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**The Involvement of Parents in Child Protection
Conferences in the UK: the interaction of ideology, policy and practice.**

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This paper addresses one very specific aspect of child protection work in the United Kingdom - the 'case conference'. A brief introductory comment is, however, necessary for an international audience, to put that particular event in context.

Although there are at present quite radical changes appearing in British child welfare policy, with a shift of emphasis from 'child protection' to family support, mainstream British child welfare policy has, since the 1970s, concentrated mainly on the protection of children, who have been or are very likely to be, abused, sexually, physically and emotionally or who are neglected.

From the 1970s, this has been linked to the development of interagency and interprofessional cooperation. Central government has issued influential advice on 'working together', which, although not mandatory, has been implemented across the UK, led by local authority Social Service departments. Every such area has Area Child Protection Committees whose task is to ensure effective cooperative working with all the relevant agencies. One crucial aspect of their work concerns the drawing up of procedures in cases of suspected abuse, so that individual workers and agencies know what their respective responsibilities are. Another concerns interdisciplinary training for staff.

In this process, the role of the case conference quickly came to be seen as critical. At the initial conference on a case, professionals come together to share relevant information, to discuss risk and to formulate a protection plan where needed. An important element in this is the decision whether or not to place the child on the locally held register of abused children. Reporting of abuse is not mandatory in the UK and neither is the keeping of a register. In fact, however, registers have been set up in all parts of the country. There are also review case conferences at subsequent stages but this paper focuses on the initial conference.

The rise of 'the conference' as a mechanism for improving cooperation, rapidly revealed important differences between professionals in the perception of problems and interventions and this in turn stimulated training for all relevant staff, including those who chair such conferences - the skills needed to do this effectively were soon very evident. The conference was a microcosm of interagency, interprofessional work, whose processes and dynamics had more general relevance. By the 1980s, professional and academic interest in them was quite high. (One of the earliest expressions of this was my own work, with Hallett,) (Hallett and Stevenson, 1980).

And now we come to the focus of this presentation - parental involvement in such conferences. As I have earlier indicated, central government was unusually proactive in the detailed advice it gave to local authorities on 'working together' - a phrase which came to mean the actual documents which government issued, which were thus entitled. Revised 'working together' advice was issued from time to time. In 1986, a draft consultative document came out. This draft version was unequivocal in its rejection of parental participation in case conferences.

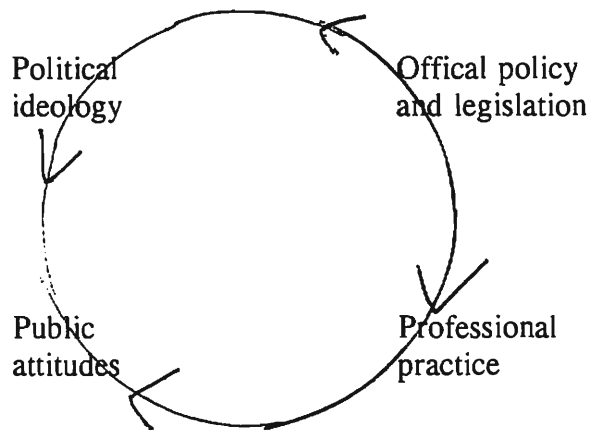
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'it may be helpful for the key worker and one or two more members of the core group to meet with the parents from time to time ... such meetings, however, should be clearly distinguished from interagency case conferences. It is not appropriate for parents to attend the latter'. (DHSS 1986-p.19). In 1988, the final version came out: it said 'Parents' views should be sought prior to a case conference to afford them the opportunity to seek advice and prepare their representations. They should be invited wherever practicable to attend part, or, if appropriate, the whole of the case conference unless in the view of the chairman (sic) of the conference their presence will preclude a full and proper consideration of the child's interests (DHSS 1988a, P.30)'.

By any standards, this is a remarkable volte face by government in two years! I would love to have access to the files at the Department of Health to see from where and from whom specifically the pressure upon them originated. But for the purposes of this paper, it is more important to analyse the underlying reasons for such a shift.

I should mention here that I do not address in this paper the very important question of the role of the child in such conferences. Interestingly, there is much less research evidence and government guidance on this point has been scanty.

Let me digress for a moment so that you can understand the way in which I tend to see these social processes. The intervention of policy and practice is subtle and complex and it would be rare in my experience to see a particular shift or change in the field of child welfare in terms of the influence or impact of practice alone. Rather, there are circular processes at work, which one might illustrate thus:



CHILD WELFARE POLICY

So how does such a model help us in our understanding of the change from 'no parents' to 'parents' at case conferences?

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During the 1980s, which, you will recall, was the beginning of a long period of right wing conservative political control, two ideological trends were apparent concerning 'citizen power'. On the one hand, the conservatives emphasised 'consumerism', the rights of citizens to have information, choice, to protest about goods and services and so on. On the other hand, the word 'empowerment', long in the vocabulary of the left, was reawakened in social work and related fields. Both implied a shift in the balance of power between the state, the professionals and the citizens. But empowerment had more radical roots. Empowerment became a 'buzz word' in social work circles and was associated with an important trend in social work education, influenced, and, to a significant extent controlled by, the social work validation council, CCETSW. That phrase was 'anti-oppressive practice'. British social work was reasonably comfortable with such notions, it has always prided itself on being very 'anti elitist'. So throughout the 1980s, this powerful emphasis on empowerment of users and clients was apparent. In particular, the necessity for consultation with clients/users both an individual level and in relation to service planning was seen as important across all social welfare provision. At the time we are considering, plans for radical change in community care for adults were underway and, surprisingly, the word 'empowerment' even crept into government documents! So we are talking about social climate, even a rhetoric with which social workers could identify, even in the midst of a right wing government, whose ideology few could share.

But something else happened in those 2 years 1986-1988. There was the Cleveland inquiry. For those who are not familiar, let me briefly outline its origins. Public opinion, locally and nationally, and prominent political figures, were greatly disturbed, even outraged, by the numbers of children in a particular area whose parents were accused of sexually abusing them. Professional and agencies fell out amongst themselves in a welter of recriminations and a judicial inquiry (of an unusually major kind) was commissioned. Despite a temperate report, which carefully avoided 'findings' on particular cases, the shadow of 'wrongful accusations' hung over the professionals. This undoubtedly influenced practice in such cases thereafter. Whilst I have no inside knowledge, it seems more than likely that government guidance on parental attendance at conferences was affected by the Cleveland affair. Certainly the 1989 Children Act (a very significant piece of legislation) built in more safeguards of parental interests and rights to be involved in decisions regarding their children than before.

At about this time the word 'partnership', as an expression of the ideal relationship between parents and social workers, began to be widely used - so much so that it is surprising and interesting to note that it does not actually appear in the Childrens Legislation.

Thus I am indicating two strands which affected the change in government guidance. The first, it may be suggested, had its roots in a change in social attitudes which was eagerly espoused by social workers. The second sprang from a traumatic episode in which social workers (and paediatricians) were heavily criticised and were themselves divided. One cannot say (I think) that the process of involving parents in conferences was as a result of a particular direct practice initiative but one can say that there were social workers who took the ball and ran with it enthusiastically. This resulted in the publication of a number of small evaluative studies in the latter part of the 1980s, characterised by strong support for the idea (to ~~be~~ the point of being insufficiently analytic of the issues) and by the finding that the inclusion of parents had not created as many difficulties as had been foreseen.

(McGloin and Turnbull (1986): Phillips and Evans (1986): Rousiaux St. (1984): Shemmings and Thoburn (1990).

Finally, in this account of process, we have seen published, in an HMSO series, in 1995, a number of substantial research projects, sponsored by the Department of Health, on child abuse and protection. Two of these in particular, Farmer and Owen and Thoburn (1995), Lewis and Shemmings (1995), threw more light on the involvement of parents, including within the case conference. I recently reviewed the up to date state of the evidence on case conferences. (Stevenson 1995). [Full participation: involvement: manipulation: zero]

I hope this account of process has not seemed overlong. What I wanted to show was, first, the nature of the interaction of various factors and, secondly, how certain changes and shifts take place when, for other reasons, the time is ripe. Many others fall by the wayside, so that one hears, for example, that 'the idea was before its time'.

The final section of this paper deals with the more substantive issues which the example raises. I raise 4 points.

- * Underlying problems
- * What happened when it was introduced
- * How best to manage?
- * ~~Limitations~~ and dilemmas
Progress

UNDERLYING PROBLEMS

There is an inherent ^{lesson} ~~lesson~~, though more problematic in some cases than others, between ideals of partnership with parents and the need to explore the safety of the child. It is obvious that much depends on the willingness of the parent to explore the situation. When they are willing, the conference can become a genuine exploration of problems. When they are not (and this is particularly likely in sexual abuse allegations), a conference may become adversarial and it is dishonest to speak in terms of 'partnership'. This adversarial element may be enhanced by the presence of friends or advocates for the parent, though in other ways this may be seen as helpful and supportive. I have to admit that I wonder at times whether, in some cases it is possible to reconcile the dual objectives of the conference and whether we have only succeeded in confusing two values of parental rights and child protection within a particular bit of the child protection process, which does not lend itself to upholding both simultaneously.

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WHAT HAPPENED WHEN IT WAS INTRODUCED?

It is generally agreed that, contrary to the fears of some professionals (mostly those who were not social workers) the world did not fall apart! By and large, the research has not revealed disasters. The fears were of two kinds: the impact and stress on the parents and the effects on communications between professionals. Government guidance was explicit, that exclusion from the conference should be 'exceptional', when there is a risk of violence, when a parent is psychotic or arrives at the conference under the influence of drugs or alcohol. But it is apparent these exceptions are not much invoked. (A further criteria has been suggested - the wishes of the child or young person. As I have earlier indicated, there is a whole area here for further research). In general, professional reaction has been positive. Bell and Sinclair (1993) found that such conferences were not less frequent or less well attended. Professionals believed that conferences were better with parents attending; the quality of information was better and the parental perspective better appreciated. However, a significant number of parents did not attend: ~~Some~~ chose not to do so, some did not for practical reasons.

The research has paid much attention also to the views of the parents on conference attendance. It has been found (Farmer and Owen (1993): Bell and Sinclair (1993)) that although many (probably most) parents were glad to have attended and thought it was right that they should do, the conference was often experienced as intensely painful and humiliating. Whilst, as we discuss below, there is much in the management of it which can make it better or worse for the parents, the fact remains that it is bound to be fraught with tension, emotion and fear. The conference, as the word suggests, is a formal event at which a child's future is at stake. It may be comprised of 10-12 people, not all of whom are known beforehand to the parents. The issue places the quality of parenting under the searchlight. Could anything be more threatening?

How BEST TO MANAGE?

~~How best to manage?~~ It has become absolutely clear that there are key factors in 'successful' management of an intrinsically difficult situation. These include briefing and de briefing of parents before and afterwards and the skills of the chair in balancing necessary formality with warmth and approachability. It has also been found that compromises regarding 'partial attendance' did not work and that the actual environment of the conference - type of room etc all played a part in parent's sense of wellbeing. I mention these matters, amongst many others, to raise a very important point - that the ideal and the rhetoric are useless without attention to the detail of what the parent is going to experience. There is no doubt that much time and sincere commitment has been given to working on these details. In a very real sense, practice of a sensitive and realistic kind has been developed, which feeds back into the circle of influence which I have earlier described.

PROGRESS AND DILEMMAS

LIMITATIONS AND DILEMMAS

Up to now, the conference has been explicitly about child protection. We are now seeing a move to more preventative/family support work which may result in a refocussing of conferences from an almost exclusive concentration on 'risk' to a more general discussion of family needs. If that is achieved in some cases, it seems highly likely that the experience of the parents at a conference will be more positive. However, a word of warning: there is some experience from particular cases which ended in tragedy, which shows how the sympathy for, and persuasiveness of, the parents can lead to a kind of 'child-blindness' on the part of the professionals with disastrous results.

How can we deny the inherent tension of objectives when the interests of parents & children do not coincide.

CONCLUSION

British social work has been characterised by 'enthusiasms'; some concerning values, fewer concerning methods of practice. Those who 'get bitten' have tended to be uncritical in their espousal of a stance on a method and in the early days of less rigorous social scientific research, it was evident that evaluative research was too much affected by the presumptions of its exponents. This is much less so now. We have a body of child welfare academic researchers who are able to span qualitative and quantitative methods and ~~test assumptions~~ but whose commitment to improving child welfare practice is not in question. It seems to me to be unlikely that the greater involvement of parents in conferences and comparable events will lapse and likely that practice in the management of such situations (which are of profound importance to the parents) will continue to improve. We have come a very long way in 10 years.

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