

dealing with both the heightened vulnerability to abuse of children with a disability such as cerebral palsy, and measures developed to deal with communication difficulties in responding to instances of abuse. The experience of an aboriginal worker who develops her knowledge and skills in respect to child sexual assault includes insights and practice issues for preventive work in aboriginal communities. There is a chapter on the significance of 'community' in child protection (including research on networks and neighbourhoods) and another which describes an integrated and comprehensive strategy developed by Relationships Australia to prevent violence occurring in family relationships and to resolve the effects of violence which has occurred.

The final chapter focuses directly on the issue of child protection intervention in the context of domestic violence. Based on eight years of practice experience, Chris Burke

argues for child protection intervention 'informed by a socio-political analysis of gender, power and responsibility'. This exposes the way perpetrators 'shape the beliefs and behaviours of family members' and the way some practice obscures the impact of violence on women and children.

The book would be a worthwhile addition to the shelves of workers in child protection and workers with family violence, and for the increasing number of practitioners in various fields confronted with both.

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Children's Needs – Parenting Capacity

The impact of parental mental illness, problem alcohol and drug use, and domestic violence on children's development

H. Cleaver, I. Unell and J. Algate

The Stationery Office, London, 1999

This book is yet another very useful product of the commitment of the British Department of Health to commissioning research likely to aid practice in child and family welfare and to making the results accessible to people working in the field. This report was commissioned in response to the theme which emerged strongly from the studies summarised in the 1995 publication *Child Protection: Messages from Research* that, among the families whose children became involved with the child protection system, there were high levels of parental mental illness, problem alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence.

The authors were asked to pursue this issue further and distil the evidence as to how parenting capacity is affected by these problems. There were also some additional issues for examination related to child protection investigations and intervention. Families are reluctant to disclose these problems for fear of more punitive responses and the fact that the child protection allegations and issues compound existing vulnerabilities. Social workers would also sometimes misinterpret parental behaviour as symptomatic of abuse when it was more to do with attempts to avoid disclosing these problems. There was also evidence that workers tended to evade frightening confrontations especially when they felt unsupported or alone. At times too, workers with children had limited understanding of these problems and the specific effects on parents, while workers familiar with these particular problem areas often lacked understanding of their impact and significance for children.

The book is organised in five sections. The first explores questions of definition and prevalence to see to what extent

concern is justified. The second examines the ways in which these problems affect parents and their parenting capacity. The third examines which children are vulnerable. The fourth goes into detail on the developmental implications of these problems. To aid this process the age/stage and life dimensions adopted by the 'Looking After Children' system are utilised to provide a framework for the process. The final part discusses the implications of the evidence for policy and practice. Politicians, policy makers, program planners and managers are asked to take on board the significance of comprehensive assessment and intervention; the importance of joint working (collaboration and coordination); the necessity of flexible time frames to cope with the heterogeneity of the population and the variation and fluctuation of needs over time; the importance of communication and information for children and families, and the significance of training and education to fill in knowledge gaps and to facilitate joint working.

Although there is ample need for more research, the available evidence leaves the reader in no doubt about the existence of problems which are substantial in scale where research has been done and the work gives very useful pointers for action. One additional interesting finding is about the load often borne by children who are carers of parents and other family members. Formal interest in the needs of young carers is at present much more apparent in Europe than in Australia.

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