

Inter-Agency Collaboration : Why is it so difficult? Can we do it better?

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This paper is based on a presentation at the Mission of St James and St John Forum 'Protecting Our Children : Where Do We Draw the Line?' in Melbourne on June 18, 1993. It provides an analysis of why inter-agency collaboration has often remained an elusive goal and identifies some of the structural obstacles to collaboration which are particularly relevant to the current context of child welfare in Victoria. While many of the obstacles to inter-agency collaboration are beyond the domain of the individual practitioner and agency, some suggestions are offered for strategies which can be pursued by practitioners and agencies.

Exhortations to agencies to work together have become well worn and well meaning clichés, particularly in the wake of inquiries into the non-accidental deaths of children yet the goal of inter-agency collaboration has often remained elusive. In contrast to the amount of rhetoric on collaboration, co-operation, and co-ordination, the reality is that it remains very difficult to achieve. Despite an increasing amount of research on inter-organisational relations there has been little application of this body of knowledge to the field of child welfare. In the light of the theory on inter-organisational interaction it is not so surprising that collaboration across organisational boundaries is so challenging. As Hudson (1987) states:

...it may be more realistic to assume not only that inter-organizational collaboration in social welfare has no qualities of spontaneous growth or self-perpetuation but also that organizations strive to maintain their autonomy. From an agency's viewpoint, collaborative activity raises two main difficulties. First, it loses some of its freedom to act independently, when it would prefer to maintain control over its domain and affairs. Secondly, it must invest scarce resources and energy in developing and maintaining relationships with other organizations, when the potential returns on this investment are often unclear or intangible. (p.175).

Recent research which my colleagues and I have conducted on child protection case conferences suggests that practitioners equate effective case conferences with the absence of conflict and that the prospect of inter-agency conflict is a source of work related stress for child protection workers (Scott, Lindsay & Jackson, 1992). Yet collaboration and conflict are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Bisno and others have warned against pathologising conflict and argued that a certain level of conflict may be normative and necessary.

If human service workers are to fulfil the full range of their professional responsibilities and functions, the willingness to engage in conflict transactions is essential... conflicts are an integral part of the functions of the human service worker because differences of interest and commitment are virtually built into the job specification.

(Bisno, 1988, 12)

Assael (1969) distinguishes between constructive and destructive conflict. He found that constructive conflict was more likely to occur under five conditions: where there was a critical review of past actions; more frequent and effective communications between disputants and the establishment of outlets to express grievances; a more equitable distribution of system resources; standardisation of modes of conflict resolution; and creation of a balance of power within the system.

Inter-agency collaboration is not just a matter of organisations talking to

one another for the simple reason that organisations can't talk. Hallett and Birchall (1992) in their very extensive study, *Working Together in Child Protection* which was funded by the British government in the wake of the Cleveland crisis (itself a prime example of the lack of inter-agency collaboration) make the point often ignored by organisational theorists - 'It is people who act, not organisations'. This draws attention to the complex interpersonal processes as well as the inter-organisational processes which may operate in such situations as inter-agency case conferences. They correctly claim that the participants do not form a stable group. 'It is a complex and shifting network, not a team' (Birchall & Hallett, 1992, 8). The participants in this network also come from different professional backgrounds and their interaction occurs against a background of past interactions and in the expectation of future interactions. Each case then can be seen in the light of those which have gone before and those yet to come. In the words of another group of leading British researchers on child protection practice:

A social worker or any other agency worker, has a longer term perspective than the outcome of any particular case. Actions which call their credibility into question on one occasion may jeopardise their ability to succeed in subsequent and more important matters. The result is an emphasis on consensus.

(Dingwall, Eekelaar & Murray, 1983, 164-5)

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The desirability of consensus needs also to be challenged. Just as we should not equate the presence of conflict with the absence of collaboration we should not equate the absence of conflict with the presence of collaboration. Inter-agency collaboration thus involves complex inter-organisational, interpersonal and interprofessional transactions. It is little wonder that it is sometimes so difficult to achieve.

Child welfare – 'A turbulent field'

An aspect which has received little attention in the literature on inter-agency collaboration is the influence of the broader socio-political context. The child protection service system exists within a particularly complex and dynamic socio-political context constituting what organisational theorists Emery and Trist (1965) describe as 'a turbulent field'. Their definition of a turbulent field is:

...a field containing a relatively large number of organisations, inability of agencies to satisfy the demand for services, an unstable social situation, a new programme or piece of legislation, a retracting economy.

To those in the field of child welfare this sounds very familiar. All of these indicators of a turbulent field are present to a marked degree in the Victorian child protection system. There are a number of features which make this a particularly turbulent field at the moment and which pose problems for inter-agency collaboration.

1. The Politicisation of Child Protection

One of the most obvious features of the current context of child protection in Victoria and elsewhere is the politicisation of child protection practice based on highly publicised examples of child protection 'mistakes'. While in the United Kingdom there is a history spanning three decades of the politicisation of child protection practice arising from highly publicised deaths of children, such controversy is of relatively recent origin in Victoria and dates from 1988. As in the UK and the US, in addition to the controversy surrounding the deaths of children

where it is alleged that child protection authorities under-intervened, there have also been highly publicised cases in which the same statutory authority has been accused of over-intervention and unnecessarily removing children from their families.

Thus there are two sides to a politicised child protection tightrope. On one side is the risk of the 'false negative' – the situation in which the degree of risk to the child is underestimated and the child is subsequently abused. On the other side is the 'false positive', the situation in which a child is unjustifiably seen as being in danger and is removed from parental care, often resulting in serious psychological trauma for the child and family. In the last year Victoria has witnessed publicity on both: Daniel Valerio being constructed as a classic 'false negative'; and the 'Children of God' case in which large numbers of children in Victoria and New South Wales were removed by child welfare authorities being constructed (rightly or wrongly) as a 'false positive'.

The child protection pendulum swings back and forth between the false positive and the false negative, the direction of the swing being determined by which is the more politically perilous at that time.

The controversy surrounding the Children of God case prompted the then Premier of Victoria, the Hon. Joan Kirner to publicly joke that the difference between social workers and Rottweilers was that eventually Rottweilers give back the child. While this joke deeply offended many social workers who felt that it demonstrated the Premier's ignorance of how emotionally painful most social workers find the removal of children from their families, it is important to analyse such comments by public figures and the reactions they receive. The Premier's joke and the laughter she received from her audience, reflect a deep ambivalence in

the community toward social workers and the State intruding into the privacy of the family. It is the twin societal outrage, one directed toward those who would hurt and kill children and those who fail to protect them, the other directed toward those who would falsely accuse innocent parents and tear the child from their loving arms, which makes the tightrope so dangerous. And those who walk on the tightrope long enough will eventually fall off on one side or the other, or both.

The child protection pendulum swings back and forth between the false positive and the false negative, the direction of the swing being determined by which is the more politically perilous at that time. It is very likely that both types of errors will occur simultaneously in any child protection system. The significance of certain 'types' of abuse may change which can increase or decrease the threshold for intervention. For example, cases of chronic neglect which actually represent very serious, long term threats to a child's physical and psychological well being may be tolerated while an allegation of sexual abuse based on very flimsy evidence may result in a very powerful response by child protection workers. It is no accident that shifts in policy and practice occur at particular points in time. In the UK, the case of Maria Colwell in the 1970's began a process of tightening a system of controls and what some perceived as over-intervention – 'the remove first and ask questions later' philosophy. In contrast, the Cleveland controversy led to new British legislation which enshrines parental rights and curbs the powers of the social services department. In the current socio-political context in Victoria, child welfare practitioners and agencies are more fearful of the danger of the false negative in cases of physical and sexual abuse, a fear fuelled by recent publicity.

Such fear can give rise to what Parton (1985) describes as 'defensive practice' in which the workers and agencies are primarily driven by the goal of protecting their own back rather than the child. This is, of course, a quite understandable response to the prospect of being publicly and professionally

pilloried. One of the forms of 'defensive practice' which can arise is the game of 'poison ball' or disposing of the high risk case. Whereas in a previous decade agencies such as hospitals would be prepared to work with high risk cases such as those in which a child had been physically abused, now the intervention is limited to making a referral to the child protection agency or the police. While each agency goes through the motions of dealing with the case, often there is no service provided which addresses the family's problems, but the agencies have gone through the motions of protecting themselves from possible accusations of failure to act.

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2. The Paradoxes of New Legislation

A new Children and Young Persons Act has recently been introduced in Victoria and is based on principles of diversion from the child protection system, the maintenance of children within the natural family, the rights of children and parents to participate in administrative proceedings and the introduction of appeal mechanisms (Carney, 1989). Following intense political pressure focussed on the death of a Daniel Valerio a further amendment to the Act has introduced mandatory reporting of all suspected physical and sexual abuse by a broad range of health, educational and welfare professionals. The provisions of the Act can thus be seen as incorporating ideologically opposed elements - mandatory reporting is aimed at bringing into the child protection system all children who may

be subject to abuse even if the family problems are being addressed while the rest of the act is very liberal (I would go so far as to describe it as *laissez-faire*) and seeks to minimise the power of the State in the life of families.

The paradox of this is that while professionals are now required to make more notifications, it is increasingly difficult to obtain a statutory order. There has been a dramatic reduction in the number of children under Statutory Orders, a trend occurring in anticipation of the new Act and intensified since its introduction. While referrals continue to escalate, the number of children whose cases come to the Children's Court diminishes. In the year 1991-2 there were 16,768 suspected abuse cases referred to the child protection service in Victoria, representing a 15% increase on the previous year. Of these approximately 8000 or only one half were subject to a detailed investigation, and of those, 1,938 were placed on the Child Abuse Register, of which 872 were the subject of a Protection Application to the Children's Court, representing a 20.3% decrease in the number of Protection Applications of the previous year. The number of children for whom an order is actually granted is similarly decreasing (CSV Annual Report, 1991-2).

Child welfare practitioners thus face the prospect with which their counterparts in the US are so familiar - of threatening their relationship with parents by being legally obliged to make a notification rather than exercising their professional discretion about this, only to discover that the child protection service is either unable or unwilling to seek an order. In the small number of cases in which an order is obtained, it is usually a Supervision Order under which the child remains at home and it often fails to address the problem in the family. For the small number of children who require a permanent and stable alternative to their biological family for the child, there is diminished prospect of this happening as, unlike the United States, it is much more difficult to terminate parental rights in Victoria for that very vulnerable group of children who need this. One of the outcomes of this scenario is that non-government agencies put pressure on the child protect-

ion agency to take statutory intervention while the child protection agency, sitting in the shadow of the Children's Court, understandably applies criteria for seeking a statutory order based on second guessing the decision of the magistrate. The staff in the agency dealing with the child on a face to face basis feel powerless to act while the statutory child protection workers feel caught between the notifying agency and the court. This causes enormous tension between agencies.

3. Major Inter-organisational Changes

Major changes have occurred at the inter-organisational level, including the State child welfare authority assuming responsibility for child protection investigation from the non-government agency, the Children's Protection Society in 1985. The women police also had an historic central role in child protection assessment while the statutory child welfare agency had previously only dealt with child welfare cases after they had been taken to the Children's Court. Child abuse investigation role was thus very new to the Department and required a major shift from a welfare role to a prosecution role requiring the collection and presentation of evidence in the minority of cases which proceed to court, a shift which has been difficult to achieve. In the second half of the 1980's, the statutory child protection agency and a specialist unit within the police force shared the investigatory role, but this so-called 'dual track' system was subsequently phased out, leaving the 'welfare-based' state child protection agency as the lead investigatory authority. This move was strongly opposed by the police who perceived this policy shift as a displacement of their traditional role in child protection. In many regions the relationship between police and Health and Community Services remains strained, making a co-ordinated response in cases in which both agencies are involved very problematic.

4. Major Intra-organisational Changes

There have been corresponding changes at the intra-organisational level. Initially there were separate units

dealing with pre-court child protection investigation and post-court supervision. These are being integrated into single units in which all staff perform both functions. In some places sub-cultural differences existed between these units with the post-court units being perceived by the pre-court units as permissive in regard to protecting children and the pre-court units being perceived by the post-court units as over-interventionist and lacking in understanding of the longterm consequences of their actions. One of the advantages of the integrated units is that theoretically it should allow greater continuity in the staff handling a particular case but there continues to be a high staff turnover in the child protection service. Moreover, while it may be too early to accurately assess the outcome of the integrated units, anecdotal evidence suggests that the increasing rate of child protection notifications and the priority given to a quick response to these new cases is leading to a decrease in service to the children who are already on orders. Thus the resources are diverted from the very high need group of children who have actually been placed on orders to a group of children which, while containing the occasional high risk child abuse case, is largely composed of relatively low risk cases which, upon investigation, do not proceed to court. This situation leads to frustration among the staff in the other agencies involved in the case who feel that they are left 'holding the baby' are neither funded or mandated to carry out the case management role.

5. Categorical Funding and 'Single Input Services'

Categorical funding in which agencies receive funding for very specific services and client needs typically provide what has been described as 'single input' programs for individuals and families with multiple needs. This leads to the fragmentation of the case and the involvement of multiple organisations, and increases the chances that something will go wrong in the communication between services. It also increases the prospect of the 'splitting' of different services into the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. This also occurs between services

within large agencies where the boundaries between programs, often located in different places, can be as rigid as those between agencies. An integrated intervention individually tailored to the specific needs of each family is thus hard to achieve.

6. Severe Cutbacks to Government and Non-government Services

In the face of a severe economic recession and under a conservative 'law and order' government in Victoria, there have been major cutbacks in spending in all areas except police and child protection investigation. But a child protection service cannot stand alone. It is totally dependent on the infrastructure of the broader service system. This consists of public sector services in areas such as health, education and housing, including universal, primary prevention programs such as the maternal and child health services, secondary prevention and early intervention programs such as psychological and social work services in the Ministry of Education, and tertiary programs such as child and adolescent mental health services. In Victoria to a greater degree than other States, non-government organisations are a central part of this infrastructure at all three levels. To expand child protection investigation services at the expense of prevention and treatment services is the same as having a health system in which ambulances and Casualty Departments are increased while immunisations programs and surgical wards are closed. It is a recipe for disaster in the form of the United States child protection system. A central question is what is the proper balance between prevention, investigation and treatment services in a 'good enough' child welfare system? This question is beyond the scope of this paper but what can be said of the current scenario of escalating need and increased competition for diminishing resources is that inter-agency collaboration at the case and program level is less likely to occur. At the program level this is likely to surface in competition for resources. At the case level it is likely to surface in what is termed organisational 'gatekeeping' aimed at excluding cases of the resource

hungry 'too hard basket' variety. This was evident in our study of case conferences, particularly for families where the prognosis is poor such as parents with an intellectual disability, substance abuse problem or chronic psychiatric disorders of which there are vastly increased numbers in the current child protection population compared with a decade or two ago.

As a result of the pressure of work there is a reluctance on the part of the child protection service to take accept notifications and a willingness to close cases by pressuring health, educational and non-government child welfare agencies to 'monitor' the situation. The games of 'poison ball' and 'gatekeeping' are, in organisational terms, rational forms of behaviour, aimed at minimising risks to the agency and conserving resources. However, such strategies are likely to bring agencies into head on conflict with one another, each seeking to resist referrals or force referrals on to others. The end result is a tug of war.

What can we do?

All of the above can easily induce a state of powerlessness. There is already a risk that a state of powerlessness is reaching epidemic proportions in the child welfare system in both the statutory and non-government sectors. A sense of powerlessness, as the stress researcher Seligman had demonstrated, can lead to 'learned helplessness', a belief in the futility of one's actions and a state of despair in which one ceases to make any attempt to deal with the situation in which one finds oneself. This is what 'burnout' is really all about, and it is also what often characterises the families in the child welfare system. They have become totally demoralised and see themselves as the victims of external powerful forces, of which we are usually one! It is hard for demoralised workers to help demoralised families. They drag each other further down.

While it is important to recognise the limitations of our capacity as individuals and as separate agencies to change these structural barriers to inter-agency collaboration, it is also important that we recognise the extent of what we can change. At the level of the individual worker and his or her agency, it is possible, within limits, to work toward

more effective collaboration. Many practitioners are already doing these and other things.

1. Recognise that inter-agency conflict is predominantly structural not personal

Even though we may experience inter-agency conflict as a matter of personalities, and personalities are indeed important in the equation, structural factors such as competition for scarce resources, incongruent roles or overlapping mandates are more significant sources of poor inter-agency relationships. It is important to recognise the different organisational interests, their's and your's, which are at stake. While it would be simplistic to assume that a 'win, win' outcome is possible in many child protection cases, training in the use of problem-solving conflict resolution skills and the acknowledgment of the different interests of the various 'stakeholders', could be valuable strategies in reducing the level of destructive conflict and worker stress (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Making these different interests more explicit may create the space for negotiation of differences. Reflect upon the inter-organisational conflicts in a way that allows the different parties to get some distance.

Try to debrief on conflicts that have got out of hand. We will often reach out to our families after a conflictual exchange and try to redress it but we rarely do this with one another. Often the same thing will surface in case after case and we need to identify the underlying issues which are being expressed. For example, involving parents in case conferences at the pre-court level is now part of Health & Community Services policy, but this is often not handled well and in many cases is having a damaging effect not only on the agency's relationship with the family but with agencies' relationships with one another. This is an issue which needs to be explored and perhaps taken up at a regional level in an inter-agency staff development program. This will be more useful than staff development conducted within the organisation at a centralised level.

2. Build goodwill at an interpersonal level.

In an area in which there is high staff turnover, just maintaining familiarity with the faces and names on the other end of the telephone is a necessary precondition to an effective working relationship. Opportunities for informal contact, preferably with some

positive social interaction, need to be sought and exploited.

3. Build goodwill at an interagency level.

This requires the agency rather than just its individual members, to engage in direct interaction and this can happen in ways which involve varying degrees of participation : developing an inter-agency protocol; jointly organising an information day or seminar on an issue of common concern; arranging visits of students, trainees or new staff to each other's agencies; or at the more ambitious end of the spectrum of involvement, developing a formal staff exchange program. It is best to start with modest initiatives that do not threaten the autonomy of either organisation and which therefore have a greater chance of succeeding.

4. Avoid making the other agency into the common enemy

However tempting, try to avoid turning agencies with which you need to collaborate into 'the common enemy' against which your agency develops its sense of group cohesion and identity. This is an old strategy in international and domestic politics but it is very destructive and we need to recognise it for what it is - a way of avoiding dealing with internal problems by displacing them on to an external source. Ultimately it is a poor basis on which to attempt to build group cohesion. Organisations which are so inter-dependent as those in the child welfare field cannot afford the negative feedback loops which this creates, with escalating conflict and the sort of 'myth making' typical of inter-tribal warfare where each agency tells horror stories about the atrocities of the other side. Inevitably it is the child and the family which gets caught in the cross fire. We have all witnessed situations in which the case has become the vehicle of inter-agency power struggles which have nothing to do with the family and yet which are acted out in ways that are very destructive to the family. This is pathological organisational and group behaviour and we have a professional responsibility to recognise it and deal with it.



5. Form coalitions with other agencies on a broader agenda of change

This is not always possible because agencies differ in what this agenda should be and some agencies and individuals' interests actually further their own interests by engaging in confrontation with one another in the wider political arena. Notwithstanding this, there are many opportunities to work together toward changes in policy. Collectively individuals and agencies can achieve a great deal and this is why being part of a broader coalition of agencies and having strong peak bodies has never been more important than it is now.

6. Build our knowledge base on effective collaboration

We could build on our own and the experiences of other States and countries to a far greater degree than we currently do. We tend to be very parochial and not to examine what is happening elsewhere. Information is often easily obtained through professional journals and conferences and this can be followed up on an individual or agency basis. Resources can be obtained to pursue initiatives and philanthropic trusts are usually very responsive to well researched proposals relating to innovative programs and demonstration projects.

In relation to the structural obstacles to inter-agency collaboration which I have outlined, there are a number of ways in which these are dealt with elsewhere. For example, we could study closely the Queensland experience of SCAN teams (inter-agency Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect Teams) and the Western European 'Confidential Doctor' program, both of which have operated for a long time. The statewide system of SCAN Teams in Queensland oversees the initial child protection investigation process. The SCAN team is composed of a core group of the same individuals with seniority from the medical profession (typically the regional hospital), the police and the child welfare agency, who meet regularly to oversee all new cases in their area in an attempt to ensure inter-agency co-ordination. The staff from different agencies who are directly

involved in each new case are invited to that part of the meeting relating to their case. SCAN teams are not without their critics and some of the teams appear to work a lot more effectively than others, but among the advantages of SCAN teams are better sharing of information and the sharing of responsibility for the outcome.

The Confidential Doctor scheme has operated for many years in the Netherlands and in Germany and provides a service which parents can access on a confidential basis while the multi-disciplinary team providing the service remains accountable to the community. A recent proposal advanced by Finkelhor, one of the leading US researchers on child abuse, is the modification of mandatory reporting provisions in order to achieve a similar outcome. Faced with the negative consequences of such provisions in the United States, including the continuing high rate of non-compliance by professionals who had good reason to be dissatisfied with the outcome of reporting, Finkelhor and Zellman (1991) recommended that State Child Protection Service agencies grant a 'registered reporter' status to a number of individual professionals with extensive training and experience who had made reports in the past. Under certain circumstances and on a case by case basis, these registered reporters could be exempt from mandatory reporting provisions. Such professionals would still have to inform the child protection service, provide non-identifying details of the case situation, the intervention plan and a rationale for deferring a report unless the situation failed to improve. Periodic reviews of the records of registered reporters would monitor compliance with the system. The guidelines would specify the conditions under which full reporting was required such as when serious harm was imminent or had already occurred or where criminal investigation might be warranted.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these proposals in depth. They are mentioned merely as examples of how we can broaden the range of the options which we are prepared to consider in our policy debates. As well as examining initiatives from other States and countries we would do well to describe and document our own successful endeavours. Analysing our

successes and identifying their 'therapeutic ingredients' – the conditions and strategies under which they seem to work best, is probably more important than describing and documenting how collaboration doesn't happen. We know more about the failures than we do about the successes. Let's build on our strengths. Practice research partnerships between universities and agencies in which the research questions are those of the practitioners not just the academics, is one strategy for pursuing our inquiry. Some of the knowledge about the successful ingredients is already in the heads of practitioners. I suggest we start to unlock the secrets of how such effective collaboration occurs even in the face of what might appear to be unsurmountable obstacles. If we put our collective minds to it I think we could do it even better. ♦

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