

RECENT RESEARCH IN CHILD WELFARE  
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to give an overview of recent research in the field of child welfare. This is a formidable task, not simply because of the quantity available for review but because there needs to be an organising framework within which to set the research. Without this, the material would be disconnected and indigestible. However, the framework within which the research is presented has been determined by my own assessment of the most important contemporary issues in child welfare policy and practice and what appears to be those most salient to participants in this workshop. Inevitably, therefore, there is an element of subjectivity in the choices made and in the interpretation of the significance of results for policy and practice. Nor am I as familiar with some areas as others ; delinquency is excluded for that reason.

As if that were not difficult enough, I have referred to some work which cannot be described as recent but which in my view should be used to underpin contemporary research. Present debates in child welfare lack a sense of history and this may make policy makers and practitioners vulnerable to swings and fashions which are not soundly based.

Although claims of research ' evidence ' must be justified through references, there is growing irritation in academic circles at burdensome references, which may on occasion be more designed to impress than to illuminate. For this reason, I have not referenced assertions where they are very generally agreed or firmly established through extensive research.

The corpus of recent research on which this paper is based comes from a variety of sources. Obviously, it draws upon the work commissioned by the Department of Heath under the title ' Studies in Child Protection ', ( 1995 HMSO ) but there is other significant work which it is important to include, some also government sponsored but

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some independent, commissioned, for example, by the ESRC or by Charitable Trusts. There is no dispute that the Department of Health funding has been responsible for very important work. However, it is driven by particular policy priorities and there is little or no ability to fund spontaneous research proposals. The contribution of 'independent' research should not be overlooked.

### PARENTS AND CHILDREN : DILEMMAS AND TENSIONS

Participants in this seminar will be painfully aware of the inherent difficulties in balancing children's needs and rights with those of parents. Even if the formal situation requires the child's interests to be put first, two difficulties remain :

- what is in the child's interests ?
- what are the limits to that principle in practice when a parent's right to 'natural justice' is taken into account ?

There are good reasons for assuming that some form of family life offers the best opportunities for the satisfactory nurturing and upbringing of children. We have a solid, extensive foundation of knowledge and research concerning children's developmental needs, intellectual, emotional and social and the conditions most likely to satisfy those needs. The fact that there are contested areas, theoretical disputes and, sometimes, difficulties in knowing how to apply particular research to important decisions about children's futures, should not blur some underlying certainties about needs which go beyond physical requirements for normal development. Three examples will suffice. One concerns stimulation, a child's need for appropriate cognitive and social stimulation ( inseparable at an early age ). The second concerns the need for attachment and bonding in early years to individual adults. This latter phenomenon has been the subject of intensive research over many years and although the original work of Bowlby and others such as Rutter has been modified and

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challenged, the basic assumption holds good and remains a crucial factor in planning for children, especially when young. A third example, which has become clearer in recent years, both from research and from ( painful ) experience in child welfare practice, is that human beings have a profound need to develop a sense of identity though feeling ' connected ' to their origins and roots. ( Bempah and Howitt forthcoming ). This is not simply to do with bonding / attachment to particular adults. It is now evident that the need goes deeper and further than that. It has led in recent years to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of adults sent by voluntary child care organisations to Australia and Canada as children, to seek out their families <sup>of</sup> origin ; to a flood of enquiries to adoption agencies to trace birth parents and for some black or mixed race children a desperate wish to find parents who were black or to connect with their ethnic origins. Often to find siblings is of profound importance to such people. What then are the implications of such knowledge, confirmed by research and by experience ? They are far reaching.

What of the need for stimulation ? I use it as an example of an aspect of child abuse which has been alluded to as ' the neglect of neglect '. Neglect is one of the criteria used in the registration of children who are abused. Some of the constituents of ' neglect ' are well recognised and uncontroversial, mainly those concerned with nutrition and hygiene. But the provision of ' good enough care ' does not rest there ; for example, failure to stimulate can lead to severe developmental delay. ( Leaving children in cots or beds for long periods, failure to interact in play or conversation would be examples ). There is research evidence ( see Stevenson in article appended ) that the long term effects of persistent neglect may be more serious than sporadic physical abuse and the issue, linked to that of emotional abuse, ( Glaser and Lynch forthcoming ) is coming to the top of the child protection agenda. That is to say, health and social service professionals are increasingly aware of the importance of improving understanding and practice in cases of neglect in three ways : by widening the area of concern beyond the physical manifestations ; by greater clarity about the

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thresholds for triggering concern ; and by more effective intervention. It is important that the role of the courts is taken into these considerations, in which what is regarded as significant evidence to establish neglect and some consensus about thresholds for intervention are critical factors.

( My own work currently is on this subject, arising from ESRC funded research 1995 and, most recently, a Leverhulme Trust Fellowship to consider neglect from an interdisciplinary and interprofessional standpoint. [Stevenson 1996. See Appendix ] ).

Thus, a known and accepted developmental need, that of stimulation, has to be taken into the arena of child protection work. This requires sophisticated consideration of its implications for decision making.

The second and third examples, concerning attachment and identity, interlock in difficult ways. The traditional view of the importance of the former, led to prescriptions for placement policy, exemplified most clearly by the work of American lawyers and of psychoanalysts, ( Goldstein, Freud and Solnit ) in the 1970s, recently issued in one revised edition entitled ' The Best Interests of the Child ' (1996 )

The logic of that ' attachment ' theory suggested that young children should have permanent placements at the earliest opportunity and that their needs for permanency should outweigh the wishes and hopes of natural parents to have them home ' in the future '. Their ' best interests ' were seen as relatively clear cut. It has been claimed that, despite its USA origins, these arguments had a profound influence on British placement policy in the 1980s. Certainly the phrase ' permanency placement ' came into the policy makers' vocabulary at that time and led to suggestions that, after about 6 months in care, children should be found permanent substitute care. This drive was reinforced by research in the 1980s which found that children not discharged to their parents quickly were likely to remain in care for much longer periods. ( Millham, Bullock, Hosie and Haak. [1986] ).

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But, whatever the policy makers suggested, the policy did not work, partly because it offended field worker's sense of fairness and sympathy to struggling parents - which is later discussed.

In the context of this analysis, the emphasis on 'permanency placement' seems to conflict with the need to develop a sense of identity through connectedness to one's origins and birth family. The conventional model of adoption, for example, when doors closed on birth parents, is profoundly challenged by recent research and experience. In fact, the two areas of research are not irreconcilable if we can accept different models or patterns of upbringing. Whilst the security offered through relationships with certain stable adults is now seen as crucially important to young children, there is evidence (including that from other cultures) that they can and do make what may be described as secondary attachments to others. One of our difficulties lies in our cultural assumptions and the difficulties that this creates for adoptive and foster parents in accepting what may be described as 'inclusive' arrangements. Nonetheless, it seems likely that greater 'openness' will increasingly be seen as crucial to help children (and the adults they become) make sense of their life history and origins. This has been widely accepted for children in residential care (the 'life story' book which they are helped to make is an example). Now it seems that this principle should be extended to those children permanently placed <sup>in i. w. f. homes</sup> <sub>in i. w. f. homes</sub>. Whether that means 'knowing about' or 'making contact with' will rarely be a clear cut decision which can be taken once and for all. Nor would a general principle be rigidly applied to situations which vary hugely. But the basic assumption holds good.

Thus far, then, in addressing the 'child's best interests', I have stressed that there is a substantial amount of tested evidence concerning children's developmental needs, of which I have simply given three (albeit critical) examples and that these have direct bearing on policy and practice.

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There is one additional point to be made to participants at this seminar, that is. that whilst some delay in settling childrens' futures is inherent in tangled family relationships, the lengthy delays due to ' systems ' and ' structures ', including the judicial process, are impossible to excuse, when healthy development may depend on stable attachments made in early years. This was powerfully argued in the influential ' In the Best Interests of the Child ' in the 1970s. I do not know of evidence to show the situation has improved and there is current evidence in Britain of unacceptable delay, as in some child sexual abuse cases. The phrase ' abuse by the system designed to protect ' is hard for professionals to hear ; but it must be heard.

I have argued for ' openness ' about families of origins and for doors in most cases to be left ajar, to be opened if and when it is desired to do so. This is not, however, an argument for contact or access in all cases. Decisions on that require complex and careful judgements concerning the value or harm to the child which may result from it , based on evidence of children's needs and their emotional state.

Although some of the foregoing discussion has concentrated on policy concerning children who do not live with their own parents, we can assume a consensus that strenuous efforts should be made to keep them with their parents ( or with one parent ) wherever possible. This has been part and parcel of an aspiration held by professionals and fostered by the legal process, that wherever possible, professionals should work ' in partnership ' with parents, a term not mentioned in the Children Act 1989, but mentioned in guidance. Such views were supported by ideologies, from the left and the right, of ' consumerism ' and ' empowerment '. There has, however, been a danger that ' partnership with parents ' could become a kind of slogan and that rhetoric could mask the reality, that there are inherent difficulties in such a concept. Fortunately, we now have some solid research on which to base the discussion.

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One of the first tangible signs of the operation of the principle concerned parental participation in child protection case conferences. Policy at the Department of Health changed rather radically in the 1980s and reversed previous advice in the final version of 'Working Together' (HMSO 1988). This document suggested that it would usually be good practice for parents to attend such conferences. Obediently, most authorities initiated this with its attendant implications for practice and training. It was a neat issue for research and some significant evaluations were mounted which I have summarised and discussed. (Stevenson 1995). In general, those who undertook the work accepted the principle of participation, as being both ethically and practically desirable - likely to be the most effective way wherever possible of securing children's well being. Furthermore, some of the fears expressed by professionals - for example, the dangers and difficulties of parental presence at case conferences were found to be exaggerated and most professionals (not just social workers) found it to have been positive. Parents, in general, wanted to be there and valued the experience. However, a whole raft of emotional and practical difficulties were revealed by the research as needing attention if the practice was to be adequately developed and made rather less painful for parents. Painful it must always be; some of the 'user' accounts in the research show it to have been devastating for them. Following this, a much more extensive study of parental participation generally was carried out by Thoburn et al (1995).

In Thoburn's research, although the word 'partnership' is the starting point, she uses three dimensions, qualitatively different, 'participated', 'involved' and 'manipulated / placated' to measure parental activity in decision making. The research makes some carefully constructed assessments of these as viewed by the different participants, parents, children and professionals. The work is too dense and subtle to describe here but it shows that such research activity is well worthwhile in testing the validity of the overall objective, the extent to which it is being realised and the variations in perceptions of the participants about the process. (Some examples from this research

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will be brought to the seminar ). Most recently, there has been a developing interest in utilising the wider family network in the support of children and young people. This is exemplified in experiments with ' family group conferences ' ( a model originating from New Zealand) in which relatives and key people in children's lives are brought together to consider present difficulties and how these might be managed. Carefully evaluated projects have been undertaken ; the findings of this research by Marsh and Crow will be published in the Autumn of 1997 and show promising results, whilst not minimising difficulties and limitations. These projects demonstrate an attempt to give *wider* family members more power and responsibility and are thus consistent with notions of empowerment and partnership.

The reasonable assumption that working with parents, rather than for or against them, will benefit the child can fit quite comfortably with another, less explicit, concern about justice to, and sympathy towards, parents. In my view, the failure in Britain to implement a radical policy of ' permanency placement ' was as much about this concern as it was about child welfare per se. This deep resistance to push the argument concerning the child's interest to extremes is illustrated by the reluctance of some professionals and some courts to admit ' defeat ' in cases where they have struggled and failed to help parents improve their care of children, notably in cases of neglect where major, dramatic ' incidents ' may not occur but in which children's lives are manifestly unsatisfactory.

A particular problem of our time concerns parents ( often mothers ) with learning disabilities who in a bygone age would have been prevented from caring for ( or perhaps even from having ) children. No one would now defend yesterday's practices but the necessary consequence of their bringing up their children is that difficulties in so doing will have to be addressed and that there will be times when the children's needs cannot be met within their own families. Evidence from inquiries and from research suggests that the nettle is not being grasped.

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A further dimension of this identification with parents was seen in the wake of the Cleveland inquiry, ( 1988 ) when powerful feelings concerning injustice to fathers were raised in the minds of the general public. Since that time, social workers ( to quote a phrase from my ESRC research ) have suffered from ' a sad sense of insufficiency ', believing ( with considerable justification ) that there are children suffering and intimidated in their families where they are powerless to help. ( I would welcome a discussion on this at the seminar ).

Two questions therefore, must be posed. Can we, whatever the formal position, ever, in reality, relegate parental needs and rights to ' a lower division ' of concern than those of children ? Can we nonetheless refine our understanding of childrens needs, and adapt our legal and organisational responses accordingly, to ensure better protection in their families for a wider range of disadvantaged and vulnerable children, not just those who sustain very obvious and observable trauma ?

In making assumptions about the value of family life to children, I have so far avoided the awkward question - ' but what kind of family ' ? The radical changes in family structures and behaviour in post war Britain are much discussed Most striking of all, with one in three marriages ending in divorce, with stable cohabitations and the forming of ' re constituted ' families, society has been forced to re examine long held values and to face, head on, problematic issues concerning their impact on children. But there are other issues, though less common, challenge us morally and emotionally even more. For example, questions concerning the upbringing of children within gay or lesbian households, the transracial placement of children, ' open ' adoption in which children have ready access to a birth parent all raise intense feelings. The debate is often conducted without benefit of research evidence. To be fair, such research, involving as it does, longitudinal studies and evaluation of complex ' outcomes ' is conceptually and methodologically difficult and expensive. At the time of preparing

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this paper, it has not been possible to evaluate adequately some very recently published work ( and also, to obtain findings of some research under way in the University of East Anglia on transracial placements ). At the seminar, I will discuss in more detail currently available material.

What is clear, however, is that judgements increasingly have to be made concerning the welfare of children in what may be described ( for how long ? ) as ' unorthodox ' family arrangements. It becomes increasingly important that research on the effects of different family patterns on children should be developed.

### THE ORGANISATIONAL - CONTEXT

' Studies in Child Protection ' ( HMSO 1995 ) has provided the basis for ' Messages from Research ' ( HMSO 1995 ), a document commissioned by the Department of Health and produced by the Dartington Social Research Unit. This is primarily intended for social services departments ; it does not attempt to cover all the extensive implications and messages of these studies. However, this composite picture obtained of child protection policy and practice in recent years suggested that too many referrals were being subjected to what might be described as ' heavy ' child protection procedures and too little work with families and children ' in need ', as permitted by the Children Act 1989, was being undertaken. It was clear first, that to obtain services, children have usually to be defined as ' abused ' and secondly, that major improvements in assessment of child abuse had not led to effective strategies for intervention to support the families. This research has given a convincing picture of the organisational context within which child protection has been practised and as such, can be mined for much valuable information, for example, concerning the process of registration. Whilst much of this is not germane to this seminar, it is important to stress that we are now very well informed on ' how it works '. I suspect our research will be envied by academics and policy makers in other countries.

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The findings of these studies have resulted in a sea change of policy at national and local levels. Child welfare services are in some turmoil. The policy 'steer' is clear. Much more should be done to offer service to children and families 'in need' whilst in no way reducing the quality of child protection against abuse. Social Service managers and practitioners are ambivalent. On the one hand, such guidance is welcome because it fits with values and ideals about prevention. On the other hand, they cannot see how, at a time of such scarce resources, they can offer more to children in need and they are fearful about a backlash if abused children suffer. There is, however, some possibility of 'diversion', i.e. of helping some families and children without entering into expensive, labour intensive child protection activity. But it seems unlikely that much can be done by 'savings' in child protection to improve the service to needy families, of whom there are significant numbers. We are at a crucial juncture. It is of interest that this policy shift took place at the end of the Conservative administration and is in some ways out of line with the 'minimalist family intervention' suggested by their ideology.

#### CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 'IN THE SYSTEM'

In contrast to the clear link between research and policy illustrated above, connections cannot be easily seen between research (using that term widely) and the provision of residential care for children. Long before the recent depressing, revelations of past abuse, now widely discussed, there was solid research, from the 1950s onwards, which demonstrated first, that children in institutions, deprived of warm stable attachments suffered long term damage, and secondly, that is extremely difficult to provide what is needed within the existing structures and systems of residential care.

It is widely recognised that one of the reasons for the failure to offer sound, firm and sympathetic care to those in residential care was because the population changed,

needed within the existing structures and systems of residential care.

during the 1980s, predominantly to young people, rather than children; they were more difficult to 'manage' and the training for the staff was grossly inadequate. There will be much more to debate on this subject when the Department of Health publish another raft of research in 1998 (?). For the purposes of this argument, I simply draw attention to the unrealised potential of such care for such youngsters when they and their families need a breathing space or when they need a refuge from abusive families. To have suitable provision of this kind is essential.

There is much further research to be done, including the use of evaluated projects, to see what contribution residential care can make to the spectrum of services available to children and young people. Although much research concerning residential care has not been effectively utilised, one initiative has been important and useful. This is the work known as the 'Looking after Children' project, ( Dartington Social Research Unit ) in which very detailed guidelines for the assessment of the well being of children and young people in residential care have been devised. Particularly valuable is the development of 'seven' dimensions of well being : health : education : identity : family and social relationships : social presentation : emotional and behavioural development and self care skills. Each of these is assessed through carefully drawn questions. The value of it and difficulties in utilising it in practice are being carefully tested. The significance of this work goes beyond its use in residential care. It has considerable potential for working with families and may offer a helpful framework to the courts for the assessment of well being of children in ( amongst others ) neglectful families.

Finally, a comment about the evidence from research concerning childrens' reactions and feelings to the child protection process in which they may become involved. Some excellent work has been done, notably that of Farmer and Oliver ( 1995 ) [ a study of particular value in the HMSO series ]. The findings are of great concern (see appendix) and show that at every stage of the process children suffer, are perplexed,

and feelings to the child protection process in which they may become involved. Some

ambivalent and anxious. If this is linked to the debate on legal procedures involving children, with which participants at this seminar will be more familiar than I, one has reluctantly to conclude that ' the system ' may indeed be abusive, most particularly I suspect, in cases of sexual abuse.

## CONCLUSION

This short paper does less than justice to the volume and quality of recent research. Nor does it address extremely important questions concerning methodology. These are not merely technical. The choice of method dictates what kinds of research questions can be asked. The paper, does, however, identify certain critical issues in contemporary child welfare and suggests ways in which research has or could contribute to the debate on them. Broadly, there are 4 important strands of knowledge and theory, informed by research, which are crucial to the development of policy.

- Child development used to assess the well-being of children at home or in care and to identify adverse factors
- The organisational context, including the courts, in which child welfare is practised.
- The capacity of parents to develop and change in caring for their children or to fulfil their role in unorthodox family situations.
- The views and feelings of those who take part in the process ; ( parents, children , workers ).

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