

Enduring issues in adoption and fostering: a 40-year review

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This article explores changes in policy and practice in children's services over the past 40 years and discusses the thinking that has underpinned them. Together with a special journal supplement introduced by John Simmonds, it marks the 40th anniversary of BAAF (the British Association for Adoption and Fostering), which was founded in 1980 and in 2015 joined the long-established Coram charity to form CoramBAAF Adoption & Fostering Academy.¹

The 1980s

The year 1980 is a significant one as major changes were being examined in thinking about child development and deprivation, the adequacy of existing legislation and the structures through which services are delivered. Bowlby's (1951, 1969) influential works on maternal deprivation and attachment had opened doors to a new conceptual framework that was being further refined by researchers such as Rutter (1981). In addition, new legislation in 1969 and 1975 was still generating debates about their sufficiency and in England a major structural change was taking place resulting from the integration of local authority services into generic social services departments. At the same time, there were visible failings in the system and a general desire to improve service quality and outcomes as well as an auspicious political and economic context for reform.

As a part of this, the early 1980s saw the completion of an extensive research programme involving children in care. It was commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), the government department responsible for social services – itself the result of an administrative amalgamation in 1971. These studies were summarised in a 1985 overview publication, *Social Work Decisions in Child Care*, compiled by Jane Rowe, the Director of BAAF. This was the first in a series of *Messages from Research* summaries based on government-funded research programmes that continued until 2013. It provided

1. Free copies of the supplement will be distributed to all CoramBAAF members in October. This will be a print, members-only publication – not for sale. John Simmonds's introduction can be accessed on the CoramBAAF website from the end of September, including links to the 12 articles discussed.

extensive information on the care system and the experiences of children, carers and birth families. There had been numerous research studies before that by academics such as Parker, Triseliotis, Lambert and Rowe, but this programme was exceptional not only because it employed large samples; it was also interlinked in that individual projects covered overlapping issues. Thus, by 1983, details were available about who came and who did not come into care, children's experiences while in care, what determined their length of stay and what happened to the children after they left.

The publication of this research means that in comparing then and now, we are fortunate to have robust information on the operation of the looked after children system as a whole in 1980.

Three studies provide a ground base for this exercise. The first looked at changes in the type and sequence of placements experienced by comparing two cohorts of children entering care, in 1980 and in 2010 (Bullock and Blower, 2013). It was found that residential care was widely used in 1980 as an initial placement, a long-term option and following foster care disruption, but by 2010 its use had virtually disappeared. The demise of observation and assessment centres was also especially significant for reflecting practice changes in ways of assessing children's needs. However, the number of moves experienced by the children while in care remained virtually the same, with a small increase for the short-stay group and only a modest reduction for those children who stayed longer.

The other two studies are historical. In their evidence to the Jersey Independent Care Inquiry, Roger Bullock and Roy Parker (2014) laid out key developments in children's services since 1945, analysed the reasons behind them and discussed their effects. Then, Roy Parker, who was a driving force behind the foundation of BAAF and was its Chair for six years, brought together his historical knowledge in the book *Change and Continuity in Children's Services*, published in 2015. This identifies the aspects of child care that have remained consistent over the years and those that have radically changed. In particular, he looks at care arrangements, legislation and guidance, the structures for delivering services, statistical trends, ways of assessing outcomes, the role of inquiries and the place of evidence, judgement, values and engagement in policy and practice. He concludes by identifying issues that are likely to arise in the coming years.

In contrasting the background characteristics of looked after children and the services they received in 1980 with those of today, it is important to stress that comparisons between the past and the present are complex. The language commonly used to describe children 40 years ago was disrespectful, discriminatory and bleak, and services were often determined by terminology that is widely unacceptable today. That cannot be justified and the scandals and inquiries that have happened and are still happening present a deeply troubling picture.

But the 1980s also sowed the seeds of many upcoming reforms. Nancy Hazel and Jane Rowe had proved that children deemed to be 'unfosterable' could be found families, intermediate treatment for young offenders was a viable alternative to incarceration and 'sub-normality' hospitals and residential nurseries were fast closing. However, it was not until a decade later, in the framing of the 1989 Children Act, that these new developments and creative thinking were able to fundamentally reshape policy and practice.

Although the government published annual statistics about children in care, in 1980 these were mostly descriptive categorisations of those entering care, those there and those leaving with details of gender, ages and reasons for each group. Thus, they tended to reinforce a popular image that the children in care were orphans, in care for most of their lives and living in residential homes.

The 1980 research dashed these stereotypes by showing that there were hardly any orphans, half of the children came into care with a sibling, and for 50 per cent, the gap between referral and admission was less than a week. Children being referred to social services came from over 20 agencies, the most common of which were parents themselves, followed by the police, doctors and neighbours. Children's close relatives were likely to be dispersed across several households.

One of the core findings was that one in eight children entering care left within a week and a quarter within two weeks. Only 40 per cent stayed for two years or more although a third of these, known as 'yo-yo children', came back into care – some several times. Further revelations emerged from the widening of responsibilities of the recently established social services departments that included young offenders, disabled children, mental health and child protection in addition to those looked after. It soon became clear that for every young person in care, there were five or six not in care and receiving welfare services, thus resurrecting questions about boundaries and thresholds first identified by Jean Packman in 1968 in *Child Care Needs and Numbers*. This stimulated thinking about the place of different types of care arrangements within a wider array of services, particularly as social workers were now working generically, with adults as well as children. This situation is well known today as there is an annual audit of 'children in need', but 40 years ago it was a revelation.

In 1980 there were more children in care than now (95,000 compared with 78,000) because 10,000 boys and 1,000 girls were moved out of 'approved schools' as a result of their closure, as required by the Children and Young Persons Act 1969. Second, the proportion of children in foster care was 43 per cent – significantly lower than today's 72 per cent. There was considerable variation across local authorities, with some having a strong tradition in this area, as did Scotland, which also had a different system of decision-making (the Panel System). Third, an almost equal proportion (34%) were in residential care, compared with 12 per cent today. A common placement was in observation and assessment centres where older children underwent a six-week assessment designed to match their needs to a future placement. The speedy rise in numbers of children placed in these establishments and the rapid demise of this approach provide a vivid example of changes in the way that children's needs were assessed.

The reasons for coming into care reflected the categories in the legislation of the time, such as a mother's confinement, matrimonial disputes, delinquency and truancy. Some of these might now be incorporated into broader neglect and abuse classifications. In terms of children who left care, only 1,500 were adopted (3%) compared with 3,700 (12%) in 2019. A larger proportion of these were babies. Data about children's ethnicity were not gathered in 1980 but the diversity of backgrounds and the numbers in minority groups would have certainly been much less than they are today.

Parker (1980) notes three important features of the care system. First, it was very isolated and operating in its own silo backed by legislation, budgets and responsibilities that were different from services such as special education, juvenile justice and boarding education. The focus was on securing and maintaining the placement rather than the child's needs, their long-term plan and specific matters such as education, health and well-being. This caused many children to 'drift' in care without any sense of permanency (Rowe and Lambert, 1973). The service option open to families also seemed to be 'all or nothing', i.e. separation and little else. Because of this, many children with complex needs fell between stools and abuse scandals revealed that many were living unsupported in dangerous home situations. The 1963 Children Act had been extremely radical in allowing child care officers

to prevent children from entering care, but this had not developed into anything like the quality and availability of support that many families needed.

Second, there was a distinct lack of differentiation in the system. Children were perceived as a homogenous group to be 'herd managed' and understanding of children's development, needs and welfare tended to be narrow and inflexible. Similarly, the children's families were seen as universally bad and their service experience tended to be punitive, compounded by feelings of powerlessness.

A third feature was what Parker calls 'imitation' where the underlying ideas were prioritised rather than the visible aspects of practice. Most children are brought up by parents where their relationship is marked by a shared understanding of the child's needs and their responsibility towards the child in both the short and long term, with kinship one of the primary drivers. Parker argues that admission to care radically changes these by shifting responsibility from the personal to the corporate. This leads to day-to-day care becoming separate from the primary duties and responsibilities for the child as held by the corporate body. Moreover, carers and other professionals frequently change, making that fundamental commitment to each child embedded in their personal relationship hard to deliver. Corporate bodies often seek to replicate family care with the best of intentions but they cannot recreate the personal 24/7 intensity of those relationships.

Having provided a general picture of the dominant issues and the nature of services in 1980, I will discuss six areas of significant change over the last 40 years. These are not intended to be exhaustive but to provide illustrations of key developments, all of which have been discussed in *Adoption & Fostering* journal during this period.

1. Changes in understanding childhood and how these have become embedded in relationships between children, carers and birth relatives

It is difficult to summarise how childhood has been perceived and understood in different historical periods, social classes and cultures and any generalisation can easily be seen to be superficial. However, the distinguished historians Ariès (1962) and Pinchbeck and Hewitt (1973) suggest that in Britain until the 19th century, childhood was a short period of distinctive lifestyle up to the age of about seven. Following this, a child's position was seen to be economic with their contributions to domestic employment in the context of small holdings and home industry. (For aristocrats and royalty the functions were quite different being concerned with the continuation of inheritance of title and estate and alignments via marriage.)

In the mid-19th century, the factory system was expanding and while children still enjoyed some freedom, they were soon seen as potential labourers, this time outside the family home. The middle classes, however, were less constrained and the idea of 'childhood' became a distinct period of life marked by in-house nurseries managed by nannies. Similarly, a few children from modest backgrounds attended grammar schools or other charitable establishments.

It became clear to politicians as the century progressed that children's education could not be left to the whims of families and factory owners. European countries had begun to introduce compulsory schooling and the benefits of this for their industrial growth were becoming apparent. In response, the British Government passed the 1870 Education Act that required all school boards to set up schools and in 1880 education was made compulsory for all children aged between five and 13. While this separated children from families and

factories, the motive for reform was still largely economic although some welfare interventions had been included in the Poor Law and Factory Acts. But even then, the concern was more about reducing the burden posed by deprived children than the welfare of the individuals. The only exceptions to this view were the romanticists, Rousseau and Wordsworth, who saw childhood as a brief period of innocent bliss soon to be corrupted.

A major turning point in thinking about children came at the turn of the last century with Freud's identification of the unconscious and the notion that children's personal growth included phases of psychosexual development. This portrayed a very different individualistic picture of children, focusing attention on their personal development and the forces that shape it. This new psychological perspective was further developed and the work of three pioneers, John Bowlby (1951, 1969), Jean Piaget (1926) and Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), is especially relevant to adoption and fostering. It had long been known that many deprived children were attention seeking and 'touch hungry' and Bowlby proposed that the origins of this lay in the quality of the mother-child relationship. Where the presence of the mother was limited and her emotions and actions fell on the side of insensitivity, this could have serious consequences in the longer term for the child in relation to their emotional development. His ideas were expanded to form what has become a core concept in child development: attachment theory. Piaget's focus was on children's cognitive development, arguing that they passed through various stages at different ages. Bronfenbrenner's concern was ecological in exploring how the interaction between the inherent qualities of children and their environments influence the way they develop.

What all these researchers stressed was the individuality of each child, the fact that they developed psychosocially and that forces which enhanced or damaged these processes could be identified. This influenced the development of many areas of practice, such as the post-war establishment of child guidance clinics, the development of new assessment protocols and the closure of residential nurseries.

While few questioned the relationship between early experiences and later child development, the 1980s saw some challenges to this. One was that it was too deterministic, with Rutter questioning Bowlby's view on the inevitability of negative developmental consequences in arguing that much depended on context. Similarly, social workers using the personality tests developed by psychologists like Eysenck were concerned about the absence of information about children's families, schools and social life.

The history and development of these issues mark out major new perspectives on our understanding of children and their rights, needs and development. No one doubts that a child's experiences over time influence both who they are in the present and how they may develop into the future. But we have also learned not to set this out in a deterministic way and recognise the impact of a combination of opportunities and challenges and a range of risk and protective factors – personal, familial, social and economic. These ideas have also alerted people to the interconnection between specific aspects of children's experiences, such as deafness limiting social interaction or domestic violence at home affecting learning at school. While understanding the detail of what influences what may be challenging, it also offers encouragement to practitioners by creating a sense of opportunity through relevant skills and knowledge.

The impact of these developments can be seen in many different areas. For example, the family courts now routinely consider the child's development as affected by abuse and neglect and the opportunities different types of placement may have for their recovery. The eco-

logical view of the child has been incorporated into assessment models such as the Common Assessment Framework (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009). Service provision has become influenced by care-experienced young people through 'Children in Care Councils'. The challenge of settling a child into placement has come to recognise that while children may enter care for protection, they also have to cope with loss, unfamiliar people, maintaining contact with family and their feelings about returning to their parents. Children have come to be seen as active participants in their care experience through expressing their views, experiences and preferences and making their own choices that become an integral part of their history.

2. How the growing rights movement and abuse scandals have influenced policy and practice, especially child protection

The changing nature of childhood over the last century has come to recognise that children are individuals in their own right, with needs, wishes, ambitions and expectations to be heard. Thus, there has been a growing recognition of and respect for their rights as individuals. This is closely related to the empowerment of other groups such as women, Black and Asian minority ethnic groups, LGBT+ individuals, disabled people and single parents. It also must be acknowledged that progress on these matters can be very slow.

Since the Second World War, a rights framework became the basis for a viable moral foundation for a modern complex society based on the fundamental rights for all citizens. For children, this includes issues such as their access to health care and education, but also their right not to be abused. As such, growing respect for children's rights has led to the establishment of a child protection system in most countries (Axford and Bullock, 2005). The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a legally binding international agreement setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of every child under the age of 18, regardless of their race, religion or abilities. Most countries have also developed protocols to scrutinise cases where children have died or been seriously injured as a result of abuse or neglect. Learning from such tragedies has resulted in the development of new procedures to protect children. In the 19th century, there were regular inquiries into abuse in institutions and neglectful practices like baby farming. Monkton's report following the death of Denis O'Neill, a 13-year-old who died from neglect in foster care in 1945, raised the bar, highlighting the urgent need to clarify the State's responsibilities when removing children from their parents and establishing protocols to protect them while in care. The passing of the Children Act 1948 set this out as a major turning point. The post-war social unease about deprived children continued with further inquiries. The report into the death of Maria Colwell 20 years later was a further turning point, the impact of which has continued to the present day.

What is significant is that further inquiries have considered wider concerns about safeguarding. They now include not only the care system, with inquiries into historical abuse in residential establishments and foster care, but also schools, nurseries, hospitals, sports clubs and the behaviour of public figures and celebrities. This, again, reflects the importance of wider changes in thinking about rights and obligations and the significance of a political and social context that supports reform and expedites legislative change.

This increasing respect for children's rights led to a growing interest in the views, wishes and feelings of children about decisions affecting their lives. This contrast with adults knowing best is manifest in studies such as *Growing Up in Care* (Kahan, 1979), *Who*

Cares? (Page and Clark, 1975) and *The Hothouse Society* (Lambert and Millham, 1968). These revelations shocked the nation and it soon became clear that children's views could no longer be manipulated or dismissed.

This sympathetic response led to the formation of pressure groups and associations, such as The Family Rights Group, Who Cares?, The Voice of the Child in Care and The National Association of Young People in Care, all of which have had a considerable influence on legislation and practice. For instance, the Children Act 1989 made it mandatory for the child's wishes and feelings to be considered when decisions are made about them.

3. The concept of permanence for children

The pioneering research in the 1970s highlighted the experiences of children in care as being marked by confusion about their past and uncertainty about their future, exacerbated by frequent moves. Evidence indicated that most children in care eventually go home to their families as their plan or by default. This meant that frequent changes of placement, carers and social workers resulted in the child's birth family being the most consistent feature of their lives. Short-term aims of nurture and rescue did not necessarily secure long-term stability.

In the light of this evidence, researchers in the UK and Maluccio in the USA developed the concept of 'permanence' as a core feature of 'out of home' care. From a child's subjective experience, the security and confidence that results from experiencing the 24/7, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year care cannot be underestimated. It becomes their secure base through which the challenges and uncertainties of a child's life can be addressed. The 1989 Children Act sets this out in identifying permanence being fundamental to:

. . . the long-term plan for the child's upbringing . . . to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through personal relationships and childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.

The concept of permanence seems to apply mostly to adopted children and those placed in long-term foster care. Phrases such as a 'family for life' and 'a sense of belonging and connectedness' align themselves with these placement options. At the heart of this is the quality and continuity of the relationships that children build with their carers, regardless of the formal arrangements that enable the placement. Given the large number of older children in care, their varied lengths of stay and the arrangements after leaving, it became clear that permanence can result from several different pathways, not just adoption and long-term foster care. This includes: a return to birth parents, shared care arrangements, permanence within the looked after system in a residential placement, long-term unrelated foster care or family and friends care, or legal permanence via adoption, special guardianship or child arrangement orders. The primary issue is the child's subjective experience and the security and confidence that run through this. There is no hierarchy with first and second choice options but a plan made for each individual child – their safety, welfare, needs and circumstances.

4. The evolution of family law to address fundamental changes in our understanding of children

By 1980, the family justice system had been operating for nine years. Prior to that, family disputes had been dealt with by the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division of the High Court. Murch and Hooper (2005: 135) point out, this had become:

... a jungle of ad hoc rules, procedures and remedies exercisable or obtainable in a wide variety of courts with different and sometimes overlapping jurisdictions. The system was under pressure from the rising divorce rate and the greater availability of civil legal aid and several reviews had recommended the establishment of separate family courts as operated in the US.

As a result, a Family Division with its own President was set up in 1971. Equally significant was the specification that the new system should be qualitatively different from its predecessor in harnessing the findings of social and psychological research to the process of law reform. This new approach was manifest in developments such as the drafting of a welfare checklist to inform decisions and a requirement to consider the wishes and feelings of children. It also led to some important research initiatives as well as the setting up of influential advisory groups.

Thanks to political and professional support at the highest level, further reform resulted from the Child Care Law Review that shaped the Children Act 1989. Subsequent revisions have been numerous but include important features such as patterns of social relationships, the extended rights of women and children, evidence on the psychological effects of family tensions and domestic violence, research on the outcomes of court decisions, respect for different cultures, the growing international movement of children and a growing risk-averse culture. Although the inviolability of the law could not be undermined, there was also a noticeable move towards a team approach, with a plethora of individuals presenting evidence and providing support to those who needed it.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that everything has been harmonious. By its nature, family law deals with disputes that cannot be settled amicably and relies on adversarial processes. Resolving these matters cannot rely on finding simple solutions. One function of the law, therefore, is to act as a 'container' to help families resolve their disagreements in a context where anger is controlled and a sense of fairness instilled in the hope that this will give children a secure base from which to move forward. But there will inevitably be decisions that have to resolve conflicting issues and create complex questions into the future. The judgements of *Re B* and *Re B-S* identified that where a court was considering resolving care proceedings with an adoption plan, this should only happen where 'nothing else will do'. To satisfy this criterion, the social worker's analysis must show that the needs of the child for permanence and stability within an adoptive family outweigh all the positive elements identified as being available through ongoing connection with the child's parents or wider birth family. This seriously challenged the possibility of providing permanency for some looked after children and led to a recent fall in the number of adoptions despite Government policies to expand this option (see Doughty, 2015).

Similar issues have arisen in relation to foster care. In 2018 (*Re B-P (Children – Adoption or fostering)*), the court dismissed the local authority's plan to place the youngest three of five children for adoption and ordered that they remain in their long-term foster home and enjoy regular contact with their two older siblings living elsewhere. Other judgements have affected the administration of services and financial responsibilities. For example, in 2013 the Court of Appeal ruled that family and friends foster carers are entitled to the same financial support as those who are non-relatives and in 2017 local authorities were made liable for any abuse suffered by children while in foster care.

5. The growing ecological and holistic view of children's needs and awareness of interconnections between them

In the late 1970s, a mixture of social, economic and political forces and increasing new knowledge about child development and outcome evidence combined to transform the professional and public perceptions of children's safety, needs and welfare. These changes reflected wider social trends towards individualism, such as the rights movement, multiculturalism, family economics and the status of children.

This encouraged what has become an ecological or holistic view of children, building on but greatly expanding Bronfenbrenner's pioneering ideas. For the first time, issues like the health and educational needs of children were not only acknowledged but set out in law, policy and guidance. The change in attitudes to the education of children in care was especially important as prior to 1980, the primary focus was on finding a placement with continuity of schooling having little priority (Jackson, 1987). This resulted in children having to change schools with discontinuities in curricula and subject choices, and questions from curious peers every time they had to settle into a new environment. And then research in the early 1980s identified the shockingly low levels of academic attainment. This led to further developments to ensure that children in care and those who left care had education addressed in their care plans, with schools having staff responsible for looked after children and local authorities having virtual heads to offer oversight, planning and accountability. National statistics on educational outcomes are published annually.

In addition to health and education, other aspects of children's lives have been incorporated into assessments and reviews. Families are seen as dynamic rather than monolithic, with the quality of relationships varying between the individual family members. Grandparents, older siblings, uncles and aunts are an important part of the child's network. Children also came to be seen as a part of their neighbourhood and community, with attention paid to peer relationships and leisure activities. The term 'social capital' came to reflect the significance of these factors.

The contribution of this ecological perspective has been important in emphasising the multiplicity of factors affecting children's development and quality of life and the interconnections between them. However, this produces new problems when almost everything comes to be seen as potentially significant. This is particularly difficult to resolve when the variables linked to the problem are explained by statistical correlations without a clear explanation of causal processes. It makes it hard for decision-makers to know what is causing what, under what conditions, and what the solution should be as a result.

Two analytic models have been fashioned to meet this criticism. The first is the notion of a balance and interplay between risk and protective factors. This explains why some individuals are more badly affected than others by exposure to the same dangers. It also demonstrates the potential damage when risks accumulate over time and amplify the original difficulties.

The second is the concept of causal chains and chains of effects. Issy Kolvin (1990) was among the first to study these in social situations in England when he identified a chain that started with overcrowded housing, which led to raised levels of maternal depression, which led to increased risks of child abuse and neglect. What this showed was that while dozens of factors may be statistically associated, only a few are causally linked. It also suggested that

action in one area, in this case housing, has benefits in others where on the surface they seem unrelated, namely a reduction in child abuse. This gives professionals an idea of where to begin and what to focus on when planning help for children presenting multiple problems.

6. The growing professionalisation, inter-disciplinary nature and bureaucratisation of children's services

Given the present size and wide responsibilities of children's services, it is hard to believe just how young the social work profession is. Prior to the 1948 Children Act, the people responsible for children in care were 'boarding out officers' whose role was reflected in their job title. The Act introduced a new role – that of child care officer. By 1960 only 28 per cent of those in post had been formally trained and it was not until the 1963 Children Act that they were allowed to take action to prevent children entering care or going to court.

The establishment of social services departments in 1971 brought welfare workers who separately worked in child care, adult care and mental health together under the title 'social worker'. Their responsibilities were generic in that they were responsible for children, the elderly, the disabled and the mentally ill, although there was some informal specialisation. The subdivision into children's services did not occur until 2007 (with responsibility for young offenders having been transferred to youth justice in 2001). The national budget for children's services is now around £9 billion and in an average local authority (population 800,000), the children's department employs 15,000 staff, half of whom are teachers and only four per cent social workers.

All these changes have had enormous implications for what social workers do. They now have a very broad set of responsibilities, acting as assessors, analysts, advocates, therapists, managers and co-ordinators. Moreover, if they are to be effective, they need a wide range of skills and knowledge informed by values, including intellectual and personal attributes, problem-solving, sensitivity and skills to work with children and adults in highly complex and challenging sets of circumstances.

The development of these demands has come to raise serious questions that focus on the diminishing of personalised face-to-face work and professionally informed relationships to a role that is defined by case management and adherence to administrative and legal processes that are defined by compliance and targets. Some see current practice as predominantly a model of social work dominated by child protection and run bureaucratically by local authority and central government departments (Parton, 2014). Others say that it has become a technical, apolitical process delivered in a messy and highly political environment and highlight the challenge for families living in economically deprived contexts, many of whose situations are exacerbated by wider political and economic policies (Featherstone, Broadhurst and Holt, 2012). In short, there is a growing view that statutory children's services are increasingly organised to 'screen and not intervene', with all referrals assessed for potential catastrophe. This exhausts resources and leaves little left over for the interventions which referral agents seek.

The emergence of social work as a profession over the years is significant but there are many questions being raised; it is widely argued that the principles of best practice have become submerged by state bureaucracy, with a loss of the original values that working alongside children and families should be the primary issue driven by sensitivity, empathy and a non-judgemental attitude.

The other noticeable trend in recent years is the growing inter-professional nature of management and decision-making in social work. This is hardly surprising in that nearly every serious case review on a child death or serious injury has reported failures in interagency co-operation and the need for agencies to 'work together'. This has resulted in protocols being put into place to facilitate this on a case-by-case basis, in terms of local duties and responsibilities and form wider, regional issues.

But despite these initiatives, working together has proved difficult to achieve. There are various reasons for this. Some of them are structural, such as failure to agree about the seriousness of problems and who is eligible for help, often compounded by a lack of trust and status differences between professions. Other barriers are practical, like pressure of work, the recording of activities undertaken to meet performance targets and a lack of a common language to ease discussions.

The loss of funding over the past decade has also caused many agencies to protect their budgets and restrict their work to statutory areas. This has seriously affected preventive and family support services, something that is regretted by many front-line workers as interagency co-operation is just as necessary in these areas as for more high-profile work.

Conclusion

This discussion of children's services has sought to chart important changes in policy and practice that have occurred over the past 40 years and identify the ideas and issues that have driven them. It has described reforms aimed to improve the experiences of looked after and adopted children, their families and carers, despite the challenges posed by the changing nature of social work, the curtailment of resources and deteriorating economic opportunities for deprived groups. It has also shown that wider social trends, different models of social welfare and emerging knowledge about children's needs and development have impacted policy and practice at all levels, from high court judgements to day-to-day care. But in considering these developments, it is important to remember that the amount, content and style of services are also a product of broader political processes that determine the relationship between the State, families and individual citizens, and this should not be overlooked in a focus on practical problems and organisational arrangements. *Adoption & Fostering* has been a leading journal throughout this period and has tried to incorporate these different aspects, a point reinforced by the variety of topics covered in the 12 journal articles reprinted in the special anniversary supplement referred to in the opening paragraph of this review.

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