

# CHILD PROTECTION PRACTICE



**HARRY FERGUSON**

B L O O M S B U R Y

**Child Protection Practice**



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Harry Ferguson

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To the memory of Anne Ferguson-Arnold  
25 January 1956–16 January 2008



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In the use of case materials, all names and characteristics that could possibly identify the participants have been changed. While the case studies cover actual events and practices, some details have been changed to protect the anonymity of those involved.

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# Introduction

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## **In the beginning . . .**

It is 4pm on a crisp November afternoon in 1978. I am pacing up and down the road outside the house I intend to visit to investigate a complaint of alleged child abuse. I am a student social worker and it is my first ever home visit. I can hear Elvis Presley's 'The Wonder of You' blaring from behind the front door. I am feeling terrified, anxiously searching my mind to remember what I am supposed to say once the door is answered. And then it is. I check if it is 'Mrs Smith' that I am speaking to and announce who I am and she lets me in. I explain why I am there and Mrs Smith immediately gets upset and starts crying and gets angry that someone has reported her for allegedly leaving her daughter in the home alone. The six-year-old girl who is the subject of the referral is there. I am relieved, as it has been drummed into me that my priority is to see the child and her presence means that I can achieve this on this visit, rather than having to come back another time. I try to calm the atmosphere by suggesting we sit down and discuss things, to which Mrs Smith agrees. We go through the substance of the complaint and she denies there are any problems. I gather myself and ask to see around the home, including upstairs and the bedrooms. This too had been drummed into me by the agency, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), in the couple of months since I came on its training course. There was nothing in the state of the bedrooms or any of the home conditions to cause me concern.

Mr Smith arrived home and my anxiety levels shot up again because he was a big, tattooed, hard-looking man and I was afraid of how he would respond to this unannounced intrusion. Luckily for me, he reserved his anger for imagining tearing apart the person he thought had complained about them. There was a sticky moment when I had to keep explaining that I was not allowed to tell him who had reported it and was not even allowed to tell him if he was suspecting the right neighbour. I advised the parents – or as the agency preferred it, 'warned' them – that it was not acceptable to leave children alone at home and then returned to the office

and wrote up my case record. I also wrote, at great length, what happened in a ‘process recording’, including everything I observed, what was said and how I felt, which was used as the basis for a lengthy supervision with my practice supervisor. I even included detail on the colour and state of the wallpaper. I felt uncomfortable about some of the interactions I observed between mother and child and wrote in my process recording that ‘at times they related to one another like six year olds and at others like adults’, which the practice teacher thought was insightful and clever, and this helped my confidence and cheered me up. Our feeling was that there were no grounds on which the agency could go back to the family, who themselves did not wish for intervention, and the case was closed.

In the over 30 years since I made this first home visit, some things have changed in social work and child protection. But a great deal about what child protection workers do, or need to do, remains the same, not least in how conducting home visits is central to seeking to protect children. This is a book about those kinds of child protection practices. By ‘practice’ I am referring to the actual work involved in trying to protect children, the actions, movements, talk that need to go on to ensure that, as far as possible, children are safe. One thing that has changed in the past 30 years is that social workers have to give greater amounts of energy to following procedures and time spent seated at their desks completing computerized records and other admin work (Munro, 2004; Broadhurst et al., 2010a). Yet, in crucial respects, social work remains a professional life spent on the move. If children and adults are to be seen and worked with, everyday practice requires workers to leave their desks, make journeys by transport or on foot, walk the streets and housing estates, and walk into and around the homes where service users live. This book explores the performance of child protection whenever and wherever practitioners are present with children and their parents or carers. It is about the dynamics and methods of face-to-face child protection, especially on home visits, but also at hospitals, clinics, offices and children’s and family centres. The book sets out what skilful, authoritative child protection practice has to involve.

Recent decades have seen a relentless catalogue of high-profile cases where children have died despite the involvement of social workers and other professionals. Western governments have responded to these tragedies by putting in place elaborate procedures to try and improve cooperation and communication between the organizations involved, in response to findings that failures in communication were crucial to the increasing risk to children not being spotted. What has been given much

less attention is that a crucial reason why attempts to protect these children did not succeed was because social workers and other professionals did not recognize the children's injuries when together with them, not simply in their homes but in the same rooms. The highly influential case of 'Baby Peter' exemplifies how children have literally been in front of professionals yet serious injuries were not picked up and acted upon. At the time of his death in London in 2008 at the age of 17 months, Peter had a broken back and some 50 injuries. The social worker saw the child on a home visit four days before he died. There was chocolate on Peter's face, which the social worker asked to be removed, and cream on his scalp treating an infection. A family friend, on the instruction of the mother, took the child away to clean him up, but never brought him back and the social worker did not follow through on it. Peter was known to be at high risk, having been assessed by professionals to have had non-accidental injuries in the past and he was on the child protection register. The social worker did not herself touch the child while on the visit, and although a paediatrician and a GP saw him in their clinics within a couple of days following this visit and just a day or two before his death, neither of them seems to have examined or even touched Peter either (Haringey, 2008, 2009).

This book is concerned with the dilemmas workers experience about how to manage such situations: What should be made of signs such as when there is chocolate on the face and cream on the child's head? How can workers best get a parent to remove it? How far should workers themselves go in removing the chocolate and cream and directly touching and insisting on seeing the child's body to check for injuries? Where – in the home or elsewhere – is the best place for children to be interviewed alone about their experiences? Many other questions of this kind arise and will be addressed in this book. The remarkable fact is that the literature on social work and child protection has largely failed to address these questions, leaving us bereft of understanding and knowledge about the most complex challenges that child protection practitioners face on a daily basis.

I argue that we need a new way of thinking about the work that social workers and other professionals do to try and keep children safe; I call it 'intimate child protection practice'. The aim of developing a concept of intimate child protection practice is to capture in much more depth the reality that where the work goes on is predominantly in the homes, living rooms, kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms and gardens of the families that social workers visit, and to evoke the lived experience of



what it is like for practitioners to perform child protection in these intimate spaces. The idea of intimate practice also seeks to capture the humanity of the encounter, the fact that it involves facilitating and listening to children's disclosures of any harm that has been perpetrated on them, how they feel about their parents, themselves, their pain and pleasures; discussing their experiences of abuse and arranging medicals that involve the removal of clothing to enable examinations; dealing with the anguish of parents who have harmed their child and may now lose them into care forever; or helping those adults to develop their capacity to care and be safe, nurturing parents. For the professionals, intimate practice demands a range of sophisticated skills, courage and a capacity to use authority directly and wisely, but also tenderness and empathy, all of which requires reserves of mental strength and resilience.

In many respects, evoking intimate practice means little more than giving attention to what professionals already do; the originality of the analysis lies in the fact that most of the literature on child protection has failed to provide this kind of understanding. But it also involves bringing new knowledge and understandings to what is done and challenging professionals, organizations and systems to do things differently. If workers are not practising intimately enough and performing effectively when face to face with children, in their homes or elsewhere, this book sets out why this is so and how it needs to change. The neglect of intimate practice arises from a curious absence from most social work and child protection literature, policy and discussions about practice of any considered attention to the core dynamics, experience and methods of doing the work (Forrester, 2008a, 2008b). Not nearly enough attention is given to the detail of what social workers and other professionals actually *do*, *where* they do it and their *experience* of doing it.

This is most obvious with respect to the practice of home visiting, which is the methodology through which most child protection goes on, yet it is virtually ignored in the literature. The aim of this book is to correct this huge gap in knowledge by focusing on the practices involved in trying to gain access to children and relate effectively to them and their parents and carers in their homes. There is a huge literature on child protection and what is now more fashionably referred to as 'safeguarding'. There are introductory texts, which very usefully cover the law, interagency work, definitions of child abuse and ways of responding to it (Munro, 2002; Corby, 2005; Beckett, 2007). Another group of writers focus on the way that child protection and fears of being

blamed for not preventing child deaths dominate childcare services, with the effect that adequate day-to-day family support and preventive work tends to be marginalized or not done (Garrett, 2009; Lonne et al., 2009). Most studies of child protection that have involved researchers observing practitioners doing the work are focused solely on what goes on in the office and analysing the occupational culture and how social workers talk about their clients (Pithouse, 1998; Scourfield, 2003a), or this has been done in tandem with interviewing service users (Buckley, 2003). In some exceptional studies, researchers have left the office and accompanied social workers in their work (Dingwall et al., 1983), or used their own experience as data (de Montingy, 1995), but these studies are not only out of date, they also did not pay systematic attention to the core dynamics and experiences of doing the work, such as home visiting.

A significant factor that has drawn attention away from intimate child protection practice is the increasing concern about the restructuring of social work and child protection since the 1980s, with the emphasis on new rules, procedures, audit, information sharing, interprofessional collaboration and greater accountability as a way of managing the risks of system failures and child deaths. As a result, practitioners are increasingly characterized as ‘deskilled’ by having to spend more and more time in the office, on their computers, and less and less time with service users (Garrett, 2004a, 2009; Munro, 2004; Webb, 2006; Parton, 2008; Broadhurst et al., 2010a, 2010b). The outcome is what Walker (2004, p. 162) calls ‘the subtle yet fundamental shift from the term case-worker to case-manager’, except that, with the impact of computerization, it can no longer be deemed so ‘subtle’. A focus on the implications of the changing nature of organizations is legitimate because what goes on there is indeed crucial to effective social work and child protection. But to remain rooted in the office means leaving out any sustained attention to the core components of child protection work and what needs to be done, on our terms, to make it as intimate and effective as possible.

The result of this organizational focus is a dominant view of child protection as static and immobile, with the sedentary social worker glued to their desk – and computer – deeply frustrated and unhappy about how the demands of bureaucracy and managers restrict opportunities to spend more time with children and families. We need to go further and consider how the (scarce) time that social workers do have should be used when they are face to face with children and their carers. It does not take long

to walk across a living room to directly engage with a child, get a tissue out and wipe some chocolate off their face. But why is this not done, and is it their role and ethically sound practice by a social worker to do it? Suppose social workers and other professionals had all the time they could ever need to spend with children and families, how would and should they best use it? This book seeks to open up a debate and provide some answers to these kinds of questions. For it is impossible for an effective child protection response not to involve human contact and direct relating with children and families. We therefore need to place at the centre of analysis what happens when social workers leave their desks and go on the move to be face to face with children, which invariably means entering the private lives and spaces, the homes, of service users.

How the space where the child lives is viewed, whether or not social workers move around, is central to investigating child maltreatment and keeping children safe. In cases of suspected neglect, the state of the 'home conditions' is fundamental to the assessment of child wellbeing and parenting capacity. I know from my experience as a NSPCC social worker in the 1980s and from my research into the history of child protection that, traditionally, child protection workers used to routinely inspect the entire home where children lived. As well as living rooms, kitchen cupboards would be gazed into, cookers checked out, and bedrooms and the children's sleeping conditions examined. Classic signs of extreme cases were discoveries that children were sleeping on mattresses that had become rotten from bed-wetting, with little or no bedding. Even when the concern was not neglect but other forms of abuse and where there was evidence of quite clean and orderly sitting rooms and kitchens, the determined worker was not supposed to put off investigating the sleeping conditions. There was a belief that it was in bedrooms that the 'truth' of the family's inner life and child welfare were to be found and it often proved to be painfully true. The archives of the NSPCC (where I have spent many years doing research) are replete with photographs of such neglectful conditions, and in the 1950s and 60s, some of these were used in publications to inform and no doubt shock the public about the hidden realities of child cruelty (Allen and Morton, 1961). In my own experience as a social worker, some of the worst conditions I found children living and sleeping in were in homes where the downstairs was okay.

It is striking how little is known about such vital home visiting practices today. My research, based on an approach of shadowing social

workers and observing how they actually perform child protection work, from which this book partly draws, suggests that getting into the house is sometimes difficult and that some social workers do insist on looking around the home and seeing children on their own and find these to be challenging and often uncomfortable things to have to do. It takes a clear intellectual understanding of the child protection role, the importance of good authority, and great courage, skill and resilience to go through with what is required to protect children. This book shows how even the most effective workers are sometimes at risk of avoiding carrying out difficult tasks that are essential to ensure children are safe, and examines why such avoidance occurs and how it can be recognized and prevented. As Turnell and Edwards (1999) observe, having to knock on a door and tell a complete stranger that they are under suspicion of maltreating their children is deeply personally and professionally challenging for even the most experienced workers.

The book also addresses other areas that contemporary scandals and research have shown knowledge to be lacking, such as working with fathers/father figures. In the Baby Peter case, for instance, the social workers made little effort to inquire into or engage with the 'stepfather' and the other male lodger who we now know lived there and brutally assaulted the child. I have conducted a number of studies into social care work with men and fathers from which I draw here. Approaches to working with mothers and children have also been the subject of my research and I will draw on some of what I learned about that. This is not, however, a book that seeks to report on a particular research study or findings, but a text about the theory and practice of child protection, which draws on my research conducted over the past 20 years and case studies, as well as other sources of knowledge. It is not a book about child protection in any particular country and my references to policy in particular places are limited. This is not because policy and the contexts of different countries are not important. Chapter 2 in particular shows that they are. Cultural diversity and social class as well as gender and ethnic differences will be considered in the context of the sensitivities involved in engaging with children and families in their homes and other spaces. But far too often the literature on social work is dictated by what the legislation and policy says. It is as if policy *is* the practice. My focus is on practice, on what happens when professionals attempt to protect children and the nature of intimate child protection practice wherever in the western world it goes on. A home visit is a home visit wherever that home is.

## **Towards intimate child protection practice**

The core theoretical argument of the book is that understanding how effective child protection practice is carried out requires a deep analysis of how it is experienced through movement, the body and the emotions. The notion of 'performance' seeks to capture the full range of movements, talk, management of emotions and interactions that are played out during child protection interventions. In elaborating on performing child protection, the book draws on concepts and research about childhood, gender, power, social work and the state and three theoretical strands in particular.

First, because the book focuses on what happens when professionals are face to face with children and families, it is informed by theories that attempt to deepen understandings of 'relational' work. The analysis draws on the perspective of 'relationship-based practice' and ways of thinking about the significance of the emotions in social work (Froggett, 2002; Sudbery, 2002; Trevithick, 2003; Bower, 2005a, Cooper and Lousada, 2005; Ruch, 2007a, 2007b; Howe, 2008). Relationship-based practice seeks to reach a deep understanding of the complexity of human beings, the uniqueness of the person, the problems at hand and what is happening in this case/encounter. It is a 'psychosocial' approach, which focuses on the interaction between the external factors that influence people's life chances and the social conditions they live in and their internal emotional worlds and capacities to be loving, safe, caring individuals (Schofield, 1998; Lefevre, 2010). The 'relational' approach taken here attempts to reach an integrated understanding of individual and structural factors as they interact with each other. This is not a naive approach that ignores power and inequalities but one that explores these 'structural' factors as they are apparent and experienced in and through relationships. It is about the politics of emancipation as expressed in the life of individual service users and families and those who work with them, what I have elsewhere called 'life politics' (Ferguson, 2001, 2009a). The focus of analysis is on the nature of helping relationships as 'the medium through which the practitioner can engage with the complexity of an individual's internal and external worlds and intervene' (Ruch, 2005, p. 113).

A related concept is 'reflective practice'. The aim is to provide knowledge and understanding that can help with critical reflection on the content of the work, so that practitioners can better understand what is going on between them and service users and other professionals, and

become aware of emotionally charged experiences and how their values and knowledge base influence their work. The relational approach not only seeks to increase understandings of service users and helping relationships but to provide ways for professionals to have deeper relationships with *themselves* and their own experience. This can be understood in terms of two kinds of reflection: reflection *in* action, which needs to occur when workers are doing the work, for example in the home on the visit, checking how they are feeling and its impact on what needs to be done next; and reflection *on* action, which is about looking back over what has just been done, getting support from colleagues and in supervision to critically review how an encounter went and the direction that relationships and cases are taking (Schön, 1983). This enables the book to examine the complex conscious and unconscious processes that go on between workers and service users, which both constrain and enable intimate connections and effective child protection. For instance, the psychodynamic concept of ‘containment’ (Bion, 1962) will be used to reach a deeper understanding of how social workers work therapeutically with children and families and to outline a model of supervision and staff support and development through which practitioners can be supported to use their minds and bodies to move more and better in performing child protection to the benefit of children, other service users and themselves.

A second strand of theory the book draws on is the new interest in the social sciences in movement, which has come to be known as the study of ‘mobilities’ (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Creswell, 2006; Urry, 2007; Adey, 2009). Movement has been ignored in the social work literature, as it has been in the social sciences generally (Ferguson, 2008). For sociologist John Urry (2007, p. 43), the study of mobility refers to a ‘broad project of establishing a “movement-driven” social science in which movement, potential movement and blocked movement’ are understood as central to people’s experiences of relationships and everyday life. Utilizing this approach, I argue that movement, potential movement and blocked movement are the very stuff of child protection practice and relate to fundamental issues such as whether professionals move towards children to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure that they are fully engaged with, here and now, on this home visit, or in this clinic or hospital ward, and the harm to them uncovered. Social work always involves *potential* movement, as professionals need to stay still during encounters, such as when interviewing a child or parent, and be prepared to move around to see the child and the home. However,

practitioners are not always mobile when they should be. Drawing on such theory helps the book to show how a key dimension to the risks of children not being protected arises from the ways in which movement is blocked and fails to occur. This can happen on the street, in the hospital ward, and in the service user's home.

Movement (and non-movement) in child protection are linked to the worker's emotions, bodily awareness and lived experience of practice. The requirement to move, to walk up the garden path, knock on the door, enter the home, be face to face with children and their carers and to have to use authority in seeking to check on the child's wellbeing brings up many feelings. In grounding the everyday actions of practice in issues to do with movement, I want to try and capture the adventures and atmospheres of social work and child protection. How social work practice is generally written and talked about lacks atmosphere, as it largely fails to capture the texture, the feel, the lived experiences of where the work goes on and how this impacts on perception and what does (and does not) get done. Urry (2007, p. 73) defines 'atmosphere' as being 'in the relationship of people and objects. It is something sensed often through movement and experienced in a tactile kind of way.' This usefully helps us to focus on how, in having to move to meet their objectives, social workers must engage in highly physical ways with objects such as the street, the service user's home, and children's bodies. This perspective enables us to see afresh and analyse in new ways how the movement of people's bodies, cars, information and activities such as walking and driving are central to child protection practice.

The third strand of social theory informing the book concerns the place of objects and things, or what is called 'material culture', in everyday life. A rich and fascinating set of studies and ideas are available about the place of things such as cars, mobile phones, the internet, buildings and the homes in which we live and the possessions we surround ourselves with (Miller, 2008). Miller (2010), for instance, argues that we need to think about houses as things that are not merely shaped by us in terms of how we decorate and inhabit them. Homes, he argues, shape us and impact on how we live and act. While he does not refer to social work or professional home visiting, I will try to show how such ideas can help us gain new understandings of the meanings that surround homes, what matters to the people who live in them and what happens when professionals like child protection practitioners step into them, and try to make sense of what is going on in them and move around in them. As Miller (2001a, p. 1) argues, 'most of what matters to people is happening behind

the closed doors of the private sphere'. I believe this to be as true of child protection practice as it is of people's everyday lives and we are fortunate to now be able to draw on a range of work that provides new ways to make what goes on in private publicly understandable. The creative use of objects plays a vital and undertheorized role in child protection, although the computer is probably the main exception to this. Turnell and Essex (2006) argue for the use in child safety plans of a 'family safety object', which is placed in an agreed place in the house on the understanding that the child is the only one allowed to move it, and that doing so is a way for the child to communicate that they are worried about something. Professionals, non-abusing relatives and other 'safety people' in the child's safety network keep an eye on the safety object and are alerted to concern if they find that it has been moved. Turnell and Essex (2006) give a wonderful example of a boy who chose a rubber fish as his safety object which was put on top of the fridge. The book seeks to develop such insights into the role of objects by addressing the meanings of homes, different rooms, possessions, cars and mobile phones in child protection.

In sum, analysing practice through relationship-based practice, relational theory, a life politics perspective, and the sociology of movement and material culture enables the book to provide new ways of understanding the lived experience of doing social work and child protection as it needs to be done, while 'on the move'. It tries to illuminate and inform the challenges, hazards, adventures, achievements and joys of moving into and through other people's homes and other public spaces and offices to access children and work with their parents and carers, which constitutes the core experience of social work and intimate child protection practice.

## **The structure and scope of the book**

The social work process in child protection involves a number of stages:

- suspicion of child abuse and referral to social work
- investigation/assessment by social work, in conjunction with information gathering and, in some instances, joint working with other agencies
- planning and formal interagency work, including case conferences
- longer term therapeutic and support work with children and families.



The book deals with key aspects of child protection at all these stages. It does so in part in chronological fashion and the earlier chapters are generally more concerned with investigation/assessment and the later chapters give more attention to longer term protection, therapeutic and support work. The reason why a straight chronological approach is not followed is because a thematic approach is also adopted where key issues are discussed as they relate to each stage of the child protection process. Thus the early chapters on home visiting and relating to children cover longer term as well as initial assessment work. The later chapters on working with children and parents are concerned with initial engagement and relationship building, as well as how to intervene over the longer term to develop parenting and achieve child safety. The chapters on working in other spaces like the car, hospitals and offices cover all stages of the child protection process.

The book tries to deepen understandings of the nature and flows of child protection work by breaking down what social workers typically do into visible actions performed in specific contexts and domains of practice: organizations (social work offices, hospitals), journeys (by car, on foot), and the service user's home. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a historical analysis of the origins and development of child protection policy and practices (such as home visiting) from its 19th-century beginnings to the present. Chapter 3 deals with the journeys on foot and by transport that are necessary to get to see the child, including the practice that goes on at doorsteps in literally trying to get into a home. Chapters 4 and 5 cover what goes on during home visits and the movements and actions that are needed if children's safety is to be ensured. Chapter 9 addresses the nature of effective child protection practice in places such as hospitals and social work offices. Organizational matters are also addressed in Chapter 13, which deals with multi-agency working, and Chapter 14 with respect to the role of supervision and organizational support in effective child protection. The issues raised in these chapters are further developed by focusing on work with different family members: Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are devoted to aspects of working with children; Chapters 10 and 11 focus on work with mothers and fathers, while Chapter 12 is concerned with using good authority, working with resistance and involuntary service users. While the domains of organizations, journeys and homes and working with children and parents at different stages of the child protection process are analysed separately, in practice everything is interdependent and connected and some chapters address these cross-cutting themes. Chapters 8 and 14 use the car to