

SAY CHEESE! HOW SLICES OF EMMENTHAL COULD HELP MANAGE RISK IN CHILD PROTECTION

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Moving from child-protection law to working with air traffic control in France is not the most obvious career path. However, it has been fascinating and enlightening. Cross-fertilisation of ideas from one field to another always has the potential to provide fresh insights and to enrich practice, so does aviation have anything to offer child protection?

One potentially useful idea is the Swiss cheese model. This is very familiar to anyone working in aviation and many other professions dealing with risk prevention, but so far, at least to my knowledge, not in child protection. Although the similarities between aviation and child protection may not be immediately apparent, in fact, both are complex systems involving multiple agencies cooperating to ensure safety in a field where human factors (including professional expertise and judgment along with human fallibility) and system structure combine in a high-stakes effort to avoid disaster.

All analogies have their limits, but language is always revealing; the imagery we choose sheds light on our understanding. Before considering Swiss cheese, we should look at the classic images we tend to employ when visualising child protection.

The first very familiar idea is that of a safety net. This implies a mental picture of a child hurtling down through the air with only a single flimsy layer of protection held out to prevent a fatal impact with the ground. The child is either caught and is saved, or plummets to disaster if the net is not extended in the right place at the right time and held sufficiently tight. And, of course, a net is full of holes, thus evoking the other familiar expression of 'slipping through the net'.

Under this conceptualisation, there is a single one-off, last-minute chance to save the child, whereas, in fact, experience tells us that many child-protection cases build up over time, often over years and even generations. Furthermore, in the 'safety net' model, if the child is caught, all is well and life goes back to normal, whereas in the real world, even after a 'successful' intervention, child protection is a long-term task with ongoing ramifications.

When things go wrong, this vision of child-protection makes it easy — especially for politicians and the media — conveniently to blame social workers and/or police for failing to step in with their net and catch the falling child without looking further, for example as to why the child was falling in the first place.

Another image we hear is that of the weakest link. This suggests that there is one problematic weak point which failed, with the unspoken implication that the other links are sound. This analogy allows us to place all the blame on one single element; when things go badly, it is because the child was just let down by the single failure of that weak link. Thus, depressingly often in child-care tragedies, we see one agency

or even a single professional hung out to dry, condemned as a failure. This image absolves us of the obligation of checking whether the other links were indeed strong; perhaps they too were fast approaching breaking point. Instead, society has its single identifiable scapegoat, conveniently avoiding any obligation to look further or deeper into root causes, systemic failures, or, indeed, the impact of budgetary pressures.

How many professionals in the child-protection field live with the dread of becoming that scapegoat? In consequence, how many leave child-protection for roles which are less stressful and less exposed? Lawyers are less directly in the firing line than, say, social workers, but I for one certainly remember feeling overworked, overwhelmed, unable to keep all the plates spinning and painfully aware that mistakes, oversights and misjudgments in child protection cost dear. Even more importantly, I was quite certain that if one of my cases went wrong, my management's response would be to point their fingers at me and shout: 'It was her fault!', dismiss me for incompetence and breathe a sigh of relief that the problem had been dealt with so that they could go back to business as usual. The media and public would be happy because they had their scapegoat and they could go back to ignoring child protection until inevitably the next tragedy occurred and the next poor benighted professional had to be identified as the weakest link designated to carry the can.

How does the Swiss cheese image differ? In aviation, it is understood that accidents, incidents and mishaps are not the results of a single weak link, nor is a single safety net ever going to be enough to save the day. Instead, the Swiss cheese model is used to conceptualise how things really go wrong in complex human systems. It was first proposed by Manchester University's Psychology Professor James Reason in 1990 (Reason, 1990) and it has been developed and applied in different fields dealing with risk ever since. It helps us to understand the passage from potential risk to actual harm.

Essentially, the image is of slice after slice of cheese, lined up one after the other. Of course, this being Swiss cheese, each slice contains holes which are of

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