

MARCH 2017 RESEARCH REFLECTION:

Munro, E.: *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report*. London: Dept for Education.

By Anne Scott

I wasn't expecting to have much reading fun when I picked up this report, which is being cited internationally and has made a real splash; most reports are rather dry, and I was reading this one because it relates to the research we're doing on child custody when parents have mental illnesses or addictions. However, I got a very pleasant surprise. This report makes gripping reading; I could see why it's so widely quoted!

Link to the report here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system>

Eileen Munro did a thorough review of the child protection system in England and Wales, and what she found applies to New Zealand too, as far as I can tell. She argues that child protection has become too bureaucratic, too driven by policies and procedures, and too focused on filling out forms rather than allowing space to really engage with children and families. I'm sure that this problem is familiar to many of us, in whatever workplaces, or other official dealings, we might be engaged in.

What Munro said in her report is that good practice emerges from good relationships. And good relationships are created through flexibility and being able to respond to individual needs and situations. They require room to move. When a good relationship is built with a family, outcomes are improved. It is more likely that the changes that allow a child to stay with his or her birth family can be achieved, and even where this isn't possible, everything goes more smoothly for the child, the birth parents and any foster carers.

She notes that every time a child is killed or harmed, there is a media storm, and a serious case review is held. Normally, the review will recommend changes that bring in a new procedure that might have prevented that specific instance of harm. The barn door is shut after the horse has bolted. Each individual change makes sense, but when you put them all together you end up with a procedures-driven culture. People are so busy ticking all the boxes, and meeting all the specific regulations, that they are not able to engage with the individual circumstances of THIS family in front of them. And the result of that is poor engagement and poor outcomes.

Munro suggests a bonfire of the regulations, and at the same time upskilling social workers in relationship based practice so that they are equipped to deal with the variety and diversity of families in need. She suggests changing from an audit-driven 'blame' culture to a learning culture, in which people learn from their errors rather than being taken to task for them and ending up being driven to defensive practice by fear of being found 'guilty' of some procedural mistake.

She also made some other great recommendations. She said there is a need to detect abuse and neglect and intervene, and at the same time to offer support to families so fewer children experience neglect and abuse in the first place. There is a need to listen to children, she says, and to focus on their needs. Rather than a bits and pieces approach to institutional policy, she argues for a systems approach. Finally, there is also a need to provide social workers with a path to promotion through practitioner roles, so that skilled and experienced people keep working on the ground with families and children.

This report is useful for our research, but its common-sense information and guidelines are also of wider importance. How many of us live or work in a 'compliance culture' which is averse to risk, and focused on a narrow following of procedures at the expense of really engaging with the problems and people we are working with? How many of us are frustrated with this? It's a systemic and culture-wide issue and this report shows us a way we can address it.