
‘The issue is no longer one of taking the right decision in a child protection case but of taking a defensible decision’. (Dingwall, R., Eekelaar, J. and Murray, T., 1995:251)

In May 2011, Eileen Munro, a social worker and Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, completed a review of England's child protection system. In a media interview following the release of her report and recommendations, she echoed Dingwall et al.'s (1995) above contention, reportedly maintaining that the UK child protection system had ‘become preoccupied by individuals “doing things right” rather than “doing the right thing”’ (Richardson, 2011). Several of her recommendations for reform have now been implemented.

Protecting children from child abuse and neglect has historically presented insurmountable challenges. Child protection work is challenging, stressful, may endanger workers, and is more often criticised than valued. Workers may be censured when they remove children from their families and just as often condemned when they leave children in dangerous environments. Critical decisions about children's safety and well-being, frequently emanating from structured risk assessment procedures, may result in unanticipated and even devastating consequences (see Goddard et al. 1999, Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010). Perceptions of children, and views regarding children's rights versus parents' rights, will influence definitions of abuse and neglect; legislation and policy; professionals' intervention thresholds and strategies; and, ultimately, outcomes for children and families. The media also significantly influences child protection policy and practice.

Anne Stafford, Nigel Parton, Sharon Vincent, and Connie Smith are all associated with The University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Child Protection Research Centre, set up in 2007. Research at the Centre focuses on child protection in the United Kingdom and internationally. It aims to provide insights that will help safeguard vulnerable children from abuse and neglect. The authors contend that much can be learnt through critically comparing and analyzing child protection developments in legislation, policy and systems. Their well-written book provides significant insights into selected child protection systems around the world. The authors' primary focus, however, is the intricacies of the child protection systems in the four countries of the UK – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as they operated prior to the book being published.
Munro’s review of child protection in England had not been completed when Stafford and her colleagues wrote their book. Consequently they could not confidently foresee England’s progression toward a more child-focused, less bureaucratic child protection system, amidst other reforms in health and policing. However, child protection systems regularly undertake change, if not in direct response to a review, as a reaction to a well-publicised child protection failure. The adequate resourcing of services for children and families is critical to positive change. Indeed, Eileen Munro was recently quoted in the *Guardian* newspaper (Tickle, 2012:39) saying it is ‘a really tough time in the economic cycle for people [child protection practitioners] to be changing [however] reflection and learning can be energising’, as Stafford and her colleagues well illustrate.

The authors contend that, even since devolution (which is well explained on p.69), reforms in England invariably filter through to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Changes in response to Munro’s Review might therefore also be expected in these countries. Even amidst change, much can be learnt from Stafford and her colleagues’ analysis of, and commentary on, child protection prior to Munro’s recommendations. This is particularly so for readers not familiar with the four distinct child protection systems in the UK, and the nature and effects of their differences. As a reader living outside of the UK, I found this book to be very informative. Despite some unfamiliar terms and many acronyms, the text is engaging and easy to read. Tables, flowcharts, graphs, and boxes are well used throughout, especially to present numerical data and to provide comparative snapshots.

The book is divided into two parts. Chapters 2-4 comprise Part 1, titled ‘Introduction and context’. This section introduces the UK child protection context and chapter two highlights major factors that have led to changes in policy and practice. Stafford and her colleagues explore policy-making at the macro, micro and meso levels, and they also present an insightful reflection on the media’s role in motivating child protection policy changes. Chapter three situates the UK system within the international context. The authors present an insightful analysis of literature related to child protection systems in North America, Scandinavia and Northern Europe, Australia and New Zealand. They identify two broad orientations that can be applied in varying degrees to the nature of each system, either ‘Child Protection’ (Anglo-American) or ‘Family Service’ with and without mandatory reporting requirements (Northern European and Nordic countries). The authors acknowledge that the way the different systems operate is ‘influenced by wider cultural and societal conditions’ (p.45). This is clearly presented in Tables 3.1 and 3.2. They also identify the emergence of a new ‘child-focussed orientation’, with a greater focus on early intervention and prevention. From a child-focussed perspective, the