

 Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.1093/BJSW/BCT052

A Marriage Made in Hell: Early Intervention Meets Child Protection — [Source link](#)

Brid Featherstone, Kate Morris, Susan W. White

Institutions: University of Birmingham

Published on: 01 Oct 2014 - British Journal of Social Work (Oxford University Press)

Topics: Family life, Child protection and Family support

Related papers:

- [Child protection systems : international trends and orientations](#)
- [Blinded by neuroscience: social policy, the family and the infant brain](#)
- [The Munro review of child protection: final report, a child-centred system](#)
- [Re-imagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families](#)
- [Reforming Child Protection](#)

Share this paper:    

View more about this paper here: <https://typeset.io/papers/a-marriage-made-in-hell-early-intervention-meets-child-vdc8x0m99s>

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

A marriage made in hell: early intervention meets child protection

Journal Item

How to cite:

Featherstone, Brid; Morris, Kate and White, Sue (2014). A marriage made in hell: early intervention meets child protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7) pp. 1735–1749.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2013 The Authors

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1093/bjsw/bct052>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

A marriage made in hell: early intervention meets child protection

Brid Featherstone is Professor of Social Care at The Open University, UK. Kate Morris is Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Nottingham, UK and Sue White is Professor of Social Work (Children and Families) at the University of Birmingham, UK.

Correspondence to Brid Featherstone, Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. Email:

brigid.featherstone@open.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article we will argue for the moral legitimacy of support and its difference from intervention and the need to engage with and develop a family support project for the 21st century. We call for a debate on the current settlement between the state and family life and for a recognition that a perfect storm has ensued from the unholy alliance of early intervention and child protection. We will argue for a project that celebrates families' strengths as well as their vulnerabilities in the context of considerable adversities and (re) locates workers as agents of hope and support. We draw from a diverse set of literatures and disciplines to locate our arguments within a broader project occasioned by the economic crisis and questioning of the verities of neo-liberalism.

Keywords

Child, family, inequality, protection, support

A marriage made in hell: early intervention meets child protection

At the point we began writing this article, the BBC had finished screening a documentary series called 'Protecting Our Children' which focussed on the practices of social workers and their managers in Bristol. The first programme centred on concerns about a three-year-old, Toby, exhibiting signs of neglect and developmental delay. A flurry of commentary in the press and on the internet followed this programme. Much of this commentary seemed to support Suzanne Moore's (2012) observations about contemporary discourses on the vulnerable and poor. She has suggested that instead of being disgusted by poverty, we are disgusted by poor people with that disgust being tempered only by our sentimentality about children. Analysing media commentary on Toby's parents would seem to bear out her analysis (see, for example, Patterson, 2012).

Many social work academics seemed to see the programme as a tool to rehabilitate the battered image of social workers and show their bravery in difficult circumstances, although others felt the social workers were not decisive enough and swifter action should have been taken with the early removal of Toby by the police (Mahadevan, 2012).

By contrast, the authors of this article were concerned by the apparent lack of meaningful, hands-on, practical support offered to the family with a seeming preference for telling the parents what they needed to do. Moreover, we were concerned how little attention has been paid in the commentary to interrogating the desirability of the outcomes achieved in this microcosm of the system in action. The father left the family, alienated and angry and, we would suggest, likely to have more children. The mother, having apparently decided to relinquish her children for adoption, came across as emotionally devastated and also likely to have more children. The child and his new-born sister were removed on care orders and separated, the baby placed for adoption. At the point the programme was screened Toby remained in the care system. For both children their trajectories are unclear but set in the context of our knowledge from existing research it will be exceedingly challenging to secure positive long term futures for both children. These outcomes

are not unusual. 2010-11 saw a 3.6% increase in applications for care orders from 2009-10, which itself saw a 36% increase on applications from 2008-9 (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, 2012).

The programme underscored the urgency for a reasoned debate about the current settlement between the state and family life and for a recognition that a **perfect storm** has ensued from the coming together of a number of developments around early intervention and child protection over the last decades. Early intervention had its origins within a social investment rationale and has morphed across domains with particular implications for child protection. A number of 'now or never' (Munro, 2011: 69) arguments about the need to intervene with urgency and with a clear focus on the child within a specified age limit, underpinned by the use and abuse of neuroscience, has become influential if not hegemonic. Moreover, such arguments have achieved particular resonance in the fall out from the death of Baby Peter Connolly within a project that seeks to reconstruct practices and indeed workers in a way that has disturbing echoes of the 1970s and 1980s with its focus on using the law, removing children decisively and getting them placed for adoption early. Furthermore, a lesson from that period was the importance of recognising secondary or system abuse. This lesson seems to have been forgotten by the cheerleaders for removal today as witnessed in the lack of discussion about the longer term outcomes for Toby, his sister, his mother and father.

There is a danger that a debate about the direction in which we are going is impeded in the context of understandable anxieties about the risk to state services as a result of the Coalition's cuts. Moreover, the absence of critical scrutiny is amplified because the idea of child-centred, early intervention carries such an overwhelming, *a priori* correctness. Who could possibly disagree? Left, right, centre, suffer little children to come unto me.

In this article we will argue for the moral legitimacy of support and its difference from intervention and the need to engage with and develop a family support project for the 21st century. We will argue that this should be located within

a project that celebrates families' strengths as well as their vulnerabilities often in the context of considerable adversities and (re) locates workers as agents of hope and support. We draw from a diverse set of literatures and disciplines to locate our arguments within a broader project occasioned by the economic crisis and questioning of the verities of neo-liberalism.

Re-thinking in the context of crisis

We have now endured decades of a neo-liberal project and are witnessing for the first time some serious re-thinking in the context of economic crisis. We would seek to situate a family support project within that re-thinking. Of considerable importance is a recognition of the pernicious effects of inequalities on all aspects of social life and of their inevitability in a neo-liberal economic system.

As Hall (2011) notes, the term neo-liberal is not a satisfactory one. It is reductive, lumping together too many things, sacrificing attention to internal complexities and lacking in geohistorical specificity. However, he argues there are enough common features to warrant giving it a provisional conceptual identity. Moreover, he suggests naming neo-liberalism is politically necessary to give resistance content, focus and a cutting edge.

A key feature across diverse systems has been a rise in inequalities. This rise was not accidental and, indeed, is central to neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005). Harvey has noted the turnaround in the share of national income going to top income earners in a range of countries between the late 1970s and 1999. Extraordinary concentrations of wealth and power emerged in countries as diverse as Russia and Mexico, throughout Latin America and in China, with a similar process happening in the UK.

The work of epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) has illuminated the impact of this bringing together an array of evidence in their book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Always do Better*, to reach important conclusions. They have collected internationally comparable data on health and a range of social problems: levels of trust, mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction), life

expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, children's educational performance, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates and social mobility. Their findings suggest that there is a **very strong** link between ill health, social problems and inequality. Differences in average income between whole populations or countries do not seem to matter, but differences **within** those populations or countries matter very much. The amount of income inequality in a country is crucial. Wilkinson and Pickett note strong findings from the data that levels of trust between members of the public are lower in countries where income differences are larger. For example, people trust each other most in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands and least in very unequal countries such as the UK.

A linked insight from their work concerns how inequality *within* a society quite literally 'gets under the skin' of individuals leaving them feeling unvalued and inferior. They note the work of the sociologist Thomas Scheff who has argued that shame is a key social emotion. 'Shame and its opposite, pride, are rooted in the processes through which we internalize how we imagine others see us' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 41). Greater inequality heightens our anxieties because it increases the importance of social status. We come to see social position as a key feature of a person's identity in an unequal society.

Distances between groups are intensified including between social workers and their service users. This is a really important insight for us to take on. Within a couple of decades under both conservative and labour governments, greater distances emerged between individuals, groups and communities. These distances were physical and psychological and affected everyone.

Risk became a dominating if shifting trope. As Culpitt (1999: 35) notes, social policy successfully eclipsed the former moral imperatives of mutual obligation that sustained political support for welfare states. A new rhetoric of governance argued for the lessening of risk, not the meeting of need. Moreover, the notion of responsibility was deconstructed from any social nexus:

The disadvantaged individual has come to be seen as potentially and ideally an active agent in the fabrication of their own existence. Those 'excluded' from the benefits of a life of choice and self-fulfilment are no longer merely the passive support of a set of social determinations: they are people whose self-responsibility and self-fulfilling aspirations have been deformed by the dependency culture, whose efforts at self-advancement have been frustrated for so long that they suffer from 'learned helplessness', whose self-esteem has been destroyed. And it thus follows, that they are to be assisted not through the ministrations of solicitous experts proffering support and benefit cheques, but through their engagement in a whole array of programmes for their ethical reconstruction as active citizens' (Rose, quoted in Culpitt, 1999: 39).

Rose's analysis was portentous, for New Labour. The Conservative government with its free market passions was not going to spend on programmes to reconstruct 'active citizens'. They emphasised individual responsibility and small government – sink or swim, 'society' be damned. However, New Labour did spend massively on constructing active citizens through a range of programmes. Whilst some such as Sure Start opened up possibilities for a more solidaristic and universalist approach to risk (need having been eclipsed), there was a more worrying underbelly. Indeed, New Labour created the conditions for the perfect storm of today: catch them early, focus on children and identify and treat the feckless and risky. Whilst they were spending money, the consequences were not quite so obvious. However, under the coalition government enforcing austerity, matters are rather different.

Early intervention

The following quotation from the interim Allen Report captures the zeitgeist:

I recommend that the nation should be made aware of the enormous benefits to individuals, families and society of Early Intervention – a policy approach designed to build the essential social and emotional bedrock in children aged 0–3 and to ensure that children aged 0–18 can become the excellent parents of tomorrow (Allen, 2011: xvii)

The focus on early intervention begun under New Labour has been sharpened under the Coalition. This is a future oriented project building on elements of social investment and moral underclass discourses. It incorporates an unforgiving approach to time and to parents - improve quickly or within the set time limits. It is shored up by a particularly potent neuroscientific argument which has been widely critiqued from within neuroscience itself (Bruer, 1999, Utall, 2011) but is unchallenged in current policy. Read carefully, the *original* neuroscience literature shows that the infant brain has quite remarkable resilience and plasticity when exposed to ordinary patterns of 'chaotic' neglect usually seen in the population referred to children's social care (Wastell and White, 2012). In truth, if changes to the brain were the criterion for removal from parents, very few children would be removed. Yet the rhetorical potency of the 'now or never' (Munro, 2011: 69) argument is so great it is supporting a drive towards early removal and has become a powerful and unquestioned professional mantra. The President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services on Radio 4's Today programme on 10th February 2012 noted that an exponential increase in applications of care orders during January 2012 was the result of: 'better understanding the effect of neglectful parenting due to drug and alcohol problems and the physical damage to development and to brain development it can do with very young children.'

Alongside the focus on time, there has been an allied and particular construction of practice. The term intervention needs interrogation as it suggests practices delivered to families rather practices with families. A development that increased in momentum over the last decade as part of the evidence based practice movement (EBPM) was active government encouragement and funding for 'transportable' parenting programmes - that is programmes developed in one country such as Triple-Parenting programmes or Incredible Years and promoted for use in all other contexts. The notion of 'fidelity' was central to such programmes - they should be implemented in the same way across all contexts with the same formats and time-limits. In their review of parenting programmes across a range of countries, Boddy et al., (2011) noted that the promotion of such parenting programmes in England reflected the English policy context. It is in line with a neo-

liberal welfare regime's tendency towards discrete-targeted interventions for groups with identified needs and New Labour's prioritisation of 'what works' defined in terms of a particular understanding of a methodological paradigm.

To a certain extent New Labour's ideological commitments to parenting programmes served to limit alternative forms of family support intervention. Thus, what emerged was a far cry from the open access family centres supported by the Children Act 1989 that offered practical support, such as washing facilities, a hot dinner and child care (Featherstone et al., 2012). This standardising (and increasingly manualised) effect was felt across a range of services, not just those offered by the local authority. Funding streams increasingly tied a range of agencies into programmes of behaviour change influenced by central government diktats.

Of course matters were not all of a piece, seamless or straightforward under New Labour. Ambitious programmes such as Sure Start, the Children's Fund, and Connexions were all funded centrally and rolled out nationally. Family support activities were embedded within Sure Start in particular and were part of an outreach approach on a scale not witnessed before. Very important learning emerged from national and local evaluations about engaging differing types of families and what kinds of social support were most valued by differing groups. Sure Start and Children's Centres were concerned with developing easily accessible preventative provision that sought to help families develop their skills in developing pathways out of poverty and social exclusion. Although drawing on a genre of US evidence-based prevention programmes, the UK Sure Start model was within a tradition of helpful, negotiated support services.

However, as Frost and Parton (2009:165) noted, the emphasis under New Labour seemed to shift from the earlier universal emphasis embodied by Sure Start towards a more muscular interventionist stance targeted at those deemed "hard to reach". By 2005, through the Respect Agenda, a high profile focus emerged on anti-social families. The families with chronic levels of risk who were considered to present high costs to society became the new focus of policy concern. Indeed it was argued that there were four per cent of families who presented multiple, complex

needs and who were not responsive to existing programmes. 'Think Family' as the primary policy response sought to bring together previously segregated service arrangements (adult services and children's services) and develop a holistic approach to families with complex and enduring needs (Morris and Featherstone, 2010). Within this policy stream were very specific initiatives such as the extension of Family Intervention Projects and the introduction of Family Nurse Partnerships and Family Pathfinders.

The policy discourses surrounding these initiatives identified such families as failing but primarily failing to access and utilise the change opportunities presented by the various prevention programmes such as Sure Start (Morris, 2012). However, it is of interest that within the projects developed to engage with such families, there appeared to be a return to older constructions of practice with key workers appointed to work in responsive individualised ways with families over relatively long periods of time, albeit within a framework of control such as curfews and so on (Morris and Featherstone, 2010).

Early intervention meets 'child protection'

Under New Labour safeguarding became the term used to signal a broader more ambitious remit for children's services than that encompassed in child protection. Safeguarding not only encompassed the need to pay attention to harms to children not usually considered such as bullying or traffic accidents, but also was located within a broader project concerned with tackling social exclusion (see Frost and Parton, 2009 for a fuller discussion). The term family support used since the Children Act 1989, and the subject of considerable debate throughout the 1990s, was subsumed within a broader language of intervention and prevention.

However, over the New Labour period, a number of child deaths and the attendant publicity continued to ensure that the risks to children of being harmed by their parents or carers retained very strong purchase in the popular imagination and, in practice, meant that a set of activities associated with 'child protection' were central to the work of social workers in local authorities.

Lonne et al., (2009: 3/4) highlight the prevalence of what they call a child protection paradigm across a range of countries. They identify the main features of this paradigm as follows: the term child protection, rather than, for example, child welfare or supporting families, is used; the focus is on the assessment of risk to children by family and caregivers; services tend to be managerialized with priority given to procedures and risk averse practices; the referral portal tends to be one in which reports and referrals are for children at risk rather than for child or family in need; many countries have mandatory reporting protocols; prevention and family support are in the policies but are **secondary to the primary** role of child protection. Of importance in a child protection paradigm is the promotion of the child protection task as one to be carried out by 'experts' who enter families to assess and treat.

A **child** protection project encourages the notion of the child as a disembodied individual or poses choices in dyadic terms; for example, the interests of the child versus the interests of the parents (Lonne et al., 2009). Thus in the BBC programme there is a rational if cruel logic to the decision to place Toby and his sister separately – they are considered as individuals. The social worker muses that it will be Toby she will think about in years to come and wonder about. She does not mention his parents.

A language of **child** protection situates the idealised child separate from his/her family. This is extremely dangerous especially in very unequal societies. As the history of child rescue and child protection endeavours has demonstrated, practitioners cannot help but act in ways that will affect the lives not just of children but of parents, grandparents and communities, not just in the here and now, but for a long time in the future (Lonne et al., 2009). A host of international evidence has poignantly demonstrated the consequences for Aboriginal or first-nation communities. While they may not seem as immediately visible they are evident also in a range of other impoverished communities across a range of countries. The analysis by Bebbington and Miles (1989) demonstrated how the child protection system bears down disproportionately on those from disadvantaged and

marginalised communities. In the current climate this analysis needs to be re-stated and updated. Who is being taken away from their families? Who is being adopted? Where do they come from? What kinds of backgrounds?

At the time of writing, the Coalition government has dropped the term safeguarding and is using that of child protection. Unlike in previous decades, there is not a counter or even complementary discourse focussing on policies and practices called family support. Indeed, it is of interest to note how rarely the term family support appears in contemporary discussions and policy documents in England about how best to protect children from maltreatment (It is important to note that the analysis in this paper is primarily concerned with England, although early intervention is a policy that seems to be being implemented across the four countries of the UK).

The commissioning of Professor Eileen Munro by the Coalition government to review the 'child protection system' could be seen to exemplify an interest in establishing a 'new' direction after the command and control tyranny of New Labour. However, as child *protection* was the un-interrogated focus of the Review, the central activity of the system was assumed in the brief (Featherstone et al., 2012). Moreover, the second and third reports include in their titles respectively, the phrases: '*The Child's Journey*' and '*A Child-Centred System*' (Munro, 2011 and 2011a). Thus, despite a very welcome emphasis on 'early help' (as opposed to 'early intervention'), and a much more cautious approach to the grander claims of the parenting programme franchises, the importance of the family ecology is likely to be marginalised in the minds of practitioners and policy makers.

However, it is important to note that the Munro Review recommendations depart in very important and welcome respects from the accepted version of child protection as outlined above. A child protection paradigm contains a practice focus on risk accompanied by highly centralised and risk-averse procedures. What is being proposed under Munro is the removal of prescription and targets and an emphasis on a learning culture through the promotion of a systems approach to child deaths for example. Thus there is much of value in the review. However,

because it will be read alongside government projects focused on 'early intervention', more holistic family minded approaches may need considerable further help if they are to have a chance to take any hold.

The commissioning of the Munro Review by the Coalition government was occasioned by the fall-out from the death of baby Peter Connolly which occurred on the New Labour watch. Prior to the collapse of their economic model, New Labour were to suffer a mini collapse of their mode of governance in relation to children and families. The implications for social workers specifically of an agenda with its focus on standardisation, e-technology and performance management was to receive sustained critical scrutiny in the wake of the death of Peter Connolly as research evidence emerged of workers tethered to their computer stations with direct contact with families a precarious, time limited project. In a neo-liberal context where inequalities were intensified more generally and distances between social groups became more profound, social work became subject to a range of technologies that intensified such processes (Featherstone et al., 2012). Thus, to some extent, e-technology emerged as the means of communicating with professionals and indeed of building up knowledge and understanding about families and certainly the demands of poorly designed systems such as the Integrated Children's System (ICS) meant that social workers had less and less time to engage in direct contact (White et al., 2010).

The evidence of the apparent demotion of face-to-face work, in the context of a high-profile child death, opened up profound questioning by a range of diverse constituencies. It was to provide potent fuel for commentators who wanted to take decisive action on removal early and to construct social workers who started from a position of scepticism about parents (see, for example, Narey, 2009). This has strong echoes of the 1980s, and the reaction to child deaths then, emphasising a form of practice that is legally based, decisive, promotes permanency (with adoption privileged) and treats parents as means rather than ends (Featherstone, 2004). The reaction to the BBC programmes, discussed at the beginning of this article, suggests

this is the legacy that has considerable purchase on popular and professional imaginations.

However, there are also very serious on-going debates and developments taking their cue particularly from the Munro Review that advocate the importance of relationship building and abjuring risk averse practices as well as a valorisation of professional judgement and rejection of prescription.

What are lacking in contemporary debates are the voices of advocates of the value perspective that Fox Harding (1997) named as defence of the birth family and parents' rights. This perspective was a reaction to an authoritarian child protection project in the 1970s and 80s and emphasised the importance of supporting poor and vulnerable parents to bring up their children safely and was an important genesis of family support.

In the next section we offer some thoughts on how a reinvigorated family support project may open up possibilities for a better future.

Family support: why and how?

First, why do we think the term family support is helpful? We think language matters, constructing legitimate versions of the world and obscuring or negating others. Thus we recognise some of the dangers of using the term family in the context of diversity in forms. Politically there is an important critique to be made of exclusive notions of family which rest upon moralising and/or authoritarian approaches to those seen as 'deviant'. Indeed, the capture of the term family by those who see to moralise or prescribe has led to concern about whether it can or should be used for progressive purposes. Despite its potential for exclusion or prescription, it is important that the power of the term 'family' is recognised as it speaks to deeply rooted longings and reflects everyday practices. The language of family emphasises connectedness and relationships, unlike, as explored above, a language of **child** protection that situates the individual and, indeed often, idealised child separate from their families.

Morgan's (1996) notion of family practices has been particularly helpful in directing attention away from focusing on family structure to the practices that sustain or impede love, connection and support (Featherstone, 2004). Building upon this literature, advocates of family support have begun to urge attention to the supporting not of particular family structures but of particular family practices (Morris 2012).

A language of **support** opens up possibilities in terms of thinking about what is going on for all of us and what we need at differing times and keys into an international family support literature containing very valuable insights on what people value, when and how (see Katz and Pinkerton 2003). Support allows for a recognition of the chronicity of need, it is not intrinsically tied to individualised change – 'responsibilisation' or to a tyrannical and unforgiving notion of time. It builds on the insights from the ethics of care literature: we all give and receive care throughout the life course, dependency and vulnerability are basic aspects of the human condition and policies should recognise and support human flourishing in the context of our interdependence (see Featherstone and Morris, 2012). Such a project cannot be chopped up into short-term, time limited, discrete 'interventions' delivered by disembodied experts.

In the international family support literature, there is a refreshing degree of attention paid to thinking about what kinds of support activities are valued and make a difference to families with emphasis on the local and the innovative as well as the large-scale (Dolan et al., 2006). Reflective practice has been written into policy agendas in countries such as the Republic of Ireland in order to ensure a project that's rooted in on-going learning. Such learning is valued above fidelity to programme (Dolan et al., 2006). Whilst some of this has been drawn on in the UK to inform family support activities, there has been such a preference for 'evidence-based' transportable programmes that innovation and diversity have been frowned upon.

However, there are exciting examples of both innovation and diversity currently in England. Organisations such as Participle have been developing what they argue are 'new' approaches to the welfare state. They call their approach relational welfare. A relational model of welfare has the following features: the intensive use of distributed systems; blurred boundaries between production and consumption; an emphasis on collaboration and a strong role for personal values (Cottam, 2011: 136/7). As Cottam notes, Participle take entrenched social problems and develop new solutions that can scale nationally:

As part of this work we live alongside those whom we are working with – the young, the elderly and families suffering from entrenched deprivation: financial, social and psychological. These are families who have previously been hardest to support and with whom we see these new relational approaches working (p, 137).

Cottam offers the example of Ella and her family as an illustration of the approach. She argues that such families exemplify the breakdown between the state and the citizen:

[They] are visited by an endless stream of different workers who are both called upon by the family as well as 'intervening'. The constant visits and delivery of messages do not constitute a conversation, and the families do not feel properly listened to or understood. Asked to change, the families have no lived experience of what this might feel like and, worse still, they know that these commands are accompanied by the dead weight of expectation that they can't change- 'this family will never change', it was explained to us' (p, 138).

Moreover from the perspective of the professionals involved, the system constraints are apparent. Eighty six per cent of their time is spent on system driven tasks with only 14 per cent in direct contact but even that percentage is problematic with dialogue dictated by the forms and the need for data and information. 'The

system is a costly gyroscope that spins round the families, keeping them at the heart of the system, stuck exactly where they are' (Cottam, 2011: 139).

So what was done by Participle and the families working together? Families such as Ella's got to choose their worker and decide who was actually in a position to support them and the ratio of 86 to 14 was reversed. In choosing those they wanted to work with them, Ella chose professionals who would neither be 'soft' or those she saw as dehumanised – she chose those who confessed they did not necessarily have the answers but who convinced her they would 'stick with it'. What they offered was driven by human qualities rather than rule books and there was a lack of reliance on jargon.

A small amount of money was made available to the families to identify what services they would find helpful. Workers used a range of approaches and were supported by supervision that recognised the complexity of the work at a number of levels.

Cottam notes that it takes at least two years to 'turn around' a family and it is not a linear process. Workers live alongside the family, persisting through the ups and downs. Interestingly, technology was used by all involved to document and support the process, to record stories of hope, disappointment and resilience. This is a project rooted in today in the use of technology.

When outlining the philosophy, there are many synergies with the strengths based approaches found in the family support literature. The focus on capabilities (derived from the very influential work of Amartya Sen) is crucial – professionals are not there to intervene and solve problems – they are there to listen, challenge and support a process of discovery and transformation. Relationships are of course key- within and between families and between families and the team as well as those with neighbours and wider communities.

This is but one example of an innovative approach to family support. As we noted earlier there is a substantial literature internationally which is increasingly evidence based. Moreover, there is an associated literature on the importance of

placing trust at the heart of services. If practices are to be really meaningful in the sense of bringing about positive outcomes in people's lives, then trust is crucial for a number of reasons (Smith, 2001). First, many of those who need services will have experienced situations where their trust was betrayed very profoundly. This might lead to the conclusion that it is better, therefore, to concentrate on developing systems based upon rights and entitlements. Rights are a vital underpinning for services but rights are exercised in inter-personal encounters and are mediated by people. Research evidence suggests that **how** a service is delivered really matters in terms of whether people continue to access it. For example, young people constantly give feedback on the importance of how they are talked to by workers, whether they feel such workers are genuine or not. Secondly, developing a trusting relationship with another can help repair the damage that has been done by earlier disappointing relationships. Furthermore, workers can demonstrate that to trust is not always foolish and that change is possible.

As Smith (2001) has argued trust and confidence are related but not the same and, moreover, systems that are only focused upon confidence building can destroy the possibilities for developing the kind of trusting relationships we have described above. For example, systems that focus on timescales, targets and delivering standardised responses are unlikely to lead to the kinds of careful thoughtful work that allows trust to flourish.

Confidence measures are relatively easy to institute and were, indeed, a speciality of the last government with its focus on inspection and audit. Trust however is more complex particularly we would suggest in societal contexts riven by inequalities. As we explored earlier, such inequalities do not just mean that there are differences in outcomes between different groups of people, but that they cease to inhabit the same spaces at a whole range of levels; material as well as psychological. Practitioners and service users are not immune from these processes and it is of interest that Participle staff choose to live alongside those they work with just as was advocated many decades ago by in the Barclay Report (1982) (ironically when those social distances were not as apparent).

Conclusion

It is sobering to reflect, for example, how far we have moved from the promotion of patch social work by the Barclay Report (1982) to a highly individualised risk-focused enterprise. The following quote from the Barclay report contrasts sharply with the tone of the Allen report referred to above:

‘With this constellation of people ...[an individual] will usually have developed relationships varying from the very intimate to the very distant: he (sic) will be in sympathy with some and at odds with others....He is part of many networks of relationships whose focus is a local area....whatever his position in, or attitude to the networks, if he falls on hard time, becomes handicapped or is confronted by acute personal crisis, he will be vitally affected by the extent to which networks can be a resource to him by way of information, practical help, understanding or friendliness. It is these local networks of formal and informal relationships, together with their capacity to mobilise individual and collective responses that constitute... community’ (Barclay, 1982: xiii).

The practices described so pertinently by Rose as not so much “discipline-and-punish but screen-and-intervene” (2010: 79) need to be challenged. They may be paradigm perfect but they are not the only way. Policy claims continually o’er leap themselves and when they fail, the system prescribes more of the same. There are other ways.

We would argue that other ways are to be found rooted in socio-economic analyses of who gets ‘intervened’ with and who loses their children in unequal societies and in stories from within paradigms that emphasise families’ capabilities rather than their deficits and workers’ abilities to cheer on change and encourage hope.

Checking under beds and telling people what to do should not be our *raison d’etre*. If it is then we are definitely part of the problem!

References

Allen, G. (2011) *Early intervention: next steps*, London, TSO.

Barclay, P. M. (1982) *Social Workers: Their Roles and Tasks*, London, Bedford, Square Press.

Bebbington, A. and Miles, J. (1989) 'The background of children who enter local authority care', *British Journal of Social Work*, 19. pp. 349-368.

Boddy, J., Smithy, M. and Statham, J. (2011) 'Understandings of efficacy: cross-national perspectives on 'what works' in supporting parents and families', *Ethics and Education*, 6(2), pp. 181-196.

Bruer, J.T. (1999) *The myth of the first three years*, New York, The Free Press.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (2012) *Annual Report and Accounts 2010-11*,

<http://www.cafcass.gov.uk/PDF/Cafcass%20Annual%20Report%20%20Accounts%202010-11%20web.pdf> accessed February, 10th, 2012.

Cottam, H. (2011) 'Relational Welfare', *Soundings*, 48, pp. 134-144.

Culpitt, I. (1999) *Social Policy and Risk*, London, SAGE.

Dolan, P., Canavan, J. and Pinkerton, J. (eds) *Family Support as Reflective Practice*, London, Jessica Kingsley.

Featherstone, B. (2004) *Family life and family support*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Featherstone, B., Broadhurst, K. and Holt, K. (2012) 'Thinking systemically- Thinking politically, building strong relationships with children and families in a context of rising inequality', *British Journal of Social Work*, 42, pp. 618-633

Featherstone, B. and Morris, K. (2012) 'Feminist ethics of care' in Gray, M., Midgley, J. and Webb, S.A. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Social Work*, Sage, London.

Fox Harding, L. (1997) *Perspectives in Child Care Policy*, 2nd edn, Essex, Longman

Frost, N. and Parton, N. (2009) *Understanding Children's Social Care: Politics, Policy and Practice*, London, SAGE.

Hall, S. (2011) 'The neoliberal revolution', *Soundings*, Summer, 48, pp. 9-27.

Harvey, D. (2005) *A Short History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Katz, I. and Pinkerton, J. (2003) 'International Convergence and Divergence: Towards an Open System Model in the Evaluation of Family Support' in *Evaluating Family Support: Thinking Internationally, Thinking Critically*, London, NSPCC/Wiley.

Lonne, B., Parton, N., Thomson, J. and Harries, M. (2009) *Reforming Child Protection*, London, Routledge.

Mahadevan, J. (2012) 'BBC social work film prompts calls for early police support', *Children and Young People Now*,

http://www.cypnow.co.uk/Social_Care/article/1115564/bbc-social-work-film-prompts-calls-early-police-support/

(Accessed 5th February, 2012)

Morgan, D. (1996) *Rethinking family practices*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Morris, K. (2012) 'Thinking Family? The complexities of family engagement in care and protection', *British Journal of Social Work*, 42, pp. 906-920.

Morris, K. and Featherstone, B. (2010) 'Investing in Children, Regulating Parents, Thinking Family: A decade of tensions and contradictions', *Journal of Social Policy and Society* 9(4), pp. 557-586.

Moore, S (2012) 'Now instead of being disgusted by poverty, we are disgusted by poor people themselves', *The Guardian*, pp.10, Feb, 16th

Munro, E (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection. Interim Report: The Child's Journey*

<http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/downloads/Munrointerimreport.pdf>

(Accessed 11 April, 2011)

Munro E. (2011a) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report. A Child Centred System*, London, TSO.

Narey, M. (2009) 'The case for care', *Public Policy Research*, 15(5), pp.180-181.

Patterson, C. (2012) 'A second chance for a bad parent can mean a life sentence for a child', *The Independent*, pp.12, Feb, 11th

Rose, N. (2010) 'Screen and intervene': governing risky brains', *History of the human sciences*, 23(1), pp. 79-105.

Smith, C. (2001) 'Trust and confidence', *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, pp.287-305.

Uttal, W.R. (2011) *Mind and brain: a critical appraisal of cognitive neuroscience*, Cambridge, MIT Press.

Wastell, D. and White, S. (2012) 'Blinded by Neuroscience: Social Policy, the Family and the Infant Brain', *Families, Relationships and Society*, 1(3), pp. 397-414.

White, S., Wastell, D., Broadhurst, K. and Hall, C. (2010) 'When policy o'erleaps itself: the tragic tale of the Integrated Children's System', *Critical Social Policy* 30, pp. 405-429.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies always do better*, London, Penguin.