

Practice Commentary

Coaching Parents About Children's Needs and Navigating the Child Protection and Other Systems

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This article reviews developments in the NSW child protection system which aim to reduce the number of children in state care. The first development was changes to the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1988 made in 2016 that created a permanency hierarchy for children who have been removed and not restored to parental or extended family care. Under Section 10A of the Act, guardianship and adoption becomes the priority if restoration is not possible, although Aboriginal children are exempt from adoption to some extent. The more recent development, during 2017, is the purchase by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) of a license for two US models, namely Multi-Systemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect (MST-CAN[®]) and Functional Family Therapy through Child Welfare (FFT-CW[®]). US studies have shown that these models reduce the number of children being taken into care. Related to this effort is the recognition by FaCS that the cost of out-of-home care (OOHC) is increasingly unmanageable given the 16,843 children in care in NSW. Added to this is the knowledge, confirmed by the Minister, that for many children in OOHC the outcomes are dismal. Finally, the article turns to the issue of poverty and seeks to address the established correlation (not causality) between poverty and child abuse and neglect. This remains the key issue that underscores child abuse and neglect that has to be addressed if a significant reduction in the number of children taken into state care is to be achieved.

■ **Keywords:** teaching, learning, coaching, navigating, poverty

Introduction

Evidence acquired by the authors through a decade or more of close interaction with the New South Wales (NSW) child protection (CP) system shapes the views expressed in this article. It is about rethinking and reshaping the CP caseworker role in NSW with the aim of reducing the number of children in state care. It relies on two key concepts – “navigating” and “coaching” – as applied to the CP system. Navigating is defined as ‘manage or direct the course of’ (Oxford Dictionary, 1964). Coaching is defined as “tutor or train” (Oxford Dictionary, 1964). In that respect, this article will not use the term counselling or family therapy as the emphasis is on teaching and learning, not psychological processes to correct deficits or pathology. This shift towards coaching and education will, in our view, help parents en-

gage in productive and constructive efforts to safeguard their children's future. This is also a way of addressing the power imbalance between a CP caseworker and parents that all too often is viewed by parents as manifestly dictatorial (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2011). The approach places responsibility for successful teaching of navigating and coaching skills on the CP caseworker. The responsibility for learning, as always, remains with the parents. The evidence is that many parents who are in contact with the CP system lack education and are ill-informed about their children's

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needs. As a consequence they all too often replicate with their own children their own poor childhood experiences, because they know no better. In addition, these parents often lack both confidence and knowledge about how to navigate the wider social service system that may be able to help them move beyond their current deficits in their child rearing practices. Some services may also be able to encourage parents to think about vocational training that in the long-term may improve their socio-economic status.

Reducing the Number of Children in Care

At 30 June 2015, there were 16,843 children in care in NSW. This is almost twice the number of any other state or territory in Australia (AIHW, 2016). The first step in reducing the number of children in care was taken via amendments in 2016 to the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1988 that created a permanency hierarchy for children who have been removed and not restored to either parental or extended family care. Under Section 10A of the Act, adoption then became the next priority for non-Aboriginal children if restoration is not possible. In 2016–2017, NSW had 152 known adoptions, which was an increase of 97 (63%) from the preceding year (Berkovic, 2018). The NSW figure is five times more adoptions than any other Australian state or territory. The next step towards reducing the number of children in care is the recent purchase by FaCS of two US practice models, namely Multi-Systemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect (MST-CAN[®]) and Functional Family Therapy through Child Welfare (FFT-CW[®]) (Berkovic, 2018). FFT-CW[®] has both a high (HR) and a low (LR) risk track. Significant scientific evidence exists that supports both of these practice interventions (Swenson, Schaeffer, Henggeler, Faldowski, & Mayhew, 2010; Turner, Robbins, Rowlands, & Weaver, 2017). FaCS deserves credit for purchasing these programs in that this action is a firm signal that FaCS have a desire to improve CP casework practice. Over four years at a combined cost of \$90M, MST-CAN[®] will be delivered to 100 families and FFT CW[®] to 800 families each year (Berkovic, 2018). Presumably, the families who will receive MST-CAN[®] or FFT CW[®] services will be those where a case of abuse and neglect is newly substantiated. In NSW in 2014–2015 this involved 15,022 children (AIHW, 2016, Table 3.1). What is not clear is how many families were the subject of substantiation, as many families include more than one child. Worthy of note is the fact that while 900 families will be part of the MST-CAN[®] or FFT CW[®] programs each year, 50% will be Aboriginal families. This indicates that many families, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will simply continue to receive the usual FaCS service which is not clearly specified methodologically.

The imperative to reduce the number of children in care is also linked to the variable quality of foster care services. Indeed, we have the Minister for Family and Community

Services in NSW saying that ‘the closer you looked at the foster care system and outcomes for these children the more you knew that it was dreadful’ (Berkovic, 2018). This is entirely in keeping with the questions about the survival of family foster care that were asked by Ainsworth and Hansen (2014).

Therapy or Education: Does it Matter Which Comes First?

Both MST-CAN[®] and FFT CW[®] are worthy additions to practice attempts to reduce the number of children in care in NSW. They are both cast in term of treatment or therapy in keeping with the individualistic US culture. In Australia, a treatment or therapy orientation tends to be viewed less favourably. Of course some adults have psychological issues and may benefit from such an approach, but this individualistic approach has many critics. The current NSW CP emphasis on counselling or treatment, that has US overtones, may be at odds with this more common Australian position. It may also be more in keeping with the Australian culture to view neglectful and abusive parenting as rooted in social causes, such as family poverty, substandard housing and disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are evident in the wider social community rather than in individual psychopathology. This is not to say that in some dreadful Australian cases of child abuse and neglect individual parental psychopathology is the most likely explanation.

Poverty – The Elephant In The Room

There is overwhelming evidence that a high proportion of parents who are involved in a CP proceeding live in poverty (not just economic poverty) and in seriously disadvantaged environments that inhibit good parenting (Bywaters et al., 2016; Ghate & Hazel, 2008). These cited studies are from England, but any postcode analysis of NSW CP cases to identify the region or neighbourhood that generates the largest percentage of Children’s Court cases shows that the Western suburbs of Sydney, a known low income area, meet these criteria (AIHW, 2016; Weatherburn & Lind, 2001). In fact, across jurisdictions where data was available, 37% of children who were the subject of a substantiation finding were from the lowest socioeconomic areas. For Indigenous children, this was 49% compared to 33% for non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2016).

NSW Children’s Court files do not contain any information about parental living conditions, employment or income. In fact ‘lives are de-contextualized’ (Ainsworth and Hansen, 2014, p. 254). Yet, any equation that seeks to identify the causes of child abuse and neglect must include poverty as a significant factor in many cases. Importantly, poverty is a factor which MST-CAN[®], FFT-CW HR[®] or FFT-CW LR[®] do not and cannot address. A blanket application of these worthy interventions, in all cases of child abuse

and neglect, given the focus on individual psychopathology may be inappropriate as this may not be the dominant factor in precipitating many cases of abuse and neglect. After all, “poverty” is not neglect (McMillan cited in Cocks, 2018).

What Else Might We Do?

If poverty is the elephant in the room the question is, can FaCS, as the CP authority in NSW, do anything more to address this issue? We suggest that it can, and that it begins with the communication style adopted by CP caseworkers when interacting with parents for the very first time. It is based on an acceptance that parents who have abused or neglected a child must still be respected and treated humanely (Connolly, 2010; Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014). This is a necessary precursor to all other efforts. This is especially so as parents all too often say that their experience of CP caseworkers is one of authoritarian attitudes, arbitrary decision making, and a lack of honesty in the basic relationship (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2011). It is also based on a recognition that many parents who are involved with the CP system, as indicated earlier, are poorly educated and need to be taught how to navigate the CP system for the benefit of their children. They also need to be coached about the wider social service system where important family support services are to be found. Some simple

examples of both positive and negative navigating and coaching the CP and other systems follow in Figures 1–4. The point here is that simple things do make a difference.

The adoption of this model of communication and to teach parents how to navigate the CP and other social service systems returns CP caseworkers to the traditional role as family workers. The adversarial/investigative/prosecutorial role is accordingly less emphasised, but not ignored by CP caseworkers, when poverty is a prime precipitating factor in child neglect and abuse.

Conclusion

We welcome the NSW “Their future matters” 2017 reform initiatives, especially use of US evidence-based practice models like MST-CAN[®] or FFT-CW HR[®] and FFT-CW LR[®]. Also welcomed are SafeCare[®] and Treatment Foster Care Oregon[®] (TFCO) (formerly Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)) (Ozchild, 2018). Hopefully, this will lead to the introduction of further evidenced based models in relation to other areas of practice in Australia. After all, scientific evidence should not be culture bound.

NSW is, however, still left with the task of reforming CP practice as the majority of families where a substantiation of child abuse or neglect has been made will not be served by MST-CAN[®] or FFT CW[®], but will be left with the usual FaCS practice interventions. It is into this space that the navigating and coaching approach to CP practice, as

FIGURE 1

Navigating – example A (positive). Comment: The rules are designed to foster a cooperative relationship with the CP caseworker as this will encourage the CP caseworker to think positively about you as parents and the possibility of a child being restored to your care.

Peer advocate to parents of a child who has been taken into care.

There are some golden rules that you have to remember when working with CP caseworkers.

When you talk with a CP caseworker you should be polite. You must not shout, swear or threaten. If you do any of those things the CP caseworker may form a poor opinion of you.

If you are involved in alcohol abuse or drug use that has to stop right now. This applies to everyone living in your house/apartment.

If a CP caseworker asks you to undertake urine tests to prove that you are drug free, agree without hesitation and do not miss any tests.

Make sure that the place where you live is clean and tidy and that it is a safe place for children. A dirty house may be seen by CP caseworkers as you not caring.

If the CP caseworker asks you to attend any courses, such as parenting, anger management or about domestic violence, show a willingness to do so. There is little use arguing that you know all that stuff already, as that will be seen as you not cooperating with the protection process, and that will go against you.

If a CP caseworker comes to your house/apartment always welcome them and let them inspect where you live if this is what they want to do.

If you do not understand something that is being said to you by a CP caseworker ask them to explain.

Do not write a letter of complaint about a CP caseworker to the Minister, Member of Parliament or the Ombudsman, or at least not until after your case is finalised.

FIGURE 2

Navigating – example B (negative). Comment: This behaviour may cause the CP caseworker to form a negative view of you as parents. Under these circumstances the Department will probably seek an order for the child to be placed into the care of the Minister. In the longer term this may mean guardianship to kin or a foster carer.

Peer advocate to parents of a child who has been taken into care.

The following is not the way to behave towards CP caseworkers, it may put you in a bad light.

I was furious and I told the CP caseworker I'd find out where she/he lived and

She/he was interfering with my rights as a parent and I'll bring up my child the way I want.

She/he was ignoring my human rights as a parent and I'll write letters of complaint and get her/him sacked.

Then I walked out of the Department shouting C...t and B...d and violently slammed the office door.

She/he is just a mongrel.

FIGURE 3

Coaching – example C (positive). Comment: Careful step by step support from the CP caseworker. The parent is helped to fulfil the CP agency's expectations. The parent's motivation to attend and complete the anger management or other course is reinforced.

CP caseworker to parent.

What we need you to do is an anger management course. There are a number of agencies that provide these courses. The agency nearest to you is [insert name here]. Would you like me to call them and book a place for you?

Parent. Yes please.

CP caseworker makes the call and books a place for the parent on an agreed date.

CP caseworker to parent.

How will you get there?

Parent. By bus.

CP caseworker to parent. Will you have the bus fare or do you have an Opal card?

FIGURE 4

Coaching – example D (negative). Comment: No support from the CP caseworker. All action is left up to the parents. Is it a test of the parent's motivation or is it setting up the parent to fail?

CP caseworker to parent.

What we need you to do is an anger management course.

Here is a of list agencies that provide these courses and their telephone numbers. What you need to do is call them and get a place on a course.

outlined in this article, should go. The intention of this reshaping of the CP casework role is to reduce the number of children entering state care while still removing, when necessary, some children from parental care.

Note

Dr Frank Ainsworth is a Guardian ad Litem who regularly appears in Children's Courts throughout NSW. Dr Patricia Hansen is a solicitor who practices in the NSW Children's Court.

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