

Time to work together: Relationship-based practice in child protection



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Our presentation asks “*how might we begin to develop practice that supports therapeutic engagement with parents embroiled in child protection?*”

Child protection trends in Canada



- Residual/threshold system
 - Legal sanction to investigate, assess and intervene in situations of actual or suspected risk to children only when parental care is deemed to have fallen below a minimum standard
- Oscillation between commitment to *family preservation* and preoccupation with *child safety*
 - In the 1980s, concerns for the emotional damage caused by separating children from their primary caregivers gave rise to practices that sought to maintain children in their families.

Present day Canadian child protection



- **Legislation guides practice to integrate:**
 - Expectation of swift reaction to situations of potential risk;
 - Emphasis on ensuring stability, consistency and opportunity for children to form and maintain secure attachments;
 - Stricter timelines for parents to rectify conditions of risk;
 - Articulation of maximum durations of temporary placement of children (linked to child's age);
 - Increased potential for parental rights to be terminated; and,
 - Concurrent permanency planning.

Delaney Family



- Thomas and Janice lock the girls in their room for hours so as not to hit them.
- Thomas punishes the girls by refusing to speak to them. He acknowledged preventing Janice from giving affection to the twins until their behaviour improves.
- The family lives in a working class neighbourhood. Their income is \$35, 000/year.
- Thomas' job is at risk of being cut; he is drinking after work hours.
- Janice works at the twins' daycare centre in exchange for the service.
- The parents have no support from other family members.
- Janice is pregnant again but has not told Thomas.
- Both parents express loving their daughters and only wanting the best for them.
- The girls' daycare teacher later informed the worker that the girls' demeanor changes when Thomas picks them up, particularly Angelina who appears afraid. She reported that when she brought this observation up to the parents, they claimed the girls were just playing a game and suggested that the teacher to mind her own business.

The Delaney family is based on a case study drawn from the archives of Vanessa Brown's (2002) front-line child welfare experiences.

Practice as usual – Voluntary Measures



- The Delaney family situation would be deemed urgent and the girls in need of protection from emotional neglect and psychological abuse.
- Parents would be required to:
 1. refrain from using psychologically abusive forms of discipline;
 2. participate in a parental capacity assessment;
 3. attend a parenting group; and,
 4. ensure that Abigail and Angelina undergo a developmental assessment and comply with any recommendations arising from the assessment.
- The child protection agency would be required to:
 1. Provide the family with “aid, counsel and assistance” *as per the legislation*.
- This plan would be put in place for probably 12 months.
- Failure to comply with these measures would result in the immediate involvement of the court.

Practice as usual



- Decisions would be guided by the notions of attachment as follows:

a 'child's time' in the crucial early years is much shorter than the 'adult's time:' A young child cannot wait for the parents to solve their persistent personality problems, childhood traumas, drug abuse, and violence. A child cannot be put 'on hold'.

Gauthier, Fortin & Jéliu , 2004: 394

Contemporary Child Protection



Current practice tends toward “*a preference for responding to people’s external performance rather than understanding their internal psychology, measuring need and behaviour according to checklists, ... asking what people do rather than wonder why they do it [C]lients are disembedded from both their past and present social environment. The individual is seen as a psychologically discrete, isolated entity without a psychosocial history...; it is only their current performance that matters. The result is a here-and-now world in which work is episodic – cases are opened and closed according to agreements set, time allowed [and] immediate needs met.*”

(Howe, 1998: 48)

Contemporary Child Protection



But, while structures, procedures and protocols “may be necessary...they are not sufficient conditions of good practice. They are surface instruments, capable of guiding us and organizing us towards the relevant point of contact with the deeper, more complex, and ambiguous realities with which to engage in child protection work, but little more”.

Cooper & Lousada (2005: 153, cited in Hingley-Jones & Mandin, 2007: 182)

Relationship-based practice



- Emphasizes “*the professional relationship as the medium through which the practitioner can engage with the complexity of an individual’s internal and external worlds and intervene*” (Ruch, 2005: 113).
- “Takes place within an existing context of power and difference” (Turney & Tanner, 2001: 200).
- Relationship understood as a forum in which to manage and contain uncertainty and anxiety
 - Potentially experienced by both the worker and the client
 - Arising from risky and uncertain situations
- Draws on diverse sources of knowledge: “practice wisdom, intuition, tacit knowledge and artistry as well as theory and research – for understanding human behaviour (Ruch, 2005: 116).

Hearing their accounts



- Entering into a therapeutic relationship requires a deep and complex understanding of the internal and external conditions within which risk to the children arises.
- Introduce mothering/fathering narratives in which the worker purposefully listens for the emotional and material contexts within which parenting takes place and the impact these contexts may have on the daily experience of caregiving, including the tensions or hardships faced by both Janice and Thomas.

Risky emotions



- A first encounter with Janice and Thomas will be driven by the child protection mandate, and will evoke feelings of vulnerability and/or powerlessness.
- Feelings such as anxiety and fear can be rendered explicit and discussed as expected responses to child protection interventions

Power in context



- Relationship-based practice involves workers' engagement in *critical reflection* concerning their identities and social locations and those of their clients while being ever-cognisant of the organizational setting within which the work and relationship are embedded.
- Explicit acknowledgment of power has the potential to be as oppressive as saying nothing at all. The intent behind naming power is to open a dialogue with Janice and Thomas – to circumvent coercion and instead offer information about the organizational context, constraints and possibilities of child protection involvement.

as long as we see ourselves as not implicated in relations of power, as innocent, we cannot begin to walk the path of social justice and to thread our way through the complexities of power relationships”

Razack (1998: 22)

Reflecting on assumptions



- Critical reflection also includes interrogation of:
 - dominant ideologies of children's needs and parental responsibilities to meet them,
 - the internalization of the mantra to protect at all costs,
 - assumptions around how child maltreatment comes about, its impact on children, and the centrality of parents, usually mothers, as the best protectors.
- ✦ Explicit examination of the worker's own as well as Janice and Thomas' expectations and motivations can allow the parents' strengths – for example, refraining from physical means of discipline – to be seen and emphasized rather than only their deficits.

Concluding thoughts



- The worker, as well as Thomas and Janice very well may feel they are working against a clock, given the young ages of the twins as well as the legislated time allowed to correct situations of risk.
- Relationship-based practice:
 - Allows, through the inclusion of diverse sources of knowledge, the worker and parents to set realistic priorities;
 - Requires a commitment to maintain an intense therapeutic relationship at all stages of child protection involvement;
 - Requires that workers receive the necessary support and safe environment to process their encounters with families in distress and work through not only decisions but also their own emotions, thoughts, and anxieties – *Clinical supervision*