

Social workers as a profession must stop to reconsider the core values and ethics of their role and not be pushed down the road of coercive social control, writes **Eugene McCarthy**



CARERS OR CONTROLLERS?

DR Helen Buckley's reported comments in the article, Social worker's urged to take care in abuse cases (Irish Examiner, January 6, 2012) presents an important opportunity to review the responsibilities and expectations of our social workers tasked with the statutory protection and welfare of our nation's children.

Dr Buckley, according to the report, cautions about the dangers of "sending an army of young women to deal with situations that even the gardai would have trouble dealing with", yet goes on to emphasize that social workers should "tell parents where to draw the line... and should invoke the law in a more coercive way".

We are, as a society, rightly horrified by the disturbing details of abuse emerging in recent years, and such cases have shattered any remaining innocence and naivety regarding the potential for deliberate harm to children by parents. However, it is important that we maintain a sense of balance and perspective in relation to child abuse, and reconsider our core principles and beliefs regarding families.

It was accepted within the childcare profession that parents, as a general rule, did their best to care for their children. There was no such thing as the perfect parent, children were best cared for within their own families, and where care was inadequate, it was often due to personal or circumstantial shortcomings rather than willful neglect or abuse. A parent with addiction or mental health problems was not an unfit parent per se, but one in need of support, and that was where the social worker came in.

Social work was more of a vocation than a profession. The social worker knew her (or his) families, and over time built a solid supportive and trusting relationship. Its bricks and mortar laid by endless advocacy phonecalls to housing or social welfare office, as well as the magical production of secondhand washing machines, cookers, cots, and extra funds for Christmas and confirmations. The social worker saw at first hand and was able to offer support before things became serious.

Whilst we now live in more complex and difficult times, it is not certain if developments in training and service delivery have been entirely successful. Social workers in their quest for greater status and "professionalism" have become too busy or too important for those core tasks that brought them close to their clients.

However, social workers on the ground are very acutely aware of their legal responsibilities, even more so of inadequate resources, and the lack of solid support and supervision.

They are eternally caught in a "no win" situation, damned if they act and damned if they don't. When things go wrong they feel blamed and scapegoated.

The advent of team leaders, principals, and childcare managers has bureaucratized services, and whilst social workers have become isolated from their clients on the ground, they have also become isolated from their employers, from those they reasonably expect support and guidance.

As recent high-profile cases have raised questions regarding the timing and quality of interventions, the professional and statutory reaction has become defensive and legalistic.

Whilst the child's safety and welfare



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must always be paramount, there is a danger that intervention may become based on agency or individual expediency or self preservation.

Today, gardai have become more like social workers and the social workers more like gardai, and all the time the distance, and alienation from

the client grows. The parent in crisis feels unheard and not cared for, and their natural anger and frustration seen as hostility and they become labelled as dangerous in office files.

Parents are criticised for failing to avail of services, often poorly designed or inadequate. They are

labelled as uncooperative and unmotivated by social workers and others who overlook the simple but important fact, that difficulty in engaging and accepting support is itself symptomatic of many conditions. They forget that this is the challenge of the professional, what separates the

professional from the amateur social worker. The skill, ability and commitment to work with the "difficult" parent or client over time in a non-judgmental caring way.

When it comes to ensuring the safety and welfare of vulnerable children nothing can be left to chance.



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When faced with such complex personal and family need in times of severe cutbacks and recession, it may be tempting to take the "short cut" of the legal or coercive route. However, more coercive practice in dealing with parents will only generate greater anger, conflict and alienation. Surely if we are to properly care for our vulnerable children, we must begin by caring for and supporting their vulnerable parents. An important distinction must also be made in child protection between the HSE, as the agency with statutory responsibility, and its social workers on the ground knocking on doors.

The individual social worker on the ground can only do so much and can only fulfil their employer's statutory duties if both they and the families they seek to help are provided with the necessary support and resources. "Helping" is indeed the key word for the social worker, a profession that has always emphasised its caring nature. It is time now for the profession, to stop and reconsider its core values and ethics and not allow itself to be pushed down the road of coercive social control.

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