

In three years Heang lost her father, mother and two sons, who died of starvation. 'We all so weak from no food... when my husband try to bury his son, he couldn't stand up to support his weight.' At one time, Heang was too ill to move and had to lie by the side of the road, for one month, while her daughter scrounged for scraps of food to keep them alive. We learn of how, after the Vietnamese took over, trust and hope for life in Cambodia were already too shattered to put any faith in governments of any sort. Heang, her husband and now two daughters barely managed to escape at night across the border into a Thai refugee camp. Life in a refugee camp is very hard and overcrowded, but eventually they were sponsored out to Australia.

Frequently for refugees, resettlement in Australia represents yet another life of hardship, as alienation and acclimatization to a strange country requires many years of adjustment. Heang responds to the common criticisms directed at migrants who share a language and choose to live in the same areas, explaining that they live close together because they have no other choice, relying on friends for information, assistance, and simply communication for survival.

But Heang worries about 'nothing' now. 'I've gone past everything... I have been through all the hard things, many kinds of experience in suffering, even from different political parties, different governments. Anything that might happen here, I can consider just a small thing. I have been through much harder than this.'

These are just three examples of glimpses into ten authors' lives. Far too often, we tend to be busily concerned with policies, programs, implementations, evaluations and tight budgets. We risk overlooking the fundamental reasons for our work in the first place – the meanings of lived human experiences.

It is important too, not to romanticize tragedy, hardships and others' struggles, for in doing so, we may just as firmly place them out of focus, on the margins, as if we had disregarded them.

This book neither romanticizes nor underplays people's lives. Its poignancy is distilled in its presentation, which, except for a brief preface, consists entirely of the authors' own words, their own depictions. 'They...' are the authors, unadulterated and (thankfully) uninterpreted.

This book offers a broad scope for public and professional readership alike. Its stated purpose is to offer insights which may help to counteract popularly held misunderstandings about disadvantage and its causes in our society. (From the Preface by Rhonda Stein, Chief Executive Officer, Burnside.) It is all too easy to skim surfaces and make snap judgements about hardships with a narrow focus on an individual. Myopic views need to be both deepened and broadened. Deepened, to discover what it's like to 'walk a mile in someone else's shoes', and broadened to keep in mind the bigger picture, of how human suffering of all kinds can be structurally sanctioned by societal and cultural forces, through omission, commission, avoidance, or vested interests. This book achieves its purpose.

Use of story and narrative is a powerful tool for the act of telling and listening, but there should not be an end to it. This is not simply a book of stories about courage and the tenacity of the human spirit for its own sake, although that is inherent in its production. 'They...' the open phrase of the title is apt, for it begs our reflection, suggestive of a loop in which we are brought back to look at the relations of 'They...' to whom? To us, *others* ... but are we? No, there is no opposition implied here, but a conjunction. Rather, it is 'They...' *and*...

Now, how are we going to realize these conjunctions? What are we going to do with such gifts?

Reviewed by:

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Signs of safety

A solution and safety oriented approach to child protection casework

Andrew Turnell & Steve Edwards

A Norton Professional Book. John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd. 216 pp.

This book, written by two very experienced Western Australian child protection practitioners, should have wide international appeal for professional workers in systems dealing with reports of child abuse and neglect. For them it is a must read. Workers in other systems and others affected by child protection practice will also find it a useful guide to the elements of intervention. Anyone interested in the solution focused brief therapy work developed by de Shazer, Berg and others over the last fifteen years or so, will find it a book of very interesting and useful applications of the approach.

The signs of safety approach to practice tackles the difficult area of meeting legislated requirements, and the potential coercive power this entails, and engaging reporters and the reported, parents and children, in constructive action to achieve safety while setting the stage for positive outcomes. This often entails seeing and doing things differently which the solution focused approach with its particular approach to questions – exception questions, miracle questions, etc – assists greatly. The approach is also developed around the idea of partnerships between the professionals involved and

the family operating to achieve safety and the cessation of statutory intervention at the earliest appropriate time.

The book is structured around some practice principles which build partnerships, six practice elements and the application of these ideas through the sequential stages of the intervention process. The text is illustrated throughout by case illustrations and useful examples of questions pertinent to the area of inquiry drawn from practice. The twelve practice principles resonate well with the complex demands of the child protection investigation task and a practice wisdom borne of highly accountable experience and serious reflection on what works. The practice principles for building partnerships are worth relating here: respect service recipients as people worth doing business with; cooperate with the person, not the abuse; recognise that cooperation is possible even where coercion is required; recognise that all families have signs of safety; maintain a focus on safety; learn what the service recipient wants; always search for detail; focus on creating small change; don't confuse case details with judgements; offer choices; treat the interview as a forum for change; treat the practice principles as aspirations not assumptions.

Described as a map of the territory to guide the worker, the six practice elements incorporate much of the solution focused approach. They are, in brief:

- *understanding the position of each family member* – this enables an understanding of the uniqueness of each case and enlists the family members in moving toward plans they will enact;
- *finding exceptions to the maltreatment* – this can generate mutual hope, they may indicate alternative viable solutions or, when none can be found, the presence of more serious problems;
- *discovering family strengths and resources* – by highlighting these, discouragement is reduced and potential reinforced;

- *focus on goals* – by eliciting the family's goals for improving safety and for life in general and using their ideas wherever possible in conjunction with agency goals, realistic plans can be built around change necessary to close the case and thorough consultation with family and extended networks;
- *scale safety and progress* – the use of scaling questions enables closer identification of family members' sense of safety and progress, and allows comparisons with worker's judgements;
- *assessing willingness, confidence and capacity* – this testing is seen as a necessary step before trying to implement plans which might otherwise founder on these factors.

The remainder of the book details with rich examples the application of these ideas from referral, through assessment and *more than* investigation to cooperative case plan and implementation. The focus on safety and good practice is emphasised and practical formats are provided as well as details of a training program. It adds up to a useful guide for practice and a sense of positive management of statutory abuse and neglect intervention. It draws some boundaries around these risk related episodes but in a way which sets the stage for families themselves and, where necessary, other services, to follow through with the long term task of maintaining an environment of sufficient safety and a platform for broader and better life goals. An important underlying theme concerns worker skill, supervision, support and morale; in this respect the sharing of the distilled experience of the authors, their colleagues, clients and mentors provides a welcome boost to this somewhat beleaguered field.

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Children's Welfare Association of Victoria Inc **Costings Benchmarking Framework**

The Children's Welfare Association of Victoria Inc (CWAV) undertook the Costings Benchmarking Project in 1999 to assist member organisations providing youth and family services to identify all the costs of service delivery.

The Costings Benchmarking Framework Project Final Report is now available for purchase. For further information, contact:

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