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A CASE FOR A CLIENT CENTRED, NEEDS BASED APPROACH TO CHILD NEGLECT

Having worked in the child welfare field for a number of years it has struck me at different times that theory and practice have not always come together in a productive way to effectively address how to keep children safe and meet their needs in situations where they are at risk. We are living in a time where the need for policy innovation that brings together theory and practice is more pressing than at other times. Child poverty, family breakdown, erosion of the social fabric in communities and the demand for child protection services are far greater issues than they were when the child welfare system was created in Canada and the United States.

I am writing as a child welfare practitioner in Ontario looking to make improvements to its child welfare system, primarily pertaining to the handling of child neglect cases. To assist me with the task I have looked at similar and different child welfare systems. My critique of what needs changing will make reference to Canada, the U.S. and Britain given the similarities in the three countries approaches to child protection. Looking at promising theory, policy and practice in the three countries is also useful in trying to uncover and elucidate some of the pathways that can lead to improvement.

Child welfare theory and practice ought to mutually influence each other. Without such complementarity there cannot be progressive change and innovation. All too often child welfare research and practice seem to be pulling in different directions on the fundamental issue of poverty and its relationship to child protection, as well as the related issue of a safety agenda versus a family support approach. The field, not believing that it should or can do anything about poverty focuses, largely, on helping parents to overcome their deficits. The academic world is frequently critical of the field for ignoring the profound influence of poverty in causing and fueling child protection issues, advocating a more engaged role be taken by the field. Child rescue and a risk orientation are generally more closely identified with the child protection system whereas a call for greater emphasis on family support and client needs often have a stronger voice within the academic field. It is natural for the field to be more pragmatic and academia to be more reflexive. Ultimately however, in not working together more productively on these issues, few realistic solutions have emerged. There are no neat solutions. Nor should it be surprising that research and practice are not more aligned when one also considers that at the societal level there is polarization around the issues just identified.

Before turning to the child neglect discussion, as a means of setting the stage for that discussion, some background on the place of personal and social problems in child welfare will be my point

of departure. Historically child welfare has been residual in nature. It has been a system that has reacted when family difficulties become so severe that a child is maltreated. There is provision in child welfare legislation to act in a preventive capacity but funding has rarely allowed that to happen. It is also a system that is increasingly operating in a child protection model as opposed to dealing more broadly with child welfare issues. This change has been both by policy design by governments and perhaps in response to rapidly escalating reports of abuse and neglect over the last twenty five years.

The residual approach tends to fit more with a psychological view about people's problems. It sees parents as having shortcomings that should be addressed through casework and other change strategies that will help the individual resolve their shortcomings.

An institutional approach tends to fit with a more sociological view of poverty and the problems experienced by clients. "It assumes that family supports and resources are not fully or automatically available but need to be introduced as universal social policies."(Wharf 1985:62)

The discussion in this paper will not incorporate a debate about the merits of the residual and institutional perspectives. My position, throughout this paper, is that the current over reliance on the residual approach leaves much to be desired. Further, to the foregoing statements I would endorse the thinking of Kamerman and Kahn who argue for, "a broader framework and context than traditional child welfare services. The task is to develop family support services within a personal social services system, to include services of the developmental, socialization type and those that will offer help to individuals in the early stages of difficulties when family integrity is more readily preserved."(Kamerman and Kahn 1983:161)

When considering this idea of a broader framework one cannot separate it from the issue of social and economic disadvantage. The following statements aptly captures the magnitude of the issue of poverty in America.

"At the beginning of the 1990's distinguished social theorists across the political spectrum had recognized that child poverty had become the fundamental social problem." (Lindsey 1994:120)

Closer to home, the Canadian government, through it's Children's Agenda is now recognizing the seriousness of child poverty. Health Canada has advocated that public assistance policy must pay attention to it's impact on child maltreatment. Speaking of child maltreatment and poverty it has stated,

"Child maltreatment is affected by several major environmental conditions, of which low socioeconomic status (typically defined as family incomes below the poverty line, under-employment, and low education) plays a significant role. Childhood poverty is a disturbing reality for about one in five children in Canada." (Health Canada 2001:21)

Yet, our approach to child welfare largely does not reflect the significance of the relationship between children being in need of protection and poverty. Unstable, low income has been shown to be the highest predictor of removal of a child from the family in various studies.(Fanshel and Shinn 1978, Lindsey 1991, Testa and Goerge 1988) Canada and the United States have the largest and most expensive child welfare systems in the industrialized world and also the highest rates of children in poverty. The U.S. also has the highest rate of child abuse reports in the industrialized world, followed by Canada. Deaths in the U.S. due to child abuse have remained constant over the last 20 years but have decreased in some European countries where a strong social safety net is a priority. While there is clearly a number of factors affecting the rate of child abuse reporting it would be difficult to argue that poverty does not figure significantly into why the child protection and child welfare systems in the United States and Canada fail to keep children safe.

The child welfare field is aware that low income families comprise the vast majority of the income levels that are represented on child protection case loads. Theorists and practitioners are also well aware of the considerable stress caused by poverty for those families involved with the child protection. Given our awareness of the serious impact of poverty on clients it is striking that child welfare theory, policy and practice has not been able to collectively articulate a shared vision for dealing with the issues related to poverty.

I would not suggest that the child protection field completely ignores issues of poverty. There are certainly examples of the issues being taken into account. Child protection agencies in Ontario do attempt to connect clients to resources that will alleviate their instrumental problems. Obtaining housing, social assistance, legal aid or recreational opportunities for children in the family are examples that come to mind.

I am speaking more in the broader context of developing a service philosophy and examining how values and even ideologies relate to the environment of clients when I say issues around poverty are being ignored. Were that analysis to be completed and an approach developed then it would follow that some aspects of the day to day practice would change.

If one accepts the supposition that poverty is a major factor in children becoming in need of protection then agency policies ought to reflect that view. For instance, budgets for emergency assistance for clients might be increased to prevent children becoming in need of protection. Data gathered about children coming into care would examine what role financial problems and socio-economic disadvantage played in the admission to care. Advocacy for clients both at an agency and child welfare system level would be examined to assess whether we are doing as much as we should to promote entitlements for children and families.

The mix and approach to services offered in a child protection agency also must change if one accepts that protection issues frequently emerge because of social problems. Although there may not be a consensus as to what degree social problems impact on child maltreatment there is wide spread acknowledgement by researchers and practitioners that social problems do have a

significant impact. Moreover, we know that it is often a combination of personal, situational and environmental factors that are at the root of child maltreatment. Underpinning both my analysis and recommendations is my support of this ecological theory regarding the causation of abuse and neglect.

My intention in this paper is to focus, primarily, on a different approach to services where neglect is involved. While my analysis is pertinent to all forms of child maltreatment that is not of a criminal or high risk nature, my emphasis will be on child neglect because of its strong correlation to social disadvantage and because neglect is the category of child maltreatment about which we know the least. (Wolock and Horowitz 1984; Hallett and Birchall 1992; Nelson, Saunders and Landsman 1993; Minty and Pattinson 1994) Any proposals I make will be ones that pass the test of being practical and realistic to implement in the child welfare system in Canada. As I look at theory and practice it will be with a view to bring about change in child welfare policy.

Having mapped out how I see today's child protection landscape in North America and the U.K. in a broad and cursory way and some of the assumptions and parameters that will govern my analysis I will outline how the paper will unfold from this point forward.

It will begin with how child neglect is defined and refer to some of the issues surrounding definition. From there a profile of child neglect in Canada will be presented so as to demonstrate a basis for looking at neglect differently from other maltreatment. Considerable attention will be paid to de-constructing how child protection operates in neglect cases and to commenting on issues I have with how it operates. Why there are obstacles to a client centred, needs based approach will be discussed. And the needs based approach will be explored from a number of perspectives, including what it is, the rationale for it, what clients are saying about their needs and how needs should be determined.

In order to show that it is possible to take theory and ideas about needs and make them relevant to changing child welfare policy and practice I will be looking at the research taking place in the United States surrounding the use of a dual track approach in child maltreatment cases. For the last six years the child protection system in Missouri has been pioneering a Family Assessment/Response model that is used in the majority of child protection cases rather than the traditional investigative mode. I will outline what the program evaluations have said about this initiative and speak to how it could be applied in the Canadian context. As well I will spend some time analyzing the evaluation of several projects that are utilizing community partnerships for protecting children.

DEFINING CHILD NEGLECT AND PROFILING OF NEGLECT IN CANADA

From the outset it is critical to have some discussion about how neglect is defined and to have some description about the extent and nature of neglect in Canada. I say this because child welfare policy about neglect clearly must be based on knowledge about definitions, incidence

and characteristics of neglect.

It is not my desire to arrive at an absolute definition but rather in discussing definitions to elucidate what are the prevailing views on what constitutes neglect and to challenge some of those views. Neglect in North America and the United Kingdom is seen as being a situation where some harm/risk of harm to a child occurs due to some form of omission on the part of the parent, with the harm being of a physical, sexual, emotional or developmental nature. Operationally, harm is further defined in the child protection field by creating thresholds such that if care of a child falls below specified standards then neglect is seen as occurring.

Generally, the professional community involved with child welfare issues identify that arriving at a clear definition of what constitutes child neglect is problematic.(Giovanni 1989; Goddard and Carew 1993). The United States National Research Council 1993:5) noted that,

“Despite vigorous debate over the last two decades, little progress has been made in constructing clear, reliable, valid, and useful definitions of child abuse and neglect. The difficulties in constructing definitions include such factors as lack of social consensus over what forms of parenting are dangerous or unacceptable; uncertainty about whether to define maltreatment based on adult characteristics, adult behaviour, child outcome, environmental context or some combination; conflict over whether standards of endangerment or harm should be used in constructing definitions; and confusion as to whether similar definitions should be used for scientific, legal, and clinical purposes.”

While the debate continues child protection legislation and by extension, child protection agencies who must carry out the legislation, do exhibit more clarity on the matter of definitions. Rose and Meezan (1993) tracked nine categories of child neglect in use by the child protection system.

- 1) inadequate food, clothing and shelter
- 2) inadequate supervision, abandonment
- 3) medical care
- 4) education
- 5) moral fitness of the parent
- 6) condition of the home
- 7) mental or physical capacity of the parent
- 8) inadequate emotional care
- 9) exploitation

Thresholds are defined. For instance, in Ontario the Eligibility Spectrum is utilized to determine standards of endangerment and harm warranting child protection intervention. While, I have no doubt that such standards do allow for the identification of ‘children in need and at risk’, it is my contention that we need to determine whether these standards should always be used to trigger a child protection investigation. Are children being neglected by their parents when the care of the child falls below a certain standard? Our child protection system in Canada is designed so that it

is the behaviour of the parent which is in question. It ignores the extensive literature which demonstrates that in most cases the environment is a key factor. The debate about to what degree child maltreatment is due to the individual deficits of parents or due to social problems will not likely be resolved for many years. It has much to do with values and beliefs about various aspects of the human condition, such as the issue of whether individuals shape their environment or are shaped by their environment. Is it life that determines consciousness or the reverse? My position is that both individual and social factors must be vigorously considered. Hence, I am concerned about the narrow focus taken by the child protection system in this country when it comes to defining neglect.

Profile of Child Neglect

“Child neglect is commonly associated with low income, larger, multi-problem families, families receiving government benefits, poor housing and living conditions, and low educational and employment levels.”(Boehm 1964; Daro 1988).

The recently completed Canadian Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect depicts the forgoing characteristics. The following is a brief description and analysis of the findings on neglect as reported in the Canadian Incidence Study. As the information will show there are some marked differences in this report between neglect and other forms of maltreatment which need to be taken into consideration in policy making and practice.

1) Primary Reason for Investigation

Physical Abuse	31%
Sexual Abuse	10%
Emotional Maltreatment	19%
Neglect	40%

2) Forms of maltreatment within each category yields some important information. Within neglect, 48% of the substantiated cases were Failure to Supervise. Within the Emotional Maltreatment category, 58% of the substantiated cases were Exposure to Family Violence. Given that Failure to Supervise and Exposure to Family Violence (primarily men towards women) represent such a sizeable proportion of cases served it would seem important for the child protection system to devote considerable attention to determining what form of intervention would be most effective.

3) There was some physical harm in 9% of neglect cases

Types of Physical Harm in Neglect Cases

Other Health Conditions	67%
Burns and Scalds	12%
Bruises/Cuts	16%

These figures indicate that physical harm is seldom associated with neglect and that serious harm is even more rare.

4) Lone mothers account for 45% of all neglect cases. In fact, the 45% is quite noticeably the highest figure across all categories of maltreatment with reference to the household structure.

5) Source of Income

Social Assistance is the source of income for 47% of neglect cases and 35% of emotional maltreatment cases.

“A clear distinction in source of income is evident between physical and sexual abuse, and neglect and emotional maltreatment. About 60% of families of physically and sexually abused children derived their household income from full time employment, compared with 24% of families involved with neglect and 34% of families involved in emotional maltreatment.” (Trocme and Wolfe 2001:30)

6) Housing

“Child maltreatment, neglect in particular, is often associated with basic necessities that keep children safe and healthy.”(Trocme and Wolfe 2001:33)

“In contrast to physical and sexual abuse only 17% of substantiated neglect investigations involved children living in purchased homes.”(Trocme and Wolfe 2001: 32)

The statistics for physical abuse cases are 40% of clients owning their home and 50% for sexual abuse cases.

Child neglect was associated with the highest percentage of unsafe housing (31%) and the greatest number of moves.(29%) by a significant margin.

7) Caregiver Functioning and Family Stressors

The Canadian Incidence Study profiles a list of stressors and caregiver problems for all categories of child maltreatment. Neglect and Emotional Maltreatment generally have the highest ratings for each caregiver problem and stressor. For alcohol and drug abuse the comparison is quite dramatic, with these problems being much more serious for neglect when compared to physical and sexual abuse.

8) Charges Laid

Sexual Abuse	70% of cases
Physical Abuse	20%
Neglect	4%
Emotional Maltreatment	25%

9) Alleged Perpetrator in Substantiated Child Maltreatment

Biological Mother

Neglect	84%
Physical Abuse	43%
Sexual Abuse	2%
Emotional Maltreatment	59%

Referring to the 84%, Trocme says,

“The findings may reflect the inter-connection between child neglect, poverty, and single female headed households.” (Trocme and Wolfe 2001: 21)

Turning to male perpetrators, the percentages become substantially less across all categories of maltreatment.

Summary for Child Neglect Profile

Neglect is the single largest category of maltreatment. It is strongly associated with single mothers living in poverty. Substance abuse and lack of social support are serious issues with neglect cases. Physical injury and criminal charges are seldom associated with neglect. There are marked differences in the profile of a neglect case as compared to a physical or sexual abuse case.

Much of what I see in the Canadian Incidence Study would support a differential response to child maltreatment, especially pertaining to most neglect cases. This would mean a shift to a family assessment and support approach for cases that do not warrant criminal investigation and/or are not deemed high risk.

Recommending a comprehensive family support response for most neglect cases should not be seen as de-emphasizing the seriousness of the neglect issue. The long term effects of chronic neglect on children are devastating and often cyclical. Furthermore, although a child and family support approach is indicated with many neglect cases it is imperative that child protection workers have the skills to recognize the most serious neglect cases. They may be few, but the risk of physical harm is great. It is for this reason that cases deemed as high risk require not only support and treatment but a strong investigation and surveillance component.

HOW CHILD NEGLECT IS CONSTRUCTED

Referring back to earlier discussion, there are no absolute definitions about child neglect. Yet policy makers and the child welfare field have been called upon to make choices about neglect, constructing it according to their views, beliefs and using the knowledge they have available to them. This would be the case for anyone in the position of developing public policy and designing a system to implement the policy. My intention is to de-construct child neglect. In doing so, I am less interested in questions of absoluteness and relativity about child maltreatment than I am in showing how it works. (Parton 1995)

One of the ways I see child neglect working is that is largely constructed as a personal problem. In *Manufacturing Bad Mothers*, Karen Swift asserts,

“The tasks within a child welfare setting fit together with larger social processes to produce and sustain this social category.”(neglect) (Swift 1997:11)

She notes that besides protecting children how we approach neglect “serves less visible functions such as controlling social costs and re-orienting particular people in ways that benefit groups other than themselves.” In making reference to a case study she did in a very poor area of Toronto she noted there were no ‘social facts’ in the file. No connections were made between the socio-economic situation of the client and the child welfare concerns for which the Children’s Aid Society had become involved.

Swift questions who is objective and who is subjective. The child welfare field likes to see it’s reports as neutral and objective. I question how objective file information is with the absence of social facts. In a narrative analysis I completed of child neglect cases, while I did find evidence of some social facts, there was no analysis of them. Without the social facts and analysis of them, does case recording accurately reflect why the needs of children in a family are not being met? Such an absence leads to making conclusions that make child protection issues more a matter of failure on the part of the parent.

Generally, the examination of how child protection agencies report their intervention in child neglect cases illustrates that neglect is treated as a personal problem that the client needs help in resolving. Since ideology is not only ideas but also reflected in practices and organization there is an ideological element to child protection work when it excludes 'social facts' from its analysis and intervention. A dominant theme in many child neglect cases is the 'neediness', 'emotional immaturity' and 'dependency' of mothers.(Swift 1997) This is often connected to neediness getting in the way of meeting the needs of children. While harm to children in these situations is clearly an issue, there is an ideological aspect to helping women to overcome their 'neediness'. This is because it fits with the idea that clients must change, not their situation and circumstances.

Arguments can also be made to demonstrate that child protection also works to maintain the social order. There are, of course, other purposes. I would say that society is generally concerned about the welfare of children and wanting to devise some means of helping children. I am not exceedingly concerned about the child protection system playing a role in perpetuating the social order, in the sense of helping parents to raise children who will become socially and economically productive adults. Most social institutions do so. Arguably, in a democratic society this is a choice citizens can choose to make through the people they elect. What is very concerning to me is that parents who neglect their children do not receive the help they need. A case in point is situations where the state is looking at a child being admitted to care but where a strong social safety net might well have prevented the child from coming into care. What is happening is that the state, via the child protection agency, is saying what is acceptable parenting but is not giving the parent the means to overcome their problems or find a way out of difficult situations. This kind of social control can be characterized as repressive. My sense is that many child protection staff recognize there is an element of their work that assists in maintaining the social order. At this time, this element of child protection is emerging as a larger issue in jurisdictions that have made a "hard right turn" in their electoral decisions in that the values of the social order are increasingly in contradiction with the values of social workers and social work.

The way child protection operates for mothers who are found to be neglectful illustrates a serious concern about constructing a system where it is the client who must change and who is seen as lacking in ability to be a good parent. As mentioned earlier, almost half of all neglect cases in Canada involve single mothers. Within the emotional maltreatment category of the Canadian Incidence Study, 58% of the cases involved children being exposed to domestic violence, mostly by males toward female partners. Various case studies have shown that it is consistently mothers who are being asked by child protection staff to protect their children from neglect and domestic violence. Mothers are told that they must make the right choices about putting the best interest of their children first. The choices they have available to them are limited and often not very attractive. Child protection staff know that it is not entirely reasonable to expect single mothers living in poverty and women being subjected to domestic violence to be able to parent effectively, and in two parent families to be the one who is expected to be the caregiver. However, that is how child protection is constructed. It is the mother who is seen as neglectful

and in need of help and surveillance. The social problems of poverty and domestic violence are not accepted by governments as significant causes of neglect that must be rectified if the parent is to have a reasonable opportunity to provide good care. This kind of practice has been characterized as blaming mothers. A growing body of research has been attempting to demonstrate how women are treated in the child protection system, looking at alternatives and attempting to give women involved with the child protection and welfare systems a voice as well as fairer treatment without jeopardizing the safety of children.

Fernandez argues that,

“Analysis of poverty and its effects have paid scant attention to the poverty of women (Hanmer and Statham, 1988; Parton, 1990; Swift, 1991). It is important to understand the impact of poverty on women since poverty for women entails not only a low income and struggles from day to day to make ends meet in poor physical surroundings, but it also contributes to a worsening of mental and physical health along with a major reduction in options and opportunities generally.”(Hanmer and Statham, 1988:38)

In working with families where child neglect is an issue there is often a need for extensive services aimed at helping the parent(s) and child(ren). In cases of serious chronic neglect there will have been a history of deprivation of needs on the part of the child and also on the part of the parent. I have been talking about the meeting of socio-economic needs. However, there are also serious deficits in the functioning of the parent and the child that also need attention over a sustained period of time. Without an extensive and sustained commitment of time and resources to such families the prognosis for improvement is unlikely.

Risk in Child Protection

“While at the moment of its modern re-emergence in the 1960's child abuse was constituted as essentially a medico-social reality, where the expertise of doctors was seen as central, increasingly it has been constituted as a socio-legal problem, where legal expertise take pre-eminence. Whereas previously the concern was with diagnosing, curing and preventing the ‘disease’ or syndrome, increasingly the emphasis has become investigating, assessing and weighing ‘forensic evidence’. (Parton 1997:19)

Debates about risk lie at the heart of the discussion about future directions in child protection. Risk assessment and risk management are the dominant orientation in the field. Parton argues that in the 1960's and 1970's meeting social needs was seen as possible and important. In the U.K. there has now been a recognition that the investigative/legalistic/risk orientation has become problematic. The child protection legislation (Children Act 1989) is intended to strongly support families with “children in need”, meaning the promotion of the welfare of children who are in need. To date, the concern has been that not enough funds have ever been allocated to address this objective.

Child Abuse Inquiries in North America and the U.K. have been the catalyst for bringing about

change in policy and practice. In the U.K., alone, there have been more than 30 inquiries related to the deaths of children. In examining a study of Inquiry Reports from 1980 to 1989 Parton makes the following observation,

“Finally the study of the inquiries endorsed the Beckford Inquiry report in finding that high risk is difficult to define, and stated that it is not possible ‘confidently to predict who will be an abuser, for the potential for abuse is widespread and often triggered by the particular conjunction of circumstances which is unpredictable.’”(Parton 1997:80)

He concludes that,

“ attempts to identify key risk factors associated with child abuse have failed to establish any clear causal relationships or sequences between variables. Crucially they have failed to differentiate between what constitutes high risk and the rest.” (Parton 1997:54)

In a letter to the Government of Ontario, Dr. Paul Steinhauer, on behalf of the Sparrow Lake Alliance explained that the ability of risk assessment tools to predict future maltreatment is poor. He cautioned that they must be used to assist with decision making, not as the decision maker and only when certain conditions for their use are met. Of equal concern in the Ontario context, and probably elsewhere as well, is the way that a risk assessment model can become the dominant paradigm for the practice of child protection. Perhaps, in time it will settle into a less pervasive yet significant part of child protection work. Will risk assessments tools have predictive validity in the future? And how should such tools be used? For the small percentage of cases where children are abused and/or appear to be at risk of serious harm, risk assessment tools and an investigative framework are a good fit. Whether or not risk assessment evolves to the point where it has predictive validity it does provide a solid framework for trying to assess risk and prevent harm. However, for the majority of cases this kind of paradigm perpetuates a view of clients as being dangerous to their children, mistrust on the part of clients and an organizational culture which emphasizes surveillance. The increased time being spent on the investigative\legalistic\ risk side of child protection is, of course, done at the expense of investing more time in helping clients to deal with issues that concern them and that place their children at risk.

Examining the results from LONGSCAN, the longitudinal studies of child abuse and neglect that have been conducted in North Carolina over the last 16 years provokes some interesting questions about the investigative model from another perspective. For 8 year old children reported to the child protection system between the ages of 4 and 8 “there isn’t any difference in the ability of maltreatment to predict behavioural and emotional outcomes according to whether allegations are substantiated or not.”(Kotch, 2001) On a Trauma Symptom Checklist the mean scores on all variables were almost identical whether the allegation was substantiated or not. It seems to be pointing to the need to ensure that all children in high risk families and environments receive effective services.

Policy makers, the public and some proportion of those working in the child protection system

believe that in using the investigative and risk assessment approach for child neglect that the field is detecting harm and injury, and assessing the risk of harm and injury whereas, arguably, in many instances it is primarily assessing adequacy of care. Speaking to the question of what is actually being assessed by child protection staff, Thorpe (1997) did a study in Australia of child protection investigations in which he read files to analyze how risk was assessed. There were 12 factors which he generally found the social workers used as a basis for their decisions.

Factors Used to Make Decisions in Thorpe Study

- 1) the reactions of others in terms of how they view the scale of deviations from a norm
- 2) the child's behaviour
- 3) the moral character of the carer
- 4) the influence of significant others
- 5) the role of the carer
- 6) the specific/non-specific nature of the time/space dimension
- 7) the overall image of the family
- 8) reactions by carers to the investigators
- 9) the supervision of children
- 10) the nature of distribution of roles and responsibilities in the family
- 11) the proximity and nature of interaction with extended family
- 12) the views of other state agents

I am not convinced that the moral character of the care giver is as significant as portrayed by Thorpe. Nonetheless, while the 12 categories do have some bearing on the assessment of risk they do not constitute what one would expect from a risk assessment. They are more about child rearing practices and family functioning. Thorpe comments that using this methodology "has a potential for constructing something as abnormal in any child rearing setting" (Parton 1997, p.154). I am not intimating that risk assessments of neglect in Ontario, or Canada for that matter, are normally mostly about child rearing practices and family functioning. However, as neglect is more nebulous to define and value-laden than abuse there is a danger of that concern developing. As a child welfare practitioner I have seen some evidence of that concern. Pelton (1981) in a case study of child neglect identified the need for greater specificity in identifying the actual harm to the child and in determining what conditions in a particular case place the child in risk of harm. Avoiding generalizations about risk are imperative to guard against the danger of being too intrusive or, in some cases, not intrusive enough. So often, in child neglect cases there is a chronicity involving inadequacy in parenting and in the child's environment. The child protection worker's role ought to be working at raising the level of adequacy as to both factors. To a large extent, there is limited value for risk assessment in many, marginal, chronic neglect cases. That long term harm is being done to the child is given. What is less clear is how to intervene knowing that effective options are limited by insufficient resources for intervention.

The Risk Society

Before leaving the risk discourse in child protection it is important to situate it within the larger discourse about risk in Western society.

“Recent work in sociology (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) has emphasized the way current social constructions of risk have become a prime focus of a risk society, where there is such a rapid pace of change and institutional instability that risk has become central to the way contemporary society functions.” (Clifford 1998:115)

Ulrich Beck characterizes contemporary society as a ‘risk society’. He posits that in a risk society the normative basis is safety and the utopia is negative and defensive, in other words preventing the worst. There is a general undermining and scepticism about expert knowledge. Audit and holding people accountable becomes more pronounced. We certainly see this kind of response flowing out of child abuse inquiries. On a broader scale, we have recently seen Western society’s fragility when risk assurance strategies failed. After the recent terrorist attacks in New York and Washington I was struck by how quickly economies unraveled due to concern about safety and risk.

Nigel Parton argues that,

Statements about risk have become the key moral statements of society and lie at the heart of child protection work. They represent a more general societal gauge on the way we value and treat children and the people who take prime responsibility for looking after them and bringing them up-usually mothers.”(Parton 1997:245)

It would seem that rather than concern about caring and needs the prevailing sentiment is on child safety and making sure parents don’t harm their children.

Connected with this focus on child safety is the issue of bureaucratization of social work. There is a concern that social work has become too legalized and proceduralized to the detriment of being able to foster relationships with clients. (Howe 1992; 1996;Parton 1997) It is not within the purview of this paper to analyze that aspect of how child protection is currently constructed. It is certainly an issue that the field needs to learn more about. It is a constant source of concern amongst my colleagues in child protection. In a case study that I recently completed involving a narrative analysis of child neglect cases it my finding was that case records were devoid of any expressions of caring or descriptions of the worker-client relationship. Given the amount of time that child protection staff spend in case recording one does wonder how the absence of caring in child protection files impacts on the social worker’s ability to develop caring relationships with clients and how that absence impacts on the culture of their organizations. It is my sense that the bureaucratization of child protection is a matter that clearly requires much more research.

PRESENTATION OF A CLIENT CENTRED, NEEDS BASED APPROACH

“The definition of risk and need is always a social construction which expresses social values.” (Douglas, 1986 and 1992 in Clifford 1998)

Need is a concept which seems to have gone out of vogue in the human services. Trying to determine needs and meeting them is not a social value that has the priority that it should in the child welfare field. My hope would be that a client centred, needs based approach would come to have the same kind of prominence held by risk. Adopting a client centred, needs based approach essentially means assessing and addressing the needs of children and parents. It involves talking to clients about their needs and working in partnership with them to meet their needs.

In *Social Assessment Theory and Practice*, Derek Clifford expresses the view that all social assessments should combine both the assessment of risk and need. He speaks about the interconnection of risk and need. For example, risk and need are connected in the sense that if certain needs are not met a child or adult may be at risk of some form of harm to themselves or others. Risk can be placed on a continuum going from low to high risk, as can needs where one starts with Wants at the low end of the continuum progressing to Needs at the high end. He advocates that risk be understood in the broader context of need and that both risk and need require the assessment of future potential, positive and negative. Past history is seen as critical to the assessment of both risk and need.

Clifford sees it as imperative that there be a better framework for social assessment.

“Rapid, developments in social theory, social research methodology and in the various practices of social assessment during a turbulent period of change have meant that the development of a methodological framework at a theoretical level, combining contemporary social theory and research methodology with the experiences of practitioners and the perspectives of users and oppressed groups, is now long overdue.” (Clifford 1998:151)

Farmer and Owen (1995) make the point that recent research has provided evidence about the importance of the views of parents and of taking into account differing views of parents and other professionals when conducting social assessment. The social research unit of the British government notes,

“A central feature of recent research has been the enormous negative impact of child protection systems on families.” (DoH Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995)

In Canada we have not turned our attention as yet to the issue of needs in child welfare, client involvement in the assessment process or to some of the negative impacts that occur within our child protection system to the extent that is occurring in the U.K. I believe we would do well to pay heed to some of their experiences and their child welfare research.

In looking further at the rationale for developing a client centred, needs based approach there are a number of reasons that can be enumerated for adopting it. In the human services the achievement of outcomes has been seen as a key direction in the last number of years. Achieving outcomes for clients presupposes that some need(s) is being met. Currently child protection organizations talk about outcome measurement but with no confidence that the right goals have been selected. In the child protection field clients usually do not enter into a partnership concerned with goal setting, nor are the clients consulted about their needs. It follows then that it would behoove the child protection field to begin to correctly determine needs if it is serious about outcome measurement.

Sustainability of progress is also part of the rationale. Any improvements in child safety are more likely to be of short duration if there is not accurate assessment and effort to meet parental and child needs. By involving clients in the process of clarifying their needs a more respectful way of working with clients results. This can translate itself into engaging clients in meaningful work to do with the safety and well being of their children. It also is more likely that the social problems that are influencing the condition of neglect will be given some attention. Later in the paper I will be making specific reference to the instrumental needs identified by child protection clients in several studies.

Measurement of Need

“Social agencies exist to meet human needs... But at that general level, the area of agreement which seems apparent, can become clouded by problems of definition. How extensive is the need? How intensive is the need? What kind of provision will meet it? What level of provision can achieve public support? These are the kinds of questions which face service providers, and which are daily being answered in one way or another.”
(O’Brien 1973:22)

Undoubtedly it is difficult to measure need. The state of the art is not terribly sophisticated in the social services field. In child protection the needs of children and parents are often so great that determining an adequate level of service provision to meet needs is very complicated and well beyond the capacity of that system to actually meet the needs were they to be defined. Decision makers at the governmental level in Ontario and many other provinces in Canada have opted to define need as risk reduction. The safety needs of children are paramount, as they should be. All the needs that are associated with promoting the well being of children have been given much less priority. In this sense I believe that the bar has not been set high enough with respect to the role and resourcing of the child protection system as it pertains to ensuring that the well being of children is enhanced during the course of intervention and long after child protection cases are closed.

A good place to start would be to recognize that child protection assessment should be about both risks, needs and strengths. The task would then be to develop the kind of tools needed to do such assessment. Bradshaw developed a taxonomy of needs which provides four approaches to

measuring need.

- 1) Expressed need- the demand for service by consumers
- 2) Normative need- a standard or level set by the experts or professionals as desirable.
- 3) Felt need- a person's self-perception of his situation
- 4) Comparative Need- as assessed by the characteristics of those receiving the service, and those in the community with similar characteristics. (O'Brien 1973:24)

While considerable research is required to be able better measure social needs there are tools available. There are needs assessments that can be used by professionals. Felt need is the area that most interests me because it is so integral to the social work ethos and because so little consideration is being given to it.

Being more client centred and needs based can involve implementing particular service delivery models. Later on I will be making reference to some of these models. Client satisfaction surveys can help child protection agencies understand how clients feel about the services they are receiving. The case planning process is also a key opportunity to talk to clients, not only about the social worker's perception of the client's needs but also about the client's own perception. From time to time surveying groups of clients about their needs should also be undertaken. The following are some highlights of two research projects carried out in the United Kingdom where child welfare clients were asked about their needs and those of their children. As you will see one of the ways their research seems relevant to child protection in Canada is that some of the findings speak to gaps and/or inadequacies that exist here.

The first study by Jean Packman (1986) examined social work decisions about admissions to care through the eyes of social workers and parents. There were three groupings: children admitted to care involuntarily, those admitted voluntarily and children where it was decided not to admit to care.

On a number of questions the perceptions of parents and social workers was close. However on matters of parental health, the social environment and housing the social workers were not aware of the seriousness with which parents viewed those areas as being problems for them. The majority of parents had hopes that the social workers could help them with certain issues. Emotional support, child behaviour and instrumental problems were the primary areas where they were looking for help. At the time of a decision being made about whether their child should be admitted to care, two thirds of the parents saw the social worker as sharing their view of the problem and felt they had influenced the decision. Six months after the initial decision around admission two thirds of the parents where the child was admitted without their consent or where the child was not admitted were not happy with the help they received. The reasons for the dissatisfaction often hinged on it being the wrong decision for the child, for the family or that the social worker had not been helpful during the six month period covered by the study.

The second study by Margaret Williams (1997) was designed to find out the views of parents and

children about the degree to which they felt there was a partnership with the social worker who was working with their family. The elements of partnership examined were satisfaction, participation in decisions and information shared by the social worker.

Overall, 63% of the parents were satisfied with services received and 37% were dissatisfied, in contrast to the Packman study where the level of dissatisfaction was much higher. Of those satisfied emotional support, admission to care and help with material goods were most mentioned. The unmet needs for parents most frequently mentioned had to do with the provision of material goods, housing and not seeing the social worker enough. When talking about services a number of parents talked about intrusiveness, interference and being afraid they would not be allowed to participate in decisions about their children. However, 73% said they had participated to some degree in decisions. And 83% were unhappy about the information given to them by their social worker. Many felt the social worker knew information about material goods available but had not shared it with them. Although differences in how social services are delivered in the U.K. may partially explain why parents receiving services under the Children Act are identifying so strongly the importance of having a social worker who can help them with material and housing problems these problems are nonetheless felt to be of a very serious nature to them. Both studies also emphasize the importance of emotional support for families from a social worker. Other studies (Howe) have also underscored the importance of having someone who will listen as being one of the most important things clients value.

Before leaving the responses of consumers of child welfare services there is a third study I will refer to as it is one of a number of studies that have brought to light some of the negative impacts that child protection intervention can produce. Elizabeth Fernandez (1996) conducted a research study in Australia that attempted to understand how parents were affected by child protection involvement. She stated,

“A sense of grievance, powerlessness and alienation characterized the response of parents in this study.” (Fernandez, 1996:264)

Studies such as this as well as mechanisms like client satisfaction surveys can be helpful in gleaning information that will allow the field to minimize the negative impact of intrusion into the lives of families.

WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO A CLIENT CENTRED, NEEDS BASED APPROACH?

The obstacles to developing a client centred, needs based approach are both numerous and intractable to a large degree. However, I would not suggest that this apparent intractability rules out the opportunity of making improvements.

Cost is a major factor. The resources required to effectively intervene such that child neglect would be greatly reduced are well beyond what governments, and presumably taxpayers, in Canada are prepared to subsidize.

Societal values and perceptions about child welfare impact substantially on that lack of willingness to invest in a more client centred, needs based approach. As Canadian society is strongly rooted in the self sufficiency of the individual there is a belief that the poor are being given enough help, enough that if they really put their energies into it they could break out of the 'cycle' of neglect and poverty. I would suspect that at governmental levels there is a view that more expensive solutions will be no more effective at resolving child neglect than is the current approach. In part this perception would be based on the child protection system not having demonstrated what outcomes it achieves and in part on the view that neglectful parents will always be marginal no matter how much is invested in their rehabilitation. There is also a political constituency that equates a more client centred, needs based approach with putting more children at risk. This constituency sees need and risk as a dichotomy, as an either/or situation rather than understanding that there can be a balancing of the two. My experience has been that within the child protection field there are also elements of this dichotomous perspective on need and risk.

There is also concerns in the political realm that if needs are identified and legitimated that governments will be pressured and obligated to attempt to meet the need. Need does have that quality of entitlement attached to it. One can see why governments would be reluctant to go down the road of investing in how to determine the needs of child protection clients.

PRESENTATION OF NEEDS BASED MODELS OF INTERVENTION

In order to bridge the gap between theory and practice I would like to present what is being done in the child protection field by way of needs based approaches. This does not mean they are not risk based. In fact they combine both approaches. By way of introducing this section of the paper I would like to look at the problems being experienced in the U.S. resulting from the demand for services greatly exceeding the supply of resources at the disposal of the child protection system. We see this problem in Canada, also. It does not appear to be quite as critical here. However, the information about the U.S. is clearer as it has been documented through better data collection and more research on the topic and than has been the case here. In Canada, the most reliable data on the reporting of child maltreatment comes from the province of Quebec, where statistics show an increase of 100% in reporting from 1982 to 1989. (Gilbert 1997) This information would indicate a need for a considerable increase in resources to handle the reports.

There is strong evidence that the child protections system in the U.S.A., as well as elsewhere in North America, cannot respond to the spiraling demand for services. In 1975 there were 294,796 reports of suspected abuse or neglect made to child protection agencies in the U.S.A. Twenty years later that number had jumped to 3,140,000. This dramatic escalation in reporting has overwhelmed the child protection system in that country.

In response to growing concern that there is a pressing need to find new ways to protect children from abuse and neglect, the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard convened a working

group from the child welfare field and academia to look at the problem. They identified the following problems:

- 1) CPS agencies and staff are so overwhelmed that they inevitably overlook some dangers to children, and some endangered children entirely.
- 2) Service systems are rarely flexible, intensive or comprehensive, and serious needs are not addressed. Too many families return to the system because the problems and stresses leading to maltreatment are not resolved.
- 3) Too many cases are investigated and determined not to warrant further response. (Approximately 50% of cases are closed after an investigation. This rate has increased over time.)
- 4) CPS staff find their jobs frustrating, harrowing and ultimately impossible to perform.

In a series of papers the Kennedy School of Government has developed proposals for reform of the child protection system in the U.S. Primarily the recommendations focus on a differential response between serious maltreatment or risk of serious maltreatment and all other child protection cases. About 40% of the cases would fall into the serious category. The recommendations also call for the development of the building of community partnerships to protect children. My plan will be to outline the differential response that was adopted in the state of Missouri and to present the results of an evaluation that was conducted. There are other jurisdictions in the U.S. that have implemented a differential response to child maltreatment reports, but Missouri seems to be furthest along in it's development. Community Safety Partnerships are being piloted in various U.S. states. I will look at four communities that have piloted this approach, again outlining what they are doing and the findings of the evaluation of the initiatives.

In 1994, Missouri embarked on a pilot project that involved a differential response to reports of child maltreatment. At the initial screening level all reports that did not involve an allegation of a potentially criminal nature were considered for a Family Assessment response. A Family Assessment response meant that client involvement was voluntary while still maintaining a focus of enhancing the child's safety and well being. Any reports that involved behaviour on the part of the caregiver that would constitute a criminal violation continued to be responded to in the traditional Investigative manner. Those screening the initial reports were then called upon to decide if those reports eligible for a Family Assessment response would be dealt with in that fashion. If warranted due to concerns of risk those cases eligible for the Family Assessment response could be channeled to the Investigative stream. In 1998 the differential response was expanded state-wide due to it's success. The reasons for moving to this new system were to promote the least intrusive and disruptive means of protecting children and to provide child protection services in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

The pilot project was evaluated by the Institute of Applied Research from St. Louis, Missouri. The evaluation was done using a number of pilot sites as well as a number of comparison sites which were felt to be similar to the pilot sites for the purposes of the study. At the pilot sites cases could be directed to either the Family Assessment or the Investigative streams, whereas at the comparison sites all cases were directed to the traditional Investigative stream. During the evaluation 69% of the hotline reports were screened into the Family Assessment stream and 31% into the Investigative stream. The evaluation looked at data from all sites over a two year period. Cases were followed from opening to closing. The following will be a discussion of the major findings from the evaluation.

Safety of Children

Of greatest importance was the need to determine whether child safety was compromised by use of the Family Assessment approach. The evaluation unequivocally was able to determine that child safety was not compromised. In cases typically screened into the Family Assessment stream, neglect of children's basic needs, lack of supervision and less serious physical and emotional abuse cases it was found that safety improved.

Recidivism and Reduction in Hotline Reports

Hotline reports, referrals for alleged abuse or neglect of children, decreased by about 9% in the pilot areas but not in the comparison areas. In part the researchers felt this was explained by the changes in the relationship between child protection agencies and other service providers. For example, at the same time there was an initiative by the child protection system to deliver school based services which resulted in less referrals due to educational neglect as these cases were handled in a more preventative manner.

Recidivism, the frequency of repeated reports of allegations of child abuse/neglect about the same family were significantly less at the pilot sites than at the comparison sites, although there was an overall increase at all sites. When broken down by type of child welfare problem there was an absolute reduction in recidivism for children lacking basic necessities, lack of supervision and educational neglect cases. This reduction occurred amongst the lowest income families. The evaluation saw a connection between the reduced recidivism in the pilot areas and the reduced hot line calls in those areas.

Service Provision Effects

Although there was a decline in the number of hot line reports in the pilot areas there was an increase in the number of families who received service, one out of four families in the pilot areas and one in five reported families in the comparison areas. Given the concern that child protection cases do not receive much in the way of helpful intervention due to workload issues for child protection staff this finding is rather encouraging.

While there was no difference in the rate of admissions to care between the pilot and comparison sites children at the pilot sites spent significantly less time in care once placed.

Timeliness and Appropriateness of Services

“The family assessment process involved changes in the approach and orientation of workers to families. These shifts, along with the procedural changes implemented in the demonstration, had the potential to affect delivery of service to families. The impact evaluation found that services were provided in pilot areas in a more timely manner.”(Loman & Siegel, 1997:19)

The evaluation studied how quickly clients actually began receiving a service, as opposed to remaining in an investigative or assessment stage and found that in Family Assessment cases the delivery of services was much earlier than occurred at the comparison sites. When the focus is not on determining whether an alleged incident occurred it is possible to move to the intervention stage much sooner it would appear. For the most part, once services began there was not a lot of difference between pilot and comparison areas as to the level of services. The one significant exception related to helping clients obtain the basic necessities for living such as food, clothing, shelter and medical care. One of the reasons this help with the basic necessities is so significant is that the literature has shown that this kind of help is one of the top priorities being voiced by child protection clients when asked to identify their needs.

Utilization of Community Resources

The linkage of clients to community resources grew tremendously during the project. Schools, practical assistance, friends, neighbours and extended family stood out for the evaluators amongst the various linkages. Workers commented on their surprise at the number of resources they discovered.

Family Cooperation and Satisfaction

Family cooperation with the voluntary Family Assessment approach was not an issue.

“Pilot families were more likely to feel their children were better off because of the involvement of the child welfare agency, and they were more likely to report they were involved in decisions that affected them.” (Siegel and Loman 1997:28)

Other Findings

1) Workers in the pilot sites expressed more satisfaction about the child welfare agency and the help they were providing to families than their counterparts.

2)Community respondents favoured the differential response approach.

3) Overall the positive impact of the pilot project was a modest improvement. The researchers speculated that without a more substantial increase in the resources available to deal with child maltreatment that it would not be realistic to expect greater improvement.

Community Partnerships for Protecting Children

Prior to presenting the differential response model from Missouri I had noted that there are currently four communities where the Edna McConnel/Clark Foundation is funding projects to develop Community Partnerships for Protecting Children. In recent years there has been considerable endorsement of a partnership approach given the inability of the child protection system to be the sole protector of children. I know that many agencies in Ontario are making modest efforts to do so, but are constrained due to a combination of factors, including lack of resources as well as support at the provincial government level to pursue such a direction. The programs being undertaken in Jacksonville, St.Louis, Cedar Rapids and Louisville are ambitious undertakings to develop full partnerships at both formal and informal levels to construct a better way of providing child protection.

As these projects have only completed Phase One, during a four year period, there is much work to be done. The projects have been evaluated by the Chapin Hall Centre for Children at the University of Chicago. I will present some of their findings, but not in the detail as done with the differential response because these projects are far from completed. However, what has occurred thus far does offer some valuable data for those envisioning more needs based approaches to child protection.

Key Accomplishments

1) There was found to be strong child protection system leadership in organizing community partnerships. While some strong partnerships have been forged not much progress has been made in moving to the level of shared responsibility for child safety.

2) There has been progress with the utilization of differential responses to reports of child maltreatment, the use of comprehensive assessments that assess risks, needs and strengths and the use of a case planning tool known as the Individual Course of Action. The Individual Course of Action is supported by workers because it emphasizes working on a goals desired by the client.

3) St.Louis and Louisville have a system for flagging chronic and serious maltreatment cases. Further work is seen as being needed.

4) The use of neighbourhood hubs for service delivery has been integral to the development of partnerships with professional and families. Residents feel better about dealing with the child protection system at the hubs. They have been a good vehicle for promoting professional partnerships and involvement of residents living in the hub area. There is a need to develop

service goals for the hub so as to better evaluate their impact.

5) There has been some integration of key agencies. At the systemic level it comprises joint training, shared assessments and participation of agencies in the decision making processes about the project. At the case level there is increased collaboration between agencies. Integrated team meetings amongst key agencies where there are hubs has promoted integration at the case level.

6) Service users had some positive comments about the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children. They said that it brought residents together in neighbourhoods, it provided access to information and resources, they felt better treated and respected by child protection workers and it provided exposure to new experiences, training and opportunities.

Issues for the Future

1) Many site strategies are still not firmly established nor have they reached a sufficient number of families, workers or organizations to effect meaningful change.

2) Promoting resident involvement to act in a helping capacity with child protection clients has been a struggle. The researchers describe it as a long process that will need a sustained effort.

3) There is some scepticism amongst child protection staff as to whether this reform is more sustainable than previous reform efforts. There is also some concern on the part of child protection staff that they do not have time to devote to the higher expectations for more service delivery in the community partnership approach.

4) Further development and refinement of hub service delivery is seen as critical

Summary Discussion on Needs Based Models of Intervention

By no means have I presented all the models that could be considered. I have presented the differential response used in Missouri because it is highly applicable as a better response to child neglect and eminently adaptable to the Ontario and larger Canadian context. I felt that it was important to further examine the research on the community partnerships model both because it is being touted as the way for the future.

The differential response strikes me as having numerous attributes. It pays appropriate attention to child safety and offers features that are clearly an improvement on how intervention currently occurs in child neglect cases. The evaluation demonstrated not only that the model allowed clients to identify their instrumental needs as a priority but that child protection staff then worked with clients on those needs. More families received service and with a quicker response time. Recidivism improved. With respect to satisfaction clients, social workers and the community felt the differential response was a better way to deliver services.

Turning to the community partnerships projects it would appear they have made a good start but have much work to do. The use of a differential response, the integration of services, the attempts to involve residents and the use of hub models of service delivery all have as an underpinning the desire to meet needs. It will be interesting to see how successful these projects are as they attempt to move to a shared responsibility for child safety. The development of informal support networks within those projects is moving ahead very slowly. I suspect that goals in that area will be the most difficult to achieve. With the scope of the goals of the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children it is unlikely that it is realistic to be successful with all of them.

There are other effective models for service with child neglect cases. Various social support approaches have been demonstrated to have efficacy. It should be said that there is often a need

for intensive and comprehensive services for such cases. Generally, it is cost that prohibits their wider application.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to weave together the strands I have been discussing and to make the discussion more real I have selected some passages from an article by Gerald de Montigny. In them he recounts an experience where he was called to an apartment building as a child protection worker after a single mother had gone to hospital due to injuries she apparently sustained while intoxicated. After calling her parents to come to look after her daughter she left. These passages lucidly depict many of the issues that make neglect so complex and controversial.

“The windows over the entrance doors were shattered. Graffiti was scrawled on the hall walls. The building stank of urine and filth. The floor tiles in the apartments were cracked and broken. The wooden front steps were rotting. The grounds were unkempt and littered.... Moving to the back bedroom I found an infant, perhaps ten or twelve months old, lying asleep on top of filthy sheets turned brown by dirt. I saw that she lay on a bed not in a crib. I looked at the child’s body to note that she was wearing only a feces-soiled and urine-soaked diaper. Feces had dried to cake her torso and face.(de Montigny 1995:155 and 161)

“In my report to the court what disappeared- as not worth reporting- were the conditions of Donna’s life expressed from her standpoint. The report to the court did not address her situation nor her understanding of what it meant to be a Native Indian, a young woman(nineteen years old), a single mother, a grade eight drop-out, and disabled. Later, Donna told me that she, her brothers, sisters, and mother had all been victims of his (father’s) rage, beatings, and abuse. But this information was peripheral to the work at hand of determining whether or not there was a child in need of protection.” (de Montigny 1995:166)

The narrative illustrates the poverty and despair so often present, the issue of trying to determine risk and the evoking of strong emotions when confronted by the conditions to which neglected children are subjected, and how the conditions of the parent's life often become swept aside or ignored in the interest of protecting children and because child protection staff feel powerless to effect a change in those conditions.

In a more client centred, needs based approach to child neglect both risk and need are given prominence and a better balance of the two is sought. The social conditions and social exclusion of clients is not allowed to remain hidden. No longer are these issues accepted as realities that are not talked about because we can do nothing about them. In case supervision, in the family courts, in case records, in the training of staff, in public forums, and most importantly with clients, these issues are discussed. And this discussion results in some action to address risk and needs.

If there is to be progress in how the child protection system deals with child neglect then that system must focus more vigorously on working with clients to help them in their struggles with poverty and social exclusion. It must find ways to protect children but not at the expense of alienating and frightening mothers. Solutions to this challenge of working more effectively with mothers and all parents can be found in asking them about their needs and working together to meet them. They can be found in no longer being trapped by the investigative/legalistic/ risk orientation. There is convincing evidence of the efficacy of responding differently to the vast majority of child maltreatment cases which are not high risk. Clearly, I have not presented a panacea. Admittedly, some of the most significant changes required to prevent neglect are not within the control of the social work field. In not shying away from the challenge improvements can be made by social workers. Child neglect must be viewed as a priority for improvements to occur. Finally, while I do not promote or expect consensus, research and practice will need to come together on this issue, working in some alignment, to be successful with the challenge.

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