

Confirmatory Bias



What do you need to know about confirmatory bias?

- Research and serious case reviews have highlighted the tendency of professionals to develop fixed ideas about a child's situation (whether that is positive or negative) and to stick to this notion, taking account of information which supports the existing hypotheses and rejecting any information which appears to contradict it. Ideas about a child's situation and welfare can be heavily informed by our intuition, which whilst based on experience, is often influenced by our biases.
- Human judgement is informed by perception, memory and interpretation, which are all complex processes. We try to simplify this when in highly demanding roles – we can therefore come to rely on past experience and stereotypes, group consensus, comparing to other salient cases, maintaining the status quo, and in some cases, decision avoidance.

How does confirmatory bias manifest itself?

- Confirmatory bias can impact judgement and action – it prevents practitioners from working in a child focussed way or effectively assessing the risks that a child faces as they naturally seek to find evidence that supports the fixed view they hold, and objective 'data' or information is avoided, ignored or disregarded.
- We may encounter many cases which superficially appear similar which works to confirm the held view, and to become a template through which new cases are compared and assessed.
- Single aspects of the case dominate a professional's thinking and prevent differential diagnosis / consideration.
- People often stop searching for information or alternative explanations when an explanation has been reached.

As practitioners, how can we avoid confirmatory bias?

- Remain focussed on the child
- If there are major differences in professional opinion in a network of professionals that are responsible for meeting the needs of a child, this indicates that no one agency has fully understood the child's situation - everyone should step back and reconsider a new approach.
- Splitting is a natural defence. Consider that families may seek to divide professionals – notice when this is occurring and try not to act out the roles given to you. Communicate, understand and address this conflict, and resolve it in a child focussed way.
- Notice if you reject evidence or question the reliability of sources
- Play 'Devil's Advocate', look for alternative explanations and test out your hypotheses
- Be mindful to interpret information with equal scrutiny regardless of source family presentation, situation, class etc
- Use self-reflection and reflective supervision to critically reflect on your practice and consider the range of factors that might influence or affect your decision-making. This can be through formal, informal, group and peer opportunities for reflection.
- Use the 'Turn it on its head' method - apply a new set of circumstances and see if the professional response would be different. For example, imagine the gender of the child or parent is different.

Further reading...

- In May 2013, the Government commissioned the Behavioural Insights Team to undertake a project to look at social workers' decision making. The final report includes several references to the impact of Confirmatory Bias, and can be found here:
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305516/RR337 - Clinical Judgement and Decision-Making in Childrens Social Work.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305516/RR337_-_Clinical_Judgement_and_Decision-Making_in_Childrens_Social_Work.pdf)
- In September 2010 the NSPCC produced a booklet for practitioners to assist them in paying due regard to needs and risks when assessing child welfare. It was titled "*Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them*", and is available here:
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/10-pitfalls-initial-assessments-report.pdf>

- In November 2009 the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) produced a briefing paper asking "How do people respond to new (and challenging) information?" The paper can be found with this link: <https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/oversight-and-review-cases-light-changing-circumstances-and-new-information-how-do-people>

Suggested activity

- Having reflected on your own personal biases and where those messages originated, in teams consider what the group / service biases may be, how they have been formed, and whether they influence working practices in relation to safeguarding.
- In a team identify a case and apply a new set of circumstances and discuss whether the response would be different. For example, imagine that the family lives in a different area, or that the referral about the child came from a different source, or change the gender of the carer.