

Are Child Care Professionals and Teachers doing their jobs?

The majority of children admitted into public care have been the victims of abuse and/or neglect (see the *Office of National Statistics* for 2005), yet the continued failure to improve educational outcomes for looked after children is the fault of the care and education systems, according to Sonia Jackson and Peter McParlin, writing in the February issue of *The Psychologist*. These writers also play down the impact of pre-care experiences, arguing “*if early adversity was the reason for low attainment, one would expect children who come into care at an early age to do better than those who enter later.*” (page 91, para 2).

However, this position fails to take account of a growing body of neurophysiological evidence, which shows the dramatic impact of early neglect and abuse on the developing brain (see picture opposite).

Brain scanning technology offers child protection teams the ability to gain evidence, which would elevate neglect from ‘opinions of Social Workers’, to the argument for, ‘grievous bodily harm’. If brain scans were used in care proceedings, blaming the care and education systems for the poor outcomes of looked after children, becomes untenable.

If we add to this grim neurophysiological picture, the psychological impact of parental rejection (again, generally overlooked by the current literature on

looked-after children) then we can begin to understand the big reason why looked-after children are not doing as well as expected.

Baumeister (2005) describes the response to rejection as being like “getting knocked on the head with a brick...” (page 733), and there is also a body of cross-cultural research (see Rohner, 2005) which confirms that even when a child *perceives* parental rejection, he or she will start to behave maladaptively. Such behaviour includes aggression, violence, disaffection with school and disregard for the consequences of his or her behaviour (all characteristics to be found in many looked-after children).

Survival is the big issue for abused, neglected, frightened and rejected children. It is only when children feel good about themselves, enjoy a sense of belonging, can play, have fun and find joy in life, that they will be able to take advantage of educational opportunities.

We believe that looked-after children need to experience ‘quality parenting’ as well as good teaching. To this end we have developed our ‘authentic warmth’ model for professional childcare, to empower carers with principles rather than prescriptions.

Our model:

- Addresses the issue of “emotional involvement” by introducing the

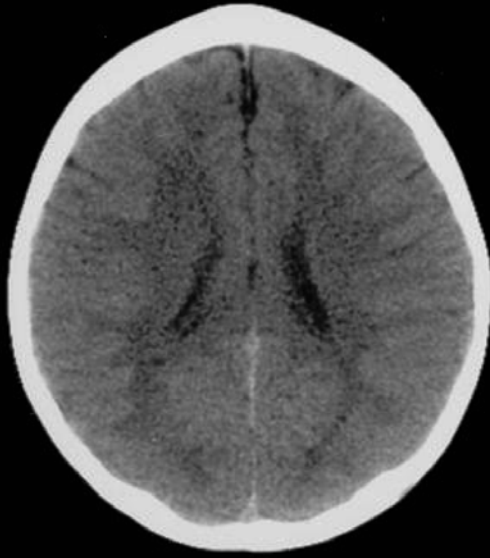
concept of ‘authentic warmth’ in everyday child and carer encounters, so that children feel “cared about” not just “looked after”.

- Employs the concept of attunement and authoritative parenting.
- Identifies seven pillars of parenting, each with a foundation in evidenced based psychological theory and research (for details see www.ingleside.co.uk). These seven pillars are:

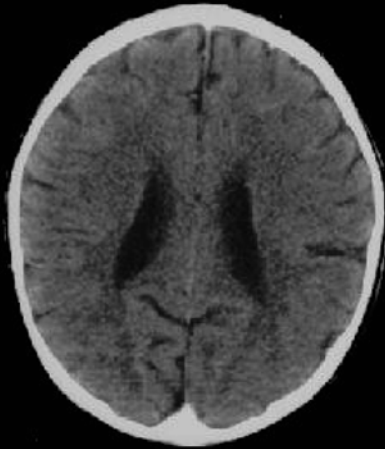
1. Primary Care,
2. Secure Attachment,
3. A Sense of Belonging,
4. Positive Self Perception,
5. Emotional Competence,
6. Self-Management and
7. Resilience enhancement.

- Clarifies the staff performances which underpin each of these pillars.
- Provides carers with a model to understand and manage the phases of grief and loss, which traumatised children experience (see Cairns, 2004 for details of this approach).
- Sets out a framework which enables a visiting psychologist to support and empower carers to respond appropriately to children in crisis. This approach offers an alternative to the more traditional role of a psychologist in providing a one-hour session with a child, during office hours.

3 Year Old Children



Normal



Extreme Neglect

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"These images illustrate the impact of neglect on the developing brain. The CT scan on the left is from a healthy three year old child with an average head size (50th percentile). The image on the right is from a three year old child following total global neglect during early childhood. The brain is significantly smaller than average and has abnormal development of cortical, limbic and midbrain structures."

From studies by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. at The ChildTrauma Academy (www.ChildTrauma.org).

Perry, B.D. *Childhood experience and the expression of genetic potential: what childhood neglect tells us about Nature and nurture* Brain and Mind 3: 79-100, 2002

In terms of blame, the "care system" is an easy target, especially since there is no coherent system or national structure that could be described as the "care system".

No two children's homes are the same and there are as many approaches to fostering as there are foster parents. However pointing the finger of responsibility at carers is not just an interesting academic argument:

- Decision makers who are responsible for children in crisis could end up deciding to protect a child from the "care system" rather than from an abusive family!
- By focusing on education the impact of the neglect, abuse and rejection can be underestimated. This is illustrated by the increase in multiple placement breakdowns as foster parents are ill equipped for the level of disturbance visited upon them by troubled and troublesome children.
- Since the introduction of the Quality Protects initiative, millions of pounds have been spent attempting to improve educational outcomes for looked after children, with little effect. There is now a plausible argument that we should be targeting causes rather than the symptoms (poor educational outcomes are part of the symptoms) and more effective use of resources would be to address the impact of neglectful abusive

parenting using the best that psychology has to offer.

The current Government has made the most dramatic improvements for looked after children in British history, (e.g. National Care Standards, requirements for qualifications, making criminal record checks available, quality protects, choice protects, every child matters etc etc).

The drive to ensure quality was most recently demonstrated on the 7th February 2006, with the announcement by Liam Byrne MP, Care Services Minister, of a plan to extend registration to a wide group of social care workers and the General Social Care Council have already started the consultation process.

This is a wonderful opportunity to establish a unified professional approach to child care and management and to incorporate current psychological insights into the process of parenting children who have had negative life experiences involving rejection, abuse, neglect and violence. Surely, after so many years of getting it wrong, we have a responsibility to get the strategy right this time ■

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