

Responding to Child Abuse Procedures and Practice for Child Protection in Hong Kong

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

Defining child abuse is difficult because, in all societies, intervening in family life, particularly in the relationship between parent and child, carries the risk of irrevocable disruption and damage. Also, acceptable standards of child care differ between cultures and variability in child rearing beliefs and behaviours suggests that there is not a universal precise standard for what constitutes good child care.

Korbin (1981) has described child abuse as the idiosyncratic behaviour of parents in child rearing practice that goes against accepted cultural norms. Nonetheless we are moving towards a significant number of universally held views on how children should be treated, as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child (UN Center for Human Rights, 1990) stipulates.

The most effective way in which a society can protect its children is to establish legislation and social welfare systems that provide adequate health, housing and acceptable compulsory primary and secondary education. That is an accepted international norm. The eradication of child labour, common in poor countries, is another.

How does a society establish its norms? One may suppose that it is the law that reflects the guidelines by which a society wishes to live. However, this presupposes that all sections of society have equal weight in the way that legislation is formed. One may see the law as an instrument that imposes the values of significant and powerful groups on the majority of the people. Also in any society, even if it is culturally homogeneous, there will be many different groupings. These parts of the whole may well have conflicting views about values. The conduct of family life and individual relationships within these groups are influenced by the different cultural values that they may have. Differing perceptions and norms will also be held by the various professional groups involved with child protection.

These decision-makers face several dilemmas when deciding whether a child has been abused. They often work within an ill-defined cultural context of what are the norms for parent-child relationships and interaction. However, that cultural context has to be defined. Hong Kong is a predominantly Chinese community and it is the cultural norms and traditions of this ethnic group that are the most influential when assessing parent-child relationships.

The main objective of this book is to provide information about, and an analysis of the response to child abuse in Hong Kong. The format will guide the

reader through the process which the child and family will experience. We have divided this process into four stages, starting with investigation, then decision-making, through the statutory procedures and finally to treatment and rehabilitation. This process is framed by a beginning chapter which places Hong Kong's experience in a historical context and a conclusion which examines prevention as well as a look to the future.

The four stages are assembled in a similar fashion. Each begins with a theoretical chapter, followed by a case illustration or illustrations and finally by a critical analysis which comments on practice and cultural aspects. The authors are assembled from those in Hong Kong with deep and varied experience of children's issues. They include social workers, lawyers, paediatricians, child psychiatrists and academics. All have a close involvement with the leading child protection non-governmental agency, Against Child Abuse, which has provided much of the case material.

The lead chapter is a historical overview by Thomas Mulvey. In it he traces the development of child protection services in Hong Kong, covering the roles of the government and voluntary sectors. He also comments on the recommendations made by the government Working Party on Child Abuse and obstacles to their implementation.

Stage One covers the process of investigation. Charles O'Brian presents the investigation process. He examines several models of risk analysis as to their usefulness and cultural applicability. The case illustrates some of the difficulties encountered in investigation and the decisions that have to be made. It also raises the issues involved in deciding whether to remove a child from home. The section concludes with Dr Kelly Lai and Dr C.K. Wong's critical analysis. They stress the importance of a framework which will guide the professional in decision-making.

Stage Two begins with Dr Patricia Ip's examination of multi-disciplinary decision-making. She explains the procedures which govern the case conference and points to the conflicting demands and agendas of different professionals which have to be reconciled. She proposes changes that might lead to improvement in the system. The case illustration is one of child sexual abuse. Differences in culture, time, social norms, personal and professional values and ideologies, may lead to different definitions of child sexual abuse. The case demonstrates the difficulties in diagnosis, and in achieving agreement on case classification among different disciplines. The critical analysis, by Dr Chung See Yuen, points to the continuing work that will need to be done with all members of the family to alleviate the effects of the trauma suffered.

In Stage Three Elsie Leung cites some recent legislative changes and the need for continuing improvements in this area. She discusses the importance and limitations of legal sanctions in child protection work as well as cultural considerations. The case, one of gross neglect, concerns two young boys regularly left unattended for long periods. The case poses the question whether more rigorously enforced legislation and the attendant punitive measures might reduce the risk to children of being left alone. The critical analysis, by Dr Lai and Dr Wong, illustrates the damage done to the children as their school

performances deteriorated and they developed a range of unacceptable behaviours such as lying, truancy, and running away from home.

It can be effectively argued that the first three stages only describe the beginning of the response to child abuse and neglect. It is the treatment and rehabilitative process and methods that we have to offer which lie at the heart of our response and how ultimately it will be judged. Gladys Lam begins Stage Four with an illustration of some intervention approaches and covers the theory and practice of a range of methods for working with the child and family to alleviate the damage done by abuse. The case illustrates the worker's attempts to use a solution-focused approach in handling a case of physical child abuse with a family in which the natural hierarchy and power structure were seriously distorted. The critical analysis by Dr Chung comments on the efficacy of family therapy, even with a very disturbed family. He also comments on the benefits of combining a family approach with individual psychotherapy.

The second case in this section deals with the more intangible nature of psychological abuse. The worker demonstrates that establishing trust before one can intervene effectively is a vital step in successful treatment. The critical analysis also comments on the worker's good timing in being able to engage the mother successfully.

The two concluding chapters examine prevention and the way forward. Chan Yuk Chung looks at the variety of ways in which we can intervene in the community to protect children and the need for more relevant, culturally appropriate knowledge on which to base our programmes.

Priscilla Lui concludes the book with an examination of current trends and future developments. She stresses the rights of the child and that attitudes change slowly but inevitably. After 16 years the voice of the child is at last heard in our legislative assembly.

This book is about our experience in developing and implementing child protection services in Hong Kong. A recurring theme throughout this work is the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to the problem of child abuse. We hope that this book will prove of interest to all who are professionally involved with children, to academics and students from a variety of disciplines, both in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

The editors

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