

## Working ethically in child protection

Bob Lonne, Maria Harries, Brid Featherstone and Mel Gray  
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The social policy landscape in which social workers are practicing is rapidly changing in Aotearoa New Zealand. Governmental rhetoric is increasingly focusing on monitoring and blaming “failing parents”, while also demonstrating a reluctance to appear fully cognisant with the impact of structural issues such as poverty and the housing crisis. This narrative of blame has the potential to reshape the social work practice environment in ways that require conscious resistance. Government has recently announced the removal of the requirement to prioritise the placement of tamariki with their whanau, a proposal that has resulted in widespread condemnation. The criticisms contained within Puaote-Atatu need to be heeded and legislation needs to be strengthened to ensure that outcomes for tamariki Māori and whanau don’t deteriorate further. No doubt an avalanche of significant changes will be announced between now and when the new Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki begins operating in April 2017.

Uncertainty is a key feature of child protection practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. As social workers we collectively wait while information is drip feed to us about what the new ministry will mean for social work services and more importantly the children and families in need of our support and advocacy. With a lack of consultation social workers are finding our key sources of information through the media, while social media platforms such as Reimagining Social Work are utilised to assert our professional voice, to influence and guide these changes. Given the rapid changes facing child protection practice in Aotearoa New Zealand this topical book is a welcome edition,

providing a critical lens from which to view ethical child protection practice.

Lonne, Harries, Featherstone and Gray are all social workers with international research expertise in child protection and ethics. The authors express commitment to improving child protection practice and policy. They state from the outset that child protection systems in Anglophile countries are failing and assert the need for ethical practice in regulated systems. The authors encourage a dialogical approach to decision making that emphasises relational engagement with clients, whanau, colleagues and other professionals. The book examines the inter- and intra-personal stress that child protection social workers experience, and attention is given to the recognition and management of unequal power relationships. A process orientated relational framework to ethical decision making is detailed, to guide the difficult choices that are made in child protection social work practice.

Lonne, Harries, Featherstone and Gray present evidence to demonstrate the crisis facing Western child protection and welfare systems. They critique protective interventions in favour of a holistic model of ethical decision making, and highlight the importance of practitioner led advocacy to reform child protection practices. The authors recommend modifying child protection practices from the individualist risk saturated lens in favour of engaging in the emotional and economic realities that families struggle with through active community engagement. The authors caution against a child focused orientation that emphasises children’s’ rights and a social investment approach. Advising that such an approach in a neoliberal environment

can transform into a child rescue approach without appropriate support for families. This caution is significant in Aotearoa New Zealand, as the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (1989) which is under review, was constructed to advance the rights of the family while keeping the child paramount, and this ethos must prevail.

The book is split into four sections; with part one containing an overview of ethical theory and conceptual frameworks for ethical decision-making. Part two critically considers the dominant perspectives which have shaped child protection practises in Western countries. In this section, the authors provide a clear review of prevailing ideologies, social constructions and the impact of neo-liberalism on child protection practices. Demonstrating how these ideologies have resulted in risk management approaches that are centred on child rescue, children's rights and social investment, as opposed to rights based approaches that emphasises parenting support to disenfranchised families and

communities. Part three explores how complex information is utilised when making judgements in ethical decision making, taking into consideration organisational and legal mandates, and key ethical principles. Part four summarises the overall ethical imperative of the book. The authors demonstrate through case examples a relational approach to child protection, which encompasses social justice action to improve systemic issues. These case studies illustrate child protection practice that enables family unity and safety, as well as the realisation of social rights. The book utilises case examples well to situate learning. Each chapter concludes with a set of reflective questions for further contemplation.

As a social work educator this book has been useful to me in shaping the debate about child protection reform, in both the classroom and in my research. This book is a must read for social workers in the care and protection sector.

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