The moral complexities of child protection: mothers, children and the state

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University researchers have drawn attention to the numbers of children successively compulsorily removed from the same mother through the family courts. The Nuffield Foundation-funded work, by Karen Broadhurst, Claire Mason and Judith Harwin of the Universities of Brunel and Manchester, has caused a flurry of media interest, with the **BBC noting (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27943591)** that 7,143 mothers were involved in repeat care cases, affecting 22,790 children.

This is a fact well known to those of us connected with the system, particularly the family judiciary. The highly respected judge Nick Crichton, who, until his recent retirement, presided over the pioneering and successful Family Drug and Alcohol Court, notes frequent experience of removing three or four children from the same mother; and sometimes removal of seven or more.

It will be interesting to see how the moral debate about this plays out. There has often been little sympathy from the media for parents involved in the child protection system, particularly those who have drug or alcohol problems or who live in volatile and violent relationships. Over the last decade, the policy rhetoric has also become more punitive. In November 2012, Education Secretary Michael Gove called for the rescue of children from the 'natural disaster' of living with such parents. We have recently heard plans for a 'Cinderella Law' in the Queen's Speech, which would seek to criminalise emotional neglect.

The timescales for care proceedings in the family court have been drastically reduced, with a view to preventing delay. These are now set at 26 weeks. As Nick Crichton has noted, this is very little time for a parent to turn their life around, which means pre-proceedings processes and support for parents are vital in the interests of justice. However, if one is a mother who has had previous children removed, such support is unlikely to be there. The separation of children's from adult's services means social and health services usually stop working with a mother at the point of permanent removal. The case is deemed resolved and closed, but this leaves in its wake **'maternal outcasts' (http://www.takenuk.com/Broadhurst2013.pdf)** often emotionally desperate to have another baby, however dire their own circumstances remain.

Since the death of 'Baby P', we have seen year-on-year rises in the number of children being removed. These have recently flattened out and some people feel that the increases simply reflect more decisive and appropriate action from social workers. I don't think we have the data to attribute causation as yet, but it seems to me that the time is right to have a debate about how the current system is treating parents, and particularly mothers. It is a point Professors Brid Featherstone, Kate Morris and I have made in our recent book ***Re-imagining Child Protection (http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?k=9781447308027)***, in which we call for humane practice with families.

There is currently in child and family social work a strong and understandable focus on the child, but entering an encounter believing 'I'm only here for the child' is going to affect interaction with mothers and fathers. Approaching the work from this stark moral stance is not likely to lead to compassionate attention to the difficulties parents experience in their own lives. In this context, multiple removals are unsurprising.

All this is profoundly moral territory but this is obscured by new expert vocabularies. The view that the child's brain is desperately vulnerable to lasting and irreversible damage, supported by drastically simplified neuroscientific ideas, supports 'now or never' arguments for early removal. We are starting to see biometric measures of stress, such as hair cortisol and epigenetic changes, enter the evaluation protocols for early intervention projects taking place in the most disadvantaged communities. This could have deep consequences in the future for children and parents.

Where is moral debate? It is high time it started.

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