

Book Review

The impossible imperative. Navigating the competing principles of child protection

Berrick J. D. (2019). **The impossible imperative. Navigating the competing principles of child protection.** New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-067814-2. Hardback. pp. 144. GBP 27.26 including delivery charge. Aust. \$47.81 on 17 December 2018.

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This is a very useful book. It is cleverly conceived, and it is a praise-worthy and successful attempt to throw light on the complexity of child protection practice and the dilemmas practitioners face, as they seek to practice professionally. Highlighted in this analysis is the way a set of fundamental principles, which in themselves may compete with each other, can fuel this situation.

The eight fundamental principles as set out by Berrick are as follows:

1. Parents who care for their children safely should be free from government intrusion in their family.
2. Children should be safe.
3. Children should be raised with their family of origin.
4. When children cannot live with family they should live with extended relatives.
5. Children should be raised in families.
6. Children should have a sense of permanence – that the caregivers they live with will care for them permanently.
7. Families' cultural heritage should be respected.
8. Parents and children (of a certain age and maturity) should have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

What Berrick has done to illustrate both these principles and the decision dilemmas they create is to allow selected Masters of Social Work (MSW) graduates who are child protection practitioners to describe typical, not extraordinary, cases they have completed. She then subjects these cases to analysis against the

framework provided by the above eight principles. In doing so, she shows that “the impossible imperative” is what child protection caseworkers typically encounter in every day practice.

The book contains a number of surprises, not least of all Berrick's statement that:

“The debate about over involvement versus under involvement *in family life* (italics added) puts into sharp relief what our child protection system is not. It is not a child welfare system. It does not attend principally to the welfare or developmental needs of children at risk . . . There is no child well-being system in the United States to which child welfare workers can refer children in need” (Berrick, 2018, p. 28).

In so far as educational, health, homelessness and domestic violence services operate in silos and are not necessarily mandated to provide a service to families, the same is true in Australia.

She then asks other important questions, such as:

“When did safety become the guiding principle in child welfare? And is the principle broad enough to capture children's needs” (p. 38)?

“Today 'safety organised practice' serves as the framework that characterises public child welfare responses to families . . . Should our framework be different? Would children's well-being be better secured if we relied on a 'best interests' standard instead of a safety standard” (p. 39)? (Berrick, 2018, p. 38-39)

It can, of course, be argued that child protection services in Australia do rely on the “best interests” standard, given the legislative prominence afforded to this ill-defined term. Whether this results in children's well-being being better secured is a question for debate, given the documented dismal outcomes for many children and families who become involved with child protection services.

In summary, this book is a must read for any social work student or newly qualified social worker who is considering applying for a position as a child protection caseworker. The stories presented here by 15 MSW graduates from the University of California of their experience as child protection caseworkers brings to life what it is like on a day-to-day basis to hold such a position. These stories are like no other accounts that I know of. In that regard they are of immense value to new workers as well as members of the general public, especially those who want to know about these matters and do not want to rely on various media presentations of child protection services that portray them as incompetent and failing to protect children. This book shows this is far from true.

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