

A Child Welfare Social Worker Perspective

Social Workers who work in child protection services in Child Welfare Agencies quickly learn that they cannot talk about what they do at parties. People do not really want to know. They say such 'closers' as 'I don't know how you do what you do, I could never deal with what you must see'. If you are reading this and nodding in agreement then you understand this experience. You know...it is indeed difficult for workers.

Workers bear silent witness and are often emotionally touched by the terrible tragedies that can occur in families. Children who are abused sometimes have eyes lacking any sparkle of life in them and their faces already show the weight of the stresses that they carry. Young mothers who want to do well but are hampered by their own childhood experiences struggle with their children and sometimes can no longer look after them with any reasonable degree of safety. To keep a child safe in this circumstance means that often the child needs to be separated until such time as the necessary safety mechanisms can be put into place. To do so and still maintain the parent as a voluntary client requires extensive skills in relationship and collaboration. In other situations, working with a parent while allowing a young child at some risk to remain with him or her requires a worker's conviction, courage and a solid assessment that the necessary changes can and will be made. These decisions are made after critical thinking and the application of specific knowledge, best practices and an exploration of available options. Every day, thousands of these decisions are made with supervisors - but imagine trying to work with the knowledge that if one child dies, even if it is not the fault of the worker or the agency, the worker could be charged criminally, ridiculed in public or subject to lawsuits.

Every worker worries about the one case that could go wrong. This is a tremendous burden and although workers and agencies should remain accountable, there should be more fairness allowed. On occasion, the media and those in authority can be unjustifiably harsh and in fact hurt other children by making the already complex tasks of child protection workers even more difficult to perform.

The Ontario Association of Social Workers provides some general characteristics of social workers. Social workers are highly skilled problem-solvers, communicators and mediators. Their aim is to enhance mental health functioning by helping people participate more fully in relationships, work and community life. This commitment is evident and carried out every day by protection workers and other staff in various roles in Ontario's 53 Children's Aid Societies.

The best child protection workers often feel some of the pain experienced by children and their families. Imagine the emotions of an emergency worker who arrives at a foster home where a child has died a crib death and tries to deal with a grieving and a distraught foster mother. Over time workers can burn out, realizing that they are most often dealing with having to be content with the "least damaging" solution rather than being able to work with the children and families on the

fundamental, underlying problems to alleviate the pain in their lives. Often there is a frustration with the realization that their efforts can be diminished by the fact that 90% of client families live in poverty or are marginalized. They come to realize that seldom in child protection work is there a hundred percent right decision as so much damage has been done and no matter what they may do they can never make it completely all right.

They experience deaths of children on caseloads due to life threatening illnesses, suicide as well as unforeseen accidents. Those terrible events can take their toll. I have seen workers go through extensive grief and soul searching when they experience this loss or as in one case, create a memorial garden for a child on their caseload who died.

Conversely, it is also this very essence of the work with children and families that reaffirms the importance of the nature of the work for the worker. The resilience that some children show is inspirational and keeps these professionals in the field. Often too, other branches of social work in hospitals and mental health clinics will hire seasoned child protection workers as they have often gained skills in breaking down resistance in clients, offering hope and understanding and appreciating the harsh realities that some families must endure. These are the same unique skills that contribute to enhancing child safety as parents who believe that they can develop a relationship with their workers and who believe that their worker is trying to help them are usually more able to identify the problems that need to be resolved. Children who are being sexually abused are more likely to tell someone who has taken the time with them to develop that trust.

Not everyone can do social work and 'child protection' as it needs to be done. It requires specific skill sets for investigation and assessment along with a sense of conviction and the determination to do what is right even when others may disapprove or oppose. Sometimes the public is led to believe that workers take children away unnecessarily and are too hard on parents. However, if a child dies at home, people in positions of authority who do not understand the issues or simply feel a need to criticize their actions after the fact, may hold them up for public censure. Sometimes the only rationale to point the finger of blame is that a child is dead and was known to the CAS and therefore the CAS must be at fault. This unfair reaction is not applied to the same degree to professionals working in hospitals where patients sometimes die in spite of the best efforts of those dedicated people, nor is the police officer on a beat criticized if there is a robbery or murder on their watch. This is due to the fact that in those cases the public understands that sometimes bad things happen in spite of due diligence and the best efforts of individuals. This should also be the approach taken towards the dedicated Children's Aid Society staff, who work tirelessly day in and day out and often work long hours to help children and their families.

The reality is that each year, approximately 45,000 families who are open to service with Ontario's Children's Aid Society workers, do not kill their children. Having said this, the work of CAS workers should always be open to scrutiny and for this reason, systematic, wide-ranging accountability already exists and is overseen by people who are trained in knowing what to assess.

The Child Welfare System in Ontario works - it saves many children's lives each year and is staffed by capable and committed workers, both male and female, from diverse backgrounds corresponding quite often to the clients and communities with which they work.

Professionals in Child Welfare have taken considerable criticism from some influential corners although most people understand that Children's Aid Societies workers usually do a good job even while managing excessive caseloads and paper work requirements. It is about time that these same critics look at Ontario's societal conditions that either cause or sustain those problems. People who are poor have more stress. People who do not have the skills to compete in today's job market exist on government assistance and that places them below the poverty level where meeting basic needs is problematic. People who are stressed and poor cannot hire babysitters, cannot upgrade their skills and are more likely to become depressed or outwardly angry. People who have experienced trauma need counseling services and there are long waiting lists in most areas even where there are services. It is true that many people who are marginalized, isolated or have lost hope do not hurt their children. Despite this it still stands to reason that adverse social conditions create stressful conditions that can contribute to abuse and neglect. The challenges faced by single parents to obtain and maintain employment often consume an enormous amount of their limited financial resources - managing the necessary means of transportation to get them to work as well as the additional pressures of having to organize arrangements for substitute care for a child.

There is a need for more public education through the media to enable children to be kept safer. In our society all citizens, by necessity, are protected by child protection laws, which provide that children cannot be protected or removed from their parents unless there is a civil law level of proof or a 'balance of probabilities' that the concerns expressed by someone actually exist. This means that CAS agencies may believe that there are reasons for concern but unless they have people come forward to provide sufficient evidence to support the concern, they are sometimes unable to protectively intervene. In a number of public inquests and inquiries it has come to light that individuals knew that there were protection issues involving children who subsequently died or were seriously hurt but did not report the information to child welfare authorities. The community too, has a responsibility for keeping children safe.

Until there is more public awareness and understanding of the mostly unrecognized work being done by staff of Children's Aid Societies, it is not surprising that staff do not feel comfortable or are able to advocate for the protection profession. The need

to protect the privacy and confidentiality of families holds as much importance as the need to educate the public in understanding that this confidentiality is the cornerstone in building trusting and helpful relationships with families and is not a veil of silence that we hide behind to protect the organization.

Child welfare work continues to be stigmatized by negative one-sided, and erroneous misinformation and workers experience this negative perception on a daily basis. In addition, workers frequently encounter families with no history of involvement with the system yet find that the parents have used the Society to instill anxiety and fear in their children.

So in social situations it is not uncommon for workers to avoid discussing where they work or rehearsing a rather ambiguous or generic response to the question. It is not enough that staff should feel proud of the work being done in their own agency, they need to feel empowered and supported to be able to engage in dialogue with others where they are not disadvantaged by the current social stigma associated with the profession.