

# WORKING WITH CHILDREN IN NEED

STUDIES IN COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGE

Edited by **ERIC SAINSBURY**  
Foreword by **TOM WHITE**

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with a foreword by Tom White CBE



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# Foreword

Social Workers continue to be much in the public eye – sometimes as a result of a report of a scandal or of where things have gone seriously wrong in an individual case. Yet numerous public opinion surveys reveal that the public generally are more understanding of the complexity of the problems social workers deal with, and more supportive of the social worker they have had contact with, than newspaper reports imply.

The public, properly, have high expectations of social work practice and social workers are themselves generally very keen to improve the standard of their work.

Compared with other professions, and despite an explosion of wider publications, relatively little written material is available, based on actual case practice, which will help social workers improve their day-to-day interventions in people's lives.

For several years I chaired the Advisory Committee of the Goldsmiths' College course leading to the Diploma in Advanced Social Work (Children and Families) and was always impressed with the quality of students' written work produced from their practice.

The 'students' concerned were, of course, experienced social workers anxious to improve their practice by attending a widely respected advanced social work course and I'm very grateful that a number have agreed to share their work with a wider audience.

The intention of this book is to provide examples of sensitive and innovative practice through a collection of essays on working with children in need, edited by Professor Eric Sainsbury, from the work undertaken by students during the Goldsmiths' Course.

The writings deal exclusively with social work practice, rather than administration and legal issues, and will be helpful to social work practi-

tioners in showing the challenges, difficulties, heartache and important achievements of their work.

Not all the work described in this book achieves an ideal standard – what work does? – but the 20-plus case illustrations are always stimulating and thought-provoking, and encourage the reader to ask ‘What would I have done in this situation?’

NCH has benefited in recent years from significant numbers of staff participating on the Goldsmiths’ Course and a number of their studies are included in the publication.

This will be a useful book for all engaged in social work in the child care field, and in social work training courses at all levels.

*Tom White*  
*Chief Executive, NCH Action for Children*

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# Introduction

Most books about social work are properly concerned with the values and methods of practice. Increasingly since 1968, emphasis has been given to the experiences and feelings of those who use services and to the importance of achieving forms of help which will feel relevant to the specific needs of specific users in their personal and cultural circumstances. Relatively few studies, however, have attempted to record what it feels like to be a social worker in emotionally challenging, critical, intractable and tragic situations; or to record the interplay of feelings between worker and client when efforts are made to achieve empathy and to promote movements of attitude and emotional response in circumstances where problems seem – initially, at least – to be well nigh insoluble.

This book, made up of case studies and course-assessment projects, seeks to offer some insights into these kinds of situations. It does not set out to offer guidelines for better practice – though the practices recorded here are often remarkable for their sensitive insights into the needs of disturbed children and their families; neither is it suggested that all the work recorded here is (by whatever criteria) very good. But the book offers vivid and honest accounts of how social workers have attempted to help children, and at what costs to themselves.

## **The origins of the book**

The case studies presented here were work undertaken by trained and experienced social workers during the course of their post-qualifying training on law and practice in working with children and families. The workers were employed in many Social Services Departments (mainly but not exclusively in London and the Home Counties) and in major voluntary



organisations. Their training course aimed, amongst other things, to help them to develop imaginative and innovative skills in working with children and families, and the achievements of some of these advanced students were, indeed, remarkable.

At the outset, therefore, a decision had to be taken whether to publish only the best work, or to record the somewhat wider range of skills and insights that are present on any post-qualifying course, particularly when one compares the earlier and later work of a particular student. The latter route was followed: thus, the book offers examples of good work, but also examples of things going wrong; it records the achievements, the difficulties and the stresses of conscientious and experienced social workers who are seeking to improve their skills. Other books are readily available which provide counsels of perfection; this describes what happens in social work as currently practised.

### Audiences

For this reason, it is hoped that the book will be of interest first to the general reader who wishes to know what social workers actually do when faced with the presence of abused and damaged children. The recent spate of social work scandals and enquiries, particularly as recorded in the popular press, has given rise to widespread condemnation of social workers – as inept, over-bearing, blinkered, bureaucratic, and as likely to harm the very people they are paid to help. Good work, sadly, gets no popular publicity. So, for the general reader, this publication records what really goes on in situations of neglect, injury and abuse.

Second, it is hoped that this collection of case studies will be of practical help in social work training courses at all levels. In order to give as many examples as possible of social work practice, all of the case material is edited, shortened and sometimes truncated. It is possible in every case, therefore, to raise questions of major importance in social work training:

- Are there alternative explanations of this situation and the participants' responses to it?
- What alternative routes could the social worker have followed in this case?
- How far were the achievements in this case dependent on the support of colleagues, the flexible and sympathetic response of managers, and the availability of space and resources?
- At the end of this recording, what is likely to happen to these people? What should be the worker's *and the agency's* next moves in this case?

All of the work recorded here was time-limited, partly because of professional commitment to planned, focussed and structured intervention, and partly because of the time constraints within a training course. This raises a more general question concerning the responsibilities of the agency towards children and families where the local authority has statutory duties which extend for several years after the closure of the work recorded here, and where continued support is desirable in order to sustain the somewhat dramatic and positive changes in the lives and feelings of these children.

Third, it is hoped that these essays will interest social workers and team leaders; partly because they reflect competent professional practices in being an advocate for the child, in developing sensitive and responsive ways of working, and in recognising that intervening in a current crisis may have both positive and negative longer-term effects. But in addition, these studies show the importance of constructive working between social workers, their supervisors and their managers in three aspects.

First – sensitive, responsive and constructive work with hurt children can only take place if the social worker has the time and space to think, to plan and to help. Second, because of the virtually infinite complexity of human needs, there can be no standard answers and there must always be room for professional debate and monitored experimentation. This is a constant dilemma for managers: is it possible to resolve the need, on the one hand, for standardised procedures and accounting systems, and the need, on the other hand, to permit professional independence and flexibility? Probably this cannot be satisfactorily resolved, but awareness of the problem on both sides may allow it to be mitigated. Third, these case studies (and the professional disputes to which, potentially, they give rise) illustrate the difficulties of assessing needs ‘in the real world’, and, by implication, the resultant temptation to seek certainty in theoretical or bureaucratic constraints. To be faced by a vulnerable and hurt child, and to face the awesome responsibilities of trying to help, is stressful and isolating for the social worker. What is needed is not more procedures or more sophisticated theories but good team supports and the right kind of supervision. Some of the present case studies show the value of supervision; some show how things can go wrong *for the worker* when the supervisor fails.

### **The general lessons to be drawn from the book**

As all social workers know, every new case presents a challenge of new insights and new learning. But certain themes are recurrent in the studies which follow, and it may be useful to list them as a general introduction to the work.

- (1) The importance of ascertaining how the child sees the current situation and how he/she perceives desirable outcomes.
- (2) The importance of giving time to comprehending what relationships *mean* to the people in them, and how the social worker's relationship fits into that meaning.
- (3) The importance of seeking the co-operation of child and parents in exploring what will inevitably be painful memories and experiences.
- (4) The importance of being sufficiently sensitive, and of spending enough time, to be able to distinguish between immediate wishes and longer-term wishes and hopes, and between perceptions of reality and recourse to fantasy.
- (5) The importance, in situations where the negatives of behaviour and feelings are all too apparent, of finding ways of translating negatives into positives, of re-channelling the strengths of feeling into constructive actions and constructive motivations. Sometimes this transformation cannot be achieved – social workers cannot perform miracles – but we have examples here of how patient, sensitive and planned work can sometimes succeed in ways which fall only a little short of the miraculous.

Besides these professional themes, there are also certain recurrent managerial issues which have already been touched upon. The contributors to the book would, it is suggested, wish to emphasise the following components of good management:

- ensuring supervision which supports experimentation while guaranteeing the safety and well-being of service-users;
- providing, and giving time for, systems of support for social workers who need to find their way through feelings of stress, inadequacy and involvement;
- not assuming that a worker's need for support necessarily means that the worker is not coping adequately with his or her duties: accepting that if social workers do not occasionally need support they are probably not performing at a professional level;

- seeking ways of alleviating – though not resolving – the dilemma of professional integrity and choice within a context of agency purpose, function and public accountability.

### **The shape of the book**

The case studies have been arranged in chapters. The first is concerned with one-to-one work with children who have suffered neglect or physical injury; it introduces the usefulness of play and drawing as means of finding out what the injuries have meant in the experience of the child, and as means of helping the child to come to terms with earlier suffering. Second, there is a similar chapter about helping children to talk about and to come to terms with earlier experiences of sexual abuse. The third chapter provides examples of work within and across divisions of race, language and culture: white workers with black clients; black worker with white clients – and, in the following chapter there is an example of a black worker with black clients within a predominately white agency; and the use of interpreters. Unfortunately, the material available does not permit a full exploration of these various combinations, but it illustrates some of the issues which need to be addressed by agencies working within anti-racist and anti-discriminatory policies. Chapter Four glances briefly at some of the issues faced by young people who have been in local authority care and who need help in effecting a transition to the responsibilities and independence of adult life. The fifth chapter addresses specifically the stresses experienced by social workers in matters to do with child protection. The final chapter deals with a few administrative and inter-professional issues in child protection – here again, not complete because of the limited scope of the material available, but illustrative of certain problems.

This is not a text book. It does not claim to be comprehensive. But it presents some of the realities of a complex and difficult area of social work practice.

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NB: These case studies span a period of ten years; some pre-date the implementation of the Children Act 1989, and allowance should be made for this when reading the accounts.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Direct Work with Young Children in Situations of Neglect and Injury

This chapter is centrally concerned with examples of how children can be helped to come to terms with disruptive and abusive earlier experiences. Much of the work described here illustrates the methods, skills and values of play in seeking to enter and understand the child's world; and a case is made – albeit implicitly – for training in these skills.

Play therapy can be employed to achieve a range of purposes. In Sam's case (aged eight), the social worker sets out to help him to overcome his timidity and preoccupation with being a well-behaved child; he is anxious to avoid any further emotional disruptions in his life. He is now with foster carers, and the worker has an additional concern to discover whether this placement should be made a permanent one.

For Victor (aged nine), the aim of the work is to help the child to overcome persistent nightmares and occasional stealing, both of which appear to be associated with unresolved grief following his mother's death. Here again there is an additional concern arising from his father's somewhat repressive discipline.

With John (aged nine), therapy addresses the child's difficult behaviour at home. This behaviour soon becomes apparent in contacts with the social worker; play therapy can, on occasion, get out of control, and the work with John raises an important issue of how to achieve a constructive and helpful balance between permissiveness and the setting of boundaries. It is not infrequently found that, in the course of learning how to express fear, anxiety and ambivalence as a prelude to resolving past trauma, children go through phases of exhibiting tremendous rage and defiance towards their helpers: an anxious and friendly child may suddenly appear to be demonic and destructive. As one contributor remarked,

'The difficulty for social workers is to know how to allow the expression of overwhelming pent-up rage and to channel it in constructive ways which prevent destruction or mutilation – of the self, of other people or of the environment'.

In Eric's case (aged five), the therapeutic task is preparation for long term placement, based on helping him to understand why he is in care, and to alleviate the guilt he feels that, in some way, he is responsible for his parents' rejection of him.

The chapter starts with the case of Chris (aged eight). It illustrates the complex situation in which a social worker may become involved. It sets out a rationale for undertaking play therapy as essential to Chris's future wellbeing. It also provides examples of how a child's personal emotional disturbance is reflected in the way in which he plays. Here, and in the subsequent case studies, the emotional pressures on the social worker are illustrated: no worker should embark on the techniques illustrated in this chapter without recognising the extent to which children can transmit the gravity of their unhappiness, and can unwittingly trigger our own earlier unresolved anxieties.

### **Chris (eight)**

Chris was the second of three children. His elder brother Paul fell from a window and fractured his skull when Chris was three years of age. When his younger brother David (now aged seven) was born, the father deserted and the parents divorced when Chris was aged four. Mother has been estranged from her own family for some years.

When Chris was four years old, he set fire to the family home, and David nearly died from smoke inhalation. After a period in bed and breakfast accommodation, the family was rehoused. Shortly afterwards, there was a series of complaints from neighbours that Chris and David were neglected; in addition, Chris was involved in sexual acts with a neighbour's child.

Both children spent a short period in voluntary care. An investigation indicated that both children had been sexually abused. It seems that sexual acts had taken place between siblings. This concern was renewed following their return home: there were suspicions that Andrew (12) was engaging in homosexual acts for money; Chris threatened to kill himself. Chris and David are now in care. Their father has visited occasionally, but does not wish to have any continuing relationship with his children. Mother has re-married: her husband is fifteen years her junior. Chris and David were separately placed with different foster-carers; Chris's first placement lasted for nearly three years (from age five to age eight); he and David

have been reunited in a second placement for the last six months. Chris's behaviour is described by his foster carers as overtly sexualised. The children's mother visits them every two weeks.

The social worker identifies the following needs:

- (1) To devise an appropriate plan for Chris's future.
- (2) To consider how far the mother can be a partner in this planning; Chris's relationship with his mother is unclear. (A psychiatric assessment of the mother strongly advises against returning Chris to her care.)
- (3) To assess Chris's relationship with David, and to decide whether the children should continue to live together.
- (4) To assess how far to initiate and encourage contact between the children and their father, and, possibly, members of the wider family.

Given the complexity of these issues, it is essential that the social worker is able to create an atmosphere of trust in which Chris can express his views freely. In view of his age, one cannot wholly rely on his ability to find words which adequately encapsulate his ideas and feelings – indeed, few if any adults, could find the right words. For children, play is the child's 'work' and is an important medium of self-expression: it is likely to reflect the emotions which are currently felt; it provides opportunities for sharing with, or rejecting, another human being without having to do so verbally; it is based on familiar motor activities, and thus provides a safer affective environment than struggling with language. The following extract from the social worker's record indicates how Chris was able to use play to express his complicated feelings.

I collected him for the first session at the Family Centre and from this we established a routine where he asked me many questions on the way there, telling me about himself when I was taking him to school after the sessions. Chris went into the room, walked round, picked up the gun, pointing it at me. I remarked that it felt like he wanted to shoot me. Chris replied 'somebody'. I reflected this back, 'You are feeling you want to shoot someone'. Chris – 'Yes'. He examined the clay then went over to the sand and water, proceeding to test out the rules of the room. I tried to convey to him his right to use the hour in *his* way, which I would respect, but bringing him back to our agreement not to leave, hurt himself or me. Chris chose the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* for me to read, saying with great passion at the finish 'that cannot be the end; I know a different ending, those children should have gone back to their parents'. He

then went over to the finger paints, checking out again if he could use all of them. (Throughout this session, I was trying to establish with him that this was his time in which there would not be any pressure.) He then began to smear the paint thickly onto the paper, with little regard for colour and adding the sand until he made a sticky substance on the paper. At the end of the session, on the way to school, he told me he had been to court where it had been decided he could not live with his mum any more. He was reluctant about my accompanying him through the playground; it was playtime when we arrived so we arranged an acceptable way of my ensuring he was safe in school.

On the way to the second session Chris spoke of his first foster carer, telling me he did not believe in God any more as he asked for something four months ago (the time of his move) which did not happen. I read him three stories at his request – Billy Goats Gruff, Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Bean Stalk. I had made some coloured dough for this week's session (finger paints were expensive to replace weekly) which Chris proceeded to use in the same way as he had used the finger paints in the previous session. Kramer (1978) describes how playful activities with paint and other materials are ways of breaking taboos, getting dirty, wasting materials, engaging in primitive childish pleasures. Chris's play grew more intense with this material; I can liken his attitude and posture to a surgeon, with me as his assistant. He hardly ever allowed me just to observe; I mostly had to join in with any activity.

During this session Chris wanted to smear me with paint and dough. Chris said at the end of the session 'that was really good, I want to do this next week', but wanted the dough plain, which he could colour. Despite my attempts to protect the room, it took me two hours to clean and there was a memo from the secretary when I returned to the office about paint on the wall. By the time the third session arrived there had been a directive that we had to use a different room, despite my own and a colleague's attempts to keep the same place for our sessions. There also had been the possibility our work would have to cease. This session there were questions about the new room, with Chris splattering sand and paint everywhere and again trying to smear me. I considered that for me to be smeared would be inappropriate touching. I also knew from my assessment that Chris had never been held, or controlled in his toddler years and his 'boundaries' had been abused by sexual molestation. Dorfman (1951) writes of the problem of limit setting,



commenting on how 'the therapist establishes no limits upon the child's *verbal* expression of his feeling'. Some feelings she states are not permitted to be directly expressed in actions. She also adds that 'there is now far more concern with the problem of determining just what activity restrictions are required in order to permit the therapist to remain emotionally accepting of the child'. Smearing was unacceptable to me and I was apprehensive that windows (there were many in the new room) would be damaged. I conveyed these feelings to Chris. I therefore decided to limit the activity of throwing paint and sand and I did not allow Chris to smear me. With the new room I had to re-establish the rules and our agreement. Chris accepted that I did not want to be smeared with paint and he did not attempt to do it again.

Kramer (1978) found that deprived and disturbed children are notoriously wasteful and unless waste is tolerated it is not possible to work with them at all.

In the fourth session Chris asked if I liked the room. I acknowledged that new places did feel strange for a while. He went straight to the dough, water and sand. Then for the first time he broke away from me and went and sat with his back to me playing in the sand, announcing he was making a swimming pool and proceeded to put figures into it. He came back and gave me an order to make clay balls. He then joined the balls together to make a large ball of clay and I found that in this session he began to think about colour, realising if he mixed too much black he would lose the brighter colours. He then very carefully put paint onto the clay mound. He showed pleasure, something I had been told Chris found extremely difficult to express saying 'It's wonderful!'. I then had to help him shift sand from one container to another. Chris complained when the hour was up, saying I had decided only an hour. I reflected to him about adults making the decisions he did not want and he agreed. He wanted to stay and drink out of the bottle, I reminded him that it would be there next week.

The fifth session was again with the dough, water and sand, together with the paint. The mixture spilled over the table and the analogy of playing with faeces seemed obvious. He enjoyed getting his hands thickly covered in the mixture, squeezing them together and flicking the mixture off. This I concluded was anal behaviour typical of a child in the second or third year of life. This could have been aggression, or developmental play; also I have found sexually abused children often use materials in this way. Chris did not paint