

**RELATIONSHIP-GROUNDED, SAFETY-ORGANISED
CHILD PROTECTION PRACTICE:
*Dreamtime or real-time option for child welfare?***

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Constructive relationships between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves, are the heart and soul of effective child protection practice. A significant body of thinking and research tells us that best outcomes for vulnerable children arise when constructive relationships exist in both these arenas (see, Cashmore, 2002; Department of Health, 1995; MacKinnon, 1998; Reder, Duncan & Grey, 1993; Trotter, 2002; Walsh, 1998). Despite this evidence, relationships are a contentious issue in child protection practice. (Throughout this paper, I will follow the English convention of using the term 'partnership' to describe relationships between service recipients and the professionals working with them, and the term 'collaboration' as a descriptor of the relationships between the professionals themselves.)

Examining partnership and collaboration

I once heard a very senior child protection policy advisor presenting at an international conference state 'partnership doesn't work!' The advisor went on to describe several case examples in which she believed practitioners, in their attempts to build a good relationship with the parents and in the name of working in partnership, had left children in highly dangerous situations. It seemed that this policy advisor wanted to erase the notion of partnership from the child protection lexicon. The policy advisor's vehemence might be somewhat unique, but in my experience her basic concern is frequently expressed, by many academics, managers, policy makers and front-line practitioners themselves. The literature also relates this concern, describing relationships with family members where professionals overlook serious maltreatment concerns as 'naïve' (Dingwall, 1983) or 'dangerous' (Dale, et. al., 1986).

While the concern about a relationship-focus in child protection practice usually centres on worries about working with parents, relationships between professionals themselves can also be problematic. At the most extreme end, examples of poorly functioning professional relationships are often highlighted in child death inquiries. Child death reports often describe scenarios where a child has experienced a pattern of increasingly severe injuries or neglect, within a family in contact with many professionals. Each professional usually holds only a partial picture of the situation and when the professionals do not share their knowledges with each other, the child is placed at greater risk. It is not until after the child dies, that the review team, by talking to all the professionals, puts together a more complete picture. Frequently, the professionals say that they were worried about the child however, since there were so many other professionals involved they felt that one of their colleagues would be making sure the child was at least minimally safe. Meta-analyses of child death inquiries such as Department of Health, 2002; Munro, 1996 and 1998; Hill, 1990; Reder, Duncan & Grey, 1993 would suggest that poorly functioning professional relationships of this sort are as concerning as any situation in which a worker overlooks or minimizes abusive behavior in an endeavor to maintain a relationship with a parent.

Some of the problems that typically befall child protection relationships are identified here, not to dismiss the notions of partnership and collaboration, but rather to set the scene for a more careful examination of what constructive child protection relationships might look like. In my view, locating relationships at the heart of the child protection endeavor is neither problematic or naïve, though written accounts of how child protection relationships should function often display both of these attributes (Healy, 1998 and 2000; Morrison, 1995). Too often, proponents of relationship-grounded, child protection practice have articulated visions of partnership and collaboration that have been overly simplistic. To be meaningful, it is crucial that child protection relationships are framed in grounded ways that reflect the typically messy lived experience of the workers, parents, children and other professionals who are doing the difficult business of relating to each other in contested child protection contexts.

Part of the problem of framing relationships in a meaningful manner is that thinking and theorizing about partnership and collaboration is usually undertaken by academics and policy makers often very distant from the day-to-day specificities of child protection work. In my view, the people that know most about building relationships in child protection practice are the service deliverers and service recipients. Over the past ten years the voices of parents and children on the receiving end has been increasingly heard through careful research (see for example, Butler & Williamson, 1994; Cashmore, 2002; Gilligan, 2000; Farmer & Owen, 1995; Farmer and Pollock, 1998; McCullum 1995; MacKinnon 1998; Thoburn, Lewis & Shemmings, 1995; Westcott, 1995; Westcott & Davies, 1996) and also through the work of activist and self help organizations representing service recipients (e.g., Family Rights Group, 1991). This body of work stands as an important resource for framing constructive relationships from the perspectives of children and parents who have been involved with child protection systems.

There is however, no equivalent body of inquiry regarding the perspectives of front-line practitioners. Child protection workers primarily receive attention when their practice is seen to be problematic and therefore their knowledges and experiences of what works well are usually undervalued or ignored. The most notable exceptions to this assertion exist in the form of ethnographies prepared by practitioners themselves (see Crawford, 1994, deMontigny, 1995; McMahan, 1993). I believe it is vital that researchers and policy makers themselves work more closely with service deliverers and service recipients to better frame, grounded and meaningful child protection relationships.

Child protection workers do in fact build constructive relationships, with some of the 'hardest' families, in the busiest child protection offices, in the poorest locations, everywhere in the world. This is not to say that oppressive child protection practices do not happen, or that sometimes they are even the norm. However, worker-defined, good practice with 'difficult' cases is an invaluable and almost entirely overlooked resource for improving child protection services and conceiving what constructive child protection relationships might look like.

Over the past twelve years of creating and evolving the signs of safety approach with Steve Edwards it has been a fundamental practice for me to elicit worker's self-defined examples of good practice with 'difficult' cases. More recently, I have begun to take the workers' stories of what they view to be good practice and interviewing parents to compare and enrich the perspectives and insights (see Boffa, Parton, and Turnell, forthcoming; Turnell and Edwards 1999, pp 148-154; Teoh, Laffer, Parton, and Turnell, 2003). This is a powerful process for generating rich descriptions of constructive child protection relationships.

In 1996, Murray Ryburn suggested that partnership is 'in many respects an idea still in search of a practice' (p16). While there certainly are child protection models that locate partnership and collaboration at the core of practice (see for example, Berg & Kelly, 2000; Department of Human Services, 1997a and b; Keys, 1996; McCullum, 1995; Morris & Tunnard, 1996; Scott & O'Neill, 1996 and Turnell & Edwards, 1997 and 1999) there is a very real sense in which the idea of partnership and collaboration must be reinvented and certainly reanimated in every new case. Rather like a marriage, partners can read many books about the subject but at the end of the day, the marriage relationship has to be lived out on a day-to-day basis. In like manner, in every situation of substantiated or alleged child maltreatment, relationships with family members and between professionals need either to be created afresh or refocused and re-energized, in the attempt to build sufficient safety for the children in question.

The following case study is a good demonstration of building constructive relationships in a difficult child protection situation and was prepared by the author jointly with the caseworker and family. Following the description, I will draw on this case material to exemplify the later discussion of key aspects of relationship-grounded, safety-organized practice.

Case example

This case involved a North African family, who we will call Zeinab (the mother), Asha (14 year-old daughter) and Dawood (10 year-old son). Olmsted County Child and Family Services (OCCFS) and the county police became involved with this family when Asha disclosed to a school counselor that her mother had assaulted her with an electrical cord leaving bruises on her shoulders and back. Both the mother and the children described that Zeinab had assaulted Asha to punish her for being out almost

all night with a group of young men including two in their early twenties who were reputed drug dealers. The situation was further complicated by the discovery that this family had previous child protection involvement in another county. That county's reports revealed that when Dawood was four, Zeinab had poured boiling water on Dawood's genitals as punishment for soiling. At that time, both children had been placed in care for 10 months.

Based on the past information and given the current incident, both children were removed into foster care and four assault charges were laid against Zeinab. Due to the severity of the assault, the previous incident involving Dawood and the opinions of professionals from the previous county, the investigating social worker and the court appointed guardian-ad-litem formed the view that the children should be permanently removed from Zeinab's care.

With the investigation complete and the children placed in care, the case was handed over to the OCCFS long-term team. Cindy Finch, a social worker in the long-term team was given the case. Before meeting the family, Cindy and her supervisor Sue Lohrbach with input from a cultural advisor, prepared carefully for how Cindy would go about building relationships with Zeinab and the children. As a result, and after introducing herself, Cindy asked Zeinab 'what needed to happen so that they could create a relationship where they could discuss and deal with the very difficult matters that had occurred?' Having been given the chance to guide how they began their relationship, Zeinab asked Cindy to come to her home to share a meal and also meet with the spiritual leader of her community. On the same day she met Zeinab, Cindy also met individually with Asha and Dawood to look particularly at what they wanted. Zeinab and the children wanted to get together, but since Asha and Dawood felt their mother might be angry with them, Cindy supervised the initial contacts. All parties requested more contacts quickly and Cindy worked with the children to explore simple safety plans that would enable them to feel comfortable, Cindy made sure Zeinab understood what she had negotiated with the children. All of these things happened within the first 2 weeks of Cindy's involvement and demonstrate well some of the careful efforts Cindy made to build constructive relationships based as much as possible on Zeinab, Asha and Dawood's priorities and perspectives.

The careful relationship building work that Cindy undertook laid a foundation on which she was able to address the tensions and issues that had given rise to assault. At one point, Cindy asked Zeinab if she really knew how serious things were in regards the charges and what might happen before the court? Zeinab became quiet for a time and then said she didn't really understand what had happened since her mother had hit her more severely and frequently than she had with Asha. Zeinab emphasized that despite this she still loved and respected her mother and that this was the way it had always worked in her country.

Cindy also continued to spend time with both Asha and Dawood, and allowed them to choose when and where they met and to end a conversation if they felt uncomfortable. At the same time, Cindy was always clear with Asha and Dawood that no issue would be ignored. In this way, Cindy was able to talk to Asha and Dawood about the fact that at times they felt scared of their mother, that Asha was angry with her mother for wanting to control so much of her life and also that Zeinab's mother had organized an arranged marriage for Asha. Cindy negotiated with Asha and Dawood ways to then talk and resolve all of these issues together with Zeinab.

From the outset, Cindy focused on how safe Asha and Dawood would feel in their ongoing contact with Zeinab and facilitated an evolving conversation with all three to find ways of dealing with future family problems that would not involve excessive physical punishment. Over time, Zeinab, chose for herself, to use disciplines such as time outs, removal of privileges, and groundings and, above all else, to focus on talking to her children more often. Cindy had also created a quite unique context for the supervised contacts, having made it clear to Zeinab that she was not looking for her to be on her best behavior during the contact visits, but rather to react to the children as normally as possible. Cindy explained to Zeinab that when difficulties arose during the contact visits this would be an opportunity for them to explore very specifically how Zeinab could respond to the children without physical force when she was frustrated with them. Cindy believes that a situation that occurred in one visit when she helped Zeinab to draw back from striking Asha was a major turning point in helping Zeinab take up more fully the use of her own alternative punishment ideas.

Cindy's direct work with the family was only one aspect of moving forward with this case. Given the matter was before the court, the judge, attorneys and the guardian, were centrally involved in the how

the family's problems would to be dealt with. When a case like this is brought into a court setting (or any other highly professionalized context) it is common that service recipients feel very disenfranchised and the professionals dominate proceedings. It is also not uncommon that competing perspectives and agendas dominate and undermine the professionals' relationships.

In Olmsted County, through a Federal Court improvement project called the Children's Justice Initiative an innovative conferencing process has been created that fosters collaboration and partnership in child protection cases that are before the court. Working with county judges, attorneys and guardians, OCCFS Director, Rob Sawyer and supervisor Sue Lohrbach have created a conferencing approach called the Parallel Protection Process (P3), which diverts matters away from the typically contested court process. The most unique feature of the P3 conference is that it privileges the family members' own perspectives regarding the problems and what should be done. (See Lohrbach and Sawyer's 2004, for a full description of this collaborative conferencing approach.)

The P3 process is designed to give the parents an opportunity to describe:

- The maltreatment concerns in a way that is meaningful both to the professionals and to themselves.
- Strengths and resources the family manifest and draw on.
- Their plans to make sure the problems cannot happen again.

In effect, the P3 conference creates a challenging but supportive context in which the parents are given the opportunity to speak directly to the key professionals that they need to convince, if the court and OCCFS is to close the case.

In the case we are following, Cindy prepared Zeinab for the P3 conference so she knew what to expect. The conference was a large affair, involving Zeinab and her attorney, and others including the conference chairperson (Sue Lohrbach), the guardian-ad-litem and an attorney acting for the guardian, the prosecuting attorney, Cindy, and the foster parents. The children had chosen not to attend.

In her role as conference chair, Sue began the conference by asking Zeinab to describe all the members of her extended family. This first step allowed Zeinab to begin speaking by addressing a subject in which she was the expert. Zeinab surprised everyone by including a wide array of both friends and kin in her 'family map'. Zeinab explained that in her culture she saw family in much broader terms than simply people with whom she had biological ties.

Following this, Sue asked Zeinab to describe the problems and incident that had led to her involvement with CPS and the courts. Sue also questioned Zeinab about the strengths she saw in herself, her parenting and her children, her community and culture. Finally, Sue asked Zeinab to describe her ideas to improve her family's life and to ensure the children were not physically punished again. Sue white-boarded all of this information under the county's key assessment criteria; danger/harm, risk to children, complicating factors, existing strengths/protective factors and future safety. In this way, the parent's rather than the professional's voice was being privileged and Zeinab was leading all the professionals through her own comprehensive risk assessment of her parenting and care. As a final step, Sue checked with Zeinab that she agreed with everything that was recorded on the whiteboard.

This work took more than 90 minutes, during which time the other professionals functioned as an audience to the process. (All participating professionals in the P3 need to be prepared for this.) In effect, this conference created a challenging but supportive context, where Zeinab had the opportunity to speak directly to the key professionals that she needed to convince, if her family was to reunite. After a short break the P3 is structured so that the professionals can respond.

The county attorney spoke first and immediately stated that on the basis of what he had heard he would be dropping three of the four charges that had been brought against Zeinab and that in prosecuting the fourth charge he would be seeking a non-custodial sentence. When the Guardian's Attorney spoke he stated that they had previously intended to recommend that the children be placed in care until they were 18, however their position had shifted and while they would not yet recommend reunification they were now open to that possibility being pursued.

The last task was to draw up a settlement agreement based on the proceedings. As part of this it was also decided that a family group decision-making (FGDM) conference should be held as a follow-up to the P3 conference. (See Burford and Hudson, 2000 for more information about FGDM conferencing, which is effectively identical to what is called *family group conferencing* outside of the United States.)

Eighteen people that Zeinab described as 'cousins' came to the FGDM conference. During the 'family alone time' the family and its network came up with the following plans:

- Zeinab was to spend time with two community members to help Zeinab talk and think through the issues surrounding raising teenagers in America.
- Plans were drawn up and people identified that both Asha and Zeinab could call and that Asha and Dawood could go to if the situation in the family home became too stressful.
- People were identified who would provide transport for Asha and Zeinab to go to family counseling.
- People were identified who would provide babysitting for Asha and Dawood so that Zeinab could go out and pursue activities important to her.
- People were identified who would support Zeinab with issues around the school and translate notes and report for her.

Within two months of the FGDM meeting, the children had returned home with Cindy still visiting regularly on both an announced and unannounced basis for several months. In total, Asha and Dawood were out of home for just under six months.

Zeinab was very keen for her family's story to be told in this case example. (The example as written here is a summated version. A fuller description of the case will be published in Boffa, Parton, & Turnell, forthcoming.) Zeinab held great fears about how she would be dealt by the professionals and had talked to many members of her community in Minnesota and across America who advised her not to trust or even work with the child protection services. From Zeinab's perspective it was the trust she felt in Cindy and the respect she experienced from her that created a context in which the problems could be dealt with.

Toward richer, more grounded descriptions of constructive child protection relationships

As is well demonstrated in the case we have just considered, forward moving, child protection relationships involve participatory processes that energize a purposive focus on building safety directly related to the maltreatment concerns. In the remainder of this paper I will attempt a description of some of the key and often overlooked focus and process aspects of constructive child protection relationships.

A purposive focus: organizing child protection work around future safety

Child protection cases commence because there is a concern about the well being of a child and it is vital that a thorough and detailed exploration of the maltreatment concerns and the attendant issues is undertaken. However, for partnership and collaboration to remain forward moving it is important that the problems are seen as the starting point, not the organizing loci of the work. Child protection practice is always at risk of becoming dominated by everything that is wrong with the family under investigation. When this happens the relationships between the professionals and with the family members tend to become debilitating and 'problem saturated' (White, 1988). For child protection relationships to be constructive it is vital they have a purposive focus. Purposive child protection practice, begins when professionals and family members alike can look squarely and openly at the problems *as well as* strengths that are in and around the family. This however, is simply a survey of the past, a purposive focus only evolves when the relationships are organized around building sufficient future safety to address the problems that will allow the child protection agency to close the case.

Over the past decade as strengths-based thinking and practice has begun to influence the child protection field, a polarization of professional positions has sometimes arisen between being problem-focused or strengths-based. This I think has been an unproductive and unhelpful development. No meaningful relationship, whether personal or professional, functions well by solely focusing on

everything that is negative or, on the other hand, by trying to optimistically focus on everything that is positive. Rather, I would suggest that the more difficult the child protection case, the more important it is that professionals and family draw on every ounce of hope, resource and strength they can collectively imagine and identify, to energize the capacity to honestly focus on the maltreatment concerns and build safety to the dangers. I think the supposed disjunction between a problem and strengths focus is a poor argument, and would suggest therefore that child protection practice is simply too serious to not be strengths-based. However, sensitivity to strengths does not of itself solve problems. Information about both problems and strengths are best interpreted, and make most sense, when considered in the light of a participatory exploration of solutions and safety. Professionals and family members don't really know the seriousness of the problems or the significance of the strengths and resources at hand, until they collectively begin to envision and enact solutions. Put simply, if professionals and family members cannot work together to build safety the risk equation worsens, if they can the risk lessens.

This logic is well demonstrated in the case we just considered. Cindy was constantly taking great care to focus on how Zeinab, Asha, Dawood, she and others saw the problems, while at the same time drawing on strengths to energize solution- and safety-building discussions.. In the P3 conference, when Zeinab was able to meaningfully describe her own ideas and actions toward building safety, this significantly altered the professional participants' assessment of the problems and the strengths within the family. Cindy and Sue's work also highlights that strengths-based practice is much more than generating lists of family member's strengths and most crucially is about approaching service recipients as people that can contribute meaningfully to the solution-building process.

The logic of safety-organized practice not only sharpens a purposeful focus for child protection relationships but also casts a different light on risk assessment. Risk assessment is central to the child protection task, however risk assessment typically has a narrow problem focus, privileges the professional perspective, leaving family members outside of the assessment equation and often leaves practitioners with a sense of seeing the problems more clearly but with little guidance about what to do about the situation.

Over the past 6 years a number of Australian child protection professionals in several state jurisdictions have sought to re-envision child protection risk assessment to create simple, yet rigorous assessment formats that practitioners can use *with* family members to elicit, in common language, the professional *and* family members' views regarding concerns or dangers, existing strengths and protection and envisioned safety (Boffa, Parton & Turnell, forthcoming; Department of Community Development, 2000; Department of Human Services, 1999; Turnell & Edwards, 1999). These formats deepen and balance the usual problem saturation of most risk assessment and see assessment as something that is most constructive when undertaken in relationship between the professionals and family members. The idea that risk assessment is something that can be, and in fact is best done in partnership with parents and children is a profound challenge to the usual thinking about assessment in the child protection field. The theme of relationship-grounded risk assessment is developed more fully by Julie Boffa and Heather Podesta in their paper later in this volume.

Constructive, participatory processes

While the logic of problem-founded, strengths-based, safety-organized practice brings a purposive focus to the child protection endeavor the capacity to do this depends on processes that underpin the relationships. There are some very useful descriptions of constructive relationship building in child protection (Department of Health 1995, Jeffreys & Stevenson, 1997; Trotter, 2002; Turnell & Edwards, 1999) but I want here to explore three processes that I see as common to good practice which are not always well articulated in the literature. These are the ability of professionals to:

- Exercising authority skillfully
- Make judgments constructively
- Use an inquiring approach and adopt a position of humility about what they think they know.

Exercising authority skillfully

Any grounded exploration of constructive child protection relationships needs to address the issue of using authority. Unfortunately, there has been something of soft shoe shuffle skirting around these

issues in much of the child protection literature on partnership and collaboration. Some literature suggests that constructive child protection relationships are characterized by 'choice in entering the partnership', that there is 'equality or near equality between the partners' and even that 'power is shared' (Department of Health, 1995). In like manner, Ryburn (1991) speaks of 'service user control and leadership', Mittler (1995) of 'equality between service users and professionals'. It is ludicrous in my view, to talk about equality or near equality between parents and child protection workers, when the latter have the statutory capacity to instigate investigations into the intimacy of family life, remove children and undertake other powerful statutorily mandated actions. Further, service recipients do not in the vast majority of cases choose to enter the relationship with a child protection worker and they certainly do not control the decision that determines when the relationship is to be concluded. Even family group conferencing, which is probably the primary international exemplar of relationship-grounded, safety-organized child protection practice, is not a process that families and their networks volunteer for. Despite the enthusiasm for this approach by proponents of strengths-based practice, families only participate in family group conferences in the context of being caught up in a child protection system, and there is inevitably always some level of coercion (hopefully, skillfully exercised) to garner their participation.

I believe partnership can best be achieved when all professionals (including those writing about it), are frank and straightforward in their thinking about power and authority in the child protection relationship. In studies of child protection service recipients, the service recipient, like Zeinab, knows the statutory worker is the more powerful partner (see for example Farmer & Owen 1995; McCullum 1995; MacKinnon 1998; Cashmore, 2002). The service recipient consistently wants to know where they stand vis-à-vis the authority of the worker (hence the frequently asked question; 'are you going to take my child away from me?'), and is looking for frank and straightforward information in this regard. When the worker is both comfortable with and clear about the nature of their authority in the relationship, this lays a solid and honest foundation for a working partnership between worker and family. On this foundation partnership can be further enhanced by workers who then purposefully and skillfully work to minimize the power differential by building trust, involving the family as much as possible, sharing information, utilizing participatory planning processes, providing choice wherever possible and fostering family input at every possible opportunity. These aspects of practice are well exemplified in the way Sue and Cindy worked with Zeinab, Asha and Dawood.

Making judgment constructively

Just as helping professionals are usually ambivalent regarding the use of authority they are also inevitably trained to believe that being non-judgmental is a core principal of their professional outlook. However, the daily reality for child protection professionals is that they must constantly make judgments. Even more than this, the anxiety provoking situations that child protection workers face as their daily fare, escalates the instinctive human reaction to jump to judgment. Research in child protection and other areas highlights that humans naturally tend to make judgments very early in complex situations and subsequent events are organized to confirm the original judgment (Kahnerman et al., 1990; Munro, 1996 and 2002; English & Pecora, 1994).

The whole notion of being non-judgmental is a problematic professional aspiration since human beings, whether professional or otherwise, cannot, not have opinions. In aspiring to the cherished goal of being non-judgmental, professionals potentially distance themselves from part of what it is to be human. I would want to propose a vigorous campaign social work to reclaim and re-energise judgment making as a vital and integral aspect of good human service practice generally and constructive child protection practice in particular.

A client's perspective is instructive at this point. Ah Hin Teoh is a Chinese-Malaysian, Australian who has had eight years experience being on the receiving end of child protection services, including a four-year period when his children were in care. Ah Hin comments:

I felt that the department and the residential home saw me as a useless person, just out of prison. They had decided I was some sort of Asian drug lord criminal, but they were not going to come out and say it openly, instead they hid behind talking about 'the best interests of the children'. They were scared I was using my children to stay in the country and that feeling of theirs messed everything up, but we could never get to talk about it. It always felt like they had a hidden agenda because they'd get me to do one thing, then they wouldn't be certain

that that was enough so they'd come up with another thing. (Teoh, Laffer, Parton & Turnell 2003, p151).

When professional judgments become hidden agendas, that in Ah Hin's words 'we could never get to talk about', those judgments however sound they may be, will tend to create many problems in the relationship with service recipients. Ah Hin recognised that the child welfare department had to make judgments about him, his parenting capacity and his children, that was not of concern to him, the problem was the handling of the judgment making process and the use to which the judgments were put.

Judgment making tends to be more constructive when professionals clearly specify their judgments and who has made them and find ways of making this information overt in the relationships between professionals and with family members. Cindy constantly worked with Zeinab and the children to make overt the seriousness of her situation and to talk about the judgments that were and would be made about her parenting. Part of the power of the P3 conferencing process is that it brings together the key professionals and family decision makers and makes the major judgment making process a human, interactional and participatory process. At a more micro level, Cindy was constantly making judgments and exercising her authority in focusing attention on the key issues that she, Zeinab and the children saw as contributing to Zeinab's use of violence. Cindy then constantly took this further by requiring and ensuring that Zeinab and the children, with her help, talked about these issues together.

Practicing from a stance of inquiry and humility

Paternalism, which most simply stated is a situation in which professionals act as if they are the experts in the nature of the problem and what is required to solve it, is the default setting of child protection. Not only do workers find it difficult to resist the temptation of professional certitude, there are innumerable systemic pressures on child protection organisations to 'get it right' when facing the anxiety of child abuse. Professionals and agencies who believe they are right tend to be dismissive of other perspectives whether they come from other professionals or family members.

The most skillful practitioners I have worked with are those that can be explicit about their role, concerns and expectations while simultaneously making their actions, assessments and authority vulnerable to family members and other professionals. Munro states it simply when she says 'the single most important factor in minimizing error is to admit that you may be wrong' (Munro, 2002, p141). In my experience the workers who are best able to do this, are ready to make judgments but also constantly try to approach their professional colleagues and their clients from a stance of humility about what they think they know, informed through a spirit of inquiry. Gerald de Montigny, a Canadian child protection worker, articulates the same view when he writes 'I learned that good social work is not marked by confident pronouncements, certain decisions and resolute action, but by an openness to dialogue, self-reflection, self-doubt and humility' (1995, pXV). This surely is a stance that can serve to antidote the paternalistic default.

Within the human services field over the past decade or so, some professionals have set themselves up as experts regarding what constitutes 'anti-oppressive' and 'culturally sensitive' practice. Adopting an expert stance about these aspirations concerns me since, as ever, good intentions in child protection are a volatile medium for fueling paternalistic practice. In contrast to taking an expert stance, Cindy demonstrated an inquiring stance by continually asking Zeinab and the children to guide how the professional-family relationships should be established and function, to fit with their culture and context.

Conclusion

The American poet, potter and educator, Mary Caroline Richards writes 'the world will change when we can imagine it differently, and, like artists, do the work of creating new social forms' (1996, p119). Locating partnership and collaboration at the centre of constructive child protection practice are social forms whose creation, continues to require our best imagination and effort. Relationship-grounded practice is a philosophy that lies lightly on the surface of a child protection field that because of myriad pressures, tends to constantly default to paternalism and managerialism. In this sense, partnership *and* collaboration continue to be ideas in search of meaningful practices.

The ongoing challenge is to imagine and create ways of building relationships between professionals and with family members that can function within the pressurized, day-to-day realities and imperatives of child protection organizations and the messy, uncertain business of going into the lives of families where children are at risk. In this endeavor, I believe worker and service recipient defined, rich descriptions of good practice in difficult cases, is an invaluable and almost entirely overlooked resource. For this reason, I have made one such example the centerpiece of this paper. I believe it is also crucial that we continue to imagine and work to build conferencing, assessment and planning procedures that enhance partnership and collaboration. I have pointed to initiatives that reflect relationship-grounded, safety-organized aspirations and later papers in this volume will offer greater depth to these descriptions.

I stated earlier that the child protection field rarely listens to the experience of front-line practitioners. To remedy this a little I want to conclude with the words of Gerald de Montigny:

Social workers need to recognize the structured regulations posed by a clock and an organizational calendar, and they must struggle to build a practice regulated by the beats of a heart, the cycle of seasons and the paths of a social life. As social workers we must not abandon judgment, but we do need to identify the relations of power and inequality between the judges and the judged. We need to judge our practice and our organizations alongside, or in solidarity with those who are clients and those who are poor, native, black and marginalized (1995, p226).

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