PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

Series Editor: Jo Campling

BASW

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Social work is at an important stage in its development. All professions must be responsive to changing social and economic conditions if they are to meet the needs of those they serve. This series focuses on sound practice and the specific contribution which social workers can make to the well-being of our society in the 1990s.

The British Association of Social Workers has always been conscious of its role in setting guidelines for practice and in seeking to raise professional standards. The conception of the Practical Social Work series arose from a survey of BASW members to discover where they, the practitioners in social work, felt there was the most need for new literature. The response was overwhelming and enthusiastic, and the result is a carefully planned, coherent series of books. The emphasis is firmly on practice, set in a theoretical framework. The books will inform, stimulate and promote discussion, thus adding to the further development of skills and high professional standards. All the authors are practitioners and teachers of social work, representing a wide variety of experience.

JO CAMPLING

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Social Work and Child Abuse

**David M. Cooper
and
David Ball**

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For Hilary and for Sylvia

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List of Abbreviations

BASW	British Association of Social Workers
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
SSD	Social Services Department

Introduction

Much has been written about child abuse since it was first identified as a 'modern' problem in the 1960s. Writers have sought to isolate the nature and causes of abuse and specific methods of preventing or treating it.

Much less has been written about the unique role of local authority social workers in child abuse. They have been criticised, sometimes savagely, in a succession of formal enquiries into the deaths of abused children in their care or under their supervision. The net effect may be that local authority social workers have come to feel guilty, anxious and desperate as well as hungry for solutions to the difficult problems they face.

A practice guide for child abuse work is overdue but writing it is an almost impossible task. How to deal with a problem whose nature and definition changes year by year? How to work within a formal legal setting which requires that children be protected? How to work within local government agencies which are large and bureaucratic? How to reconcile these pressures with the ethos of social work training which promotes helping, compassion, co-operation and respect for individuals whether they be children or parents? These are the dilemmas for the writers of a practice guide in child abuse for local authority social workers.

This guide offers no easy answers, no precise and detailed methods. Rather it attempts to maintain *perspective* and an acknowledgement that local authority social work will always be a compromise between a number of competing roles and tasks. It also distinguishes between infrequent complex acts

of abuse in families across the social spectrum which may be almost impossible to predict and the more common catastrophes that occur in those families who are all too familiar to local authority social workers. In these latter cases, a theme of this guide is that there are no sophisticated and distinctive methods that have been particularly successful. They are more likely to respond to thoroughly developed child care skills that combine authority with a willingness to work with, as well as on behalf of, the community.

The themes in this guide may not immediately seem neatly practicable but in the long run we hope that our reluctance to offer magic answers will reassure social workers that they can do a difficult job well by acting on sound, basic principles of practice. While it is written primarily with the needs of local authority social workers in England and Wales in mind, we hope it will prove helpful elsewhere and in other contexts.

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