between potential users of research evidence and the potential sources of research. Research-practice partnerships are offered as strategies for strengthening such connections. A recent paper by Larry Palinkas describes the structure, advantages, and challenges of three different types of formal partnership structure.<sup>10</sup> Other arrangements can also lessen the distance between research and practice; these include loaned executives, joint faculty-staff appointments between universities and child welfare organizations, and faculty staff course buyouts to allow time for researchers to embed in local or state organizations.

*Supports Assist with the Processing and Application of Research Evidence.* Research users sort, evaluate, and interpret research evidence, and incorporate research evidence into their decision-making. It is rare that research evidence is the only factor in decision-making. Often, professionals balance research evidence with other relevant information and use priorities born out of their professional orientations, political and financial considerations, personal experience, and personal judgment.<sup>11</sup> The application of research evidence manifests in the consequences—actions, decisions, and changes in thinking—that come about in light of the research evidence. Sometimes this means putting aside the research evidence in favor of

other types of evidence. At other times the application of research is direct and used to help solve a problem or more fully understand a challenge at hand. In all of these cases the processing and application of research evidence has consequences for the policies and practices that shape outcomes for children and youth.

The processing and applying of research is more likely to happen when structured opportunities exist within and across organizations to debate, reflect, and learn from research. Decision-makers also often value working with trusted intermediary organizations that can help make sense of the research as it applies to the local context, such as technical assistance providers and Community Development Teams.<sup>12</sup>

*Organizational Qualities That Matter for Research Use.* Relationships within and across organizations shape what research is produced, what is acquired and shared, how it is understood, and how it is applied. Trusted relationships between decision-makers and researchers increase the acquisition of research and the degree of understanding, which may ultimately affect decisions and practices. Organizations' relationships with intermediaries—whether these are individuals or organizations—can serve as bridges for connecting research to local contexts and enhance the application of research and quality of implementation. Finally, organizations that value active processing and ongoing evaluation and improvement will likely lead to more appropriate uses of research evidence and better outcomes for children and families.

## **Summary**

Despite the availability of relevant research evidence, child welfare agencies often aren't able to leverage this information to better serve youth and families. Concrete strategies are needed to make research more readily available, understood, and used. In December 2014, a small group met to discuss how to facilitate better use of research evidence. Specifically, the themes of acquiring, processing and applying research evidence were identified as critical activities. Participants also recognized the importance of connecting child welfare leaders and researchers to help ensure that new research is responsive to the needs of those providing services. Organizations contributing to this discussion will continue to collaborate and develop strategies for child welfare agencies to promote how better to incorporate research evidence into decision-making to identify ways to help youth and families.

## **The Collaborating Organizations**

**Casey Family Programs** is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America. Our mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. Casey Family Programs works in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families, and the communities where they live. We are committed to [\*2020: Building Communities of Hope\*](#), a nationwide effort to improve the safety and success of children and their families.

**Chapin Hall** is an independent policy research center at the University of Chicago focused on providing public and private decision-makers with rigorous data analysis and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of society's most vulnerable children. Chapin Hall partners with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists at the forefront of research and policy development by applying a unique blend of scientific research, real-world experience, and policy expertise to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change. Chapin Hall directs the Center for State Child Welfare Data and the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive, a longitudinal database containing records of approximately 3 million foster children nationwide. Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child and adolescent development; child maltreatment prevention; child welfare systems; community change; economic supports for families; home visiting and early childhood; runaway and unaccompanied homeless youth; school systems and out-of-school time; and youth crime and justice.

**The William T. Grant Foundation** is a private foundation that supports research to improve the lives of children and youth in the United States. We are nonpartisan and do not promote specific reforms. Instead, we support rigorous research that can inform policymakers' and practitioners' decisions to improve young people's development. The Foundation supports an initiative to build knowledge about improving the use of research in practice and policy, as well as a national network of research-practice partnerships in education.

## Reference Notes

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<sup>11</sup> See Weiss (1979).

<sup>12</sup> See Palinkas et al. (2011).