

# Definitions

- process threshold** describes a stage in the process of delivering an intervention and the activity that is required to trigger it (e.g. checking a register or holding a meeting with a family)
- pure threshold** refers to the seriousness of the child's need measured in terms of their health and development
- reliability** refers to the ability of a data collection instrument to produce consistent results. A method is judged to be reliable when it consistently produces the same results, particularly when applied (a) by different researchers, or (b) to the same subjects at different points in time (when there is no other evidence of change)
- validity** refers to the ability of an instrument to produce findings that are in agreement with conceptual idea. A measure is valid if it measures what it is supposed to measure

## Further reading

Department of Health (1995) **Child Protection: messages from research**, HMSO, London, p11-22.

# Connections

### connecting modules

- Module 2 - What is child development?
- Module 3 - What is risk, protective factors, resilience and coping?
- Module 6 - How to do an individual assessment.



exercises with this lecture  
Using the threshold tool.

most relevant Practice tools  
*Threshold: determining the extent of impairment to children's development.*  
*Paperwork: the clinical assessment of children in need.*

### the other lectures in this module

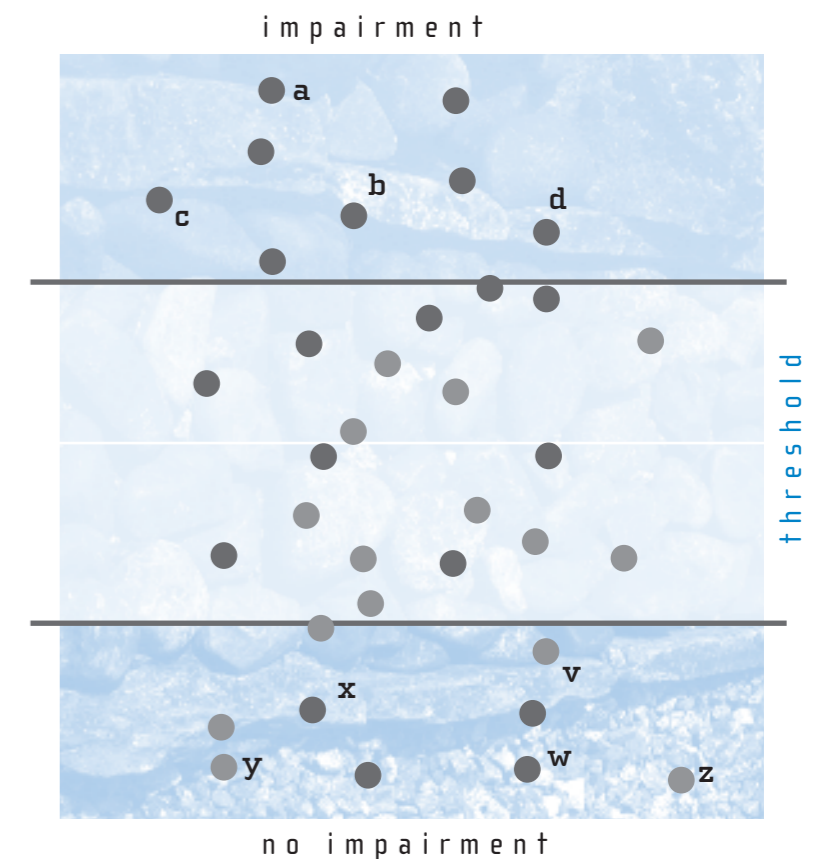
- 5.2 - What are absolute and relative judgements?
- 5.3 - What is impairment to development and significant impairment?
- 5.4 - What are impairment, disability and handicap?
- 5.5 - What other thresholds exist?
- 5.6 - How do threshold judgements relate to the provision of services?

## What is threshold?



- Determining which children get support from children's services involves the setting and application of thresholds and as such is an integral part of the work of children's services staff.
- Children's services tend to rely heavily on eligibility criteria - a type of process threshold to determine who gets help. Common Language focuses on pure thresholds which concern the child's development.
- The *Threshold* tool has been designed to determine impairment to health and development in children and to ensure practitioners make consistent judgements.
- Threshold judgements are integral to most Common Language applications. At the clinical level it is an important part of the process; at the aggregate level it is used to design and evaluate services.

The dots in the diagram represent children. Those in the top band have, by anyone's judgement, impaired development. Those in the bottom band have no impairment to development. The dots in the middle band fall on the threshold and making consistent judgements about these children is difficult.



- 1 The term 'threshold' comes from the Middle Ages when houses had stone floors that were damp and cold in winter. 'Threshings' from the harvest were used as a floor covering and the doorway to the house would be built high so as to hold the thresh.
- 2 The diagram on the front of the handout shows a series of cases, representing children. Some of the cases (a, b, c and d) clearly have impaired development. Others (v, w, x, y and z) are obviously in the category of having no impairment to development. Good assessment is a necessity to determine impairment and in some cases such judgements are easy to make. In the middle of the diagram, however, is a group of cases where the judgement is more difficult. These cases fall on the 'threshold' between impaired and unimpaired development.
- 3 Historically, children's services have used what are called 'process thresholds' to decide whether or not a child gets a service. In recent years, these process thresholds have sometimes been referred to as eligibility criteria and used to ration scarce resources so that only those most in need of help benefit. As attractive as these process thresholds are to administrators, they tend to disadvantage children by moving attention away from broad questions of development and towards narrow concerns of individual parts of children's services, such as child protection, child welfare or youth justice.
- 4 In Common Language the focus is on what are called 'pure thresholds' that indicate (a) whether there is any impairment to a child's development, (b) the nature of that impairment and (c) whether that impairment is significant. Decisions about whether or not to intervene in the child's life follow from decisions about the pure threshold but are not always dictated by it.
- 5 There are two contrasting approaches to making threshold decisions. The first is quantitative. Most scientists use tools proven to be reliable and valid (as described in previous modules of the training) to measure aspects of child development and well-being, for example emotional health. They then apply the measure to a sample of children selected to be representative of all children in a society and look at the distribution of scores for the sample. They consider the mean or average score and the scores at each end of the distribution, that is, those children with very good emotional health and those with very poor emotional health.
- 6 Since the scores will fall on a continuum, it is necessary to draw a threshold to distinguish between ones that are considered to be problematic and those that are not. Generally speaking scientists take an arbitrary cut-off point, such as the five per cent of children at the end of the distribution, as these may be considered to be 'abnormally' (unusually) high or low. Thus the five per cent becomes the threshold and indicates whether development is impaired or not.
- 7 The second approach to making threshold decisions is qualitative, and is sometimes referred to as phenomenological in the sense that it concerns the study of phenomena. The work of the German philosopher Goethe exemplifies the approach. When seeking to classify flowers, Goethe started by describing everything he could perceive in the flower, including colour, shape, size and smell. He then tried to explain how the plant came to be as it was, for example how its leaves changed over its lifetime. Next, he sought to understand the meaning behind the phenomena, setting out the feelings plants evoked in him - hence in later times the somewhat ornate names we give to some flowers, such as 'Proud Princess'. Finally, Goethe brought all these sources of information together to form the basis of a classification system that set a series of thresholds to help decide which category a flower falls into.

- 8 A qualitative or phenomenological approach to the assessment of threshold is probably about as appetising to practitioners as the quantitative approach, in which a well-tested instrument determines the decision. In reality, some mixture of quantitative and qualitative is not only present in most assessments of child development, it is also desirable. The careful description of what is seen is important, as is an understanding of the meaning behind the observation. But in children's services, every observation must conclude with a decision about which side of the threshold the case falls: does the child need help or not?
- 9 Common Language attempts to combine the quantitative and qualitative approaches by encouraging systematic observation and analysis, where necessary involving consultation with tools that have proven reliability and validity. By providing a strong structure for the observation and analysis, Common Language seeks to ensure that threshold judgements are consistent and also encourages practitioners to share their conclusions about cases with one another.
- 10 The *Threshold* tool has not been rigorously tested for validity and reliability. Informal testing suggests that in 60% of cases well-informed practitioners looking separately at the same cases will agree on the threshold judgement and that after training levels of consistency rise to 80%. But disagreement is also welcomed as it stimulates discussion about the case: there is no single correct answer. Common Language encourages those with responsibility for the child's well-being to look at the same facts through the same lens and so come to an agreement.
- 11 The dimensions used to assess impairment to development differ from those used to look at possible risks to development or needs to be met for healthy development (living situation, family and social relationships etc.). For threshold judgements the categories are health and development. In the context of *health*, the judgement extends to (i) physical health and (ii) psychological health. In the context of *development*, the judgement covers the following dimensions: (i) physical; (ii) behavioural; (iii) intellectual/ educational; (iv) social; and (v) emotional development.
- 12 As with any classification system, these categories are not written in stone. The value of the one chosen is that it covers both health and development and all areas of the child's development. Other approaches to classification that share these criteria can be used equally well.
- 13 The threshold judgement is integral to nearly all Common Language applications. First, it is critical in making a clinical assessment or analysing whether and how to intervene in the life of an individual child. Second, aggregate assessments of the circumstances of a group of children being served or potentially being served generally include a threshold assessment. This information can inform service planning decisions as it indicates the volume of need. Third, threshold is used both in individual assessments and in evaluations of interventions to see whether a child or children have improved outcomes (for example, by charting any movement from 'impairment' to 'no impairment').
- 14 In some cases, thresholds become integral to legislation or more sophisticated representations of eligibility criteria. In England and Wales, for example, threshold decisions indicating actual or likely impairment to a child's development give children's services permission to intervene. Some children's services agencies now restrict their resources to children with impaired development.
- 15 As with many aspects of Common Language, *Threshold* attempts to help with making judgements that are part and parcel of the day-to-day work of children's services professionals more routine and consistent.