Children Australia
Volume 40 ▌ Number 1 ▌ pp. 20–22 ▌ © The Author(s) 2015 ▌ doi:10.1017/cha.2014.45

Commentary

Understanding Difficult Parental Behaviours During a Child Protection Investigation

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When child protection caseworkers make first contact with the parents of a child (or children) who is suspected of being at 'significant risk of harm' they may encounter a range of hostile, angry and aggressive verbal responses from parents. If this contact results in a child being removed from parental care, it is not unknown for these responses to escalate into attempts at verbal intimidation and loud threats of personal violence. These behaviours then get recorded in case files and in materials submitted to the Children's Court to support the case for permanent removal of a child from parental care; these behaviours being presented as evidence of the parents' unsuitability and unwillingness to comply with demands for changes in their child rearing practices. But how should child protection caseworkers view these less-than-helpful parental responses, and how should they, in turn, respond? This article explores this issue and offers a number of ways of understanding these behaviours, and canvasses new ways for caseworkers to respond when these behaviours occur.

■ **Keywords:** parental behaviours, language codes, pain-based behaviours.

Introduction

A postcode analysis of the residential addresses of families with whom child protection services are involved frequently reveals that these families live in areas of significant social disadvantage. These areas are often public housing estates with poor social amenities, inadequate public transport services and underperforming schools. These communities are where parents may also be among the long-term unemployed. As a result, it is not uncommon for the only source of family income to be Centrelink benefits. Early school leaving and low-level educational achievements are also a feature of this group of parents. In addition, there may be issues with regard to drug or alcohol abuse, mental health, criminality and intellectual disability. Finally, and all too often for some of these families, domestic violence is present.

All of these conditions and circumstances create a stressful, toxic environment that is not supportive of good child-rearing practices (Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Weatherburn & Lind, 2001).

Encounters with Authority

It is against this type of family background that child protection caseworkers arrive at a family home to investigate a report that a child is at 'risk of significant harm'. The caseworkers indicate their considerable authority when they identify themselves, by displaying their identity cards and confirming that they are the representative of the government child protection authority. This signifies a serious power imbalance between the parents and the child protection caseworker.

For many of these parents, who may have had difficult relationships with other government authorities, starting with school and progressing to police, health and housing authorities, this is not an easy encounter. That this encounter is about their child makes matters much worse and, unless carefully and cautiously handled, it can set a negative tone for future exchanges between the parents and all subsequent child protection caseworkers. Nowhere is this negative consequence more clearly seen than through the vitriolic commentary about child protection caseworkers by parents who have had their children removed. Examples

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https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2014.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are to be found on the website of Luke's Army (2013) and the unusually named Australian Legislative Ethics Commission (2014).

Language Codes

So why do some parents, when faced with a child protection investigation, engage in verbally hostile and aggressive exchanges with caseworkers? Basil Bernstein in the early 1970s wrote about two general language codes – restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1971). The restricted code, according to Bernstein, is used by working-class families, while middle-class families use a different elaborated code; this second code being a product of education. Today we tend not to use the terms 'working-class' or 'middle-class', and substitute terms such as 'low-income' or 'middle-income' to describe people's status. There is no doubt that education has an impact on language development and use, and, in turn, on income level. Referring to a low-income, poorly educated person as 'inarticulate' does occur. Reference to a better-educated, middle-income person as 'articulate' is also a frequently made statement.

Certainly, the users of the elaborated code when conversing have the power to select from a relatively extensive range of alternative words or expressions when seeking to present an idea or a position. In contrast, the users of the restricted code are severely limited in the choice of alternative words or expressions when they want to present an idea or position.

If Bernstein's ideas about the two language codes is correct – and experience suggests they are – then these codes play an important part in the exchange between child protection caseworkers when they first talk with some parents under investigation for a suspected case of significant harm to a child. A child protection caseworker, even if he or she came from a socially deprived background, will by virtue of their university education be using an elaborated language code. In comparison, the parent, by virtue of a poor education, may only use a restricted language code. Under such circumstances the potential for miscommunication is very high, as is the potential to interpret what the parent says in a way that distorts what the parent meant. Some parents in Children's Court cases say that what a caseworker has written in Court reports distorts and misreports what they have said to him or her.

It is important to recognise that parents whose communication language is set in aggressive and hostile forms of exchange (which they may not recognise as such) often relate to each other and, indeed, to their children in a similar manner. This is because of their restricted language code usage. In fact, it is the only way they know how to communicate verbally. This style of communication is also associated with poor emotional regulation (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2014). An example of this type of exchange might be when, in frustration, a father says to his partner and the mother of his child "if you don't stop doing that I'll kill you" which, of course, is not necessarily the intention. This is a manifestation of poor language skills and an example of the father's restricted language code. In that regard, it is important for child protection caseworkers to understand this pattern of communication and not to interpret it as a sign of parental dysfunction. Rather, it should indicate that the parents need assistance in developing more appropriate forms of communication and a more adaptive response to stress.

Children's Pain-based Behaviour

The removal of a child from parental care creates trauma for a child, and pain and distress for parents (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2012). In out-of-home care services, especially in the emergent therapeutic residential-care units (McNamara, 2014; Victorian Auditor-General (VAG), 2014), the emphasis is on attachment and trauma informed models of practice (Barton, Gonzales, & Tomlinson, 2012). In this context, the impact of parental abuse and neglect, and the removal of a child from parental care, no matter how justified, is viewed as traumatic for the child. The resulting hostile, angry, aggressive and destructive behaviours that a child or young person may display are then seen as a manifestation of the internal chaos that trauma creates and that the child or young person is experiencing. Added to this is the characterisation of these behaviours as 'pain-based behaviours' (Anglin, 2002; Fulcher & Moran, 2013). This characterisation forms the basis of a non-punitive response to these out-of-control behaviours by staff of the therapeutic-care units, in their endeavour to provide a corrective or healing response for the children or young people in their care.

The term 'pain-based behaviour' is a clever, supportive reframing of how to view what can be challenging, difficult and provocative behaviours that all too readily generate an unhelpful controlling and punitive response from residential care staff. Once these behaviours are seen as pain-based, an empathetic attitude that this reframing encourages is possible. What then follows is a more productive, caring and non-punitive response by care staff, given that most people respond in a caring rather than a controlling way to the pain of others.

Parents' Pain-based Behaviour

From a parent's perspective, as part of their trauma, there is also the issue of the grief and loss they experience once a child is removed from their care (Burgheim, 2005; Davies, 2011; Schofield et al., 2010). Removing a child from parental care also poses a threat to the parents' personal identities and the likely image they have of themselves as competent parents. Indeed, how do parents explain to their extended family and friends the reason for the removal of a child from their care?

For disadvantaged parents who may have no other social role, as, say, a tradesperson or successful sports person, this threatened loss of identity can be devastating. This is because

https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2014.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it was their role as a mother or father of a child that was the only meaningful role they had, even if they performed this role poorly. When this is the case, a child protection investigation, not surprisingly, may provoke from parents hostile, angry and aggressive responses, verbally communicated in the parents' restricted language code. If the investigation results in a child being removed from parental care, these responses may escalate into attempts at intimidation and loud threats of personal violence.

This development should be seen as parallel to a child's behaviour in out-of-home care and, likewise, as a manifestation of pain-based behaviours and the internal chaos the trauma of removal has created for the parents (Anglin, 2002; Fulcher & Moran, 2013). This perspective on these behaviours is what is important for child protection caseworkers, and forms the basis of a non-punitive response to these difficult behaviours by parents. This skilled response is vital to the relationship that has to be formed between a child protection caseworker and parents in order to protect the 'best interests of the child' (Goldstein, Solnit, Goldstein, & Freud, 1996). Writings in case files and materials submitted to the Children's Court should similarly reflect this perspective.

Conclusion

This article is not apologising for verbally hostile, angry, aggressive intimidation or loud threats of personal violence that characterise the responses of some parents to a child protection investigation. Rather, the purpose of the article is to offer a perspective on parental behaviours that may allow for a non-punitive response by child protection caseworkers, based on a clear understanding of these difficult-to-tolerate parental behaviours.

A non-punitive response is important because punishing what may be viewed as unacceptable behaviours by parents is unlikely to change this behaviour, when negotiating a shift in such behaviours has to be the overall purpose of child protection services. Changes to parental behaviour and to child-rearing practices that make a child safe from harm can only be achieved by child protection caseworkers if they are able to establish a relationship with parents that is characterised by 'trust'. It is also a relationship that has to embody empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism (ERGO) (Scott, Arney, & Vimpani, 2010). Self-evidently, parents will not listen to, or change their behaviour, at the behest of someone they do not trust.

The need to understand difficult behaviours, rather than being disgusted by them, comes with the child protection territory; as does learning to work with parents regardless of these awful first responses. And this has to be the hallmark of skilled, humane, professional child protection practice (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2014.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press