

# Child Protection in the Twenty-First Century

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What is the future of child protection? It is certainly simpler to look back in time than to gaze into the future. Yet, we want to know what the future holds. We want to know whether the years we have dedicated to child protection have sown seeds of hope. I offer you one person's vision of child protection in the 21st Century. To make this vision clear, however, we need to delve briefly into the past.

You may not remember the tremendous national fear caused by polio between 1942 and 1953. Once a child contracted polio, a virus that causes varying degrees of paralysis, parents and doctors could do little more than wait while the virus did its destructive and, sometimes, deadly work. Treatment consisted of helping children cope with their paralysis. There was no cure. However, dramatic changes occurred when vaccines were created; our approach to polio was transformed from one of treatment to one of prevention. Just as prevention was our salvation from polio, so too must *prevention* be our salvation from child abuse. Although prevention plays a role in today's response to child abuse, it must move closer to center stage if we hope to make real progress.

Before we reshuffle our approach to child maltreatment, however, we must assure ourselves that the present system—which reserves center stage for reporting, investigation, and legal intervention—needs fixing. The old saying is: "If the wheel ain't broke, don't fix it." If the child protection wheel ain't broke, let's not fix it.

I have great respect for the professionals in child protection. The current system saves children every day. However, if our goal is prevention, the present system will not work. As reported by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, "the system that is intended to help and protect abused and neglected children does little to mitigate the nightmare. Instead of emphasizing prevention of maltreatment, America's child protection system usually steps in when damage has already been done. We devote massive resources to investigate allegations and precious little to assist at-risk families and prevent child maltreatment from taking place. By stressing investigation over positive assistance, the child protection system may actually be increasing the possibility of maltreatment in some high-risk cases. The bottom line is that the child maltreatment crisis in this country is not being alleviated. It is worsening" (1993, pp viii-x).

This is a sobering indictment. Rather than depress us, however, the Advisory Committee's report can serve as a catalyst for change. The child protection wheel is indeed broke and needs to be fixed. Repairing the wheel will not require us to abandon our values or commitment. Indeed, our values and commitment are essential to facilitate the three things that must happen before prevention can take center stage.

## **We Must Become Less Cynical About Our Government**

First, we must work for a time when Americans are less cynical about their government. Lisbeth Schorr writes that "an unprecedented cynicism about the capacity of government to help solve our most serious social problems is casting a terrible pall over our national life. The collapse of confidence in our political institutions and the rampant antipathy toward government that emerged in the mid-1990s represent perhaps the greatest obstacle to the development of strategies to bring all children and families into the American dream" (1997, pp xv-xvi). Pervasive cynicism of government is not inevitable. There have been times when government inspired people, when the best and the brightest went into government to make things better. Such times can come again. Renewed confidence in government *must* occur to make real progress in child protection. The government is often wrong. Nevertheless, when government is working at its best, that is, when the *people* in government are working at *their* best, the government does solve problems, as demonstrated by our civil rights and environmental laws and by the many ways government improves our lives. The government's inspirational values of child protection are another example: protect children, strengthen families, and build a brighter future. Thus, the first thing we must do to move forward into the 21st century is to rebuild confidence in government.

## **We Must Identify and Support New Leadership**

The second requirement for real progress is new leadership. We have many great leaders in child protection. However, these leaders have much in common with Edward J. Smith, the captain of the *Titanic*. They are captains of a sinking ship.

We need a new vision of leadership. As Bennis points out, leadership is not the same as "managership." "Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right. Both roles are crucial, but they differ profoundly. American organizations are underled and overmanaged. They do not pay enough attention to doing the right thing, while they pay too much attention to doing things right" (1989, p. 18).

Where will we find new leadership for child protection? Don't look for answers in the literature on child abuse. Instead, delve into the literature on leadership, which is rich in ideas for child protection. Two excellent books are: Bennis's *Why Leaders Can't Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues* (1989) and Kouzes and Posner's, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* (1995).

Kouzes and Posner describe five fundamental practices of exemplary leadership: challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and encourage the heart. Some discussion here of one of these practices—challenging the process—may be useful. Leaders have a vision for the future, and, in most cases, that vision involves change: challenging the status quo, shaking things up. Kouzes and Posner remind us that “Without change, organizations and movements die.” Without change, child protection may lose its vitality. Yet, child protection is a cumbersome bureaucracy, staggering under labyrinthine rules and procedures. Although rules and procedures are necessary, they often multiply to the point where creativity and flexibility are restricted. Schorr writes that “We are so eager . . . to eliminate the possibility that public servants will do anything wrong that we make it virtually impossible for them to do anything right” (1997, p. 70). The leadership we need is leadership to transform child protection while, at the same time, preserve the rules and procedures that are necessary for stability and efficiency.

Where will these leaders come from? If prevention is the best hope, primary leadership is unlikely to come from lawyers. Although we need strong criminal and juvenile courts to protect children, the legal system is useful primarily *after* abuse has occurred. Like the iron lung for polio, it is palliative, not preventive. How about doctors, nurses, and mental health professionals? Each of these professionals has a key role in moving prevention to center stage. However, doctors and nurses cannot play a leading role until they respond to child abuse and neglect as public health problems. Mental health professionals and social work leaders must focus on prevention as well. All of these professions must change their primary focus from after-the-fact treatment to before-the-fact prevention.

None of the professions appear to be equipped by training, experience, or dominant paradigm to provide the leadership we need. But there is hope. The answer to our need for new leadership has three facets. First, we must open ourselves to new paradigms. Second, we must support leaders who want to change the system, who want to fix the wheel, or maybe throw the old wheel in the scrap heap and start all over again. The third aspect relates to our approach to problem solving. Each profession has a role to play in moving us into the 21st Century. To move prevention to center stage, we need multidisciplinary leadership.

### We Must Change Society

The third challenge is by far the most difficult. If we are serious about reducing physical abuse and neglect we *must change society*. The rate of physical abuse and neglect is closely tied to poverty and the quality of life in neighborhoods. In his classic essay *Child Abuse and Neglect: The Myth of Classlessness*, Leroy Pelton (1978) wrote that “there is substantial evidence of a strong relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect. . . . Abusing and neglecting families are the poorest of the poor. . . . Poverty is not merely ‘associated’ with child abuse and neglect; there is good reason to believe that the problems of poverty are causative agents in parents’ abusive and neglectful behaviors and in the resultant harm to children” (pp. 24, 28, 33). Anyone who thinks we can make real progress against abuse and neglect without first doing something about poverty, urban decay, violence, racism, sexism, and selfishness is simply fooling himself. Creating a vaccine against polio may be simple compared to creating a society that is safe for children. In the final analysis, however, a safer society is the only real hope.

### References

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### Erratum

In the Perspective “Comments on the Rind et al. Meta-Analysis Controversy” (v. 12, n. 3), the authors reported a calculated effect size of 0.12 for the data provided by Carlin on smoking and lung cancer. The correct figure should have been 0.17.