

The Sounding Board

Trustworthiness and Skill in Child Protection

Casework in child protection is arguably one of the most difficult human services jobs in the U.S., in part because of the emotionally taxing nature of the work and also due to its intellectual and interpersonal challenges and the ever increasing bureaucratic demands of public child welfare agencies. Popular imagination shrinks from child protection. Unlike police work, which seems endlessly fascinating to American viewers, there are few, if any, television series or movies in which CPS caseworkers are central characters; and when social workers of any stripe appear as secondary characters in movies or television shows they are likely to be half blind rigid bureaucrats, more concerned with agency rules than helping children. Scholars, advocates and managers commonly refer to caseworkers, or social workers, employed by public agencies as “workers”, terminology that underlines their questionable professional status and low organizational rank.

Even first-hand accounts of casework in child protection are rare, and when they infrequently appear (see Kevin Ramos' *The Department*, a fictional story about working in Florida's child protection system) are likely to be more about the impossible demands placed on CPS caseworkers and lack of organizational resources and support for CPS units than about the skills required to do child protection. Nevertheless, like any challenging job that requires complex skills, casework in child protection can be performed at a remarkable level of excellence. Furthermore, there are experienced caseworkers and or supervisors in most local offices who can serve as exemplary models for inexperienced staff struggling to learn how to do the job well.

Child welfare training programs frequently develop lists of “competencies” needed for various jobs in child welfare without considering the character traits that are essential to do these jobs well. First and foremost, CPS caseworkers and other caseworkers in child welfare agencies must be trustworthy. Trustworthiness has several dimensions:

- **Integrity** – Caseworkers' actions in gathering, documenting and utilizing evidence, and in court testimony, must be beyond reproach. In my view, the most damaging media stories about failures of child protection in recent years have concerned fraudulent entries into case records following a child's maltreatment related death, and stories regarding “drive by” investigations or other practices intended to “game” agencies' performance measures. It only takes one instance of egregious misrepresentation of evidence in a case file, or court document, or in court testimony, to call into question a caseworker's trustworthiness. Telling the truth, even when a truthful account reveals practice out of compliance with agency rules or errors in judgment is one meaning of integrity.
- **Discipline** - CPS caseworkers must consistently and reliably complete a variety of tasks required to complete and document investigations, assure that providers

(including foster parents) are paid, check on the status of safety plans and service plans, maintain children's placements, meet court requirements for shelter care and/or dependency hearings, fulfill case staffing requirements and sustain relationships with mandated reporters, service providers, children and parents. Concretely, this means that caseworkers have a long list of seemingly minor "must dos" on every work day. Failure to consistently complete these tasks undermines the confidence of supervisors, community professionals, foster parents, birth parents and children in a caseworker's trustworthiness. One reason caseworkers are often impatient and irritable in mandated trainings is that they must still perform the "must dos" training or no training, or suffer a loss of confidence of key persons in their social networks.

- **Communication** – The importance of returning phone calls and responding to emails in a timely way cannot be emphasized too strongly. Parents, foster parents, community professionals and adolescents in out-of-home care quickly lose confidence in caseworkers who cannot be contacted by phone or email and who cannot be counted to promptly respond to messages. Nothing communicates lack of concern, or disrespect, more quickly than silence following repeated attempts to contact a professional whose actions directly affect the safety and well-being of children. In addition, honesty and candor build trust. When parents involved in CPS investigations have been asked by researchers regarding the characteristics of caseworkers that are important to them, "fair" and "honest" tend to be high on the list.
- **Collaboration** – Working in teams, sharing resources, reciprocating favors, engaging in shared decision making can be described as skills, but the effective use of these skills depends fundamentally on an attitude of respect for the talents and contributions of others, and on the willingness to share responsibility for child welfare decision making. Experienced and effective CPS caseworkers understand their emotional and practical need for supervisory support and the support of unit members, and for access to the expertise and resources controlled by other agencies and professionals.

Concretely, working in the spirit of collaboration means that caseworkers must be willing to ask for help from other unit members and their supervisor when needed and give help when requested. It also means communicating appreciation in ways large and small to mandated reporters, service providers, foster parents, guardians ad-litem and others without whom effective child protection would not be possible.

Knowledge and Skills in Child Protection

The habits, or character traits, described above which reflect trustworthiness, i.e., integrity, discipline, responsive and honest communication, and an attitude of sharing and interdependence are vitally important in child protection; but will not inspire the confidence of other caseworkers, community professionals, parents and foster parents absent the knowledge and skills needed to protect children.

To understand the challenges of child protection, it is worth reflecting on how the goals of CPS investigation/assessment differ from those of law enforcement agencies. Making "findings" of substantiated or unsubstantiated in regard to specific allegations of child maltreatment is not an end in itself. It is a means of protecting children from future harm by establishing a case history that can reliably be used for case planning or to document a history of child maltreatment for possible legal actions. A CPS caseworker can be conscientious and skilled at

investigating factual allegations of child abuse and neglect but unskilled at safety assessment, risk assessment and assessment of families' needs.

What CPS caseworkers with advanced skills must be able to do is to reliably translate factual information regarding incidents and patterns of child maltreatment, and the events and conditions that have led, or might lead, to child maltreatment into sound judgments regarding child safety and well-being and risk of future harm. For this reason, public child welfare agencies have made enormous investments in safety assessment and risk assessment tools and guidelines both to structure and simplify this translation process, with mixed results. Inexperienced caseworkers often appreciate the structure and guidance afforded by assessment tools; but experienced caseworkers frequently view these tools as a nuisance and sometimes as an obstacle to skilled assessments. I have frequently heard experienced caseworkers insist that they have incorporated the conceptual framework of assessment tools into their practice though they only actually fill out the assessment forms at case closure. It may also be the case that the understanding and skills embodied in assessment tools do not reflect the understanding and skills of advanced practitioners as indicated by naturalistic studies of decision making (see *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* by Gary Klein).

Caseworkers with outstanding assessment skills tend to think concretely about safety threats and about risk to children. Their translations of case information into judgments about safety and risk are compelling because they can organize information about risk factors such as substance abuse and domestic violence and protective factors such as a parent's active concern with their child's well-being in a plausible narrative about actual and likely parenting behaviors. When confronted with chronically relapsing conditions such as substance abuse and depression, in addition to information regarding patterns of use of drugs and alcohol they will immediately begin to look for the presence or absence of parents' harm reduction behaviors, and for the extent of practical immediately available social support available to parents and children. Furthermore, experienced and reflective practitioners will not engage in self-deception about parental strengths, or minimize safety threats or risks because they like a parent and empathize with their struggles; or exaggerate the dangers to children because they dislike a parent and morally disapprove of their behavior.

Developing outstanding assessment skills in child protection takes time and experience because unlike assessments completed in training programs, actual CPS assessments are conducted in the context of developing relationships between caseworkers, parents and children. Possibly the most important piece of practice wisdom developed among experts and practitioners in child protection during the past 10-15 years is that effective in-home safety plans require an active parental partner; and that parents' willingness to work in partnership with CPS and other child welfare caseworkers depends to a large extent on caseworkers' engagement skills. Parents are often understandably threatened by being the subject of a CPS investigation. A caseworker's ability to calm parents' fears and engage in an honest and candid discussion of safety concerns with all family members is crucial.

Schreiber, et al, (2013) summarize research on CPS caseworker/ parent relationships as follows:

"Results from these studies highlighted two important aspects of the relationship that mattered the most to parents. The first was the importance of being trustworthy, which was accomplished by doing things such as following through on promised tasks, promptly returning

phone calls, showing up for meetings and appointments without multiple cancellations, showing knowledge and expertise of their job requirements, and going beyond procedural requirements in their work. When workers are trustworthy, parents were able to let go of their fear and engage. The second aspect of worker behavior that facilitated parent engagement was the ability to project an appearance of warmth, empathy and reassurance as opposed to appearing “bossy, businesslike, and judgmental.”

These authors go on to discuss the importance of caseworkers’ “ability to communicate (with parents) using clear, direct and unambiguous language; relate to parents at their level of understanding; and avoid the use of threatening and judgmental terms.” Caseworkers’ ability to remain calm and to interact with parents in respectful and non-judgmental ways were important engagement skills identified in several research studies, according to these authors.

In the study conducted by Schreiber, et al, “Parents were more likely to be accepting of CPS intervention when they felt that their worker had heard all sides of the story and talked to everyone that had relevant information.” Furthermore, “parents also reacted more positively to the CPS worker when they felt that the worker was impartial in their analysis of the information that had been collected.” Parents interviewed in this study were impressed by indicators of caseworker competence such as familiarity with case histories and conscientious gathering of information from collateral sources.

Schreiber, et al, also found that parents had a high regard for caseworkers who provided emotional support, including encouragement and recognition of their strengths and positive behaviors, and concrete assistance for their poverty related needs.

Decision Making Skills

The assumption that thorough and thoughtful assessments in child protection will automatically lead to good decisions is highly questionable for several reasons:

- Decision makers cannot escape the limitations of knowledge in child protection research, or predict future events in specific cases with a high degree of accuracy. Currently, there is very little research regarding the effectiveness of in-home safety plans; as a result, decisions regarding the elements and implementation of in-home depend almost wholly on practice wisdom which may well be flawed. Furthermore, risk assessment tools have modest predictive powers at best when applied to specific families.
- Caseworkers’ ability to take coercive action on behalf of children is severely limited by law and policy. Caseworkers may be aware that children are at high risk or in danger without being able to take legal action. In addition, caseworkers and agency attorneys are likely to have well informed views regarding how local judges and commissioners are likely to rule regarding various types of dependency actions.
- Biases of several types may influence decision making. Eileen Munro’s articles on confirmation bias should be read carefully by anyone who works in child protection.

- Decisions regarding case plans are greatly affected by the resources available to children and families in open child welfare cases. Information regarding the effectiveness of these services is likely to be anecdotal and/or lacking entirely as case plans are developed.

Nevertheless, experienced caseworkers and supervisors often develop useful guidelines for making key decisions:

- **Make decisions under extreme time pressures only when necessary.** CPS caseworkers who work in crisis ridden environments can easily become adrenaline junkies who seem to prefer acting in emergencies to taking time for reflection. This tendency in child welfare agencies should be resisted whenever possible.
- **Postpone judgment during the initial phases of assessment processes to the extent possible.** Keeping an open mind to alternative explanations facilitates openness to new information and new perspectives.
- **Major case decisions should always be subject to the review of well-informed persons, either supervisors or staffing groups.** Caseworkers must be willing to provide the rationale for decisions and listen and respond to critical feedback.
- **Caseworkers and supervisors must train themselves to look for anomalous features in patterns of child maltreatment, or evidence which conflicts with their views of what should be done.** Absent an understanding of how easy it is to make critical mistakes, decision makers will follow their natural inclination to look only for evidence that confirms their views and will ignore evidence that conflicts with their version of events in a specific case. This is another reason that the thought processes leading to major decisions must be made transparent. It is next to impossible to counteract powerful biases without conflicting voices in the social environment.
- **Do not confuse social values with evidence from research.** Decision makers in every field are most interested in research that supports their social values and the political views that follow from these values. Pretending that evidence from research supports decisions made on the basis of strongly held social values when there is a lack of evidence or conflicting evidence is an obstacle to clear thinking and honest discussion.
- **The willingness to change one's mind in response to evidence and rational argument is a sign of strength and intellectual integrity, not weakness.**

Experience in child protection should teach humility about one's judgment and decision making regarding highly emotional and contested issues. The inability to tolerate conflicting views or engage in rational discussions with well-informed people who think differently about key case decisions is a formula for serious indefensible errors in judgment in child protection, as in other fields.

References

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