Standardised Measures; Friend or Foe? Parenting Assessments in Court with a focus on Parenting Assessment Manual Software (PAMS).

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Decision Making Challenges: Accuracy

"Since risk assessment is, by definition, making judgments under conditions of uncertainty, there is an unavoidable chance of error" (Munro 2008, p. 42).

"it is essential to accept that it is a meta-failure to think that errors and mistakes do not exist; there is no zero-failure paradise in child protection" (Biesel and Cottier 2021, p. 22.
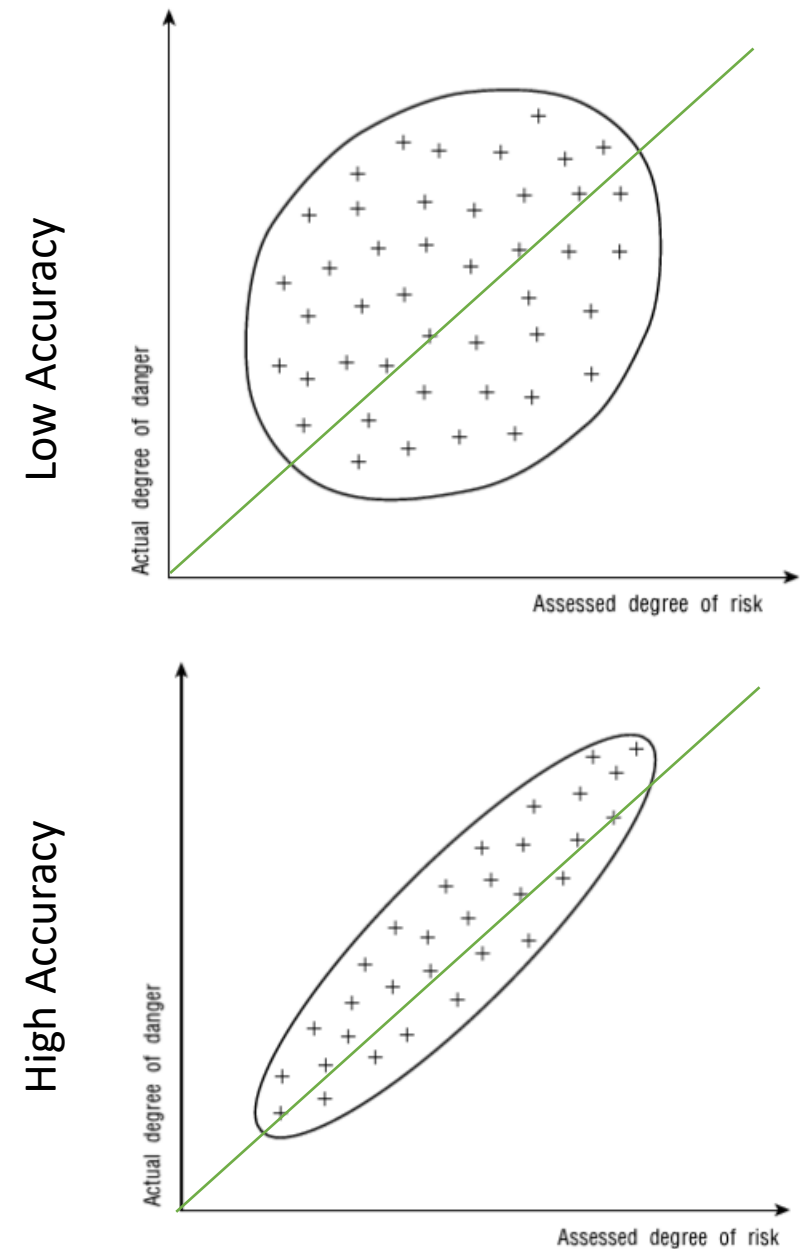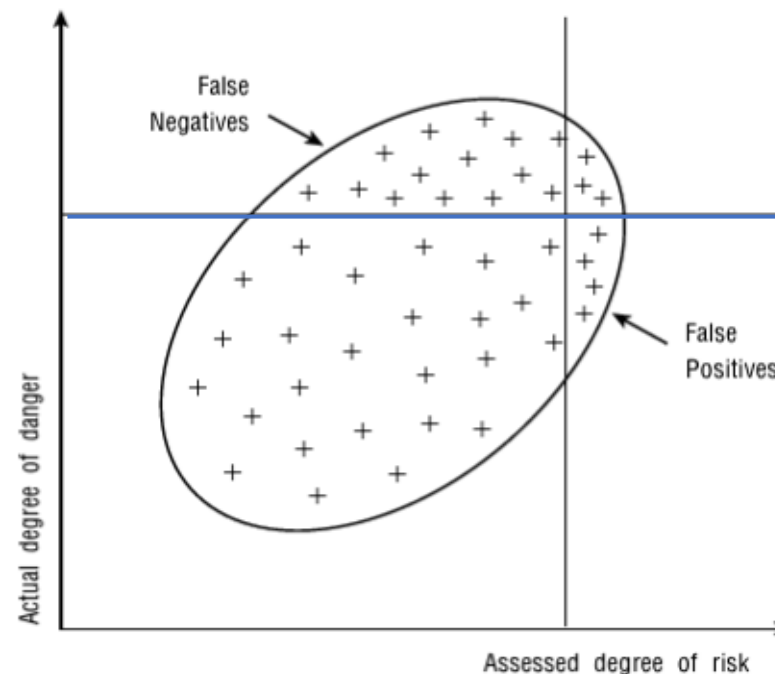

(Modified from: Munro 2008, p. 42-43)
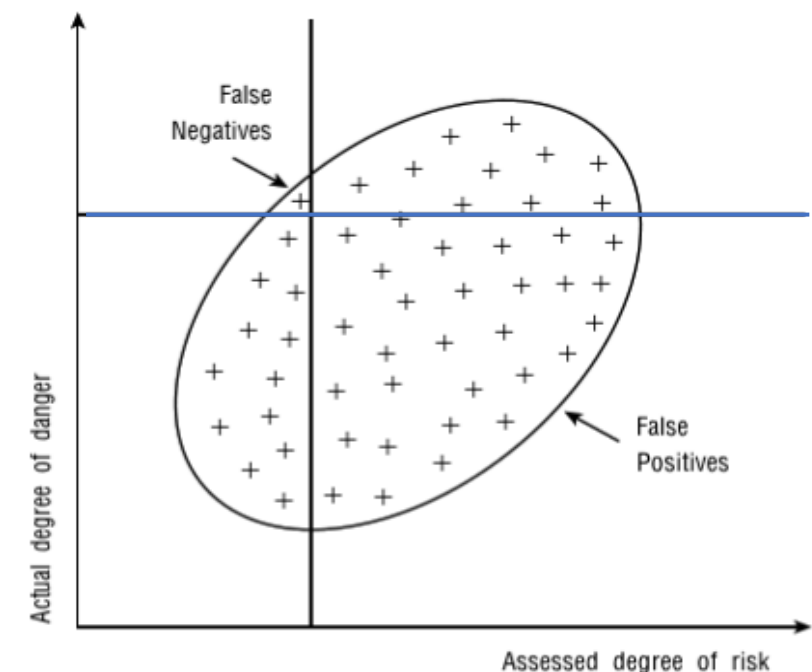
Decision Making Challenges Errors

False Positive: as assessed degree of risk goes up – the actual danger remains low.

False Negative: as the danger of risk goes up – the assessment of that risks remains low
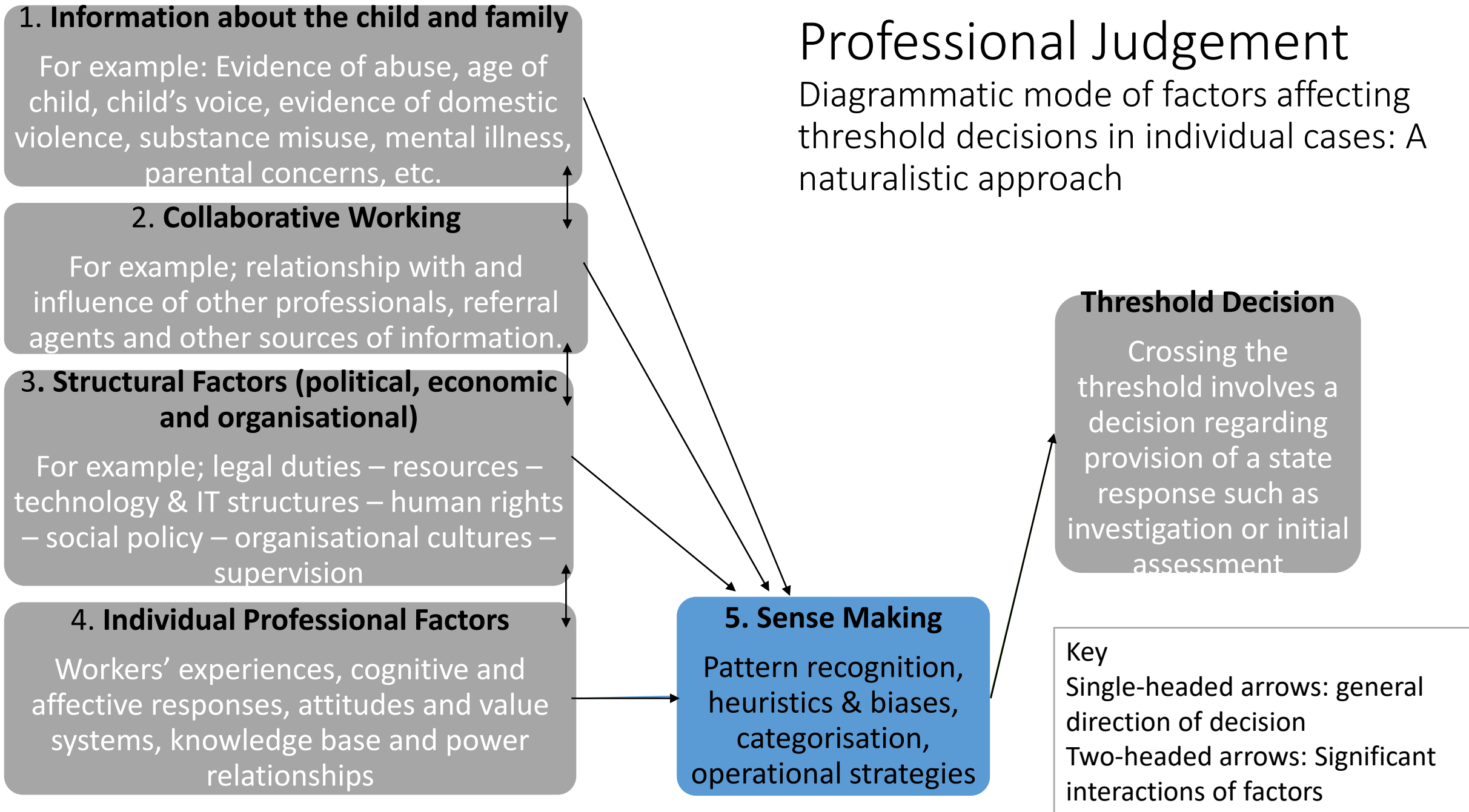
High Threshold for Intervention

Low Threshold for Intervention

(Modified from: Munro 2008, p. 42-43)

Professional Judgement

Diagrammatic mode of factors affecting threshold decisions in individual cases: A naturalistic approach

1. Information about the child and family

For example: Evidence of abuse, age of child, child's voice, evidence of domestic violence, substance misuse, mental illness, parental concerns, etc.

2. Collaborative Working

For example; relationship with and influence of other professionals, referral agents and other sources of information.

3. Structural Factors (political, economic and organisational)

For example; legal duties – resources – technology & IT structures – human rights – social policy – organisational cultures – supervision

4. Individual Professional Factors

Workers' experiences, cognitive and affective responses, attitudes and value systems, knowledge base and power relationships

5. Sense Making

Pattern recognition, heuristics & biases, categorisation, operational strategies

Threshold Decision

Crossing the threshold involves a decision regarding provision of a state response such as investigation or initial assessment

Key
Single-headed arrows: general direction of decision
Two-headed arrows: Significant interactions of factors

(Modified from: Platt and Turney 2014, p. 1480)

Standardised Measures

- Consensus-Based tools of risk assessment and management
  - Created via analysis of factors typically used when making assessments of maltreatment; these factors are brought together into a schema which is applied to a case to assess risk

- Empirical/Statistical tools
  - Based on statistically predictive factors for maltreatment which are brought together into a schema that is scored numerically to assess risk.

(Barlow, Fisher and Jones 2012)

Assessing Parental Capacity to Change when Children are on the Edge of Care: An overview of current research evidence (Ward, Brown and Hyde-Dryden 2014).

Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families: The Family Pack of Questionnaires and Scales (Cox and Bentovim 2000).

Parenting Daily Hassles
SCALE

The statements below describe a lot of events that routinely occur in families with young children. These events sometimes make life difficult. Please read each item and circle how often it happens to you (rarely, sometimes, a lot, or constantly) and then circle how much of a 'hassle' you feel that it has been for you FOR THE PAST 6 MONTHS. If you have more than one child, these events can include any or all of your children.

EVENT	How often it happens				Hassle (low to high)
1. Continually cleaning up messes of toys or food	Rarely	Sometimes	A lot	Constantly	1 2 3 4 5
2. Being nagged, whined at, complained to	Rarely	Sometimes	A lot	Constantly	1 2 3 4 5
3. Meal-time difficulties with picky eaters, complaining etc.	Rarely	Sometimes	A lot	Constantly	1 2 3 4 5
4. The kids won't listen or do what they are asked without being nagged	Rarely	Sometimes	A lot	Constantly	1 2 3 4 5
5. Baby-sitters are hard to find	Rarely	Sometimes	A lot	Constantly	1 2 3 4 5
6. The kids schedules (like pre-school or other activities) interfere with meeting your own household needs	Rarely	Sometimes	A lot	Constantly	1 2 3 4 5

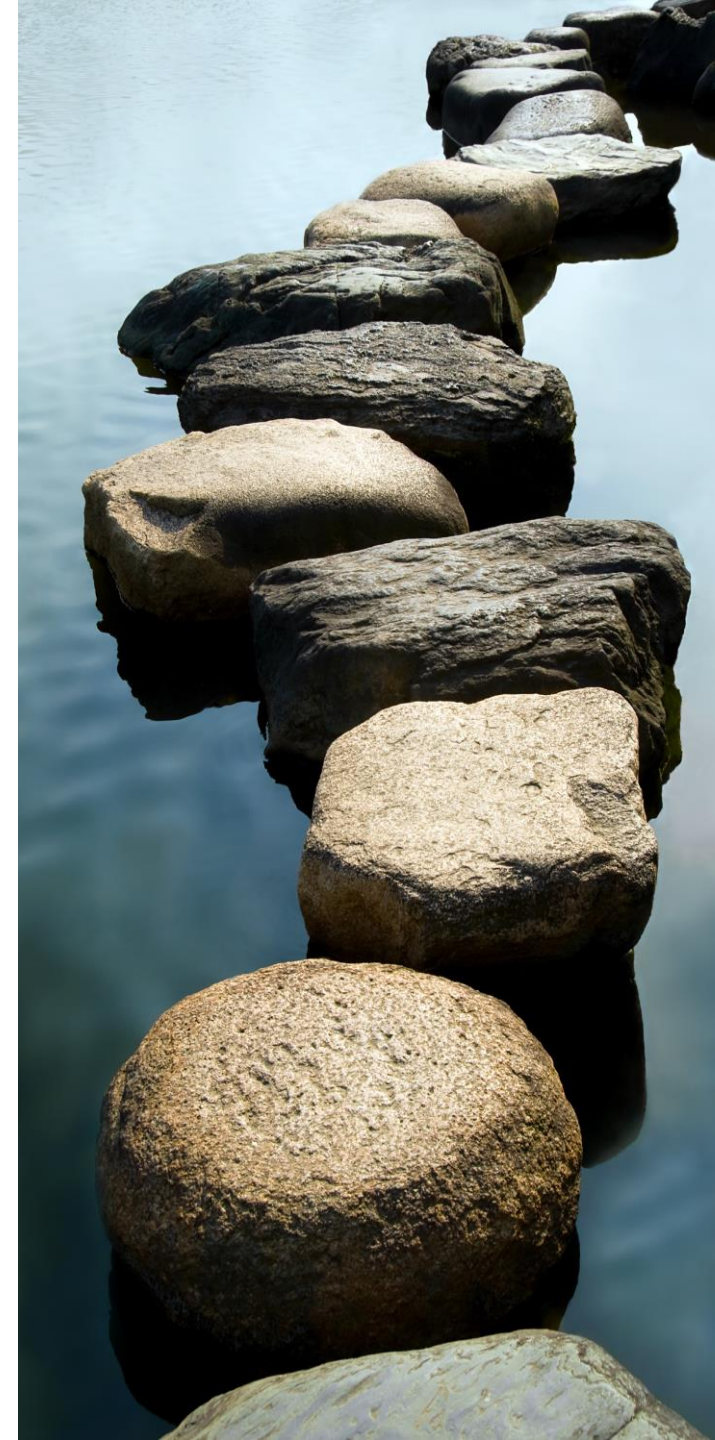# Standardised Tools versus Professional Judgement

Strengths

- More reliable, accurate and predictive

- More transparent and auditable

- More focused and structured

- Provide a new language to express work more accurately

Critiques

- Oversimplification of practice

- Managerialism focus

- Time consuming/increasing workload

- Heightened (unwarranted) certainty

- Resistance/Evasion from frontline workers

(Biesel 2021; Lätsch et. al. 2021; Sletten and Ellingsen 2020; Basian 2017; Berrick et. al. 2017; Barlow, Fisher and Jones 2012; Munro 2008)

Standardised Tools versus Professional Judgement

Contentions

- Enhances/Jeopardises the professional role, autonomy, personal development, critical reflection and objectivity

- Generates more information: valuable versus excessive

- Improves/Damages working relationships between assessor and assessed

- Evaluation and testing in child protection and UK context

(Biesel 2021; Lätsch et. al. 2021; Sletten and Ellingsen 2020; Basian 2017; Berrick et. al. 2017; Barlow, Fisher and Jones 2012; Munro 2008)

What is PAMS?

- Standardised Tool/Measure

- Evidence-Based, multidimensional assessment tool

- Not a psychometric tool

- Does not eliminate subjectivity; however, it provides guidelines to help make judgments

- Inter-rater reliability is more than satisfactory across professional groups in their scoring of different aspects of the tool

- Despite over 3000 registered PAMS users, there is no other research on PAMS.

- PAMS 3.0 versus PAMS 4.0

(McGaw 2010)

What is PAMS?

- Undertaking a PAMS involves various steps:
  - Initial Screening Tool
  - I Need Help Form
  - Parent Questionnaire
  - Knowledge Cartoons
  - Parent Booklet
  - PAMS Observation Form
  - Skills Index
  - Worksheet Summary

(McGaw 2010)

Methodology: Mixed Methods

Research Question: How do professionals who have used PAMS within 'parenting assessments for court' perceive the incorporation of PAMS?

Quantitative	Qualitative
Online questionnaire	Semi-Structured Telephone Interviews
Open and closed questions	Designed to address research questions
Designed to address research questions	Audio Recorded/Transcribed
20-30 minutes to complete questionnaire	Interview Template
SPSS Software	1 Hour
	Nvivo Software

Methodology: Sampling

Quantitative	Qualitative
3000 Assessors trained to use PAMS	37 out of 54 Volunteers
1400-1500 purchased PAMS 3.0 (most recent software)	Purposive Theoretical Sampling
50-60% of those who are trained undertake PAMS to inform a FPA	Modified Grounded Theory Analysis
Approximately 550-750 use it in FPAs	Theoretical Saturation
Response Rate: 7-10% with 54 participants	11 Interviews Undertaken
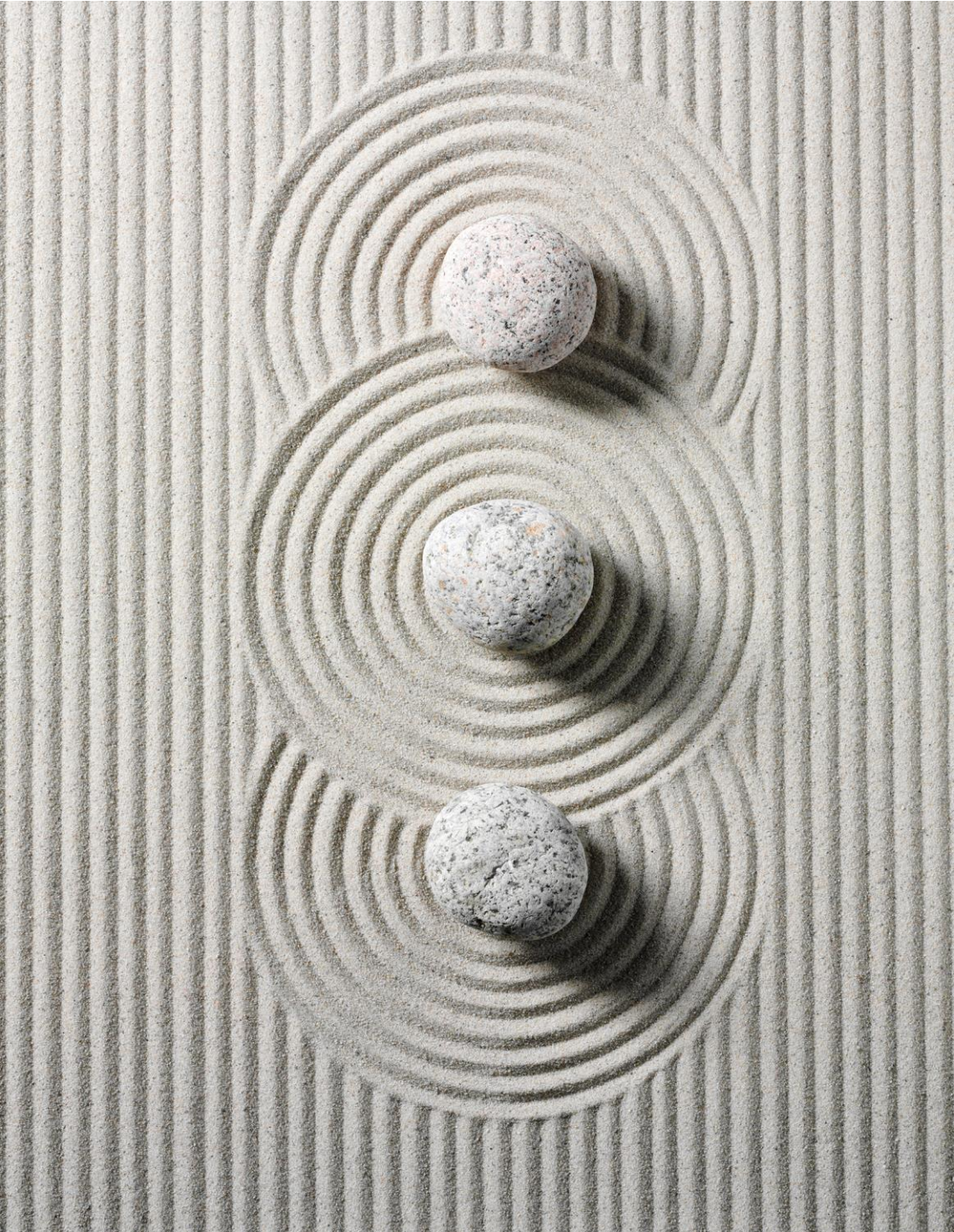
Findings: Overall Preference to use PAMS

Pro-PAMS stance:	Moderate-PAMS stance:	Anti-PAMS stance:	
"I think the PAMS tool is wonderful *both laugh*. I think it's great... I love it. I think it's great *laugh*. I just think it is really good" (participant 8).	It's fine. I wouldn't say, 'Oh, I love it.' But I certainly don't hate it. And it has its purpose. Um, it has its flaws" (participant 42).	"I don't really like the PAMS... Oh year, why do I hate it? *laugh*... Um, I don't *hate it* – well I do hate it a little bit" (participant 15).	
54%	24%	20%	

*Statistics don't add to 100% due to non-response rates for these questions

Findings: Uncontested Benefits and Limitations

Uncontested Benefits
Evidenced based
Helpful framework
Useful focus on targeted change
Positive strength-based approach
Helpful visual aids and activities
Parents expect an advantage
Parents with learning difficulties given a chance
Good to use with parents who have learning difficulties
Appreciated by parents with learning difficulties

Uncontested Limitations
Only as good as the assessor
Expectations the tool would do more
Time consuming
Difficult software to use
Monotonous process
Difficulty building a relationship with the parent
Patronising ambiguity
More of a 'social work' tool

Findings: Contentious Benefits and Limitations

Benefits (contentious)		Limitations (contentious)
A comprehensive tool in assessing parenting which covers a lot of unexpected ground	⟷	Key areas of focus need more guidance
Helpful standardisation process that was flexible enough to incorporate professional judgement	⟷	Want more flexibility and less standardisation
Strong tool to use within the courts	⟷	PAMS not developed for court

Discussion: Putting PAMS in the wider context; Strengths

Strengths

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- Provide a new language to express work more accurately

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Conclusion: Final Words

"The reliability of practitioners' judgments concerning the risks of significant harm could be improved. Judgments based on experience and intuitive thinking should be supported, but not replaced, by information collected through evidence-based tools and standardized measures to inform structured professional decision making" (Ward, et. al. 2014, p, 11).

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