
CHILD ABUSE

Towards a Knowledge Base

Second Edition

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chapter one

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Since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1993, there has been a series of new developments in the field of child abuse in Britain.

There has been a considerable shift in thinking about intrafamilial child abuse and about the way in which professional intervention in such cases should be carried out. Essentially the certainty of purpose about the state's response to incidents of child abuse within the family which has previously informed many of the policy developments in this field (if not as obviously the practice of front-line professionals) is beginning to evaporate.

As was made clear in the first edition, this was starting to happen in the early 1990s following the publication of the Cleveland (Butler-Sloss 1988) and Orkney inquiry reports (Clyde 1992), both of which raised questions about the over-zealous and insensitive styles of child protection interventions into incidents of sexual and ritual abuse which featured there. This response was in sharp contrast to the findings of inquiries throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s which had been critical of social workers' and others' responses to physical abuse and neglect cases for not being sufficiently assertive and child protectionist.

Messages from research

However, the key turning-point came in 1995 with the publication of a series of Department of Health (DoH) research projects which had been commissioned soon after the Cleveland inquiry report to examine a broad range of issues relating to child protection interventions and more general questions about the extent and consequences of child abuse and neglect.

The findings of these research initiatives were summarized in 1995 in a DoH sponsored publication *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (DoH 1995). Fuller details of the implications of this document for child protection practice will be considered in Chapter 4. The main conclusions reached were that the child protection system had become over-concerned with detecting and investigating physical and sexual abuse cases, that is the forms of abuse that were more overt or in the public eye. It was argued that in fact these forms of abuse constituted only a minority of child care concern referrals, but nevertheless dominated professionals' thinking. As a consequence of this, other referrals, especially those about families where persistently poor standards of care and neglect were prevalent, tended to be overlooked despite research showing that such 'abuse' can have the most damaging and long-lasting ill-effects of all forms of abuse.

The research summarized by *Messages from Research* also confirmed the findings of the Cleveland and Orkney inquiry reports. It drew

particularly on the parents' perspectives and showed that many interventions were perceived as intrusive, stigmatic and unhelpful.

As a consequence of these findings, the *Messages from Research* document argued that there was a clear need for child protection professionals to be more discerning in their assessment of risk to children and for more attention to be paid to the quality of life provided by parents for children than to the actual abuse incidents. It also argued that a more family supportive approach was required in order to meet the needs of children living in neglectful situations of the kind described above and to engage parents more positively in the process. The more assertive child protective approach was seen to be inappropriate in most circumstances.

These developments, therefore, have created a major change in thinking about child abuse. To some degree they have raised questions about whether the child abuse label is useful in any way at all, whether child protection interventions do more harm than good and whether it might be more useful to reframe all but the very serious cases as ones requiring family support.

Children abused outside the family

Institutional abuse

While this has been the main shift in thinking about child abuse since 1993, it has not been the only one. Concerns about the abuse of children in residential care which were coming on to the agenda in the early 1990s, particularly with the publication of the Pindown report (Staffordshire 1991), have grown apace. There were ten or more major inquiries into this form of abuse throughout the 1990s and several large-scale police inquiries in different parts of the UK. Many of these are still ongoing and have resulted in the prosecution of large numbers of residential workers for cruelty and for sexual offences against the children entrusted to their care.

Paedophiles

Linked to the phenomenon of institutional abuse and also to increased knowledge about organized abuse (see Bibby 1996), the second half of the 1990s saw a massive increase in concern about paedophiles and their threat to children (usually outside the family). There has also been much more focus on younger sex offenders and latterly on the abusive aspects of child prostitution.

If one were to generalize about developments in the 1990s, one might characterize it as a period where child protection concerns

shifted from intrafamilial abuse to the abuse of children outside the family, with the former gradually being reframed, except in the most serious cases, as symptoms of families failing to cope and provide adequate child care standards.

These shifts in thinking will be responded to in this second edition – indeed they are the main reason for updating the original book. The first edition focused mainly on research relating to intrafamilial physical and sexual abuse. To some degree this focus will be broadened in order to give greater consideration to current research and knowledge development about extrafamilial abuse and neglect.

Other developments

Ongoing concerns about intrafamilial child abuse

However, it is also important not to get carried away with these social and political shifts. Intrafamilial child abuse (or whatever term we use to define psychological and physical harms to children resulting from parental acts or omissions) remains an important concern for both practitioners and researchers. Since the early 1990s there has been no diminution in the quantity of research being carried out in this field, particularly in the USA. Most notably, there has been greater focus on identifying those children most at risk of being abused and also on the consequences of mistreatment for children, their future families and society as a whole. These continuing strands of research will also form part of this edition's update.

The European dimension

Finally, it should be stressed that our understanding of and responses to child abuse have in the 1990s taken more account of the wider European scene than before. There is now much more information available about the treatment of child abuse in other European countries (see Cooper *et al.* 1995; Pringle 1998) and reference to Europe will become even more important with the likelihood of greater political and social convergence in the coming years. This perspective will, therefore, be given more prominence than in the first edition.

The aims and outline of the book

To summarize, therefore, in this edition, knowledge about physical abuse, neglect and sexual abuse of children within the family will be

presented again and updated where there have been significant changes. In addition, the net will be spread more widely in order to include the newer concerns and emphases outlined above.

Philosophically, the intention of the second edition remains the same as that of the first, to concentrate primarily on providing a critically informed knowledge base for child protection workers. It is worth reiterating that this is not a how-to-do-it book. The focus remains on a broad range of sources of knowledge about the mistreatment of children, drawing on research and theorizing carried out in a variety of professional and academic disciplines: social work, medicine, history, sociology, philosophy, social policy and psychology. Increasingly child protection policy and practice seem to be centrally defined by a string of government publications. If this perception is an accurate one, then it seems even more important to bring together knowledge about child abuse from a broader base.

In most other ways, the aims of the original book remain, that is to present up-to-date research-based knowledge in a critical way, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses, and giving particular attention to how the values and beliefs of researchers influence their findings. I remain committed to a model of the social worker (and other child protection professionals) developing specialist expertise in child abuse work, and having a fair degree of autonomy in their practice. There is a distinct possibility that in the light of developments outlined above there may be increasing opportunities for this to happen as practitioners are required to be more flexible and discerning in their assessments and provision of family support. A counter-trend to this is the increased involvement of central government referred to above and the resultant effect of top-down management of these new developments.

The overall format of the book remains the same as that of the first edition. In Chapter 2 the focus is on how, throughout history, there have been different constructions and understandings of what constitutes childhood and child abuse. It is argued that careful analysis of historical research can help in the understanding of the present.

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on the recent history of child protection policy and practice up to the present time. Detailed consideration is given to how social and political forces have shaped the way in which we respond to child abuse allegations today. The aim is to help those currently involved in this field of activity to understand the reasons for the complex and often contradictory nature of that response.

Chapter 5 considers the issue of child abuse definition, and the impact of different definitions on policy, practice and research.

Chapter 6 looks at research into the incidence and prevalence of child abuse. It is argued that by developing a sense of the whole, practitioners can acquire a more realistic view of their particular roles and functions.

Chapter 7 looks critically at research into the question of who is likely to abuse whom and in what circumstances. Knowledge of this research is seen to be of crucial importance for those trying to assess and make decisions about cases of child abuse.

Chapter 8 considers a range of social and psychological theories and ideologies that have been applied to child abuse to explain why it happens. It is argued that understanding why abuse may be happening is an important precursor to planning intervention to prevent its recurrence.

Chapter 9 reviews research into the consequences and aftermath of abuse of children. This research has implications for both the practice and the policy of ongoing child protection work, which at present is heavily focused on the detection and investigation stages.

Chapter 10 describes empirical research into child protection practice, including in particular Department of Health research published in 1995 and 1996. The impact of research on policy and practice is particularly emphasized.

Chapter 11 considers some of the major issues that currently beset workers and researchers in the child protection field.