



WORKING WITH **CHILDREN,** **FAMILIES** AND **YOUNG PEOPLE**

Professional Dilemmas, Perspectives and Solutions

Edited by **JIM DOBSON** and **ALEXANDRA MELROSE**



A **David Fulton** Book

Working with Children, Families and Young People

Bridging the gap between learning and the application of knowledge and skills in Early Years settings, this book addresses the nuanced complexities and challenges which students may face as they progress into professional practice. Built around the experiences of undergraduate students, solution-focussed chapters tackle contemporary issues such as safeguarding, new materialism, reflective practice, and working with refugee children, linking these to theoretical and philosophical models and drawing on undergraduate and practitioner insights.

Providing contextualised examples, insight into key issues, and application of theory to practice, this book offers incisive solutions to support the undergraduate journey into a career, with chapters covering topics such as:

- Best practice as a practitioner creating a caring environment
- Reflecting on practice to cultivate professional development
- Working with and for marginalised children
- Reflective practice

Working with Children, Families and Young People is perfect for undergraduate students on Early Years and Childhood Studies courses, as well as other courses pertaining to working with children and families, social work, and communities.

Jim Dobson is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Prior to this, Jim worked as a Policy and Research Officer and as a Project Manager for a Local Authority Children's Services Department. This role involved working closely with Criminal Justice agencies, Social Care, and the Voluntary Sector.

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Professional Dilemmas, Perspectives and Solutions

Edited by Jim Dobson and
Alexandra Melrose

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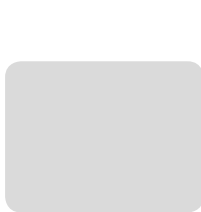
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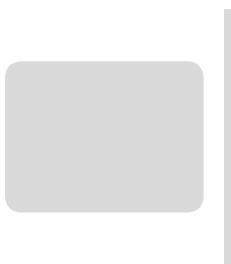
And finally, for all the contributing authors whose hard work, passion, and persistence helped us to produce what we hope will be a valuable text for students, teachers, and practitioners. We are especially indebted to Patricia Giardiello for stepping in at short notice and producing a much needed pivotal chapter on child development.



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Contributors

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Juliette is interested in social inequality; how this impacts upon children, women, and society, and what can be done to address it. Her work with students focusses on project-based learning, and aiming to provide university students with an inclusive, personalised, and meaningful university experience.



Foreword

Professor Ian Barron

Being asked to write the foreword to this important new book about the complexities of work with children, families, and young people was both a pleasure and a time for reflection. Education and training for such work has a long history at Manchester Metropolitan. It has been a long time since the team last came together to create a book of this sort and much has happened since the last one was published (Jones et al. 2005). This new edited collection has provided a wonderful opportunity for the team to work together and what has emerged reflects a team that is more multidisciplinary than previously and which has expertise from very early childhood, through to youth, community, and informal education. The team has been through the challenges of learning about each other as different academic and professional traditions and practices have bumped against each other on the way to finding new ways of working and thinking together. Bringing such a project to fruition has required a great deal of hard work for all those involved and encouragement, clarity, and persistence from the editors.

The past twenty-five years have seen the establishment of (early) childhood as an important area for academic study, research, professional practice, and government policy and we have been at the forefront of these developments from the very beginning, always giving them our distinctive critical edge. Youth and Community Work is an older academic and professional discipline and we have been leaders in the field for longer still. It is important, however, to be mindful of the fragility of these developments. Whilst there has been really important new thinking about such work, political, and economic influences have brought first growth, up to 2008, and then devastation, as services for the most vulnerable in society have been cut under austerity measures following the economic crisis. One of the great sadnesses of the past five years for the team has been the reluctant decision to close our professionally

qualifying youth and community work course in the face of political, economic, and professional adversity.

With these things in mind, it will be no surprise that this book deals with complex issues. Looking back to the foreword to Jones et al. (2005), by my good friend Professor Lesley Abbott, OBE, I gave a wry smile in finding that her words had somehow haunted what I was going to say: 'this is a challenging book and rightly so' (Abbott in Jones et al. 2005: xiii). The topics covered are important matters and they require cutting edge thinking and practice. Contrary to misguided popular belief, work with children and young people *is* rocket science. The pay and conditions for such important and complex work are a national scandal (as Juliette Wilson-Thomas's chapter bears witness) and raise very serious questions about how, as a country, we regard children and young people and the people (predominantly women, especially in the case of young children) who work with them.

It is important, however, not to interpret this somewhat gloomy landscape as one without hope. We hold on to Barad's optimistic assertion that 'each moment is alive with different possibilities for the world's becoming and different re-configurings of what may yet be possible' (Barad 2007: 182). These moments are what the chapters of this book, in their different ways, seek to encourage the reader to engage with. Following Braidotti (2002: 262), the chapters of *Working with Children, Families and Young People* hold to the belief that it is important 'that we do not rush forward to hasty resolutions of complexities we hardly can account for', seeking to 'let us instead linger a little longer within complexities and paradoxes, resisting the fear of imminent catastrophe'. There is also a recognition, however, that, having lingered, we must act and so each chapter offers examples from practice and theoretical ideas that seek to help the reader engage with and navigate the key issues that they will face. Work with children, families, and young people is demanding, frustrating, and perplexing at times but it is also enjoyable, rewarding, and about hope. Pursuit of that hope is driven by 'the desire to say, the desire to speak, it is a founding, primary, vital, necessary, and therefore original desire' (Braidotti 2002: 18). In the face of powerful neo-liberal discourses that do not always appear to value the minoritarian positions of children, young people and women (especially those living with economic and social disadvantage), this book has a commitment to engaging the reader with thinking and practice that disrupts established hegemonic discourses.

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Introduction

Jim Dobson and Alexandra Melrose

This book's publication coincides with the global threat posed by the Coronavirus outbreak in Spring 2020. This far-reaching pandemic has forced humans to scrutinise and question established social norms, patterns of individual and group behaviour, and economic and political decision-making at local, national, and international levels. Ultimately, our responses to this crisis will have direct implications for the lives of children, young people, and families and those who work with them. This crisis will undoubtedly have far-reaching effects on the issues raised in this book over the coming years, specifically in relation to identity, diversity, otherness, empowerment, rights, morality, and human geographies. This book explores and harnesses the curiosity sparked by these debates and challenges, offering the reader a chance to indulge in a tapestry of ideas and arguments, some of which neatly interlock, and some which are less obvious, but nonetheless worth exploring.

The kaleidoscopic professional landscapes which grow and adapt alongside the changing lives of children, young people, and families bring rich opportunities for the future graduate: chances to develop and improve professional and academic practice, broaden knowledge, and consider new modes of engagement, collaboration, and problem solving. This book therefore presents these opportunities and shows how and where there is scope to develop aspects of practice and consequently broaden our perspectives.

For professionals, fresh challenges have emerged in the last decade, often under the harsh gaze of public and political scrutiny. High expectations in a time of reduced resources (financial and human) have meant that professionals who work with children, families, and young people need to be multi-skilled, knowledgeable, and adaptable in the face of what has become almost constant change. For example, throughout the last ten years, the increased use of foodbanks, closure of public amenities such as libraries and swimming baths, children's centres, and youth provision, along with

higher levels of poverty and homelessness, are unfortunate reminders that austerity and hardship have become routine for many who work in health, education, social care, and the voluntary sector. Furthermore, global population shifts and migrations, changing attitudes towards mental health and sexuality, increasing reliance on web-based technologies and communication, and young people's desire to create online identities, are all features of a world which is less certain, fuzzier, and more challenging to decipher and navigate. For graduates embarking upon careers that can feel frustrating or bewildering (given the pressures outlined above), it is worth focussing on the importance of our task; the opportunity to shape practice and influence others so that the children, young people, and families we work with can live happier and more fulfilling lives.

Whilst the book foregrounds some of the challenges likely to be encountered by students and future practitioners, it also offers useful insights to readers by offering real world practical examples and scenarios where solutions and possible responses are explored. There are no easy answers in this book—this is not a 'how to' guide. This book, instead, allows the reader to explore and consider carefully nuanced, culturally sensitive, and responsive ways of developing academic and professional practice.

By drawing upon academic studies and practical experiences, the reader can test out new ways of working, ultimately conferring wider benefits upon fellow practitioners, children, young people, and families. The book reminds us to take a longer-term view; although political and economic conditions change, there will always be a need for skilled, knowledgeable, compassionate, and experienced practitioners.

There are key strands that run through many of the chapters in this book which exemplify the transferable skills, understandings, and aptitudes required to work as a professional within the sphere of working with children, young people, and their families. Below we show how the book is structured and themed.

Section I: Navigating the workplace

In order to work with, support, and develop good relationships with children and families, especially those who experience and live with hardship and trauma, practitioners need to possess and foster a number of qualities built around compassionate, caring, and professional practice. Compassionate practice is increasingly regarded as a key component of working with children, young people and families; the ability to empathise, listen, and understand the challenges of others helps us to respond with sensitivity and intelligence. The idea of developing professionalism, whilst a key component throughout the book, is an obvious ingredient in navigating the demands and expectations of the children's workforce. An appreciation of the

make-up of the children's workforce—specifically the early years workforce, and how it has developed—helps the reader appreciate the importance of a work sector that is sometimes undervalued, overlooked, and consequently unrewarded. These themes are included in Chapters 1–3 to foreground the range of skills, aptitudes, and attitudes necessary for future practitioners to appreciate, make sense of, and develop their professional selves.

The following chapters are included in this section:

- Chapter 1: Compassionate spaces: Caring for self and others whilst working with children, young people, and families
- Chapter 2: Professionalism in practice
- Chapter 3: 'Women's work': Gender discrimination in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Section II: Self-development and building confidence

Section II offers the reader a series of chapters that focus on particular elements of practice, allowing them to develop and sharpen their skill-sets and underlying knowledge in a number of important areas.

A good knowledge of child development theory will lend confidence to students who are taking their initial steps in to the workplace. Application of established theories in building practical experiences, along with an encouragement to ask questions when working with children and families, are crucial in building confidence and professional development.

Safeguarding and child protection are very much a part of working with children, families, and young people. These themes are discussed from a practitioner standpoint, allowing the reader to consider what it means to take action in situations where we might have concerns about particular children.

Digital technologies are now commonplace and for many children form a central backdrop to their social lives, learning, and as a means of mapping the world they inhabit. For future practitioners, developing a sense of how such resources might be helpful or not is useful. Additionally, some discussion of the relative dangers posed by new technologies can help the reader to appreciate what this means in a practical sense.

Creativity and how to foster creative teaching and learning possibilities and spaces are important considerations in an age when there are arguably less opportunities to work within and around restrictive curriculum models. The discussion in Chapter 9 reassures the reader that there are significant reasons why we should pursue creativity in our work and the benefits of doing so for children.

Reflective practice is a crucial aspect of professional working, and whilst there is a specific chapter in Section II relating to this skill, it is important to note how being reflective is inherent in everything we do as professionals.

The following chapters are included in this section:

- Chapter 4: Cultivating a critical understanding of child development
- Chapter 5: ‘Managing doubts’ to take safeguarding action
- Chapter 6: Children and digital technology: ‘Millennium’ generations to critical undergraduate educators
- Chapter 7: Constructing critical spaces for creativity
- Chapter 8: Reflecting on practice

Section III: Children on the edge: Marginalisation and empowerment

It is important for the reader to gain a sense of other people’s lived experiences and to adopt a non-ethnocentric frame of reference when doing so. As future practitioners, it is likely we will encounter children who might be characterised as vulnerable in some sense. Of course, vulnerability, as Chapter 3 shows, manifests itself in many forms. As such, poverty, powerlessness, challenges around supporting children with mental health problems, and social marginalisation as a consequence of lost identities, form part of the backdrop in Section III.

The following chapters are included in this section:

- Chapter 9: Precarious lives: Refugee children’s identity and belonging in the UK Early Years Foundation Stage
- Chapter 10: Working with vulnerable families
- Chapter 11: Children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing

Format of the chapters

The variation in chapter content serves to offer something for all readers, depending on the nature of your studies. The book has relevance and appeal to students from a range of disciplines, including Early Years and Childhood Studies, Health and Social Care, Social Work, Education Studies, Sociology, and Youth/Community Work.

Each chapter draws upon established and emerging theories/thinking and discusses their application to practice. Rather than offer convenient answers to the sometimes frustrating dilemmas faced by undergraduates and practitioners, the book sometimes disrupts commonly held perceptions, offering alternative, sometimes contentious, and hopefully provocative explanations to help explain such experiences. Each chapter contains 'Reflections', helping the reader appreciate that other students and practitioners often consider such questions in their everyday practice and academic studies. Some of these reflections pose direct questions to the reader whilst others seek to merge theoretical ideas with practice. The voices used in these reflections include those of undergraduate and graduate students, practitioners, or the author's own experiences.

Each chapter contains at least two key questions, helping to locate and distil the discussions contained within. These questions are revisited within each chapter's conclusion. In addition, each chapter shows how theoretical models can be applied to practice and subsequently help develop academic and professional aptitudes. Some chapters have a strong theoretical thread running throughout; for example, Chapter 4 draws heavily on theoretical models of child development to show how this has developed over time.

The book is not necessarily meant to be read in chapter order, but instead is best used as and when the need to explore a particular theme arises. Some chapters, where appropriate, contain specific links to other chapters, helping the reader to pursue themes and make connections to areas that interest them.

The following section offers a summary of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Compassionate spaces: Caring for self and others whilst working with children, young people, and families

Seeking to secure the wellbeing of children and families is, at its heart, a human endeavour. As such, the authors point to the importance of compassion and care in practice. This chapter picks up various strands of compassionate professionalism; through instilling a compassionate ethos in the children's workforce, how compassion in practice is integral to efficiency and performance, and how compassionate spaces can be created and sustained, ultimately leading to better outcomes.

The chapter begins by exploring what compassion means today and how it can help professionals make a positive difference in the lives of children, young people, and families. Using case studies, the chapter explores how compassion is understood, modelled, and enacted by Early Years and Childhood Studies undergraduate students.

Chapter 2: Professionalism in practice

Being ‘professional’ when engaging with placement opportunities can be challenging as it often depends on a variety of factors such as student confidence, the ability to be assertive, clarification of expectations, and support from the setting. Additionally, the motivations, experience, and aptitudes of individual students also contribute to expectations and ideas about professionalism. This chapter explores aspects of professionalism, alongside ideas related to being professional, noting the contradictions in expectations and understandings between students and practitioners. It uses the concept of Communities of Practice to frame some of the tensions experienced by undergraduate students.

The chapter serves as a reminder that human interactions and compassionate professionalism are central to any services which support children and families.

Chapter 3: Women’s work: Gender discrimination in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an area of work dominated by women, and an employment sector which is persistently low paid and poorly regarded. As governments across the world begin to recognise the importance of this area of work, particularly for their most vulnerable citizens, it is an important moment to critically analyse the sector in terms of worker value and recognition. As a sector where mainly women work, this chapter utilises a feminist theoretical framework to unpick the injustice of vital work which is undervalued. In going beyond critique the chapter also proposes actions which can be taken to address inequality, namely consciousness raising, unionisation, and professionalisation. The aim is to provide practitioners and aspiring practitioners with a critical analysis of gendered inequality within ECEC work, and to empower them to address this.

Chapter 4: Cultivating a critical understanding of child development

This chapter provides a summary of the main concepts relating to how our ideas surrounding child development have developed. It covers the theoretical ideas that have influenced practice as well as providing critiques and challenges to established models. The main message to take from this chapter is the importance of challenging our thinking and being open to new ideas and viewpoints when working with babies, children, and young people.