



## Introducing Professional Practice

*A Culture of Blame: The way forward*

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The problem with trying to establish a culture of confidence is that if you wanted to achieve it, you wouldn't really want to be starting from here. Years of criticism and negativity have left an impression on the whole system, which is going to be extremely hard to shift. However it might actually help if all of those involved could start to acknowledge some of the realities involved.

First, it's really important for us to recognise that we're never going to totally eradicate child abuse, otherwise we set ourselves up to fail. We've already led ourselves into a path that can lead us into difficulty by calling our system a 'Child Protection System'. That actually implies that it is going to protect children. We don't call it a 'Trying to Protect Children System'. We actually imply in the title we give to the service, that it is going to protect children and, however hard we work, however good a system we have, however well we work together, however effectively we co-operate with parents, we're never actually going to totally do away with child abuse. There will always be some parents who abuse their children. There always have been historically, and there always will be in the future. All we can do is, hope to reduce the prevalence of it. If we make promises to do more than that, then society's going to say to us "look, you haven't delivered what you promised". So we have to recognise that there are going to be some failures. Human behaviour is essentially unpredictable, and we can never hope to capture all the possibilities, however good our systems of assessment may be. The second thing we have to recognise is that the system that we have, for all its faults, it's in fact remarkably effective at preventing the most serious forms of abuse. Thirdly, the professional confidence and skills of those undertaking work in the front line, are currently being constantly eroded, not only by criticism in the media, but also by the ill-considered actions of managers and ministers, who are responsible for this area of work, who constantly send the negative messages, instead of the positive ones that they require.

We need to find a way of communicating the many routine small successes of the system, rather than concentrating entirely on the occasional, though often spectacular, failings that it has. Focus on things that go wrong in child protection comes primarily from the interests of the media. The media aren't interested in the everyday reality of family life, they're not interested in small successes, in a child being made slightly happier, a child being protected from emotional abuse, a child being protected from neglect. They're interested in death and disaster. Their focus is on lurid headline-grabbing cases. When people, who don't know very much about child protection, are interviewed by researchers, who want to find out what they know about child protection, they'll tell you about sexual abuse, they'll tell you about children being killed by their parents. In fact they'll tell you about the exceptional cases, not about the rule. The rule is social workers, hundreds of social workers across the country, working with thousands of families who are neglecting their children, who are finding it difficult to bring them up. They're only working with hundreds of cases involving cases of physical abuse, and sexual abuse of the kind that hit the headlines. All we can try to do is develop a media strategy, which involves making relationships with sections of the media, not so concerned with news. With people concerned with the editorial elements in newspapers, not the front page, but people writing opinion pieces in the middle of the paper somewhere. And we can learn an awful lot from the way the police operate in this area. Police have a very effective strategy for drip-feeding positive stories about their work, to friends within the press. They cultivate relationships, which allow them to get information across routinely about the good work they're doing in areas that people care about. The approach adopted by people working in child protection is completely different. It's a hands-off approach, there's a fear of the media, there's a fear of getting engaged. The response is entirely reactive. You can only get

a story about child abuse from social services department if you push them really, really hard. They never volunteer information about the work that they're doing day by day to make children's lives happier. We really need to radically rethink the way that this whole area is dealt with, in order that we can start to get across some of the positive messages on a routine basis, rather than only dealing with exceptional events when things go wrong.

People working in the field of child protection, have a genuine concern for making life better for children, that's why they're in the job, that's what they want to achieve. Most of the work done by social workers, health visitors, teachers, police officers working in the field of child protection, is both effective and successful. Most of their work is done day by day working with families and with children, to improve the standards of parenting, to make life a little bit better, to help parents understand their children's needs, to understand their emotional needs, to understand their physical needs, to help them to meet their children's developmental needs better; and they're doing this work week in, week out, gradually, gradually lifting the standards of parenting within families. Gradually, gradually improving the quality of children's lives; it's not dramatic; it's never going to hit the headlines. It happens subtly over days, weeks, months, even years and no one sees it apart from the families actually involved in it. No one sees it apart from the children who are benefiting from these...from these kinds of services. It's a confidential service; it's not the kind of thing which is noised abroad, that's really where the greatest successes of the child protection system lie, in the routine improvement of standards, not in the prevention of death and tragedy.