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New Journal, Same Ongoing Challenge: Advancing Policies that Promote the Health and Well-Being of Children and Families

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The publication of the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* is a notable milestone for its sponsoring organization, CHILDREN AT RISK (www.childrenatrisk.org). With the release of "Volume 1, Number 1," we as the Co-Editors in Chief would like to take the opportunity to thank the inaugural contributors whose articles follow and to answer the obvious question of "Why publish a new journal?"

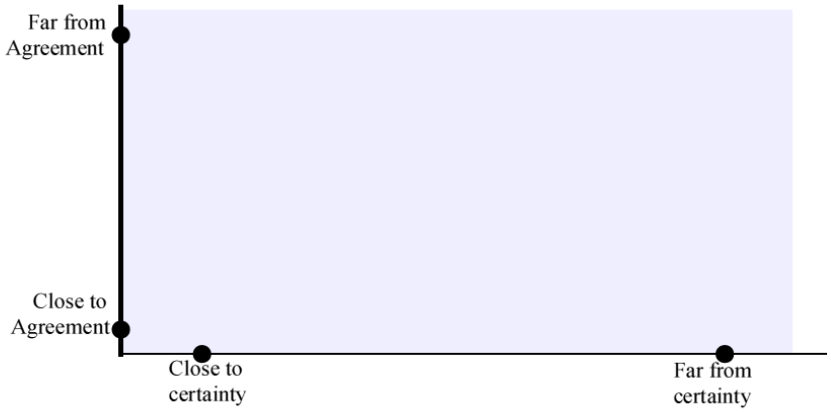
The answer to this question is firmly rooted in our experiences in meeting with many child advocates and policy specialists who have a solid interest in exploring effective data utilization to frame child and family related issues in a way that promotes policy change. While a number of excellent, highly respected journals are published that contain data and policy recommendations, we seek to make this journal a credible resource containing practical examples of how data is collected and analyzed, and then use this data to create a set of policy recommendations. First, the journal is meant to appeal to the broad set of anticipated readers who come from a variety of disciplines, perspectives and who represent a wide continuum across the political spectrum. Next, we have selected an online format to make the journal's articles easily accessible. Finally, we insist on a peer review process with invited commentaries to ensure that we adhere to the highest stands of scholarship and balanced criticism.

Despite a great deal of explicit affirmation for the value of families in our society, we are struck by the reoccurring failure to implement change. Casting about for a model or paradigm that might help us explain why the articles in the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* are necessary and how they can assist in making this policy process more effective, we have come to recognize the value in seeing our efforts from the standpoint of how "complex adaptive systems" operate.[1, 2, 3] Unlike a simple mechanical system, the presence of humans who process information and routinely make decisions based on information received as well as ideas within their own minds forms complex adaptive systems. Complexity science and the models surrounding complex adaptive systems, help us to understand the unpredictability in human endeavors that contrasts with the predictably typically seen in simple mechanical systems. In short, human actors, some with power some without, some with evidence others with none and some with open minds and others with pre-determined agendas are all active in policy domain. So, while most people in our society care about children and families, our path to ensure the health and well-being of children and to strengthen and enhance the positive functioning of families is filled with diverse opinions, mixed track records related to policy and occasional innovation along with omnipresent institutional inertia and frequent missed opportunities.

Below we briefly highlight some of the key points illustrating the paradigm that will guide our editorial decisions for the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* in the coming years.

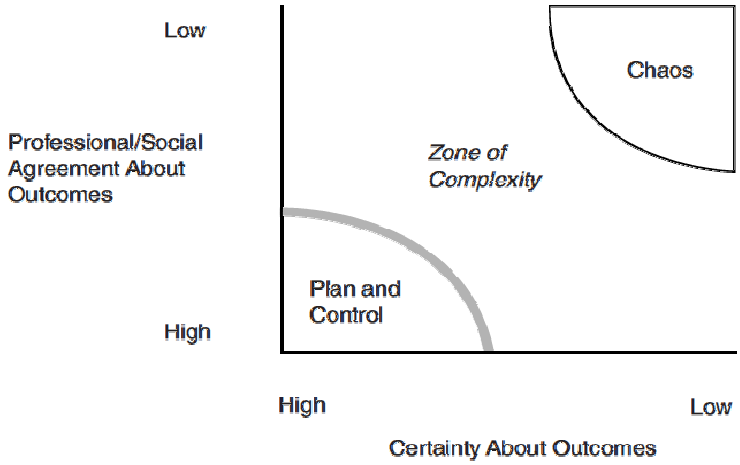
Human organizational behavior specialist, Roger Stacey provides us with a matrix from which we can describe two operating principles that shape decision making in an organizational or institutional framework.[1,2] One operating principle describes the level of professional agreement on a course of action related to the issue at hand that ranges from high to low. The other principle describes the level of certainty of a given outcome based on that course of action. When these principles are graphed against each other on an x and y axis a number of sectors or zones emerge. Figure 1a below demonstrates the two principles graphed against each other, which forms the basis of what has come to be called the Stacey Matrix and is used with permission from Brenda Zimmerman's extensive work on the practical use of this matrix in her highly applicable book called Edgeware[4] (and we thank her for her generous sharing of it for this piece). In the lower left corner of Figure 1b, one can see that some issues have a great deal of agreement and certainty as to the outcome. The best example of this as it relates to children would be a simple policy such as a food program. When one feeds a child, almost all experts would agree that the likelihood of success for that child increases. This area is referred to as the zone of certainty, and in policy work related to children and families we unfortunately seldom attain this level of agreement and certainty of outcome.

Figure 1a: Stacey Matrix



Used with permission from: *Zimmerman B. Ralph Stacey's Agreement & Certainty Matrix. Edgeware Aides. Plexus Institute. http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgeware/archive/think/main_aides3.html*[4]

Figure 1b: Stacy Matrix further defined



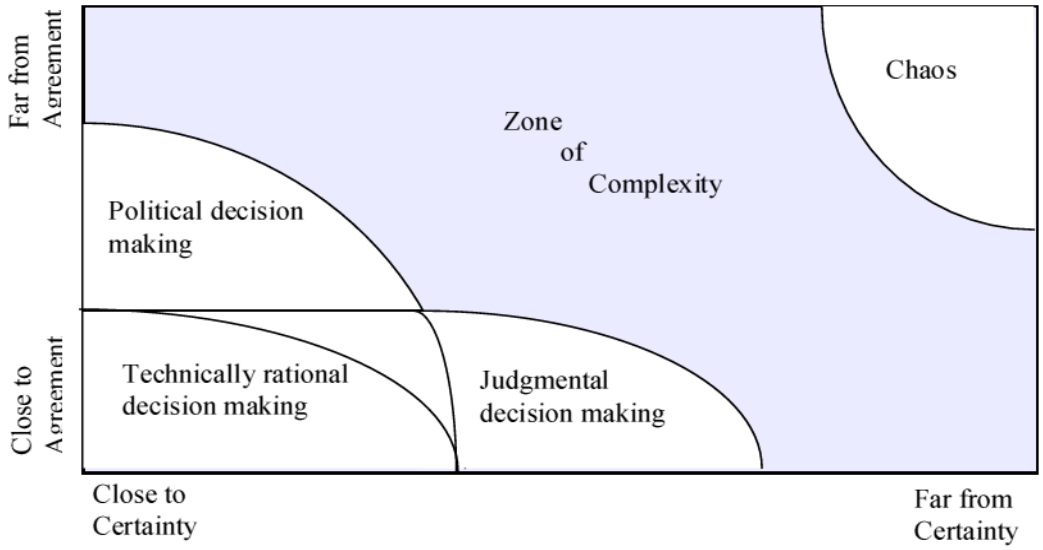
From: Plesk P. Redesigning Health Care with Insights from the Science of Complex Adaptive Systems. Appendix B. Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century. Committee on Quality of Health Care in America. Institute of Medicine. National Academy Press: Washington, DC. 2001. p 325.[3]

Alternatively, at the other end of the Stacey Matrix in Figure 1b, is the area or zone where very little agreement exists and there is little certainty of outcome. This area is called the zone of chaos, and we often operate in this chaotic region early on in policy debates. While this may be a disorganized portion of the matrix in which to operate, it is an area where a great deal of creativity and innovation may arise. In fact, Zimmerman challenges us to operate at the "edge" of the zone of chaos, hence her framework for creative solutions termed "Edgeware."[4] The recent debates on health care reform are a current example of working at the edge of chaos in which widely disparate views are developed, proposed, debated, rebuked, and railed against. Out of this cacophony of competing ideas and potential solutions a course of action emerges, although still without much agreement or certainty.[3] Some of us have worked in environments that might be characterized as this "edge". These are exciting places with many ideas, but they can also be very uncomfortable for some with conflicting views. This is not the area or zone in which the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* will aim.

In the vast majority of the Stacey Matrix, between the zones of certainty and chaos, is the zone of complexity, a region with varying degrees of professional agreement and certainty of action. The political process in our institutions and society plays out in this zone, and we as child advocates and agents of policy change need to explore what constitutes effective action in this zone of complexity. In Figure 2, one can

see that when a high degree of certainty around an outcome exists, along with a moderate level of agreement about what course of action will get us there, political coalitions form to hammer out a solution. In the real world these political processes occur in an open forum where those with evidence and those with influence seek to impact the eventual decision. This could easily be characterized as the legislative process around a budget's approval. Alternatively, one can see the alternate side of that continuum, in which there is much agreement on the need for a course of action but a moderate level of certainty as to what the outcome might be. This is where the judgment of those in decision making positions rules the day. This part of the matrix might be best characterized as what occurs around non-controversial rule making by regulators after the legislature makes its intent clear. As policy advocates, we develop skills at either end of this spectrum and seek to become as nimble as possible so that we may provide the public and decision makers with the information they need to make the best decision they can regarding important polices related to children and families.

Figure 2:



Adapted from: *Zimmerman B. Ralph Stacey's Agreement & Certainty Matrix. Edgeware Aides. Plexus Institute http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgeware/archive/think/main_aides3.html*[4] Used with permission

The articles we seek to publish will primarily be addressing issues in the zone of complexity where evidence is being uncovered, analyzed and subjected to scholarly criticism such that when policy changes that will likely promote the health and well-being of children and families arise, the public along with legislators, regulators, and other key societal decision makers will be able to move closer and closer to the zone of certainty. Inherent in this policy strategy is the need to evaluate and share data so that evidence can emerge as to what promotes the optimal policy approach and outcome.

However, the discovery of evidence takes time and even when optimal courses of action become clearer and clearer to those "in the know" there is a fairly lengthy period of time that typically defines the interval between when the work begins and when we get to the kind of certainty that we originally spoke of in the predictable example. One investigator in the diffusion of technology field who studies how long it takes for the academic process in health care to go from credible idea to generally accepted standard of care has characterized this adoption of best practice as "the 17 year odyssey." This odyssey as described by Green and colleagues[5] sees ideas emerge, attract funding, get rigorously tested and then have enough peer reviewed literature generated such that careful professionals will agree about what approach leads to a more certain outcome. The *Journal of Applied Research on Children* intends to provide an avenue for scholars and policy experts to share how they approach a problem, what data they are collecting and analyzing and to make clear how this emerging evidence is shaping their policy recommendations. Additionally, we hope that this journal will become a valuable resource for child advocates who seek to see actual examples of innovations that have evaluation to support them, and we also hope to accelerate their efforts to develop programs that address a specific need or issue in their own setting.

Over the next few years, as our authors and commentators share their knowledge and experience, we intend to publish what will be seen as a publication that is useful to a broad constituency of scholars, advocates and policy change agents. We hope to be of value to scholars and investigators looking for new ideas that have some preliminary data behind them, to child and family advocates seeking examples of how others have used data and evidence to influence policy, and to policy change agents for practical, applied work that illuminates a path towards policies that support the health and well-being among vulnerable children and families. While we may at times operate at the edge of chaos, through investment in the process of investigation and sharing results and

commenting on ideas, we aim to assist those working regularly in the zone of complexity to foster professional agreement and focus on the certainty of a given outcome. We hope such optimal policies related to the health and well-being of children and families emerge from an odyssey that will be far less that the average 17 years discussed above. We welcome our fellow travelers as we explore the complex adaptive system that is the policy arena related to children and families at risk.

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