PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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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.

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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For my children

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 The Perspective of the Abused Child	1
The child as a family member	1
The child as a victim	4
The victim as a child	10
2 Voices of the Children	18
Marie's account	18
Helen's account	22
Sarah's account	25
Cries for help	28
3 Individual Work with Children	32
Requirements of the therapist	33
Planning individual work	36
Starting the session	39
The helping process	41
4 Work with Children in the Family Context	50
Advantages and disadvantages	51
Joint family work	54
Facilitating communications	61
5 Group work with Abused Children	66
The value of group work	67
Variations on the theme of group work	69
Groups for younger children	72
Groups for older children and teenagers	77
6 Substitute Care	80
The problems of substitute care	80
The benefits of substitute care	85

Overcoming the problems	87
Returning home	91
7 Preventing Child Abuse	95
Parenthood in perspective	95
Help with the new-born baby	97
Telephone help-lines	98
Home-start	100
Portage	101
Kidscape	102
Economic and Social Factors	103
8 The Effects of Abuse – the Later Years	109
Evidence of long-term effects	109
Marie's account continued	113
Helen's account continued	115
Sarah's account continued	117
Helping adult survivors	118
Final comment	122
<i>Guide to Further Reading</i>	124
<i>Inquiry Reports</i>	127
<i>Bibliography</i>	130
<i>Index</i>	134

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CELIA DOYLE

Introduction

The inspiration for this book comes from the life and death of a small boy, Darryn Clarke. He was killed by his mother's partner and was the subject of a public enquiry (Clarke, 1979). Shortly after his death, as a participant in a child abuse training course, I was asked to present the report as though I were Darryn himself giving evidence to the inquiry. For the first time I saw the events through the eyes of the abused child.

This caused a profound change in the focus of my work. Previously I had concentrated on helping the parents. It was, after all, easier to communicate with fellow adults. Furthermore I could largely dismiss the pain felt by the children if I concentrated on the parents' needs. Their distress was considerable but not as poignant as that of their young offspring. But, having relived Darryn's last weeks, I could no longer ignore the plight of the abused child.

From then on I tried to look at abuse from the children's perspective. I sought ways to communicate with all youngsters from the smallest infant to the most sophisticated and cynical of adolescents. I slowly began to understand how best we might give them real and lasting help. This book is the product of those years of striving to focus on the abused child.

Modern day concern for the welfare of children can trace its origins back to late nineteenth-century philanthropy. The emphasis was on rescuing the child and punishing their parents. Nigel Parton in his historical perspective on child abuse writes, 'Families were expected to take full responsibility for their members and if this was not possible the state would intervene in a harsh, controlling way' (Parton, 1985, p. 36).

The earlier twentieth century saw a gradual change in attitude; the state was seen to have some responsibility for the welfare of its citizens including the youngest. State support for 'poor but honest' parents became an additional ingredient although rescue of neglected or mistreated children remained the main method of intervention.

The evacuation of children during the Second World War brought home to a much larger and more influential section of society the widespread nature of child neglect and deprivation. It was recognised

that rescue and punishment was no longer a feasible means of managing the problem. In addition the death of Dennis O'Neill (1945) at the hands of his foster father demonstrated that removal was not always the answer. Therefore for the majority of cases reform of the parents was seen to be more appropriate.

In recent times the main aim of intervention in child abuse cases has been to 're-form' abusive families or, in the most serious and intractable cases, to rescue the child and punish the parents. However, as described and illustrated in the first two chapters children are emotionally imprisoned by abusive experiences. Even after removal from home or reformation of their family's functioning they may not be truly 'rescued' because they can still carry a burden of confusing, conflicting, emotions. They are often left to cope with negative feelings towards themselves and, paradoxically, positive feelings towards the perpetrators.

The emphasis of the following three chapters is on releasing the children from the morass of potentially destructive emotions which ensnare them in an unhappy situation, however caring the nature of their new substitute home or their 'reformed' original families. These chapters examine individual, family and group work which can be undertaken by professionals, especially those with only modest training or experience and constrained by limits on time, space or facilities. These chapters are designed to offer practical guidance and encouragement to a wide variety of workers and are not confined to 'experts' in specialised settings. The suggestions have all been tried, tested and found to be helpful by myself and by colleagues, including those in local authority settings.

Substitute care with all its problems and benefits is examined. The last two chapters discuss prevention and ways of releasing adults who are still imprisoned by their childhood experiences. Many new initiatives in these two areas are springing up. Perhaps the early twenty-first century will see the dawning of a new age in child welfare – away from simple rescue/removal and punishment, away even from reform – to prevention and, for those cases where this fails, to intervention which ensures the complete release of all the victims.

The term 'child abuse' refers in this book to the physical or emotional mistreatment and neglect of children or their sexual exploitation, in circumstances for which the parents can be held responsible through acts of commission or omission. The word 'parent' includes natural, adoptive, step and foster parents. 'Child' refers to youngsters from birth to eighteen years. The term 'abused child' will often be used not only to mean the primary victim; children who are often called 'non-abused' siblings are here considered to be secondary victims if they have witnessed the mistreatment of their brothers or sisters.

All family members are important and all can suffer in cases of child abuse. Parents in particular must always be treated with respect and sensitivity. However there is a need to concentrate on understanding the victims of abuse and determining the best possible help for them. A significant proportion of the public inquiries, which have followed the deaths of children, have highlighted the fact that some social workers have become so preoccupied with the needs of the parents that they have overlooked those of the children to the detriment of everyone involved. In this book all identifying information and names in case material have been altered unless the case has been the subject of a public inquiry. This is indicated by the publication year of the inquiry report appearing after the child's name. The references for these documents can be found in the list of inquiry reports which is separate from the main bibliography.

Finally, much of this book is concerned with practical ways of helping children. Some of the ideas are drawn from other areas of social work such as bereavement counselling and work with handicapped children. Conversely, many of the models and methods of intervention suggested here may be useful for practitioners working with client groups other than abused children.