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# The Development of a Family Support Agency Protocol for its Relationship with Protective Services — A Joint Effort by Clients, Staff and Protective Services

Wendy O'Brien

Director, Alys Key Family Care

## ABSTRACT

Family support agencies that undertake work with families where protective concerns are evident, are frequently placed in the difficult situation of deciding whether to involve Protective Services, and if so, how to do this and remain a helping agency in the eyes of the parents.

Alys Key Family Care has found it immensely valuable to meet with a group of service users to consider the issues of (1) passage of information from the agency to Protective Services, and (2) circumstances which warrant involvement of Protective Services.

Unlike many professionals, the client group expressed clear and consistent views about what situations warranted notification to a Protective Service, and as a result, the agency has now developed a pamphlet for all new client families that outlines how the agency handles these issues.

The paper describes the difficult situations faced by professionals in family support services when Protective Services become involved with their client families and a clear and open policy does not exist between the agency and its clientele. It outlines the process adopted by Alys Key Family Care to actively involve service users in the development of agency policy, and describes the specific guidelines for Protective Service involvement generated by the client advisory group.

## INTRODUCTION

From 1896 until October 1985, the Children's Protection Society operated the welfare-based child protection service in Victoria. Now the Community Services Victoria, through their Protective Services units and the Victoria Police, through the Community Policing Squads, are the only authorised child protection services.

During the 90 years that the Society was involved in protective services, the multi-generational cycle of child maltreatment became very evident. Whilst rescuing children from families may have provided for the children's immediate safety, it rarely prepared children to become confident, capable parents in the next generation.

As part of the Society's change in direction from protective intervention to prevention of child abuse and neglect, the Society established Alys Key Family Care — a family development service which aims to facilitate change within families who are experiencing severe difficulty rearing their children, so that they can adequately cope with their child rearing role.

Priority access to the Service is given to those families where the children are otherwise likely to be admitted to State Care.

The Service is available to families who live within the municipalities of Heidelberg, Diamond Valley and Eltham. A team comprised of family

counsellor, family aide and child care worker can be established to work with the total family unit (depending on the family's needs) and group programmes operating from the Centre complement the individual and family work being done by the team. The groups aim to enhance personal development and parenting skills, provide social support, encourage children's development and facilitate positive interaction between parents and their children.

## The Families

Many of the families seen at Alys Key Family Care experience problems in every area of family functioning. The family unit is under threat, and the parents are having immense difficulty coping on a daily basis with their lives. Parenting problems are pronounced and parent/child interactions are often characterised by unpredictable explosive outbursts, or by an emotionally unavailable parent, pushing away or not responding to the child's needs.

The children often show behavioural disturbances and/or developmental delay. The families have few supportive relationships amongst friends, neighbours or relatives, and whilst they are often well known to other community services, they are more likely to be known as system users than as families who make constructive use of community resources.

It was not surprising that when our Research Officer traced the prior involvement of the 62 families involved during the first two years of the Alys Key Family Care Service, she discovered that 42 had had prior contact with Protective Services'. Child maltreatment, in all its forms, had been identified strongly by the community within our client group of families.

## The Dilemma

To be effective with the parents, counsellors need to establish trusting relationships — an important ingredient of the therapeutic alliance. Yet, how can counsellors be seen as 'trustworthy', and also ensure that parents provide safe family environments for the children and use Protective Services to ensure the safety of the children when the parents demonstrate they cannot do this?

This is the dilemma that exists for workers in all family support agencies, yet much more so in the case of Alys Key Family Care, because of its target client group. For Alys Key Family Care to locate and link in with its high risk families, it must work in closely with Protective Services. In referring families to Alys Key Family Care, protective service workers need to entrust the Service with close monitoring of the protective concerns of the children. If Protective Services learn that Family Support Services fail to use protective intervention when warranted, they should not be referring families on to that service.

## Problems Encountered in Attempting to Maintain a Therapeutic Alliance with Families, and also Maintain Co-operative Working Relationships with Protective Services:

### 1. *The Society's Past Role of Protection*

Having been previously involved in protective-intervention work, it was widely assumed amongst other local agency workers and some clients, that Alys Key Family Care workers would be eager to intervene and seek removal of children at the first indication of concern for the welfare of children. Rumours that Alys Key Family Care was 'part of the Welfare' circulated in the West Heidelberg community. Consequently, if one of our families was reported to a protective service by someone else, the family involved and other workers tended to blame us. This was despite a very honest, up front approach that has existed since the beginning of the Service, that parents are told of any concerns we see for the well-being of their children, and are forewarned of us involving Protective Services.

### 2. *Removal of Children from Families Involved with A.K.F.C. Was Seen as Betrayal of the Parent's Trust*

Although Alys Key Family Care has accepted and worked intensively with families since its opening in 1986, in only six families have children been removed.

However, in two of these cases, the parents have felt a great sense of betrayal from the Service. They felt they had trusted us to allow us to get really close (in fact, closer than with anyone else), yet we had betrayed their trust by recommending their children be removed. These parents became extremely hostile towards the Service and could not accept their own role in the harm being done to the children. Alys Key Family Care became the convenient scapegoat and these parents were vocal in the West Heidelberg community about 'Alys Key Family Care's betrayal of their trust'.

### 3. *Case Conferences*

The local practice in holding case conferences had been to inform parents of the meeting, but not invite them to be present. We believe this action is very disempowering for the parents and non-verbally it says to them, "We don't want to hear what you have to say about your children" and "We don't trust you to respond appropriately if you hear professionals say negative things about your parenting".

Parents are not in a position of being able to change their behaviour unless they know and understand the concerns that others have about their parenting.

Case conferences provide an excellent opportunity for involving parents in the decision-making process about their children, and for professionals to present expectations to the parents. It is not an easy task to chair and conduct case conferences with the parents present, but these are skills that workers need to learn<sup>2 3 4 5 6</sup>.

If Alys Key Family Care workers were involved in these case conferences without the presence of the parents, the seeds of doubt were sown in the parents' minds — "What is she saying behind my back?", "Do I really trust her to stand up for me?" The whole process became an alienating one.

#### 4. *A Protocol Designed by Staff*

As each of the above problems became apparent, an internal protocol for handling each particular situation was developed. Whilst the staff felt they were acting in the family's best interests, the parents were not aware of the protocol being followed and they had not contributed to its development. It became clear that a staff protocol alone was not sufficient to overcome the problems previously outlined. We felt it was time to share our concerns about our agency's relationship with Protective Services with clients and develop some practical guidelines that could be known, not just by staff, but by all families using the Service.

### **The Problems with Inter-Professional Co-Operation in the Child Abuse Field**

In Britain and Victoria, enquiries into the non-accidental deaths of children have concluded that the professional helping system has failed the children concerned. In Britain a great deal of protocol development and the setting of practice standards within helping professions, has emerged in response to the enquiry findings into the deaths of Simon Peacock (1978), Karen Spencer (1978) and Maria Colwell (1974). In Victoria protocol development for inter-agency collaboration once child abuse is detected, is still in its infancy.

Hall and Stevenson<sup>6</sup> have devoted a whole book to looking at aspects of Inter-professional Co-operation in the area of child abuse. They conclude that the requirement of the effective collaboration of a multi-disciplinary team creates a very complex system fraught with difficulties. Each professional brings to the forums their own professional identity and frame of reference in addition to their own personal reaction to the problem. Organisational arrangements on their own are insufficient to ensure the co-operation of professionals to the end of protecting children. Nevertheless some excellent guidelines are suggested for the management of case conferences (pp. 80-105).

Davies<sup>7</sup> and Dale and Davies<sup>8</sup> and Roberts et al.<sup>9</sup> have highlighted the issues of "professional dangerousness" when professionals opt out of their control and authority responsibilities, and therapy is offered without protection for children first being established. Both have also highlighted how *dangerousness* can occur within the inter-agency transactions . . . "The many British public fatal child abuse enquiries demonstrate vividly that inter-agency conflicts and lack of synchronisation of services can seriously interfere with successful identification, treatment and management of child-abusing families"<sup>8</sup> (p. 451).

Molin and Herskowitz<sup>10</sup> have described the dynamics that lead to inappropriate or collusive involvement of clinicians with families and protective case

workers. The capacity of the helping system to mirror the functioning of clients has also been documented<sup>11 12 13</sup> . . . "the range of community and professional agencies may play a pathological role, unintentionally contributing to and maintaining child-abusing dynamics in families". Dale and Davies (p. 449).

In our endeavours to collaborate to protect children and prevent child abuse, we need not only protocols, but processes that ensure that the professional helping system does assist those most at risk, the children. The most heartening work in this area has come out of Britain. Moore<sup>3</sup> has seriously questioned the practice of excluding parents from case conferences.

Many abusive parents have low self-esteem and are isolated with acute feelings of powerlessness and impotence. If this is so, are we not increasing these feelings, by holding meetings that vitally affect their freedom and future without their presence?

Child abuse so often is clouded in secrecy. It seems obvious to me that many professionals get caught up in the secrecy too, by not being direct and honest with parents about the concerns they see.

A relationship built on collusion is not sound — if workers fear their confrontation will put an end to their working relationship, then I would agree that the relationship had no sound basis anyway. My experience indicates that the very process of tabling concerns with parents, if done with an empathic concern for the parents' position, but not minimising the concerns, can be a turning point in the relationship towards a much more open and constructive working relationship.

The Rochdale N.S.P.C.C. team in England<sup>4</sup> and Waters' have developed a format for Network Meetings which involve parents and helping professionals in considering the protective concerns and the family in its wider network of helping services. At Network Meetings, the parents are asked to state their view of the helping network. The professionals write down what they have to offer the family and this is given to the parents. The Chairperson clarifies for the family which services the family has to receive (e.g., statutory protective services assessment) and which services are voluntary. The parents are put in a position of power by being asked to select the voluntary services with which they wish to continue working. In a workshop led by Murray Davies in 1986, I was certainly challenged to consider why the parents, who the professionals seemed so keen to denigrate, were excluded from so many of the decisions when child abuse was identified. I was also acutely conscious of how my own perceptions of parents were altered (usually they became more negative) when I attended case conferences of just professionals. It therefore seemed imperative to involve the parents more meaningfully in the whole process.

### **The Client Management Advisory Group**

In an attempt to resolve the dilemmas, I convened a Client Management Advisory Group. This consisted of five parents — four mothers and a father who were currently involved with the Alys Key Family Care Service. Each parent had been approached personally first on an individual basis, and this was followed up with a letter specifying in writing the purpose of the meeting.

As I mentioned to you, the first area that I want to discuss is Alys Key Family Care's relationship and liaison with the Protective Services — both Community Services Victoria and the Community Policing Squad.

It is important for us as an agency to be clear about the steps that are taken when Protective Services become involved with families where we are also involved. It is also important for us as an agency to know clearly under what circumstances we would consider contacting Protective Services if we believed that children were gravely at risk in any of the families we see.

I would hope that by meeting with you that we can make some suggestions to staff and Committee of Management and that ultimately a protocol will be established that everyone within the agency, including families, will know about.

The participating parents were vitally interested in the issues, particularly as four of the parents had previously been involved with Protective Services, and two had experienced removal of their children from their care. Whilst discussion was difficult to control because of each parent's strong desire to express their opinions without listening carefully to other's contributions, what emerged was quite surprising.

The parents were all adamant that Alys Key Family Care had a definite and paramount responsibility to protect children, and that cases of severe and persistent abuse needed to be reported to Protective Services. Parents were entitled to have Alys Key Family Care workers spell out their concerns and expectations for the parents to protect their children. However, if this failed to occur within a definite time frame, Alys Key Family Care *had* to involve Protective Services!

Unlike many professionals, the client group was able to quickly define and agree upon what constituted severe abuse and neglect. Their definitions had a clarity and simplicity that I had not encountered before in my eight years of being in the protective services field.

### **Guidelines Developed**

It was decided to compile a simple straightforward pamphlet that could be given to all parents using the service. The pamphlet outlines to parents exactly where Alys Key Family Care stands when workers encounter child abuse and neglect, and the steps that happen from thereon. The pamphlet defines situations that warrant involvement of Protective Services, and outlines the protocol adopted by agency workers, if Protective Services become involved at somebody else's request. The pamphlet is included as an Appendix. Both Protective Services have been consulted in the development of the protocol, but neither suggested alterations to the guidelines basically proposed by the client group.

### **The Future**

By distributing the pamphlet to all our client families, present and future, and by discussing our protocols and procedures within the network, we are hopeful that many of the problems Alys Key Family Care has encountered in maintaining trust and honesty with parents and still ensuring that the children are protected, will be overcome. It has certainly created greater clarity for the staff of the

Service, and the process of liaising with a Client Management Advisory Service has helped the involved parents to be a significant part of the decision-making processes within the agency.

## APPENDIX

### ALYS KEY FAMILY CARE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH PROTECTIVE SERVICES

#### What is Alys Key Family Care?

In 1986 the Children's Protection Society established Alys Key Family Care to assist families who were having difficulties bringing up their children. Through its family work, A.K.F.C. aims to prevent child abuse, and help families stay together. The service is named after Alys Key, who was a major benefactor to the Children's Protection Society.

The Children's Protection Society's protection role is now done by government agencies — Community Services Victoria and the Police.

#### What Alys Key Family Care is About: Being a parent isn't easy.

Staying together as a family can be difficult.

Alys Key Family Care is about helping families stay together. Because we believe that children are best kept with their own families, we are prepared to put a lot of effort into working alongside families to sort out troubles when they happen.

#### When a Family is in Trouble, the Children can be Hurt

We believe that every parent tries hard to be the best parent they can.

We know that when a family is in trouble, everyone is unhappy — parents and kids.

In our work with you, we need to be sure that the kids don't suffer.

This pamphlet tells you what will happen if we see your kids being hurt, or if someone else reports your family to a protective service whilst we are involved.

#### What are Protective Services?

In Victoria, protective services are the Community Services Victoria — Protective Services and the Victoria Police (usually the Community Policing Squad). These government organisations receive and investigate reports of child abuse and neglect. Workers from these organisations are the only ones who can remove children from families. Alys Key Family Care workers do not have this power.

#### What we do when we are Concerned About your Family Situation

1. We will tell you about our concern.
2. We will tell you honestly and fully.
3. We will tell you first.
4. We will expect you to want to try to change what is happening, so that the children are safe and can stay with your family.
5. We will help you work out what has to be done and reach agreement with you about how that can happen.
6. We will set a time with you to discuss whether these changes have occurred.

#### What will happen if Things don't Improve

1. After discussing the lack of change and if we are still so concerned for your children, we will tell you that we will be reporting the situation to the protective services.
2. When making a report, we will give you a copy of any written material that we give to the protective service.

#### What will happen if Someone Else Reports you to a Protective Service

1. When a protective service accepts a report, they visit the family first and tell the family of the concerns alleged in the report.
2. The protective service will then contact the agencies that are involved with the family — this would include contacting A.K.F.C.
3. A.K.F.C. will tell the protective service how you are making use of our service.
4. Before sharing any further family information, we will see you and discuss with you what information is to be given to the protective service. We will not be giving out confidential information without your permission.

#### What will happen if a Case Conference is Called

Sometimes families get help from many agencies. When a protective service becomes involved, they often ask all the helping people to come together to discuss the family. This is called a 'case conference'.

We believe that it is very important for parents to attend case conferences and be allowed to put their case. We do not agree with the practice of calling case conferences if parents are excluded from attending, or where they are not properly heard at such meetings.

#### What we will do if A.K.F.C. is Invited to a Case Conference

1. We will tell the family that it is happening.
2. We will ask the protective service that the family be allowed to attend. If the family is allowed to attend, we will prepare the family for the conference and help them work out what they want to say at the conference. We will then go with the family to support them.
3. If the family is not permitted to attend, we will discuss what the family wants to say at the conference with the aim of communicating this at the meeting.
4. We will attend the conference to ensure the family's strengths as well as difficulties are communicated. We will act as an advocate for the family at the case conference.

#### Situations that we Believe Warrant a Report being made to a Protective Service

We have reached agreement that these situations are so serious that they cannot be allowed to continue in families. We have made these decisions having consulted a number of families that use our service. Each of the families agreed with us that these situations should not be allowed to continue.

1. Persistent physical abuse of children often resulting in bruising.
2. Repeated substance abuse (drugs, alcohol) by the parents to the point that the parents seem unaware of the needs of their children and are unable to tend the children.

3. Neglect of children so that the children are becoming malnourished or ill.
4. Leaving young children unsupervised or allowing young children to wander the streets.
5. Extreme emotional abuse that results in children demonstrating behaviour disturbances.

As mentioned before, if we see these things happening in families, we will be telling you firstly that we are very concerned. If they continue to happen, then we will be reporting the matter to a protective service.

#### 6. Sexual abuse of children

In the case of sexual abuse we will be contacting a protective service immediately in order to protect the child concerned.

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