

book reviews..

Contributions from readers are invited for this section and should be forwarded to:

Book Review Editor

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AT RISK — THE NSPCC BATTERED CHILD RESEARCH TEAM (Routledge Direct Editions)

The NSPCC concerned with the increasing problems of the battered child syndrome setup a community based research unit in West London in 1968. Their intention was to create an informed body of opinion about the syndrome and to devise methods of treatment. This book records that experience.

The evolution of the unit (appropriately named Denver House), detailed information of the 25 referred families, their management and recommendations for future research are described. In planning emphases were stressed on achieving balance between the service and the research commitments of the social worker based multi-disciplinary team. Social work colleagues and

other interested professionals engaged in the management of the abused child and abusing parents will be encouraged by this excellent record noting the high calibre of the workers, their courage and not least impressively their 24 hour availability.

A tribute by Henry Kemp prefaces the volume and stresses the need for a total family approach, the collaborative efforts of a dedicated team and provision of additional modalities of treatment. Does anyone disagree?

Ample anecdotal comments supplement factual reports and illustrate battering as a phenomenon, problems in diagnosis, the repetitive nature of injuries, the initial parental explanations, determination of the abusive parents and sociological analysis of the group. Medical readers might quibble that a more detailed discussion of the physical problems could have been listed.

The children involved are discussed from the earliest parental attitudes to conception, stresses during pregnancy, sources of family support, neonatal and developmental history, parent-child interaction, parenting quality — in other words, comprehensively. The authors suggest that, whilst confirming and augmenting previous findings, global statements about battering parents and relationships with their children would be misleading. Nonetheless documented studies of this type can only contribute to improved comparative evaluation of the work of different centres.

Readers will appreciate the thoroughness of planning as the project team spent the first year in preparation. Others can learn from the organizational problems and difficulties in communication with other professionals which are sympathetically but realistically discussed.

The report has its gloomy side, two children died as a result of their referral injuries, four suffered long

term physical effects. The natural anxiety engendered by stressful situations was mitigated for the workers by the combined service and research roles with the learning obtained and the relief of isolation from sharing and discussing experiences in informal and group meetings. The difficult area of separation of the legal and therapeutic functions is well expressed, after all, "in the final analysis child abuse is simply what the judge states it to be".

Workers perceived themselves as having a primary nurturing role in a therapeutic relationship with the families and by their terms were successful as all but one mother was engaged in a meaningful relationship. The reader will observe with interest experience obtained in residential placement (both voluntary and under orders), the value of "drop in" foster mothers, day care and mothers groups. Full psychological assessment of abusing parents and their children is included.

The authors question their treatment goals and incline to the conservative aim of treatment preventing further deterioration rather than over optimistic improvement in family functioning. The modest tone of the book is reflected in the last paragraph, "much remains to be done before the many faceted syndrome we call child abuse is fully understood and effective preventative measures are formulated and applied." AMEN.

The debate continues, this foresighted account might profitably be compared to the Australian situation as outlined in the 1976 Melbourne report of the Child Maltreatment Workshop. The publication is warmly recommended and is "At Risk" of being sought by students and workers as a modern statement of the British experience.

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