Introduction to your SAGE Course companion companion

Book section

Introduction

Every Child Matters, the government Green Paper published in 2003 (The Treasury, 2003), sets out an ambitious plan of reform of children's services. The goal is to help all children fulfil their potential. Existing services have been criticised for having become too preoccupied with issues of serious, familial child abuse and neglect, paying too little attention to the needs of other children and the other welfare needs of abused children. Children's services have been undergoing major changes in organisational structures and work practices in an effort to transform the culture from a reactive service for a few to a preventive service for the many. It is hoped that all professionals in contact with children can become better at noticing low level signs of concern in a child's health or development and at providing a constructive response to that concern so that it does not develop into a more serious problem.

Within this broader agenda, the area of work traditionally known as child protection still needs to be dealt with. This covers the problems in children's health and development caused by abuse and neglect. Children may be abused by others in their communities or by strangers but the focus of child protection services has been predominantly on abuse by parents or carers. Children's services continue to have special duties in relation to children who are suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm. In many cases, the source of that harm will be abuse or neglect, usually within the home. The fact that the harm occurs within the home creates specific problems in helping the child since it affects

the role of the parents. With most problems that a child has, the parents are the people with most concern to solve them and they can generally be trusted to be honest and to try to co-operate with professionals. However, if a parent is the source of danger, then their version of events may be misleading and their efforts at co-operation ambivalent at best.

If preventive services are effective in helping families there will be some reduction in the number that escalate to serious abuse or neglect. However, at this stage, it is too soon to know how big an impact the new children's services will have on reducing abuse and neglect and, of course, some cases of abuse do not follow the pattern of slow deterioration in family functioning. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, child abuse and neglect by parents and carers will continue to be significant problems for those working in children's services.

Child protection is one of the most worthwhile areas of work with children and parents since it can make a crucial difference to the quality of children's lives and, sometimes, it literally makes the difference between life and death. But it is also the most daunting and challenging.

Child abuse is an intrinsically hard problem to tackle. By its very nature, it is hard to see, with abusers often going to great lengths to conceal the harm they are doing to the child. Even once it has been identified, it is difficult to judge how serious it is, what degree of future risk there is, and what could be done to help the child. We have only a limited, and

disputed, understanding of the causes of abusive behaviour and how to keep the child safe.

The work is not just intellectually but also emotionally challenging. An accusation of abuse, whether justified or not, stirs up strong reactions in most parents, of fear, anxiety, anger, or shock. To accuse someone of being an abusive parent strikes at the very heart of their identity and sense of self-worth. Children who are being abused are psychologically scarred by it, making it hard for the social worker to gain their trust. The emotional impact on professionals themselves is another inevitable and complicating factor. Badly handled, this can distort their reasoning about a case as well as harming their own mental health, leading to burnout and a high turnover of staff.

In addition to the intrinsic complexities of the work, there are immense social pressures. No-one can have failed to notice the strength of public reaction when a case goes tragically wrong and a child dies. The critical media stories, the naming and shaming of key workers, the rebukes from politicians, all combine to add to the stress of the work.

At the heart of good child protection work are expert professionals

The intense public concern has, not surprisingly, increased the priority given to improving practice and making children safer, leading to fundamental changes in the workplace in the past two decades. The main means for improvement has been for central government and local management to provide ever more detailed rules and

guidance on how the work should be done, accompanied by closer managerial oversight to ensure the guidance is followed. Child protection work is now under tighter political and managerial control than any other part of social work. Besides the legal framework setting out professionals' powers and duties, there are detailed guidelines, procedures, and standard assessment instruments prescribing how the work should be done.

With all this guidance available, the reader might question what this textbook can add. The London child protection procedures, for instance, now come in a three hundred page book that weighs a kilo (London CPC, 2002). But, while it contains a wealth of valuable information, particularly about how to work with other professions, it only catches some features of practice.

It is important to see all the rules and guidance as *aids* to practice; they cannot *replace* the professional expertise of the individual worker who is actually working with the family. They cannot transform the task into a clerical process. Official procedures and assessment frameworks are essential elements in practice, but they need to be integrated with the professonal's reasoning skills, emotional intelligence, and understanding of human nature and culture to lead to good quality work. Procedures can indeed be counterproductive. If used in a rote, mechanical way, they can create a barrier between the worker and the family, making it harder to get an accurate picture of what is going on or to develop a working relationship with them.

There is a danger of exaggerating the importance of rules and guidelines because they are such a highly visible and politically sensitive element of child protection work. They figure largely in the set of 'performance indicators' by which local authorities are judged. The danger lies in *undervaluing* the importance and the complexity of other equally essential aspects of work that are not being measured by performance indicators. Management information systems, for instance, measure whether procedures have been followed, whether the timetable for conducting an investigation has been kept to, whether assessment forms have been completed. However, they focus mainly on measuring quantity and it is the quality of the work that will make the difference to the child. And quality comes from the way that the worker uses the procedures, guidelines, etc. as part of the whole approach to helping the child. Procedures may specify the importance of talking to the child in an abuse investigation but it is the workers' expertise that determines whether they gain accurate, or indeed any, information from the interview or whether they help the child at all.

This book aims to help students feel prepared to face the tasks and responsibilities they will be taking on. It is a short book that focuses on the knowledge base of practice, with pointers to further reading. Where relevant, it provides cross-references to the tasks or sections of statutory guidance and documents, such as the *Common Assessment Framework* (DfES, 2005) and *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DfES, 2006) to help readers make the connection to their work environment.

Unlike many of the other topics in the Sage Course Companions series, child protection courses are taken as part of professional training. The goal is not just to understand a subject but to use the learning in working with families. Therefore this book does not just cover what knowledge is needed but also the reasoning skills involved in using it. What do we know about recognising and working with abuse? Why should we respond in a particular way, what is the policy, legal and ethical framework in which we must work? And *how* do we use the knowledge base: what evidence should we use; how reliable are the findings of research; how do we use evaluative studies to decide what to do to help the child?

Knowing what and knowing how

Developing expertise in child protection requires far more than learning material in a book. Many of the key skills can be sketched in a textbook but it is only through practice experience and good supervision that they can be cultivated. Formal knowledge about child development needs to be converted into the ability to meet a child, assess the level of development, and identify any areas of concern. Critical reasoning skills are honed through good reflective supervision, and a supportive atmosphere that encourages workers to think about whether their picture of a family is accurate or their plan of action is well thought-through.

A note on terminology: child abuse investigations may be conducted with anybody in a caring role with a child but I have used the term ‘parent’ throughout in preference for the

more impersonal word ‘carer’ or the more clumsy phrase ‘parent or carer’. The parent is the most common focus of investigation and the term ‘carer’ fails to capture the unique quality of a parent-child relationship.

Who should read this book?

This book is a course companion for anyone taking a course including child abuse and child protection. It is primarily aimed at social workers but much of the material is relevant for other professionals who play a significant role in child protection. With reference to the *Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children’s Workforce* (DfES, 2005*),* this book covers material relevant to Section 3 ‘Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child’. Many courses include some coverage of child protection: undergraduate and postgraduate social work training; post-qualifying courses in social work with children and young people, their families and carers; and multi-disciplinary courses run by Local Safeguarding Children Boards. All of these courses, however, cover much more than child protection alone and so there is no precise match between the content of this book and course requirements.

In relation to the requirements for basic social work training, it is possible to identify the key requirements to which this book will contribute. The standards for the social work degree are outcome statements that set out what a student social worker must know, understand and be able to do to be awarded the degree in social work. The National Occupational Standards for Social Work set out what employers require social workers to

be able to do on entering employment. The Quality Assurance Agency benchmark statement for social work sets out, in outcome terms, the requirements for the achievement of an academic award at degree level. The occupational standards and the benchmark statement taken together form the basis of the assessment of students.

This book contributes in particular to achieving the following occupational standards in relation to child protection:

Key role 4: manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues.

Key role 6: demonstrate professional competence in social work practice

- research, analyse, evaluate and use current knowledge of best social work practice
- work within agreed standards of social work practice and ensure own professional development
- manage complex ethical issues, dilemmas and conflicts

It also contributes to the following components of the benchmark statement:

2.4 Social work as a moral activity, requiring students to:

- recognise and work with the powerful links between intra-personal and inter-personal factors and the wider social, legal, economic, political and cultural context of people's lives;
- undertand the impact of injustice, social inequalities and oppressive social relations;
- challenge constructively individual, institutional and structural discrimination;
- practise in ways that maximise safety and effectiveness in situations of uncertainty and incomplete information;
- help people to gain, regain or maintain control of their own affairs, insofar as this is compatible with their own or other's safety, well-being and rights.

2.5 The expectation that social workers will be able to act effectively in such complex circumstances requires that honours degree programmes in social work should be designed to help students learn to become accountable, reflective and self-critical. This involves learning to:

- think critically about the complex social, economic, political and cultural contexts in which social work practice is located;
- work in a transparent and responsible way, balancing autonomy with complex, multiple and sometimes contradictory accountabilities;
- exercise authority within complex frameworks of accountability and ethical and legal boundaries; and

- acquire and apply the habits of critical reflection, self-evaluation and consultation, and make appropriate use of research in the evaluation of practice outcomes.

Full details of the academic benchmarks can be obtained from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) www.qaa.org.uk.

The occupational standards are set by the strategic workforce development bodies for social care for each country Full details can be obtained from their websites:

England: www.topss.org.uk

Northern Ireland: www.niscc.info

Scotland: www.sssc.uk.com

Wales: www.ccwales.org.uk

Students generally have the pragmatic goal of doing well enough to pass the course. However, in the case of child protection, social workers and other professionals want to achieve the highest possible standard for the sake of the children who rely on them for help. Moreover, learning does not, or at least should not, stop once the course is finished. The subject is vast and the skills are complex. There is always scope for learning in future professional practice. Continued learning is more likely to happen if the student has acquired the skills of critical, reflective practice (Kolb 1984). Therefore, one of the aims of this book is to help students learn how to seek out new information, and

understand how to stand back, reflect on their experience, and acquire new insights into the work.

How does child abuse fit in the Every Child Matters agenda?

Current policy puts a strong emphasis on the importance of placing concerns about child abuse and neglect within the wider context of children's welfare in general. This is because of the way practice had become focused too narrowly on deciding whether or not the child was suffering abuse and so failed to pay attention to whether the child's general welfare and development were satisfactory (see Chapters 2 and 3 for more detail). Consequently, many of the families who came to the attention of the child protection system were found not to be abusive and the case was closed despite there being clear evidence that, for other reasons, the child's needs were not being fully met (Dept. of Health 1995).

The current Every Child Matters agenda is concerned about helping *all* children in the UK fulfil their potential and safeguarding them from all sources of adversity. Child abuse and neglect are only two of the possible causes of poor outcomes for children and only in some cases will they amount to a level of severity to meet the criteria of causing or being at risk of causing significant harm. It is important not to treat abuse and neglect in isolation but to look at the child and family's wider needs. Working with cases involving abuse and neglect draws on the general skills and knowledge of working with children and parents. Knowledge of what non-abusive families look like is crucial in

identifying abusive families. However, there is a substantive body of knowledge and skills about abuse and neglect - of what abusive families look like and how to work with them - and these are the subject of this book. Although child abuse concerns can be phrased as another form of need – a need for protection – it will be a recurrent theme in this book that dealing with abuse and neglect also draws on a distinct set of knowledge, skills, and values.

When does imperfect parenting become abusive?

Abusive/neglectful behaviour has to be seen as on a continuum of parenting behaviour, ranging from the excellent to the murderous. The 'perfect' parent is an ideal; Winnicot's (1951) concept of the 'good enough' parent offers a more realistic and achievable standard for parents to aspire to. Views on 'good enough' parenting vary over time and between cultures. Even within one culture at a specific time, families vary a great deal, at the micro level, in how they express affection, administer discipline, or deal with anger. There can be major difficulties, in practice, in agreeing on the boundary between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.

> *When Parliament was debating the Children Act 2004, there were heated debates about whether any level of physical chastisement was acceptable or whether all forms should be considered abusive and made illegal. The final decision was to continue to allow 'reasonable' physical punishment by those with parental*

responsibility but that this did not authorise actions serious enough to be considered assault.

However, although there are difficulties in deciding exactly where to draw lines between abusive/poor/ and acceptable parenting behaviour, they are still meaningful categories. In many cases, the classification is quite straightforward. The MPs who disagreed about hitting children were in complete agreement that it was abusive to hit a child so hard that bones were broken. It is at the boundaries that problems in classification occur and this leads to serious difficulties in practice because the decision on how to view the parent's behaviour leads to significantly different responses from the professionals. This issue reappears at several points in this book.

How to use the book:

This book contains two sections (Part 2 and 3) that complement and support one another and, if used together, should help you become more informed and competent as a student.

Part 2 covers the core areas of the curriculum. It begins with a brief overview of the running themes of child abuse work, themes that run throughout work with families and shape the way policy and knowledge is applied in practice. These 'Running Themes' will be mentioned again and amplified throughout later chapters. Chapters 2-4 cover the contextual background: the history of society's reaction to child abuse, the current policy, and the current legal framework. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with issues relating to the

knowledge base, first, examining the difficulty of working with the uncertainty that is inherent in child protection work and, secondly, discussing how to find and use research to develop your understanding. Chapters 7-13 deal with the knowledge base, looking at problems in defining abuse and neglect and the theories of why they happen before devoting a chapter to each of the four categories of abuse and neglect. The final chapter reviews what can be done to make children safer. Each chapter contains key references and suggestions on taking the subject further.

Part 3 of this book has been designed to help you in developing and sharpening the study skills that are necessary for studying child protection and for practising as a child protection professional. It is intended to help you improve your study, writing and revision skills, and should be combined with the academic knowledge in Part 2. The aim is for Part 2 and 3 to support each other and be used together.

The final section, Part 4, provides an index and glossary.

A final feature of the book is the inclusion of Tips throughout. These are intended to highlight areas for you to consider, or to remind you of how this section links to earlier reading. The Tips include some practical advice, or alert you to the fact that this is an issue where mistakes or misunderstanding often occur in practice.