



Key practices for social workers

Experiences of social work

Lesley Ann Cull

Penelope Welbourne, a former social work manager and now a lecturer in social work.

Penelope Welbourne

I am currently teaching social work but for about ten years I have been a practising social worker and then a social work manager. My work has almost entirely been with children and families. So I've worked in a joint investigation team with the police for a year, just doing child protection investigations.

Lesley Ann Cull

I asked Penelope whether there were any issues in particular which were important in social work practice.

Penelope Welbourne

One of the big issues is the issue of power, and use of power, and I think that's an issue which all newly qualified social workers go through a process of coming to terms with the fact that what one is doing is both offering support and attempting to empower people, or help people to become empowered and in carrying out that positive supportive role. And at the same time one carries the responsibility of having access to a range of very powerful legal tools and being able to intervene in a very authoritative way in people's lives, if one has the support of a court to do so, one can remove a child from a family in which that child is clearly being neglected or suffering abuse. But the negative side of that is that in those situations one is going to be working with the family where there is probably a long history of difficulty and abuse and perhaps pain going back through generations, and there is an awful lot of difficulty and distress that one is not able to touch. The supportive and the authoritative role don't always feel as though they balance. You can't offer people the support and the help that they need. You can't help everybody, you have to choose, and you always have to choose the child over the parents at the end of the day and that's something which I think some social workers can find very difficult.

Lesley Ann Cull

Penelope then talked about the key principles which should inform work with children and families

Penelope Welbourne

I think in working with children and families the first thing that needs to inform one's work is respect for the people with whom one's working, and an attempt to understand their individual experience and what their life is like for them. The idea of being non-judgemental is, in a way, impossible because the job does involve making judgements about when parenting isn't good enough, but the principle that should inform making those kinds of judgements is that one does not make spurious judgements and one doesn't make judgements based on prejudice or ignorance. So I think the question of having respect for people and actually putting in the effort to listen to them, to find out and to try to understand their situation as fully as one can is a duty that one has as a social worker. Another principal that is very important is the principle that given a range of possible courses of behaviour, the course that one must choose is always the one which puts the child's need for safety first. So however hard it may be to decide not to take other choices, giving parents another chance for example when they want to demonstrate they can care for a child and perhaps you've tried and you've tried and it's time to say no, you have to make the choice which you feel is in the child's best interests at the end of the day, and prioritize the child's welfare.

I think associated with the principle of respect for people, there's a need for honesty, and people need to know what your role is, they need to know what you might do so that they know that although you may be a friend to them in some senses, they may feel that you are a friend, that your relationship with them is a professional one and that you are in a position to do things which they will certainly not experience as friendly, and which they may feel is very controlling, but that is part of your your role. So that they don't feel betrayed or misled if you do need to exercise statutory powers or make critical judgements or, for example, write a report for a child protection conference which says things which are quite critical of the family's parenting. So I think the duty to be honest on as many levels as possible is a principle that should inform that work.

Lesley Ann Cull

What about partnership with other professionals?

Penelope Welbourne

Partnership is actually crucial to effective work. Without working in partnership with other agencies we are not in a position to carry out the job as it should be done. Social workers work on a basis of continuous assessment of a situation and, and for that assessment you need information and that needs to come from more than one source. If we assess the family purely on the basis of what we see, and ignore information from other sources such as health visitors giving information about health and development, information from the police about things that may be happening, say between the adults and the family, domestic violence for example, which may be affecting the child, then we are not actually able to provide the service that we should be providing to the child and the family. So without partnership we're actually unable to carry out the work that we should be doing.

Lesley Ann Cull

What about partnership with families?

Penelope Welbourne

Unless one works in partnership with the family one doesn't have the right to expect them to be honest with you. And one doesn't enable the family to actually participate in productive relationship with social services if one fails to work in partnership with the family, that one is basically excluding the possibility that families will engage in a positive way to agree the kinds of changes that need to be made in the family, to look at voluntary ways in which those changes may be brought about. And I think one increases the possibility that a family will be angry, resistant, feel alienated from the process of what one is doing, and ultimately what that, that is going to be detrimental to the child. What one wants to aim for ideally is to help a family to understand what social services concerns are, and to engage them in a dialogue which is not a dialogue of equals, in that the family have their own area of special knowledge and also of power in that the family is their family, they know what's going on in the family and they can be more or less cooperative. But on the social services side, we have access to all the machinery that supports our statutory role. So there's a very complicated power relationship, it's, I think it's not just as simple as social services have all the power and the family have none. Powers can be used in a very negative way and the family can just decide to close the door, to give no information, and I think if one fails to address the issue of partnership with a family, in the rather restricted sense in which it's used in social work, one excludes the possibility of a lot of positive work. And I say 'restricted sense' because it's not a partnership where one expects negotiation to be on a fairly equally footing, it is this particular and rather specialized type of partnership which I think takes a particular skill to to manage.

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Penelope then gave an example from practice which illustrated some of the key points she had made so far

Penelope Welbourne

I can think of an example of a young woman who had already had children removed permanently and been placed for long term care with alternative families, who had a child and appeared to be working very well with social services. Prior to the birth of the child she was getting antenatal care for the first time, she was allowing social workers access to her home,

she had improved her living circumstances enormously, and a critical factor in making a positive evaluation of her circumstances was that she said that she had separated from the man who had been her partner and was the father of the other children, who had been, we understand, violent to her, had a drink problem and had been a major factor in creating the difficulties in the previous family which had been effectively disbanded. So we made a reasonably positive evaluation of her ability to care for a child and she did, in fact, manage to care for that child well, and proved she could parent the baby, but we found out subsequently that she was in fact still in a relationship with the same man, that this baby was in fact the child of the same father. And perhaps the balance of power between the two of them had changed and she was able to control her life better, maybe because of our involvement, but we believed that we were working in partnership with her, whereas in fact her agenda was to keep us in ignorance of the real nature of her relationship with the baby's father. The last thing I heard was that the child was actually removed from the child protection register because the level of care that she was giving was very good. So it would seem that we made the right decision but it wasn't based on full information. Had we had full information I think we would have had real doubts about allowing her to parent a child again, which is an interesting question in itself. You know the fact that she withheld information allowed her to demonstrate an ability that she really did have.

Lesley Ann Cull

I asked Penelope what kinds of problems arise in social work practice, and how can these be handled?

Penelope Welbourne

I think in working in partnership with other professionals and other organisations issues are quite complex because different professions have their own theoretical approaches and their own ethos that can cause difficulties because the cultures don't really understand each other very well. I think with the police maybe a justice oriented model that looks at, for example, prosecution of parents where an offence against a child has been committed may not sit well with a social services department who may feel they might like to support the family, and there's the negotiation to be done between the parties to try to find some agreement about what is actually going to actually be best for the child in that particular situation.

Lesley Ann Cull

Are there dilemmas which were particular to working with children and families?

Penelope Welbourne

The problems that arise are perhaps related very often to the emotive nature of the work, that decision making can be very hard, the outcome of an assessment is of such momentous importance for a family that there can be very strong feelings about what the right outcome is and the work does generate very strong feelings. Sometimes just simple distress at the things that one has seen or heard during the day. And it's very important to have somebody to whom one can talk about that, whom one trusts and ideally to have a manager whom one trusts. Unfortunately it's not something that one can prescribe. But it is important that the working relationship between the field worker and their manager is negotiated as well as possible and that both parties actually put some effort into that working relationship so that there is a level of trust and openness and that the field worker can access a responsible person to whom they can talk about their concerns. And it's also important I think to have colleagues for example to whom one can talk about one's feelings where there isn't the element of supervision and management, and having a supportive team is very, very important. Again people do move around quite a bit in social work and teams change their constitution quite frequently. But if one has a supportive team it makes an enormous difference to how one feels in doing the work.