



The nature, causes and context of child maltreatment

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Child protection: An introduction
by Chris Beckett
Sage Publications, London (2003)

In his book, *Child protection: An introduction*, Chris Beckett, an academic teacher and social worker with 18 years experience in child protection fieldwork, presents a broad overview of the field of child protection, with the insight of someone who has actually been there.

The text is organised into four parts, each comprising three chapters. The author takes the reader on a journey, describing the modern child protection system, and the nature, causes and context of child maltreatment, and concludes with a discussion of the dilemmas inherent in the modern child protection system. Implied rather than stated throughout the text is a critique of the conditions in which child protection social workers practice and cautionary lessons for the experienced practitioner.

Role of protection social workers

In Part 1, Beckett describes and discusses the role of child protection social workers in reference to the child protection system operating in England and Wales. The author has been careful in his reference to the English and Welsh child protection systems, and all but the introduction to Chapter 2 is applicable to models of child protection operating in other countries.

In the latter half of Chapter 2, Beckett provides an insightful discussion on child protection interventions, suggesting that the core work of the child protection social worker is setting goals and ground rules for parents and, where possible, providing practical assistance. He argues that it is difficult for the child protection social worker to provide therapy due to both limited resources and the complexities of the relationship between client and child protection social worker. However, the author believes “there is a danger that, in the absence of ‘therapeutic’ alternatives, child protection social workers will resort more and more to the courts as a means of stopping the abuse of children” (p. 39).

In Chapter 3, Beckett further cautions child protection social workers about getting caught up in the bureaucratic process: “One point that is frequently forgotten is that arrangements such as case conferences and so on, are a means to an end, not ends in themselves” (p. 58). What is appealing about Beckett’s discussion of the role of the child protection social worker is the way in which he portrayed workers throughout the text as humans whose decisions may not always be right, but whose motives are good. In this context, the discussion of common pitfalls is unlikely to invoke a defensive reaction and is a refreshing change to the portrayal of child protection workers in the media.

Nature and consequences of child maltreatment

Part 2 is a discussion of the nature and consequences of child maltreatment. Chapters 4 and 6, in particular, are useful and engaging. The author presents the legislative definitions of physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and emotional abuse and argues that the witnessing of family violence by children should be an additional category of abuse. He goes on to discuss how a child protection social worker might identify each type of maltreatment and the signs that maltreatment might be occurring.

In Chapter 6 he discusses the different types of harm (physical, emotional and psychological) a child may experience as a result of each type of maltreatment, as well as the relationship between the degree of harm and the context of the maltreatment, and the cumulative harm of chronic maltreatment. Part 2 provides practical assistance to the beginning child protection social worker (or other professionals who have regular contact with children) on the identification of maltreatment and the assessment of its impact on the child.

Causes and contexts of child maltreatment

In Part 3, Beckett describes the causes and contexts of child maltreatment. In Chapter 7, he discusses the predictors of maltreatment and proposes a model of vertical and horizontal stressors. He proposes three patterns of maltreatment: (a) pre-meditated abuse, (b) stress-related abuse and neglect, and (c) competence-related abuse and neglect. In addition, abuse by children is also discussed.

Chapters 8 and 9 cover parental substance abuse and learning difficulties and the ways and contexts in which these conditions can result in harm to children. The author reminds practitioners that “it is possible to be a very nice person and still not be a competent parent” (p. 158), and that “it is very important that struggling families are not expected to reach *higher* standards than other families” (p. 174).

Dilemmas for child protection social workers

Part 4 addresses three specific problems and dilemmas for child protection social workers: (a) child maltreatment in the context of poverty (where child protection intervention can do little to resolve the underlying problems for parents); (b) abusive systems (where the systemic structure, not the people within the system, is abusive); and (c) the impossible expectations placed on child protection social workers.

Some of the points Beckett makes are mentioned in passing earlier in the text, but in Part 4 he devotes more time to the discussion of each problem or dilemma. It is interesting that he chose to finish the text with a chapter titled, “The Limits of Possibility” in which he proposes that expecting child protection workers to prevent parents from *ever* harming their children is unrealistic and creates a culture of fear and defensiveness in child protection social workers. As a consequence of the culture of fear and defensiveness, child protection services have high rates of staff sickness, poor staff retention, and difficulties in recruitment. This can result in things getting worse rather than better for children and families.

The author argues that child protection workers operate with limited resources and try to prioritise between several risky cases at a time. He reminds readers that “risk assessment itself involves taking a risk of being wrong” (p. 235), and concludes that “child protection work would be more able to help more children and more families if we were honest about its limitations” (p. 243).

Overall . . .

The text is organised in such way as to enable the reader to pick it up and read a chapter or section of interest. In fact, I would recommend not reading the book cover-to-cover, as when read in this way, some sections (particularly in Part III) are repetitious. Within each chapter of the text are exercises designed to assist the reader to understand the ramifications of their decisions and the tensions within the role of child protection social worker. These exercises do not need to be completed, but do need to be read as they are integrated with the text.

The text is primarily targeted at social workers embarking on a career in child protection. However other professionals who have regular contact with children (e.g., teachers, psychologists or general practitioners) could benefit from the author’s very practical approach to identifying and responding to suspected child maltreatment. The text also has some useful lessons for the experienced practitioner, prompting them to reflect on their practice. In addition to being a useful resource in itself, this text could be used successfully in a classroom setting with social work students or as a professional development tool for new and experienced child protection social workers.

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