



THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN State Intervention and Family Life.

Robert Dingwall, John Eekelaar and Topsy Murray.
Basil Blackwell, 1983. 283pp. \$62 (hardback)

Australia has lagged behind some other countries, notably U.S.A. and the U.K., in its recognition of child abuse as a growing social problem. In our efforts to catch up, we have not always taken account of the competing preoccupations around the high value we place on the rights of parents to bring up their children in the way they prefer without interference in our liberal society. In most States we have introduced mandatory reporting of child abuse, resulting in a flood of notifications. Unfortunately, as one might expect in a time of budgetary restraint, there has been no commensurate increase in services to support and assist those families who are the subject of the notification. Furthermore, what is even harder to accept, is the fact that children have suffered recurring maltreatment, and in some cases died in spite of being known to the protective services authority. Thus there is increasing scepticism about the effectiveness of protective services. Our society wants it both ways. We prize our family privacy and autonomy, yet we are outraged when a child is abused. This is the central dilemma faced by child protection workers.

Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray's book is a "must" for those engaged in child protection work, and for anyone whose work brings them into contact with children and families. It is a very readable analysis of the process of identification of child maltreatment. The authors make no apology for not addressing causes of child abuse or possible management and nor should they. Their book makes a very important contribution to the literature on child maltreatment and raises questions that are at times disturbing. While it is primarily concerned with the British system, and there is the occasional use of irritating acronyms, the study is clearly applicable to the Australian scene, in spite of differences in legislative provision.

The authors followed an evolutionary approach to the study. This enabled them to modify and adapt, as new issues emerged from their analysis. Originally they intended to concentrate on court hearings as a means of examining the way decisions were arrived at in matters of

child maltreatment. However, the authors soon recognised that the processes of identifying or defining child maltreatment begin long before the matter is brought before the court. They decided that the way in which cases passed between agencies, particularly health and social services, also required analysis, particularly since the latter had discretion about accepting referrals. To examine the way screening of cases took place, the authors painstakingly tracked candidate cases of child maltreatment from the point of referral. They took account of those making the referral as well as those receiving, and analysed the process of sifting which took place. They examined case records, observed front line and middle management and visited three hundred and twelve households with either social workers or health visitors.

It has become fashionable to view protective services workers as intrusive and as paying too little attention to individual and family rights. The picture of decision making which emerges from this study stands in stark contrast to that view. The findings of this research indicate that not only do protective workers seek the least coercive course of action, but they seem to operate under what Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray call the "rule of optimism". They tend to define as maltreatment only those cases where "no excuse or justification can be found", and to seek court intervention where there is no room for voluntary action. The authors are quick to point out that by so acting, the protective workers are operating within the charter granted to them by the society. A society which prizes family life and jealously guards the values of family privacy and autonomy.

How to find the point of compromise between those values and the right of a

child to protection is addressed in the last chapter of the book. The authors suggest some legislative and administrative reform and stress the importance of competent workers in the front line. Interestingly, they do not recommend mandatory reporting, seeing this as a haphazard way of protecting "the smallest and least socially visible children". The authors conclude that a definitional process based on multiple definers e.g. the community, social services, health services, and the courts, results in an interdependence in the kinds of criteria used, and enables an adjustment to the often conflicting interests which are intrinsic to the problem of child maltreatment – those of parents, the child and community.

Protective workers will find much in his book to help them make sense of the maze of ambiguities they face as they carry out their very complex responsibilities on behalf of the community. Furthermore, there are lessons here for the protective services critics and not only those who have taken upon themselves the civil liberties watching brief. This analysis also contains very clear messages for those who complain of bureaucratic delay in the event of the protective service appearing to fail to protect a child. While community outrage is fitting at such times, to engage in the inevitable witchhunting and posturing from the moral high ground, is to ignore the fact that "child protection raises complex moral and political issues which have no one right technical solution. Practitioners are asked to solve problems every day which philosophers have argued about for the last two thousand years."

Robin Clark,
Department of Community Services,
Melbourne, Victoria.

BOOKS RECEIVED FOR REVIEW

Eastman, M.
Grimshaw, P.
Heap, K.

Inglis, K.
Koopman-Boyden, P. & Scott, C.
Miller, A.

Miller, A.
Nixon, M.
Oakley, McPherson & Roberts
Ramsay, D.K. (ed.)
Richards, L.
Ritchie, Jane & James
Scull, A.
Teacher, A. & Carpenter, J.
Winn, M.

Education for Family Life
Families in Colonial Australia
The Practice of Social Work With Groups:
The Systematic Approach
Living Mistakes
The Family and Government Policy in New Zealand
For Your Own Good – Hidden Cruelty in Child Rearing and the
Roots of Violence
The Drame of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self
Issues in Psychological Practice
Miscarriage
Family School and Community
Having Families
The Dangerous Age
Decarceration
Using Family Therapy
Children Without Childhood