

**Effectively protecting black and minority ethnic children from harm: overcoming barriers to the child protection process**

### **Barriers to effective child protection in a multicultural society**

Understanding cultural differences is important when assessing the needs of black children and families. However, cultural variations exist between and within all families and are not exclusive to black families. Indeed, massive cultural and social changes have taken place among even the indigenous population, i.e. an increase in single-parent families, the highest rate of teenage parents in Western Europe (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), extended family members caring for children, etc. Farmer and Owen (1995) highlighted that social workers found it difficult to understand diversity and cultural differences and, therefore, understanding what is the norm and what is deviant becomes problematic. Farmer and Owen also found that workers were overwhelmed by the number of factors which appeared to be relevant to ethnic minorities and had difficulty in combining these factors in assessments. When working with black families, such deficits may have devastating effects on safeguarding children from harm, as reported in the practice of recent child death inquiries (Victoria Climbié and Ainlee Walker).

#### *Assessing Risk*

In an attempt to identify the risk involved in a family, social care staff may ‘...fall back on moral judgements’ (Thorpe, 1994, p.15). The three case studies cited by the authors highlight inconsistencies of practice in the agencies involved, which were designed primarily to protect and safeguard the welfare of the child but clearly failed to do so. It is of paramount importance during any stage of planning child protection services that professionals remain mindful of the rights of the child as outlined under the United Nations Convention. The rights of the children in the cases cited would appear to have been breached at the expense of protecting the perceived needs of the children. It may be that the child protection agencies felt that they acted in the best interest of the child by considering the impact of culture. While culture is an important variable when undertaking assessments as it enables the practitioner to establish the circumstances surrounding the abuse, as Chand (2000) states:

‘...cultural differences in the way families rear their children should be...respected, but where child abuse does occur it should be understood that this particular family has gone beyond what is acceptable not only in the British culture, but in their own’.

A consistent feature of all three cases is a serious lack of effective multiagency partnership .

Failing to contextualize any given situation may lead professionals to make intuitive judgements within a short period of time, as in the cited cases, where the emphasis was placed on the parents and not the child/ren. This subsequently influenced the general

## *Invited Comments*

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practitioner and link workers' professional judgements and proved counterproductive in addressing the child's need for protection. When people make hasty or intuitive judgements, they are likely to be informed by their own values and stereotypes. Initial assessments and professional judgements should be treated with caution and open to revision. As cases progress and new information and ideas are being received, judgements have to be reviewed and sometimes changed. In such circumstances, 'to change your mind in the light of new information is a sign of good practice, a sign of strength not weakness' (Munro, 1996, p.793).

Professionals need to recognize that their former views may have been wrong, although reasonable at the time they were made.

### *Concerns*

The themes running throughout the cases cover a broad range of concerns:

- Denial of abuse
- Mental illness in carers
- Communication difficulties
- Safety of the child once the abuse has been disclosed
- Violence
- Lack of child-centred approach
- Professionals overidentifying with carers
- Cultural deficit (cases 1 and 3)
- Stereotyping
- Professional fear

Any one of these factors would raise some level of concern. However, a combination of these factors featuring in any given case should increase the level of concern and will increase the propensity for harm to the child. For example, in case 1, the professionals felt personally and physically threatened by the mother. The failure to reflect on both the internal and external world of the child resulted in years of physical and emotional abuse and eventual rejection by his mother. The professionals' acknowledgement of their own fears and personal safety should have led to some consideration and concern over the child's experience, level of anxiety and risk.

### *Culture*

During the analysis of these cases, one is reminded to ask the question, 'Would the standards of care, parenting and interventions of the child protection agencies be "good enough" for the professionals' own children?'. There appears to be an imbalance of the emphasis placed on cultural sensitivity as a value base informing the professionals' intervention. As in case 2, it is clearly unacceptable for the general practitioner, social workers and obstetrician to lose sight of the need to protect a young girl under the age of 12 who was found to be 34 weeks pregnant. As a result of failing to take appropriate child protection action, the young girl suffered a second pregnancy at the age of 13.

The apparent rationale behind the lack of appropriate intervention was to safeguard the young girl's future prospect of marriage; this, however, would not have posed an immediate concern for the child.

The underprotection of black children as a result of a cultural relativist approach in itself can be argued to be racist. The MacPherson report highlighted that racism and the effects of unintentional discrimination continue to have serious consequences, recognizing that:

'Racism, institutional or otherwise, is not the prerogative of the police service. It is clear that other agencies... also suffer from the same disease'.  
(MacPherson, 1999)

A number of inquiry reports into the death of black children have established significant deficits in identifying children who were at risk of suffering significant harm from their parents, i.e. Tyra Henry (London Borough of Lambeth, 1987) and Sukina Hammond (Bridge Child Care Consultancy Services, 1991). Many of the findings of these inquiries (mid-80s and early-90s) seem to have had a limited impact on the lessons learnt for future child protection practice. This was more recently evidenced in the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Ainlee Walker, who were not on the child protection register.

### Conclusion

No crime provokes more anger and incomprehension than that of a child being abused, neglected or killed by a parent or carer. The younger the child, the greater the outrage. Professionals who collude with the parents' wishes are placing the child in double jeopardy. The children who are faced with such perils and dilemmas are among the most vulnerable and defenceless victims in our society. It is of paramount importance for social care services to remain child-centred if they are to prevent children being abused or exposed to danger.

Social care professionals need a structured opportunity to explore their own values, belief systems and attitudes in order to recognize that professionals and clients are not culturally neutral but a product of their own cultural conditioning and life experiences. It is also important to establish the degree to which social care staff are influenced by their own agency value base and belief system during the child protection assessment process. These belief systems are arguably influenced by child protection inquiries, which generate a high profile in both the media and government and may result in the pendulum of child protection swinging from cultural relativism to defensive practice. In order to avoid such influences and pitfalls, one would need to ensure that child protection services are evidence-based and informed by established research.

Valuing the rights of every child is a duty and responsibility for us all.

'If you are doing it, it is happening: if you believe someone else is doing it, it is not happening'. (Sir Herman Ouseley, Address to the Civil Service College, September 28, 1999)

***'Racism and the effects of unintentional discrimination continue to have serious consequences'***

***'The younger the child, the greater the outrage'***

***'The pendulum of child protection swinging from cultural relativism to defensive practice'***

This requires a cultural shift of values and attitudes from a consumer-driven society which knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.

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