

# The Untouchables

Words are very powerful, they can hurt, heal, illuminate or conceal, the words we choose can completely change the way we see things. The words used in charging those responsible for killing baby Peter, give little clue to the violent sadistic nature of his murder, the charge was 'causing the death of or allowing the death of....'

In the United Kingdom, there are over sixty thousand children and young people in public care, the words we use to describe these are 'looked after' children. Given the risk-averse, 'hands off' approach which currently blights childcare, the choice of these words correctly reflects the present politics of childcare with the implication that these children and young people are passive recipients of some corporate, looking after behaviour.

## Looked After Children

Being 'looked after' usually means that children are either 'cared for' by 'foster carers' or 'care staff'. Perhaps, out of a mistaken desire to respect the biological relationship between parents and children, we no longer have 'foster parents' or 'house parents'. However, replacing the word 'parent' with 'carer' is a disservice to the children: the word 'care' could just as easily describe the behaviour we display when we wash and service a car or feed a goldfish. Every child needs more than just being 'cared for' each child is worthy of, and deserves to be, 'cared about' and is entitled to be 'parented'.

It seems that 'society' will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid the simple reality that children in public care, like all children, need parenting. Adding the word 'good' to parenting, qualifies the need and calls for further explanation. Parenting describes the commitment and responsibility, which is carried out through complex behaviours and skills used to provide for the child's particular needs, to guide, be concerned for, think about, and plan for a growing child. Although the child's biological parents usually carry out the 'parenting' tasks, for children in public care, this is delegated to professionals. In short, we pay people to carry out the 'parenting' tasks on behalf of society.

So can society breathe a sigh of relief? Not at all, the word 'professional' in childcare would seem to refer only to the fact that a payment is being made to the people who act as 'carers'. When we pay to have our house painted 'professionally' we expect the standard of the work to exceed our own 'do-it-yourself' attempts. Likewise if we pay for professional legal or financial advice, our expectations are that the quality of the work will exceed our own amateur efforts. Yet, when it comes to paying people to look after children, our expectations are incredibly low, most foster 'carers' are unqualified and 'care staff' in children's homes require an NVQ level 3 (a requirement which is sporadically enforced). The NVQ is a work-based practical qualification with very little theoretical underpinning and no reference to 'parenting' nor is there any attempt to define or examine the quality of the relationship between the adult and the child.

## A Cross Party Investigation

On the 20th April 2009, The House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, published a report on Looked-after Children which expressed concerns about 'parenting by committee' and championed the importance of 'relationships':

*'We believe that the greatest gains in reforming our care system are to be made in identifying and removing what ever barriers are obstructing the development of good personal relationships, and putting in place all possible means of supporting such relationships where they occur.'* (Page 27 para 29)

Unfortunately, the report failed to identify that the most important relationship for a 'looked after' child or young person, is the one that they have with the adult responsible for their care. Children need adults who are sensitive to their needs, are able to set boundaries and who are willing and able to make a commitment, in short, a parenting relationship, not another 'best friend' 'social worker' 'teacher' or 'psychologist' but someone who will act as a good parent.

## What is Good Parenting?

Now we need that explanation of what we mean by 'good parenting'. Many years of research by psychologist Diana Baumrind, identified which 'parenting styles' lead to long-term positive life outcomes. Unlike the government's targets of several GSE passes, Baumrind considered more practical life outcomes, like survival into adulthood, avoiding drugs, prostitution, and prison.

'Parenting style' refers to a combination of parental control and expectations for the child's learning and behaviour (demanding-ness) together with sensitivity to the child's needs (responsiveness). Baumrind identified four different parenting styles:

**Authoritative:** The parenting style which leads to the most successful life outcomes. Combining parental demands, control and setting clear boundaries and expectations with a high level of sensitivity and interest in the child.

**Authoritarian:** High on demands, control and expectations but low on sensitivity to and interest in the child.

**Over-indulgent:** Low on demands, control and expectations, but high on sensitivity and interest in the child.

**Neglectful:** Low on demands, control, expectations, and low in sensitivity and interest in the child.

## Social Pedagogues

Having correctly identified that relationships are key, the Select Committee went in search of outstanding practice, they visited Denmark and reported on the excellent work and positive outcomes that are being achieved with looked after children and families. Perhaps the answer to professionalising childcare can be found in the three-and-a-half year degree-level course leading to qualified 'social pedagogues.'

Could social pedagogues fulfil the child's need for 'good parenting' while allowing society to continue to avoid using the word 'parenting' in the context of children in public care? The answer is a qualified 'yes', on several counts:

- 1) Social pedagogues work with the 'whole child'. They are concerned with and support the child's development.
- 2) The professional knowledge employed by social pedagogues is informed by theory, structured continual professional development and reflective practice that seeks input from colleagues and others involved with the child.
- 3) The work of the social pedagogue is underpinned by children's rights and participation.
- 4) Social pedagogues exploit and share their own practical life skills in creative ways to engage, educate and involve children in their care. They do this as part of the child's everyday life, sharing their life-experiences, preparing food together, playing games together and involving the young people in household tasks.

However, social pedagogues are likely to find it strange working in a UK regulated, residential childcare system, which has in recent years become: risk adverse, driven by 'best value' (i.e. the cheapest option), which adopts a hands off approach to children, where the line between safeguarding children and staff has been crossed to the detriment of the children. The result is that we have literally made UK looked after children, 'untouchables'.

The good news is that most of the existing UK children's workforce, find this sterile, regulated environment every bit as alien as their social pedagogue counterparts.

Currently, in the UK there are several government-sponsored evaluation of pilot social pedagogue projects, given their success in Europe, their outstanding professional credentials and their focus on children's rights, a good outcome would be that they spearhead a radical rethink of our care system.

Radical change is unlikely to come from a few exceptional practitioners, nor from one or two enlightened Local Authorities. It is reassuring therefore to read that the Select Committee report, presented evidence of a failing 'corporate parent'. Had this enquiry been legal care proceedings against rejecting, abusing or neglectful parents, the children would have been taken away from the parents and placed in care! It is not likely that we will see a transfer of the oversight of our UK care system to the Danish Government. The answer is, however, political: what we need to learn from our European counterparts is how and what central government policies and actions ensure that social pedagogues are able to discharge their responsibilities unimpeded.

## The Pillars of Parenting

In the meantime, what can we do today, to put into practice the Select Committee's recommendation to identify and remove barriers to supporting good personal relationships? Our approach is based on emotional warmth and puts the relationship between the child and the carer at its core. 'The Authentic Warmth Dimension of Professional Childcare' was published in the British Journal of Social Work in October 2008. Here we identified how the relationships between the adult and the child is key and should be underpinned by 'good parenting' which values the child's interests and views, sets boundaries, focuses on the child's

strengths, skills and qualities and never gives up on the child. This approach empowers workers, within the existing UK childcare workforce; with the psychological theory and research to enable them to understand and respond to the emotional trauma and parental rejection, which many looked after children, have endured. This is achieved by combining the existing carer's detailed knowledge of the child with the experience, theoretical knowledge and skills of trained chartered psychologists – who are in turn supervised by a team of expert psychologist's. The psychologist works with the carers, not the young people (a cost effective use of the psychologist's time). The knowledge base to address the specific life-pervading and emotionally-limiting issues faced by many of these traumatised children, lies within psychology not politics, management, social administration, or law.

## Empowerment of the Children's Workforce

With the generation of debt that the UK is currently facing, it is unlikely that any future government will make additional funds available for looked after children, so radical solutions need to be found within existing resources. The make up of the Select committee and their ability to cut through years of misguided governance of the care system, offers a clue to a possible political solution. That is, an enlightened government could place the oversight of the care system in the hands of a cross party group. They should take 'childhood' as a measure of time rather than the current measure, the four or five year term of office. Empowerment of the children's workforce, rather than control and regulations, should inform decisions on policy relating to looked-after-children. Most importantly, for radical change to occur, we need to change the way we view children in public care, starting with the reintroduction of the word 'parenting' to describe the special responsibilities of those people working with 'looked after' children. Finally, to respond to the young people's trauma with 'professional parenting', we need to use the expert knowledge base, theory and research of psychology to inform how we respond to each child's individual needs.

© Colin Maginn 2009

**The book 'Achieving Positive Outcomes for children in Care' by Dr Sean Cameron and Colin Maginn, published by Sage September 2009, is available from the link below or directly from The Pillars of Parenting.**

**[www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?contribId=636967&prodId=Book232886](http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?contribId=636967&prodId=Book232886)**

**Contact details:**

*The Pillars of Parenting,  
Business & Innovation Centre,  
Sunderland Enterprise Park,  
Wearfield,  
Sunderland,  
SR5 2TA*

*Phone: 0191 516 6634*

*Fax: 0870 460 0765*

*E-mail: [enquiries@pillarsofparenting.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@pillarsofparenting.co.uk)*

