

Community Building Approach for Child Protection

by Ken Barter

▼ Abstract

This paper is based on a plenary address given at a conference sponsored FRP Canada in St. John's, Newfoundland in June, 2001. Dr Ken Barter presents many shortcomings existing in the children's protection system and advocates a community development approach to reclaim community participation and responsibility in protecting children.

Dr. Barter advances the argument that the changes required for a better child protection system are taking place in family resource programs. Family resource programs focus on the strengths of the families, not their problems. "They do more helping than judging" and their "power relations between those requiring services and those providing services are equal." They work within a framework that is, among other characteristics, "built on clients being essential resources and partners," "proactive," and "not about wielding power but discovering it." They see children in the context of their families and deal with families as parts of neighbourhoods and communities. Dr. Barter asserts "The experience of family resource programs tells us that important shifts in thinking occur when those who are defined as the problem are empowered to redefine the problem – that includes clients, parents, citizens and staff."

The author calls for the renegotiation of relationships among professionals, child-serving agencies, communities and governments to become collaborative partners in a more integrated child protection system.

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▼ Résumé

Cet article est tiré d'un discours présenté en plénière lors d'une conférence organisée par FRP Canada à St. John's, Terre-Neuve, en juin 2001. Le Dr Ken Barter y aborde les nombreuses lacunes du système de protection de l'enfance et prône une approche axée sur le développement communautaire pour régénérer la participation et la responsabilisation des communautés à l'égard de la protection des enfants.

De l'avis du Dr Barter, les changements requis pour améliorer le système de protection de l'enfance sont incarnés par les programmes de ressources pour la famille. Ceux-ci sont axés sur les forces des familles et non sur leurs problèmes. « Ils aident plus qu'ils ne jugent » et les « rapports de pouvoir entre ceux qui demandent les services et ceux qui les offrent sont égaux. » Les programmes de ressources pour la famille travaillent à l'intérieur d'un cadre « fondé sur la conviction que les clients sont des ressources essentielles et des partenaires », ils adoptent une approche « proactive » et « ne cherchent pas à exercer le pouvoir, mais à le découvrir. » Les enfants sont vus dans le contexte de leur famille, et celle-ci comme partie intégrante du voisinage et de la communauté. Selon le Dr Barter, « l'expérience des programmes de ressources pour la famille nous indique que des changements de pensée majeurs surviennent lorsque ceux que l'on définit comme étant à la source du problème sont amenés à redéfinir le problème – et cela comprend les clients, les parents, les citoyens et le personnel. »

L'auteur en appelle à la renégociation des rapports entre les professionnels, les organismes de service à l'enfance, les communautés et les gouvernements pour qu'ils deviennent partenaires et collaborateurs au sein d'un système de protection de l'enfance plus intégré.

If we in Canada were assigned the task to deliberately design systems that would frustrate the professionals and para-professionals who staff it, anger the public who finance it, alienate those who require or need its services and programs, that would invest in reactive responses to cope with symptoms of problems as opposed to being proactive, systems whose mandate is not shared and embraced by other public child serving organizations, and systems that would serve to be the scapegoat and bear the brunt of public criticisms should a child be harmed in any way, we could not do a better job than our present children's protection systems. — (Barter, 2002, p. 28)

Introduction

Community building represents a different approach to children's protection. It is an approach that challenges current interventions and practices in terms of assumptions, values and attitudes. It is about extending interventions beyond the four walls of parenting to include interventions at the professional, organizational, and community levels. These interventions acknowledge that child protection touches on issues related to poverty, violence, diversity, health, justice, gender, and community. Community building sounds the call to the reality that the abuse and neglect of children by society are as much a focus of intervention as the abuse and neglect by parents. This represents a fundamental shift in direction in child protection work.

This shift is necessary. Although comprehensive changes have taken place in the past in terms of legislative changes, improving standards, and introducing new policies and procedures, the ultimate goals of improving situations for children and families in need of assistance and protection are far from being realized. Child poverty is increasing; child abuse and neglect statistics are astounding; the number of children coming into the care of the state is increasing; substitute care resources are limited and in crisis; children and families relying on food banks are increasing in numbers; there continues to be a high rate of staff turnover and burn out in child protection systems; violence in families, schools and communities is a real concern; and child protection systems

continue to remain in crisis and struggle with their legislative mandate due to an absence of political will and leadership to invest in Canada's children. Tolerance for social injustices that dramatically impact on vulnerable children suggests that values associated with compassion, caring, and investments in the developmental needs of people are being replaced with arrogance, dominance, and power and control.

We know that millions of Canadian children are falling short with respect to the four determinants of health - these determinants being protection, relationships, opportunity and hope, and community (Guy, 1997). They are coping with poverty, discrimination, deprivation, unemployment, violence, substance abuse, and other significant barriers that deny them access to needed resources and opportunities. These children live in situations where hope fades into despair, affection withers into hostility, discipline turns into abuse, stability dissolves into chaos, and love becomes neglect.

Child protection systems and the families and children with whom they relate, experience first hand this reality. They are aware that the gates of social justice are sliding shut, even though there is rhetoric of fairness, equal opportunity and the importance of children. Similar to the families they serve, child protection systems are also in crisis (Barter, 2003, 1997). Persistent and ongoing crises and stresses within these systems have created working environments where creativity withers into conformity, idealism turns into cynicism, collective sharing dissolves into turf protection, and critical questions, challenges, and new ideas are oftentimes feared and avoided. Staff are faced with uncertainty, displacement, increased workloads, rigid protocols and inflexible policies, burnout and unrealistic expectations.

Public inquiries have alerted society to the fact that children are being abused, neglected, killed and murdered in families, communities, and oftentimes by the very public systems responsible for their protection. Policies and practices stemming from these inquiries emphasize rules and procedures to prevent recurrences and scandal. Little emphasis is placed on the many issues that are evident in whole

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field of child protection (Barter, 2000 ; Schorr, 1998). These include poverty, the residual nature of child protection work, minimal investments in prevention and early intervention, power imbalances, negative public attitudes, and practice being driven by neglect and abuse investigations rather than relationship building and helping.

Public policies and mandates do not deal with root causes. There is no balance with respect to interventions. Statutory duties to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect, to prevent further abuse and neglect, as well as to assume guardianship of children take place whereby any one of these duties is being carried out at the expense of the others. Duties associated with child abuse and neglect investigations absorb the bulk of financial and human resources. Workers do more judging than helping, more investigating than relationship building, and more following rules than problem-solving.

There is a consensus with respect to the following assumptions about child protection:

- The status-quo is no longer acceptable,
- Services and systems are in crisis (multi-dimensional),
- Current systems were never designed to deal with contemporary realities,
- Past interventions have been too narrow in focus,
- It is too important to be left to any one profession or agency, and
- Collaboration is required among child serving agencies and the community.

Support for these assumptions is premised on the following:

- Community has remained an afterthought and is not integrated into services, programs or human service organizations. The community role should go beyond funding systems and employing people to solve community problems. Children require strong communities.
- Many public services are crisis-oriented and re-active in nature. Crises absorb the bulk of resources in child protection with little invested in primary prevention and early intervention strategies. This does not make sense.
- Many programs are categorical, divide problems into distinct entities, and have rigidly defined rules for service eligibility. This fragmentation is unnecessary.
- Child serving agencies have not communicated with each other in a timely and accurate manner. Agencies cannot deal with their mandates alone, this includes schools, mental health, addictions, corrections, children's protection.

- Existing services are underfunded. Child welfare agencies are expected to address and manage social problems on behalf of society, yet with reduced resources they are forced into making critical decisions that affect quality and accessibility. Community and clients need to be involved in these decisions.
- Poverty, discrimination, violence, and other injustices have remained hidden in the planning and implementation of children's protection services. It is no longer acceptable to deal with symptoms independent of the causes.
- Social work, as the predominant profession in child welfare, is in crisis. The tension and stress associated with the work makes it difficult for child welfare systems to recruit and retain experienced social workers. To lose the values, principles, and ethics of the social work profession in public child welfare systems is of critical concern.

Family resource programs operate in such a way that there is obvious support for these assumptions. In fact, these assumptions have transformed into beliefs and convictions that guide practices and program development in family resource centres.

Community Building

Family resource programs acknowledge that child protection is a community issue and that children are a community responsibility. Children are a community resource, worthy of investment to facilitate their growth and development. Commitment to family resource initiatives is a commitment to building community as a primary intervention strategy in child protection. It is a commitment that challenges current and past practices. Community building integrates individual and community practices. This means support for the following:

- Acknowledging that we must structure services and programs to support community building. Community is a primary target for intervention and involvement.
- Understanding that families are critical resources and partners. They must be welcomed in our organizations in a way that taps into their creative talents and strengths.
- Helping professionals must cross traditional professional and bureaucratic boundaries to provide a continuum of services. Individuals and families must be seen in the context of their environment. Flexibility must exist whereby people can work collaboratively on common issues.

- Professionals and their agencies must be credible and genuine in their efforts to work with others. Credibility comes from behaviours that are indicative of commitment, caring, respect, trust, and shared power.
- Professionals must venture away from familiar practices and move toward nontraditional settings and hours of work. In collaboration with stakeholders, they need to redefine their roles and expectations.
- Committing to prevention and early intervention/outreach services. These services complement and supplement a service continuum that is user friendly, accessible, coherent, flexible and responsive to the needs of community.

Family resource programs integrate individual and community practice:

- Family resource programs do more helping than judging;
- Family resource programs do more relationship building than investigation;
- They are creative and take risks;
- They operate with integrity, intuition, and common sense related to the day to day experiences of parenting;
- They emphasize primary prevention and early intervention; and
- Community concerns and participation supercede organization requirements.

Family/community resource centres operate in the client/family/community paradigm as opposed to the dominant professional/bureaucratic paradigm. They know their principles are effective in working with families and their experiences suggest there are tensions when interfacing with child protection systems (MacAulay, 2002; Barter, 2002, 2003). These systems are structured in such a way it becomes difficult for them to embrace the integration of individual and community practice. The client/family/community paradigm represents a whole new way of working. The work is about relationships. Creating environments where:

- Power relations between those requiring services and those providing services are equal. The voice of the professional does not substitute for those seeking services. Clients are embraced as critical resources.
- Inclusion is of the utmost importance. Clients and their families, professionals and their organizations, and citizens and their community are expected to be collaborative partners.

- Messages that suggest professionals and their organizations are the experts are not given. They, similar to clients, are a resource with strengths and knowledge.
- Innovation is encouraged. Being innovative stresses opportunities rather than problems, uses collective intelligence, builds on strengths and diversity, and supports the emergence of new systems that will facilitate prevention, early intervention/outreach, and growth.
- Issues of poverty and oppression, as the two fundamental barriers that interfere with human functioning, are not hidden in the provision of services and the development of policy.
- Community capacity building is embraced as an essential dimension to the provision of services to citizens requiring or in need of assistance.

Environments with these characteristics suggest that family resource programs work within a framework that includes:

- A justice rather than a welfare approach to services;
- Innovation as opposed to change;
- A strengths based approach instead of pathology;
- Clients as essential resources and partners;
- Collaborative partnerships as opposed to cooperative;
- Proactive and not reactive;
- Discovering power as opposed to wielding power;
- Community accountability - how we look after all citizens as a collective,
- Community-driven practice; and
- Working with individuals and families in situations of risk and violence in the context of their neighbourhood and community.

These are reclaiming approaches to child protection. They are theoretically grounded in empowerment, collaboration, feminist and strengths perspective, Aboriginal theory, and healthy communities. There is a willingness to relinquish power and control. There is an acceptance that individuals, families, and communities understand their own needs. Family resource centres and programs do this. They are committed to extending help to families and communities when they need it, where they need it, and how they need it. Family resource programs represent a community building/reclaiming approach to the protection of children. The programs fit with what research suggests are key attributes of successful programs:

- comprehensive, flexible, responsive, and persevering,
- see children in the context of their families,

- deal with families as parts of neighbourhoods and communities,
- have a long term, preventive orientation, a clear mission, and continue to evolve over time,
- well managed by competent and committed individuals with clearly identifiable skills,
- operate in settings that encourage strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

What takes place in family resource centres and programs reflect the paradigm that is necessary in child protection. This requires:

- participation and collaboration of all stakeholders and families as key players. These relationships are built on trust and respect.
- cultural competence - recognizing the strengths embedded in diversity and ensuring interventions are compatible with culture.
- easy, user friendly access to services with active participation of families in leadership policy development, administration, peer support and training.
- a non-threatening environment.
- flexible policies and procedures to respond to individual need.
- a common vision that is supported by all stakeholders, including families.
- a collaborative relationship.
- investment in education, prevention, and early intervention.

A reclaiming approach in child protection means building communities that are deeply concerned about children and families, that will no longer tolerate social and economic injustices, that are prepared to include families and children who need services, that recognize and appreciate the strengths and contributions of all families and children, and that take the necessary steps to invest in children. It means renegotiating relationships to move away from the professional/bureaucratic paradigm to the client/community paradigm. The professional/ bureaucratic environment is not the best environment to achieve the four determinants of health for children and youth. It is governed by rigid poli-

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cies and procedures, where power remains with high-level bureaucrats, where thinking is compartmentalized and often re-active, where there is unwarranted political involvement, where the system is closed, where professional autonomy and creativity are stifled, and where those who seek services or provide services are not seen as equal partners in decisions. The complexities of child protection work elude bureaucratic and administrative solutions.

A shift to the client/community paradigm suggests that public services and programs should be more community-based with communities assuming responsibility for governance based on the goals and priorities they see as important for the well-being of citizens. This means abandoning many past practices and policies. Expectations associated

with partnership, inter-professional team work, client participation and involvement, staff empowerment, user-friendly services, primary prevention and promotion, community development, seamless systems of delivery, integrated programs and services, and community decision-making and governance dictate different practices and policies.

The client/community paradigm does not view the community as the perfect solution and a tool to be harnessed and used. Instead, the community is being approached as a place where people, if given the opportunity to be empowered and to work together, can renegotiate relationships as well as collaborate to redefine problems and innovate solutions. It is about caring, respect, acceptance, and personal and social power. It is about renegotiating relationships to strengthen partnerships built on three important concepts - collaboration, innovation, and empowerment.

Collaboration should not be confused with commonly used terms like cooperation and coordination. Collaboration is distinct in that it requires a commitment to mutual goals; a common values orientation; a sharing of power, risks, and resources; mutual investment in end results; and a willingness to embrace change and to conduct business differently. These distinctive qualities are necessary dimensions in child protection. These dimensions are evident in family resource programs. Also of significance is the importance

of innovation and creating opportunities for innovation to take place. It suggests introducing new practices, designing new methods of service delivery, approaching social problems differently, and developing models of best practice. Innovation implies changing the rules, changing the system, and changing the nature of the relationship. Tolerance for social injustices that dramatically impact on vulnerable children suggests that values associated with compassion, caring, and investments in the developmental needs of people are being replaced with arrogance, dominance, and power and control.

Collaboration and innovation are concepts that are facilitated in agencies that believe in empowerment. No agency can be truly empowerment oriented if it does not see its task as connecting the personal aspects of problems of its clients to the political aspects of these problems. Empowerment, is a people process. It is not a quick fix and it is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Collaboration acknowledges that going it alone is no longer acceptable. Working together is the only feasible solution, particularly with marginalised and disadvantaged citizens. The goal of empowerment is to increase personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, professionals, or communities can improve their situations. Through empowerment there is a development of group consciousness, a reduction of self-blame, and a willingness to accept personal responsibility for change. This is taking place in family resource centres in terms of self-help, community kitchens, community gardens, toy lending resources, train the trainer initiatives, healthy baby clubs, library and teaching resources, recreation, and many other initiatives. Creating opportunities for people to understand and appreciate their talents and contributions are primary tasks in the empowerment process. Power is not something to be given but something to be discovered. Family resource centres create this opportunity for parents and communities to make this all important discovery.

Family resource programs tell us that important shifts in thinking occur when those who are defined as the problem are empowered to redefine the problem - that includes clients, parents, citizens, and staff. We all need to be empowered, to be open to new ideas. We all need to be a participant in family resource/community centres so we can begin to re-frame our relationships with parents, community, government, youth, professionals and child serving organizations.

Family resource centres and programs are a step in the right direction. They are demonstrating much needed leadership, innovation, and collaboration. Their strengths, prin-

ciples, leadership, experiences, partnership, and support are charting a direction in serving families and children. Research and experiences suggest that this is the way to proceed in child protection. Work must continue to renegotiate relationships among professionals, child serving agencies, communities, and governments to become collaborative partners and find a common ground (MacAulay, 2002b) for purposes of protecting Canada's children.

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