



Key practices for social workers

Parents against injustice

Lesley Ann Cull

Parents against Injustice was set up in 1985. Sue Amphlett, Director of PAIN, tells us why it was set up.

Sue Amphlett

We were set up because myself and my husband got caught up in the system when our youngest daughter had a series of fractures from very minor tumbles. Both her and her sisters name was put on the Child Abuse Register as it as called, and we very much lived in fear that they were going to be removed from us because the professionals kept saying, 'It can't have happened the way you said it did Mrs. Amphlett, the children don't get fractures from minor tumbles like that'. Eventually, quite some time later, and on our insistence at getting second opinions she was diagnosed as probably having mild brittle bone disease. I was a nurse by profession, I was a registered child minder at the time, I'd held very senior posts, I had worked with abused children, I knew what the system was about, and I had an image of myself and my family and my children, that I was a very good mother, and my children were happy contented children, and suddenly I had a complete batch of strangers looking at me with a suspicion that actually I was abusing my children. And we felt so marginalised in the process. Only our GP had met us to any degree or even seen the children. The social worker who came to do the initial interview actually went on holiday the day before the conference, so there was nobody at the conference who knew us, and were sitting to make judgements as to whether these were abused children and whether they should be removed and what action they should take. We spent a long time trying to get help. We thought there must be other people out there who've gone through this; they must be able to advise us what the system is. I didn't know what a conference was, I didn't know what my rights were, I didn't know what the law said, you know, and I considered myself to be reasonably informed person, working within the system as a nurse and a child minder. And we found there wasn't anybody. And certainly there wasn't anybody who was prepared to believe that we might actually not have done anything. And at the end of the process we were very damaged, very traumatized, as were our children, if it nearly destroyed us, and we had the use of a telephone and we could try and get help and, it cost us a lot of money to some legal aid, we were a poor and young family at the time, what is it doing to people less able than us?

Lesley Ann Cull

How do people feel when they go through this experience?

Sue Amphlett

Most people just can't comprehend it. Somebody is looking at you in a way that you cannot comprehend. It is like looking at a fractured mirror of yourself and suddenly you begin to question everything that you thought you were, and this is why people struggle with it so much, that they lose their self esteem, their self respect. There have been one or two people who have been incredibly tough and have not lost that self image, but most of them lose their self image, and of course, if you are a struggling single mum, or a struggling family who's got a lot of social difficulties, got a lot of problems, financial difficulties, you have something like that come on top and people just cannot cope. And they will tell you things like, it wasn't just trying to cope with that particular issue, but I felt I couldn't even wash the dishes any more. I felt I couldn't even get out of bed to take the children to school, because the whole structure of their life which is for most people structured around their children, just disappeared, the base has been taken away out of their triangle and everything just falls through.

Lesley Ann Cull

Why did Sue feel that the process was damaging?

Sue Amphlett

The whole focus was the child protection process. Protecting a child is a very small part of a long process. The point at which you decide to protect a child, a huge other raft of other work has gone on and that is the investigative proceeds of alleged abuse. There was no focus, there was no recognition of what was happening because everybody believed, you know, if I am working in the best interests of the child I can't be doing it any harm can I? It's what I call the Snoopy syndrome. There is a wonderful cartoon of Snoopy who'd left total mayhem behind him and when he got to the end caption he stood there and he said 'But how can I be wrong when I am so sincere?' You know, he just couldn't understand how he caused this mayhem and that's exactly the same attitude and the problem is, of course, you can, the road to hell you know is paved with good intentions, and unless you stop and question what you are doing and evaluate what you are doing you will never see that.

Lesley Ann Cull

Sue gave her opinion of key points that social workers should consider when working with families.

Sue Amphlett

The first one is just because you believe you are doing good doesn't necessarily mean you are. You do have to evaluate what you do, you do have to have standards in what you do, and you do have to be responsible for your own decisions and not place the onus of decision making upon other professionals or practitioners within the group. The second is the things that I have already mentioned, you know, that in fact if you get people needlessly caught up in the system you are not doing them any good. And the ones that you are causing the most harm to, very likely, are going to be the children themselves. There's no work process going into helping families put themselves back together once you have weeded them out of the system. There's no support groups for those families. They don't even appear in the statistics any longer, because the only statistics that are actually being kept are those who are on the register. So if your child isn't on the register you don't even appear in the workload of a local authority once you are weeded out. So all those people have to find a way of putting their lives back together with all the drain that that has on GPs and hospitals and counsellors and schools and their education and so on.