



# Recognising the needs of child protection workers

*In the Firing Line: Violence and Power in Child Protection Work*  
Janet Stanley and Chris Goddard, John Wiley & Sons, UK January 2002

Reviewed by *Joe Tucci*

If you are one of the many professionals who have been confronted by violent clients, it is important to read this new book by Janet Stanley and Chris Goddard. First, you will experience a sense of relief that the authors have managed an open and honest examination of how violence is an intrinsic part of the practice of child protection. Second, you will nod furiously as you identify with the level of violence related by workers in the field. Finally, you may be challenged enough from the conclusions drawn by the authors to adjust your view about how such exposure to violence affects your decision-making.

In reading the book, you will note the authors' legitimate claim that while inquiries into the deaths of children from abuse have preoccupied health and welfare professions and the media for nearly three decades, little attention has been given to the effectiveness of protective services, where a child has not died but has been severely abused. As such, *In the Firing Line* offers theoretical developments and research findings in a number of areas relevant to the failure of state child protection systems to protect children from re-abuse.

Significantly, the authors vividly demonstrate that for many children, abuse directed towards them is only one part of a larger picture of violence engaged in and experienced by the whole family. For example, in 78 per cent of the sample of case files studied, there were descriptions of physical assault of other family members, in addition to maltreatment of the child. Moreover, 70 per cent of files recorded that the male in the parent role was involved in at least one criminal activity requiring investigation by the police.

The authors then highlight the alarming amount of violence experienced by child protection workers in their day to day work. In almost half of the research sample, protective workers had received a death threat from the



Authors Janet Stanley and Chris Goddard at the launch of *In the Firing Line*.

families of children with whom they were working. Just under a quarter of the workers had been assaulted, 14 per cent had experienced attempted assault, 44 per cent threatened with physical assault, and 10 per cent threatened with sexual assault – all in a period of six months.

Thus it is not surprising to read the claim by Stanley and Goddard that such workers often display hostage-like behaviour. It is in exploring the application of “hostage theory” to the practice of child protection that this book is most valuable. It highlights the connection between the impact of violence on the protective worker and their capacity to accurately recall the extent of abuse suffered by the child. Responding as hostages, workers may minimise, distort and re-classify the extent to which a child continues to be at risk of serious re-abuse.

The major contribution of *In the Firing Line* is its capacity to focus our attention to the needs and vulnerability of child protection workers. The authors review the centrality of supervision and training, and propose a framework for integrating the research findings. Most importantly, the book highlights how systems should work to actively protect their own staff from threats of and actual violence. This recognition is pivotal to improving the practices of child protection.

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