

## **‘Good enough caring’ and how we can do much better!**

<http://www.goodenoughcaring.com/the-journal/1a-good-enough-caring-and-how-we-can-do-much-better/>

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The words which we choose are a window to the way we think. Words shape our thoughts: words can enlighten and expand thinking or they can encourage rigid and obstructive thinking.

### **What is the issue?**

‘Good enough caring’ is an unusual choice of words for the name of a Journal providing a platform to share ideas which champion the importance of loving, nurturing and informed care for children. A journal should offer informed, enlightened and expansive thinking which indeed ‘Good Enough Caring’ does. So this short article is not a criticism of the journal or its contents but the title does provoke the questions: ‘Is good enough caring good enough?’ and ‘could we do better?’ Just suppose that one of our loved ones was about to undergo brain surgery and in response to our anxious questions we are told that this surgeon is ‘good enough’, has recently qualified and has carried out a similar operation once before. Our most likely reaction would be a hasty exit and a renewed search to find the best surgeon available.

We all expect quality from the goods and services which we pay for - a solicitor, a painter and decorator, a car mechanic, paying for a live show or even going to the cinema. Our expectations exceed ‘good enough’ even for a cup of coffee! Why then should we think that ‘good enough’ comes close to being acceptable when we are providing the nurturing and care of our most valuable assets, our children?

The dumbing down of high-quality child care, especially for those young people who have complex needs, appears to be endemic in the public childcare sector and has both historical and philosophical roots (see Maginn and Cameron, 2013). Indeed Noel Howard provides a humorous but sobering account of his difficulty to find ‘positive’ material for a 30th-anniversary special ‘lookback’ edition of CURAM, a biannual magazine of the Irish Association of Social Care Workers: *‘The truth dawned as we ploughed through previous editions that, like it or not, the vast bulk of material reflected much that was seen in child / social care not only as problematical at the time but concerning, unacceptable and in not a few cases, scandalous.’* Howard (2016) Howard wonders if a similar trend applies in the U.K. or elsewhere and confirms this by looking back on *this* journal’s articles.

### **Tribute to Donald Winnicott**

It is likely that the ‘good enough caring’ concept stems from published works of the late Donald Winnicott, a London paediatrician and psychoanalyst who died in 1971. However a reading of Winnicott’s use of ‘Good Enough Caring’ reveals that he was referring to a specific process regarding the emergence of a baby’s ‘ego’. Importantly from the position of this article, Winnicott himself makes the argument that ‘good enough is not good enough’:

*‘It should be noted that mothers who have it in them to provide good-enough care can be enabled to do better by being cared for themselves in a way that acknowledges the essential nature of their task. Mothers who do not have it in them to provide good-enough care cannot be made good enough by mere instruction.’* Winnicott, D. (1965) (my underlining)

Two important points emerge from this quotation. The first is that Winnicott was not offering a ‘good enough caring’ test, he was advocating the need to ‘do better’ and secondly, he is clearly stating that ‘mere instruction’ is not enough to improve childcare.

### **Better than ‘good enough’**

A good starting point would be to agree on a framework for professional practice which seeks out the healthy side of children and builds on the strengths, talents and skills of children as well as supporting them through their problems. Such a framework would have at its core the science of ‘attachment’, the celebration of quality relationships between young people and their carers and the identification of signature strengths. This framework would also ensure that practice provides ‘trauma-informed care’. It would challenge the current, problem-focused perspective of public care as well as its historical and philosophical roots. The framework should also embrace the emerging scientific evidence from neurological studies showing the impact of various forms of abuse on the developing brain. Watch Professor Eamon McCrory on youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hApgHngibQ&t=135s> for example (accessed on the 11 March 2019) or read any of McCrory’s research papers or those by Martin Teicher, showing the impact of abuse on the structure, activity and function the brain (see reference list).

### **Support that really counts**

The implications of the above for policymakers concerned with children in public care are clear: to ensure that evidence-based practice becomes the norm and that it is not based on finance and justified by the opinions of the person with the

most authority. It would be ludicrous for a fire chief to order fire officers to use water on electric fires because the budget for foam had run out! The officers need only to refer to the science of fire prevention and control, as well as their own health and safety rules, to ensure that their chief's hare-brained idea would never be put into practice. Yet people in social care routinely accept dictates that don't make sense from those responsible for managing and financing essential support for children who have been rejected, neglected and abused.

Unfortunately, aspirations for sector-wide change are not likely to be achieved anytime soon but individuals and teams can change the way they see things and become those people to totally transform a child's life. For a powerful insight into the impact that one caring, adult can have on a child's life, see Josh Shipp's Ted talk (\* linked in references). What follows are a few key pointers for individuals to achieve 'much better caring':

- Consider your 'parenting style'. Research by Diane Baumrind over three decades shows that authoritative parenting is the most likely style to lead to successful life outcomes for children. An authoritative parenting style encourages socially responsible and mature behaviour, is sensitive, warm and supportive and keeps open two-way communication, validates the child's individual point of view and recognizes the rights of both the adults and the child. Other styles - authoritarian, permissive/over-indulgent and neglectful parenting - all lead to current and future problems.

So, in caring for children we should have three main aims - a high level of sensitivity and interest in the child, clear expectations of both learning and behaviour, and the use of psychologically supportive methods of discipline (such as autonomy building, seeking the child's opinion, meeting the child's needs, helping them fulfil their aspirations, using their strengths and affirming the child's positive qualities, etc.).

- Little things matter and will be noticed and remembered by the child for life: acts of kindness, spending extra time, sharing a joke, laughing at yourself (don't take yourself too seriously), listening (actually staying silent while the young person is talking) then giving a brief summary of the points they made, confirms to the child that we understand them and that we have listened.
- Instead of always focusing on a problem look for the young person's potential and find their strengths. Plant 'golden seeds': *'These could be words of encouragement, noticing and commenting on a child's success, or spotting a skill, a talent or a particular strength. .... they may start a child on a journey of discovering and using their inner strengths.'* Maginn, (2014)
- As well as searching for creative strategies to counteract self-defeating behaviour, we can think of what the behaviour may be communicating about the child's traumatic past and consider how to increase shared activities that are engaging or simply just great fun.
- We should view our work as a privilege, we are sharing space, time and giving our energy to a wonderful person, when you see that the difficult times become bearable and although the young person in our care may not seem to appreciate our efforts we are changing their views of the world by letting them discover that not every adult is unkind or abusive

### And Finally

What about the name of the journal? Perhaps consider adding the strapline, '**And how we can do much better**' to the name of the journal. This would make a more appropriate acknowledgement to Winnicott as it reflects his philosophy accurately and embraces the need to always strive to do better.

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