
**SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN
CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES: THEORY AND PRACTICE****Gloudien Spies,¹ Rina Delport² and Liana (MP) le Roux³**

ABSTRACT

This article provides a discussion of the theoretical basis underpinning safety and risk assessment in child protection, and further describes the empirical research process involved in the development of safety and risk assessment tools and training materials for social workers in the South African child protection field. The research process is described according to the steps of intervention research. The study confirms a need for uniform safety and risk assessment tools and procedures in social work practice and highlights the critical role of collaboration between researchers and practitioners to enhance social service delivery in the protection of children at risk.

Keywords: *child protection; children at risk; safety and risk assessment; safety and risk assessment tools*

INTRODUCTION

The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996), Section 28 (1)(d), stipulates that all children have the right to be protected against any form of harm, abuse, neglect and exploitation. South Africa's commitment to uphold the rights of children as a vulnerable group is reflected in the Children's Act, 2005 (Act No. 38 of 2005), where it is highlighted in Section 6(2) that, "All proceedings, actions or decisions in a matter concerning a child must- (a) respect, protect, promote and fulfil the child's rights set out in the Bill of Rights ...". The recognition of these rights is aligned with international and regional policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 1989) and The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Secretary General of the African Union, 1990). The protection of the rights of children is an irrefutable matter and a moral and legal commitment of society as a whole (Pretorius & Pistorius, 2012:3).

South Africa faces a high prevalence of child maltreatment (Pretorius & Pistorius, 2012:6-8), despite legislation for the protection of children and their rights. However, the full extent of crime and child maltreatment in South Africa is not known as official crime statistics do not always reflect the exact nature of crimes that have been committed (Booyens, Beukman & Bezuidenhout, 2013:62; Department of Social Development, 2010:10).

Effective assessment is seen as the first step in the protection of children at risk. Although the assessment of children at risk is a critical skill for social workers, the global reality indicates that there is variation in the practice of the assessment of children at risk (Mackinnon, 1998:11-16). This trend was also evident within the South African social welfare field where it was observed that safety and risk assessment tools varied to such an extent that inconsistent assessment practices amongst professionals hampered effective service delivery to children at risk and negatively affected collaboration between professionals (Department of Social Development, 2010:9-10). In response to this problem in practice, the National Department of Social Development identified an urgent need to promote a more consistent approach to safety and risk assessment for social workers in the child protection field. This need formed the rationale for the authors to develop safety and risk assessment tools and

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training materials for designated social workers in South Africa. The purpose was to promote more uniform assessment practices, and in the process, empower professionals and enhance their professional accountability in the field of child protection. Effective assessment could thus support the principle of 'the best interests of the child' as highlighted in the Children's Act 38 of 2005.

The goal of this article is firstly to provide a discussion of the theoretical basis underpinning safety and risk assessment in the field of child protection and, secondly, to describe the development of the safety and risk assessment tools for the South African context within the framework of intervention research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to have a clear and consistent understanding of safety and risk assessment of the child at risk and of the developed safety and risk assessment tools, this section will focus on the most relevant concepts and the theoretical foundation that underpin safety and risk assessment.

Child maltreatment and the child at risk

The concept maltreatment refers to all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and commercial or other forms of exploitation that result in actual or potential harm to the health, survival, and dignity of a child within a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (World Health Organisation & International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2006:9). Maltreatment can also be seen as "an act, failure to act, or pattern of behaviour on the part of the caregiver that results in death or physical, medical, sexual, or emotional harm or presents imminent threat of harm to a child" (National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 2009:7). These definitions imply that maltreatment includes all types of abuse, neglect and exploitation in different levels of severity. As a result, child maltreatment is globally regarded as a serious public health, human rights, legal, and social issue.

In correlation with section 150 of The Children's Act 38 of 2005, a child at risk is regarded as a child who is exposed to risk factors that could result in him/her being found in need of care and protection. The *New Dictionary of Social Work* (Terminology Committee for Social Work, 1995:9) defines a child in need of care and protection as a "... child whose social functioning, as well as physical, psychological and emotional development is impeded by neglect or abuse, or lack of exercising control by the parent or guardian." Exposure to risk factors can harm children and hamper their optimal development (Gil, 2006:23). The Children's Act 38 of 2005 stipulates that children at risk should be protected against potential harm, which entails that designated social workers should conduct a thorough professional assessment (Malloy, La Rooy, Lamb & Katz, 2011:2).

ASSESSMENT IN THE CHILD PROTECTION CONTEXT

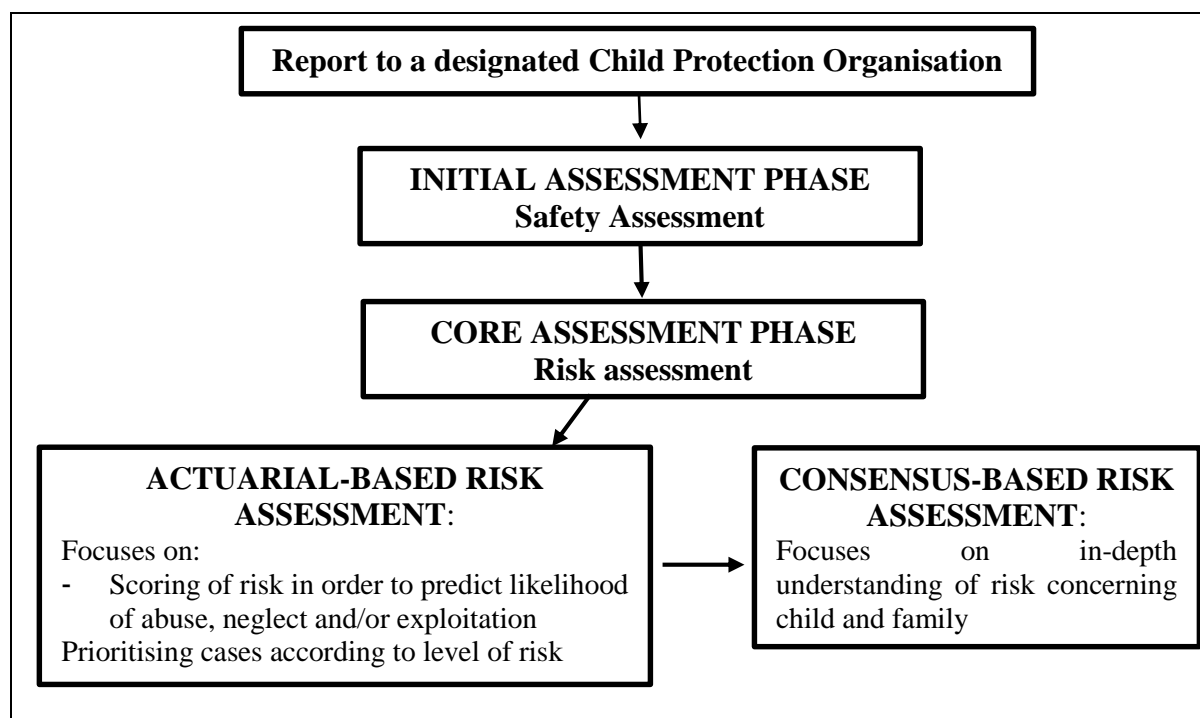
A thorough assessment of children at risk is required in order to make verified decisions that will support the best interests of the child. Assessment is defined as a process and a product (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried & Larsen, 2006:180). The process of assessment involves the gathering, analysing, and synthesising of information that will provide a concise picture of the unique circumstances of the person, including his/her needs and strengths. The product refers to a formulated statement about the nature of a person's circumstances and relevant factors at a given time.

Assessment in the context of child protection entails two phases, namely an initial and a core assessment phase (Rycus & Hughes, 2003:16-18). The two phases correlate with the two main types of assessment in child protection, namely safety and risk assessment. The initial phase, in which the safety assessment is conducted, focuses on the possibility of immediate harm or danger to the child. This focus is on maltreatment that has just happened, is happening at present, or is imminent. The aim of the safety assessment is, therefore, to ensure the

immediate safety of the child. During the second phase, in which the core assessment is conducted, the focus is on the likelihood or probability that child maltreatment will occur or re-occur at some time in the future (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007a:6; Department of Social Services, Missouri, 2004:1; Pretorius, Mblokazi, Hlase & Jacklin, 2012:179; Rycus & Hughes, 2003:11).

Safety assessment entails one method of assessment, while risk assessment consists of two methods of assessment, namely actuarial and consensus-based assessment (Munro, 2007:70; Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011:1-2; University of California at Berkely, 2005:2). Actuarial assessment is a more structured assessment that "... uses statistical procedures to identify and weigh factors that predict future maltreatment", while consensus-based assessment involves an in-depth assessment that "... emphasises a more comprehensive assessment of risk" (University of California at Berkely, 2005:2). Both of these assessment methods focus on risks related to child protection. However, the actuarial method makes use of scoring in order to determine the level of risk and predict the likelihood of child maltreatment. This form of assessment assists the social worker in prioritising cases according to the levels of risk that were determined during the assessment. On the other hand, consensus-based assessment provides information which is based on in-depth exploration of the case, and leads to the development of a case plan in which the relevant information as well as the reasoning that underlies decision-making by the social worker is stipulated. Reasoning in this context, refers to consensus that is based on the opinion of experts in practice as well as theories and literature on maltreatment, hence the term 'consensus-based'. Consensus-based assessment is more flexible, provides more in-depth information, and culminates in an intervention plan to reduce risk for children and their families (Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011:2-3). These two methods of assessment are equally important in the risk assessment phase and can be utilised independently as well as complementary to each other. The above elements within the assessment process are graphically displayed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Assessment process



(Source: Author formulated figure drawn from: Department of Health, 2000:11; Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery & Cooper, 2008:479).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT

In all social work interventions, a theoretical foundation guides social workers in the way they think about people and problems, and how they respond to persons and their problems. Social workers should, therefore, know how a theoretical foundation will influence their decisions and analysis in terms of human functioning processes (Parrot, 2003:73-74). A theoretical framework will guide the social worker in making assumptions about data collected during the process of safety and risk assessment. International literature on safety and risk assessment emphasises the importance of the following practice guidelines for assessment: a capacity for growth and development; a holistic approach that focuses on the interaction between the person and environment; the acknowledgement of strengths and capacity in people; the right of people to self-actualisation and self-determination; least intrusive interventions; and cultural sensitivity (Department of Health, 2000:12-14; Department of Social Services, Missouri, 2004:1; Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007:3; Queensland Government, 2010:2; University of California at Berkeley, 2005:11).

The above guidelines are embedded in the following four theories that form the theoretical foundation underpinning the newly developed safety and risk assessment tools:

- the developmental approach (Department of Social Development, 2006:15-16; Dutschke, 2008:30), which focuses on empowerment and capacity building;
- the ecological systems approach (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003:11; Hepworth et al., 2006:17-18; Maguire, 2002:90; Zide & Gray, 2001:9; Zastrow, 2003:18-19), focusing on the interrelatedness between people and their environment;
- the strengths perspective (Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen, 2002:39; Miley, O'Melia & Du Bois, 2007:81-82; Zastrow, 2003:60), with a focus on the utilisation of people's strengths to enhance their development; and
- the person/child centred approach (Carmichael, 2006:105; Grobler & Schenck, 2009:12-37; Merry, 2002:34-37; Tudor, Keemar, Tudor, Valentine & Worrall, 2004:91-92) that focuses on people's right to self-actualisation and self-determination.

The above guidelines and theories are also reflected in the internationally accepted Framework for the Assessment of Children at Risk (Department of Health, 2000:11; Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery & Cooper, 2008:479).

FRAMEWORK FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN AT RISK

To assess whether a child is in need of care requires a systematic approach based on a uniform framework for gathering and analysing information about children and their families. The Framework for the Assessment of Children at Risk (Department of Health, 2000 in Wilson et al., 2008:479), subsequently referred to as The Framework, provides the social worker with a conceptual map that supports the holistic assessment of children in need and their families. The Framework is based on three domains: the developmental needs of the child, the parents' or caregivers' capacity to appropriately respond to the needs of the child, and the way the wider family and environmental factors impact on the child and the capacity of the parents or caregivers (Department of Health, 2000:18; London Safeguarding Children Board, 2010:263; Sayer, 2008:64; Wilson et al., 2008:480). The social worker is required to explore a number of specified dimensions within each of the three interrelated domains, which will lead to the accomplishment of a holistic assessment (Wilson et al., 2008:480).

The domains and dimensions in *The Framework of the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Wilson et al., 2008:480) are presented in Table 1. The Framework emphasises that the child's welfare lies at the core of the assessment of all the domains and dimensions.

Table 1: Domains and dimensions in the Assessment Framework

Domain: Child's developmental needs	Domain: Parenting capacity	Domain: Family and environmental factors
Dimensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Education • Emotional and behavioural development • Identity • Family and social relationships • Social presentation • Self-care skills 	Dimensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic care • Ensuring safety • Emotional warmth • Stimulation • Guidance and boundaries • Stability 	Dimensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family history • Wider family • Housing • Employment • Income • Family's social integration • Community resources

(Wilson et al., 2008:480).

Different assessment tools are relevant to the respective stages in the safety and risk assessment process illustrated in Figure 1.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The initial assessment phase, or safety assessment, is conducted by utilising a safety assessment tool, while two assessment tools, namely an actuarial and a consensus-based risk assessment tool, are relevant to the core or risk assessment phase. In the subsequent section the purpose and content of each of the three assessment tools are described.

The safety assessment tool

The purpose of the safety assessment tool is to determine the level of immediate danger to the child (Rycus & Hughes, 2003:16-17). This implies the assessment of the child's present situation and the planning of interventions to ensure the child's immediate safety (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007b:5). Safety assessment begins at the moment of the first face-to-face contact between the social worker and the child and family. A safety assessment has to be conducted independently for each child in the family. If the decision is made that the child remains in the parental home, a safety plan is required. A safety plan describes strategies and services provided by the relevant organisation in collaboration with the family with the goal to ensure the child's immediate safety (Rycus & Hughes, 2003:16). If the information collected during the safety assessment confirms that no maltreatment occurred, a case can be closed. However, if maltreatment is suspected or confirmed, the social worker needs to proceed to the next phase, namely the core assessment, which is also known as the risk assessment phase (Department of Health, 2000:32). The risk assessment involves an actuarial and a consensus-based assessment; each based on the utilisation of a relevant assessment tool.

The actuarial risk assessment tool

The purpose of the actuarial risk assessment tool is to obtain objective information about the presence of risk factors to predict which children are at the highest risk and will need immediate child protection services. The social worker can thus prioritise cases according to risk levels, given limited resources (Munro, 2007:70; Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011:1-2). Where a safety assessment is conducted for each individual child, the actuarial risk assessment is conducted for the family as a whole. At this stage the social worker starts to build a holistic picture of a case. In line with the purpose of the actuarial assessment, the actuarial risk assessment tool is based on a scoring method to assist the social worker to prioritise cases

according to certain levels of risk (University of California at Berkely, 2005:2). The consensus-based assessment follows on the actuarial assessment.

The consensus-based risk assessment tool

The consensus-based risk assessment tool is utilised to gain a comprehensive understanding of the service needs of an individual child within the context of the family. This tool is based on the domains and dimensions of The Framework (refer Table 1), which allows the social worker to systematically gather information on the developmental needs of the child, parenting capacity of the parents or caregivers, and relevant contextual factors that impact on the child and parents/caregivers. The process of consensus-based assessment is more flexible and involves the gathering of in-depth information about the case. The utilisation of the domains and dimensions in The Framework provides structure to and verification of decisions that support report writing. Based on the consensus-based assessment, the social worker compiles a case plan in collaboration with the child and the family, which is intended to reduce risks to the child (University of California at Berkeley, 2005:2-3; Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011:1-2).

The complementary use of the three assessment tools assists the social worker to form a detailed and comprehensive picture of the case, including the developmental needs of the child, the capacity of the parents/care-givers, and family and environmental factors relevant to the assessment of maltreatment.

The development of the safety and risk assessment tools for the South African child protection context was underpinned by the different theoretical components discussed above.

SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In this section an overview of the process of the development of the safety and risk assessment tools for South Africa is provided. As such, the intention is not to focus on detailed empirical research results, but on the processes involved in the development of the assessment tools. These processes were driven by the central purpose of promoting more uniform assessment practices that will empower social workers and enhance their professional accountability in the field of child protection.

The assessment tools were developed over a period of three years, from 2012 to 2014. The development process included different phases, starting with a situational analysis and thorough literature review and culminating in the development of the safety and risk assessment tools, which reflected the stages of intervention research (De Vos & Strydom, 2011:473-489). Subsequent to the completion of the process, training workshops on the Safety and Risk Assessment Tools were presented nationally during the course of 2015.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS IN PRACTICE

The research process followed the steps of intervention research as outlined by De Vos and Strydom (2011:473-489). The discussion will provide an overview of the research activities as executed in practice.

Problem analysis and project planning

In order to obtain a holistic picture of current assessment practices in the South African context, a problem analysis was conducted (Fraser, Richman, Galinsky & Day, 2009:29). The aim of the problem analysis was to identify existing safety and risk assessment tools in practice in the South African context, as well as to explore best practices and possible gaps in the implementation of safety and risk assessment. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 81 multi-disciplinary professionals who were purposively selected (Babbie, 2013:128-129) as professionals that worked in the field of child protection in

South Africa and who were specifically involved in the assessment of child abuse, neglect and exploitation. These professionals were regarded as key informants to explain the current ways of conducting safety and risk assessment in practice. Semi-structured interviews were especially suitable to explore a complex social phenomenon such as child protection and the assessment of children at risk (Greeff, 2011:347; Leedy & Ormrod, 2006:146-147; Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2012:197). This form of data collection allowed flexibility for participants to share detailed information.

The results of the problem analysis indicated that there was general confusion about concepts relevant to the field of child protection and, more specifically, safety and risk assessment. Furthermore, it was confirmed that there were no uniform safety and risk assessment tools or assessment procedures in the South African context. A strong need was expressed by nearly all the participants on the need for a standardised assessment procedure, as this would enhance the quality of safety and risk assessment of children as well as communication amongst professionals on a multi-disciplinary level.

Information gathering and synthesis

A thorough review of relevant literature (Fraser et al., 2009:30) was conducted in order to become acquainted with existing national and international literature on safety and risk assessment. The literature review allowed the authors to obtain an in-depth understanding of safety and risk assessment, based on the core theoretical concepts underlying the practice of the particular concern being studied. This step further included the identification of existing safety and risk assessment tools, as well as globally accepted procedures to execute safety and risk assessment in practice (c.f. Department of Health, 2000:32; London Safeguarding Children Board, 2010:263; Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007a:16-23; The Scottish Government, 2010:15-16; Queensland Government, 2010:6). Content analysis, which involved a systematic and detailed review of these documents, was conducted to obtain insight into safety and risk assessment in the specific context in which it was formulated and implemented (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:142; Welman et al., 2012:151). The synthesis of existing knowledge and prototypes guided the researchers in identifying potentially useful elements which could be utilised in the design of the newly developed safety and risk assessment tools (De Vos & Strydom, 2011:473-489).

Design and development of the safety and risk assessment tools

Based on the information gathered by means of the situational analysis in practice and the review of literature, the researchers identified certain procedural elements that informed the design and development of the three assessment tools. This phase involved the development of the theory and materials for the assessment tools and training materials (Fraser et al., 2009:31). The tools included a safety assessment tool, an actuarial risk assessment tool, and a consensus-based risk assessment tool, which eventually became the final product of the research.

Early development and pilot testing

During the early development stage, a prototype of the mentioned assessment tools was developed and pilot tested with social workers who were directly involved in safety and risk assessment of children in practice (Fraser et al., 2009:31). This step in the process of intervention research served as a feedback system which enabled the authors to refine the prototype of the assessment tools as well as the procedural elements involved in the implementation of the tools (De Vos & Strydom, 2011:483). For this purpose, the tools were pilot tested with a group of 38 participants who were designated social workers working in the field of child protection. This group, who were purposively selected, provided immediate feedback after the training on the newly developed tools, while eight social workers from the

same group provided further feedback on the implementation of the tools in practice after a period of three months. Based on the feedback, the refinement of the assessment tools included changes in language, clearer definitions of concepts, and the inclusion of additional items relevant to the South African context.

Evaluation and advanced development

During the evaluation and advanced development stage, the refined assessment tools were evaluated by utilising a one group pre-test, post-test design (Babbie, 2013:279; Fouché, Delport & De Vos, 2011:485-486). A sample of 28 designated social workers working in the field of child protection that was purposively selected, received training on the implementation of the safety and risk assessment tools. Pre-test data was collected by means of a self-constructed questionnaire (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2012:202), while post-test data was collected by means of the same questionnaire as well as focus group interviews and written narratives (Bless et al., 2012:200, 393). Most of the participants indicated that the process of assessment, according to the newly developed assessment tools, were more comprehensive and thus more time-consuming than experienced in their current assessment practices, which posed challenges in contexts of high caseloads and limited resources. However, the key findings indicated that the developed assessment tools provided social workers with a uniform practice model for a holistic implementation of safety and risk assessment of children at risk, and supported their professional decision-making which could in turn enhance their professional accountability.

Dissemination

The last step in the research process involved the preparation of the final product for dissemination among the target audience, being designated social workers as well non-designated social workers and other professionals in the South African child protection field (Fraser et al., 2009:33). The final product consisted of a learner manual on safety and risk assessment, as well as a complementary training manual for facilitators.

The safety and risk assessment tools were subsequently disseminated to designated social workers from government and non-government organisations by means of workshops that were conducted on a national level. The need for uniform safety and risk assessment tools and assessment procedures were repeatedly confirmed during these workshops, leading to a demand for further roll-out of the product. Participants highlighted the fact that clear guidelines for implementation of the safety and risk assessment tools in the learner and training manuals were a measure to maintain the integrity of the final product (De Vos & Strydom, 2011:487-489).

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION TO SOCIAL WORK

The research was initiated by a need identified by the National Department of Social Development to explore current practices and needs related to safety and risk assessment in the South African child protection context. This process resulted in the development of safety and risk assessment tools and training materials. The unfolding of the process highlighted some valuable insights for the authors and for social work practice.

From the results of the research the value of scientific research methods and procedures to develop a credible product for social work service delivery was evident. In this regard, the authors concluded that the theory underlying intervention research manifested itself in the development of the safety and risk assessment tools. By considering all the steps in the process of intervention research, the authors are of the opinion that the integrity of the product, as well as of the process that was followed to develop it, were enhanced.

During the situational analysis, the need for the development of assessment tools and training materials for children at risk within the South African context was consistently supported by participants from the social work profession as well as those from other professions, such as members of the legal and mental health professions. The need was repeatedly confirmed by the social workers who participated in the later phases of the research process, namely the pilot testing, evaluation and advanced development, and the dissemination phases.

Uniform safety and risk assessment practices, entailing the complementary utilisation of three different assessment tools during the course of the assessment process, can assist social workers to conduct a comprehensive and holistic safety and risk assessment. It is recognised that social workers may be faced with additional challenges, most probably in terms of their time. However, as effective assessment is regarded as the first step in child protection, the importance of conducting a thorough assessment is a critical aspect in serving the best interests of children at risk, as well as for accountability of social work practice in the field of child protection.

During the research it became evident that the development of the safety and risk assessment tools could not be executed by either research or practice in isolation, but should be based on a collaborative effort between researchers and practitioners. Continuous dialogue between research and practice throughout all stages of the intervention research provided the opportunity for the development of a product that addresses the real needs in terms of safety and risk assessment in practice. The collaboration between research and practice was in support of the description of evidence-based practice which proposes that “increased scientist-practitioner alliances has the potential to enhance the knowledge base of social and human service professions” (Delport & De Vos, 2011:60).

The research processes that were followed to find answers to the mentioned identified problem in practice are reflected in the definition of evidence-based practice as formulated by Sundet and Kellym (2007:165):

“Evidence-based practice is a type of intervention in which the professional uses research as a practice and problem solving tool; collects data systematically to monitor intervention; specifies problems, techniques and outcomes in measurable terms; and systematically evaluates the effectiveness of the intervention used.”

The authors regard the development of the safety and risk assessment tools for the South African context as a first step to address the need for uniform assessment practices in the child protection field. The newly developed assessment tools, as the product of this research, should not be seen as an end-product, but as a vehicle for continued reflection and refinement, for example on issues related to ethical standards in safety and risk assessment of children, and training for undergraduate social work students and social workers in practice. It is recommended that further research should be conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the developed assessment tools as well as to explore other aspects related to safety and risk assessment of children at risk. Such research has the potential to further contribute to the knowledge and skills of social workers in the field of child protection.

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