

## Child of the parent or child of the state?

In recent years there has been an increasing trend toward social workers making assumptions that state oversight of children is essential, in order to ensure that parents comply with their legal duties toward their children. This is something that older generations would not have tolerated, as they considered social workers to be there to step in when a parent did not get it right, in order to help vulnerable children and families. They also expected to be trusted to not break the law, unless there was good reason to think otherwise.

Social workers do an excellent job in many cases and make a real difference to the lives of vulnerable children. It is not in those cases that their involvement is questioned, but in cases where the parents are good parents, or at least 'good enough'. The current approach appears to be that when a parent acts in conformity with expected norms they do not require investigation, but any divergence from the norm, no matter that it is a legal divergence, will require investigation.

This phenomenon is most clearly demonstrated with families who home educate their children, particularly where some other form of state intervention is declined or not taken up. Recently, a Yorkshire mother declined health visiting services on the basis that she is a paediatric specialist and experienced mother, with a family with no indication of genetic abnormality or inherited disease. Such explanation should not be necessary because, as the mother had quite rightly pointed out, health visiting is an 'opt in' service, not mandatory. The case was nonetheless reported to children's services as a safeguarding concern, because the children are home educated. The main theme of the referral was that home education means that children are 'unseen'.

To put this into even clearer perspective, the children of the family are all involved in regular activities outside the home, including public performances and classes provided by the local authority. The social work responses raised to the health visitor referral, were revealing: social workers reported '*whilst there are no safeguarding concerns, the children are 'unseen' and we therefore would not know if there are concerns*'. The children's GP responded to state that verbal referral had been made to 'education' as this '*seems to be the easiest way to get into this family*'. Tellingly, a trainee social worker, when advised of the case stated: '*That's right because a parent is not capable to assess their child*'. (confidential discussion, Sept. 2017). It appears that trainee social workers are being indoctrinated into the cult of state control.

This suggestion that social workers should investigate families where there are no safeguarding concerns, because having not seen the children, there might be concerns if they look hard enough, is rather in the vein of 'prove that you do not beat your wife', or 'prove that you are not a burglar'. It seems that the ethos is moving toward a culture of proactively seeking concerns, rather than responding to real concerns.

The mother mentioned above is not unusual; a great many referrals are made to children's services in respect of home educated children, solely on the assumption that they are 'unseen'. What is risible in this suggestion is that home educated children are uniquely visible, given that they are out in public during school hours, rather than cloistered in a classroom. In fact:

*'Home educated children were found to be disproportionately scrutinised, being approximately twice as likely to be referred to Social Services ... as were children aged 0-4 years and children aged 5-16 who attend school. Despite that double referral rate, .... Referrals to Social Services were found to be 3.5 - 5 times less likely to lead to a Child Protection Plan with home educated children than with referrals of schooled children aged 5-16 ... and 5 - 7 times less likely to lead to a Child Protection Plan than referrals for children aged 0-4 years...Rates of home educated children subject to a Child Protection Plan .... were also found to be less than teaching staff guilty of abuse offences.'* (Charles-Warner, 2015).

The safeguarding industry and, make no mistake, it is a self-perpetuating industry, is spearheading this charge toward 1984: professional oversight of every child, with effective parental responsibility to the state, on the basis that 'they' need to watch just in case parents do something:

*'Sadly, safeguarding has moved in many areas from a system designed to support individuals, to one that is a self-perpetuating industry, more interested in policies and procedures than in ensuring people have freedom, autonomy and choice, as well as being safe and secure within their services.'* (Green, 2016).

Green, the chief executive of Care England, was referring to inconsistency in care, but the comment resonates for those who find themselves shocked to be brought into that 'safeguarding industry', for making a reasonable and legal choice.

It is particularly alarming that Children's Services investigations are often undertaken covertly, without the parent consenting to share their data. Consent is required unless there is significant risk of harm to the child if consent is sought, but any objection raised is swept away as soon as 'safeguarding' is mentioned.

In a recent case where the parent had relocated to escape serious domestic violence, the investigation was akin to iatrogenic intervention [*steps taken to seek to remedy a supposed problem, or 'ill', caused harm*], in that social workers traced and discussed their 'concerns' that the child was unseen with the abusive parent, thereby providing sufficient information for that parent to locate the child, exposing the child to serious risk of harm. To read the phrase '*we have no background information on these children, which needs investigation to obtain*', is extremely worrying in cases where a parent has escaped domestic abuse, or where the family has been relocated by the Police. The reactive duty to address present concerns is cast aside in an effort to invade the privacy of a family, by obtaining background information to which the investigating social worker is rarely entitled.

It is commonplace nowadays that where parents are referred to social services in respect of home education, the allegation made is of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is all too easy to allege, as you cannot evidence emotional abuse readily, but all too difficult to defend against. Social work is not the only arena within the safeguarding industry where this approach is causing good enough parents to be brought within its bounds.

In the last few years, claims of 'emotional abuse' have become almost ubiquitous in Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) reporting in private Children Act applications. Most usually nowadays the report will state that the parents are 'conflicted' and are therefore emotionally abusing their child. This is an extremely serious concern, as a parent worried for the wellbeing of their child, will be accused of emotionally abusing their child, simply because they applied to the Court to seek to protect their child's best interests. The protective parent inadvertently becomes the suspected parent.

Confidentiality restrictions prohibit the disclosure of these reports, which are consequently unseen by the public, upon whose behalf those reporting officers work. The illogicality of a situation where a parent is referred for being 'unseen' by public employees and yet the work of those employees within the safeguarding industry is unseen, should not be lost on that public. This is not to suggest that private law reports should be made public, albeit they should be able to be challenged over their accuracy, but rather to highlight the incongruity of suggesting that a home educated child is an 'unseen' child and therefore at risk of harm.

Imagine a parent who is worried because their child is reporting that the other parent is frequently drunk and that their new partner beats them. The drunken parent denies there is a problem and the protective parent applies to the Court to care for the child, in order to remove the child to a safer environment. CAFCASS report that the parental 'conflict' is emotionally abusing the child and social workers step in to welcome the protective parent into the widening arms of the safeguarding machine, where they will be told that they are equally to blame for abusing their child. Sadly, that is not fiction for many families.

This article cannot address every arm of the safeguarding industry, but suffice it to say that it is a many armed creature, intent on gathering in any parent making legal choices which are not the social norm: declining opt in health visiting, registering with a private GP, using a private midwifery service, declining vaccinations and home education are all regular justification used for reaching out to take hold of families. Where a home educating family ticks a second, or even a third box, their invitation to join the safeguarding industry is not one that is readily refused.

Diverse societies are thriving societies and we need to act to protect that diversity. Ordinary caring parents need to raise their voices to protest about this travesty, to stem the tide of public ownership of our children. 1984 is already establishing, do not dare blink, because if you take your eyes off the ball it will be here.

Do we want it to be too late to stop it?

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#### References:

Green, M (2016) 'Safeguarding: An Idea That has Become an Industry', Care England, Chief Executive's 4 min. read. Available from: [www.caretalk.co.uk/safeguarding-an-idea-that-has-become-an-industry](http://www.caretalk.co.uk/safeguarding-an-idea-that-has-become-an-industry)

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