Identifying Neglect Ten Top Tips

Pat Beesley. (2011). London, England: British Association for Adoption and Fostering, ISBN 978 1 907585 18 0 (paperback), 142 pp.

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I'm conscious from my own experience of working with child and family services how challenging defining and working with neglect can be. Practitioners generally feel that the issues of physical and sexual abuse are clearer because it is simpler to define unacceptable behaviour and to be explicit about this with families. Neglect presents more subtle challenges to workers' values and attitudes as well as often a sense of unease: would my house be judged clean enough, could I be perceived as a neglecting parent? There is more struggle about what is considered adequate parenting — how do you decide what is just not sufficient care, compared to what used to be framed as 'good enough' parenting.

Pat Beesley is an experienced practitioner and consultant who is confident about tackling these issues in a direct and helpful way. She recognises that this is a challenging area for workers who are of course often parents themselves, with their own hopes for children, and their assumptions about how children should be cared for. Those who are not parents have obviously been children and are also influenced by those experiences. Beesley is careful to acknowledge throughout the book how contested an area of work this is, given that our views about parenting and child care are socially constructed and so open to change.

Related to this, she identifies the importance of

> a way of working based on reflective practice (which) ... acknowledges the uniqueness of every situation and the individuals involved, the complexity of the work, and allows for the use of different forms of knowledge and understanding to be applied. (p. 11).

This needs, she suggests, to include creativity and the capacity to 'think outside the box' (p. 10). She acknowledges the need to include thinking about social context, particularly in relation to diversity and difference across a range of issues from culture to sexuality. Interestingly, she does not mention religion or spirituality that is often intertwined with culture, but also potentially an important part of a family network.

Connected to reflective practice, Beesley also recognises the value of reflexivity in this area: consciousness of your own reactions and how they may impact on the relationships, particularly in encouraging children to articulate their perspective about what is happening. Helm's idea of a 'cultural review' is suggested as a way of building in ongoing reflective practice, 'process[es] that should take place individually with other members of the team and in supervision' (pp. 47–48). This review includes questions about knowledge and where it has come from, values, how a worker might be perceived by a child, and norms that might affect practice from a team or agency. This includes the potential dangers of being overly tolerant in relation to difference: 'Being sensitive to cultural and class differences is important, but you need to beware of allowing fear of imposing your own values to obscure the signs of neglect' (p. 13).

Beesley acknowledges that neglect can be hard to define and that poverty is not necessarily connected to neglect in a simple cause effect way, though, as she says, the impact of poverty needs to be recognised and remedied. She is helpfully specific about signs of emotional and physical neglect that can be generalised; pointing out that the aim, wherever possible, is to identify ways to change the situation so that there is adequate care rather than lessening standards or removing children. She points out that children in care can also experience neglect.

Assessment is clearly a key aspect of working with neglect and Beesley identifies a range of tools. These include a usefully complex triangle that includes the child's developmental needs, the parenting capacity and family and environmental factors. She suggests adding Howarth's fourth domain: 'reflecting on how knowledge about a case is constructed and interpreted in light of a practitioner's personal, professional and organisational situation' (p. 81). Ecomaps could be added as another potential assessment tool.

Generally, Beesley stresses principles that have a holistic and strengths-based orientation while at the same time maintaining a focus on the child or children in a family. She avoids black and white concepts of the impact of neglect or the ability to parent, and does identify factors that can impact and mediate factors. This is also helpful in thinking about how to work with children who have been neglected, such as the positive impact of other positive adult relationships, even if intermittent. My only slight hesitation here was the use of the term 'resistant parents' — a negative label that contradicts the general tenor of the book. It would be helpful to think of language that recognises lack of willingness to be involved with understanding why that might be — which is the general attitude of the book.

Beesley is explicit about the importance of hearing the child's voice and the dangers of assuming that it is only important to talk with adults. There is a very useful checklist of questions related to skills and confidence in working

with children and young people, which would be effective prompts to think about whether you are working at a child's pace, allowing a child to take the lead, able to emphasise positives and help the child explore for themselves. Some examples of how these might work in practice would be helpful.

Beesley balances the issues of recognising how culture and family history will influence what is seen as 'normal' and acceptable with standards about what she calls adequate care. However, she also confronts directly the challenge of identifying when children are not being adequately cared for and the need to take action to ensure that they are.

The final tip, headed 'know when enough is enough' makes helpful suggestions about the complexity of assessment over time needed to decide when children need long-term alternative care. Beesley acknowledges the weight of such a decision while asserting the need for this to be faced in the interests of children. Her powerful quotes from children throughout the book reinforce the necessity of grappling with such dilemmas.

Child Protection Practice

Harry Ferguson. (2011). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978 0 230 24283 8 (paperback), 237 pp.

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This book advocates for client-focused social work intervention (referred to here as *intimate child protection practice*) by engaging with children and parents in their 'significant places' (i.e., bedroom, kitchen, living room, back yard, car) to discover the actual reality of children and their families. The author argues that given the complexity of child protection work, social workers need to go the extra mile to access the relevant spaces and visualise the risks through bodily experiences of sight, smell, touch and hearing. Ferguson particularly emphasises the necessity of appropriately touching children, not just to help them understand the reality of relatedness, but to uncover any undisclosed physical injury. He cited an example from the United Kingdom (UK) child safety investigation, which discovered how, because of a lack of physical exploration, the professionals failed to identify the injury marks covered with chocolate on the face of toddler who later died of multiple injuries. The author emphasises the need for practitioners to develop appropriate courage, knowledge and skills as essential qualities. I believe professional values are also a prerequisite for practice. While the author emphasised a holistic and bold practice approach, he criticises the child protection system for not acknowledging creative approaches such as therapeutic engagement with children and parents. Further, Ferguson claims there is an increasing lack of acknowledgement for the value of the home visit. This book emphasises support and empowerment of parents as the best long-term options of child protection management. The author uses most of the 15 chapters to stress the necessity of exploring the social environment of the clients. The real value of this book, in my view, is the challenge posed by the author to the practice outcomes of risk management. He challenges the separation and growing chasm between families and workers and suggests quite radical strategies for rebuilding relationships and re-connecting with the people we work with and for.

I examine each of the chapters here to further illuminate this key area.

Chapter 1 discusses the nature of the intimate spaces and acknowledges the uncertainty, the risk factors and the taboos associated with touching children. Ferguson encourages workers to reflect judiciously on their use of power and control irrespective of social class differences (Reich, 2005).

Chapter 2 explains the historical shift in the British policy in child safety management, from 'inspection' strategies to a 'welfare' oriented approach based on 'partnership'. The author suggests that until the 1980s child abuse was treated as a psychological phenomenon. Interestingly, it still seems to be the case at least here in northern rural Australia where there is an apparent belief in the community, and among social workers, that redressing child abuse is the job of the psychologist rather than acknowledging the wider socioeconomic factors, and the necessity of multidisciplinary input including relevant and empowering social work intervention.

Chapters 3 to 5 explore the 'liminality' of the families' world and the nature of a social workers entry to that space. Ferguson describes how workers may be de-motivated to engage with families and children in this space for a range of reasons that must be acknowledged and explored in the context of anti-oppressive practice. He contends that the workers involved in Victoria Climbie's life admitted that a sense of disgust at her scabies inhibited their connection with her and as a result vital signs of trauma were missed. How, asks Ferguson, can such oversights be avoided, and what skills and qualities can social workers develop that enable them to inhabit the child's real world in meaningful