
Hailed by scholars and policy analysts as the “American Tragedy” the child protection system in the United States is known more for the publicized failures in its policing and investigative functions than for the system’s restorative and curative successes. Recent proposals to revamp the child welfare system through demonstration projects nationwide are an acknowledgement of this documented failure of the child protection system and its functionaries, social workers included. Amidst these ongoing criticisms of the system comes Myer’s book on the history of child protection that is dedicated to CPS social workers, past, present and future.

Organized into nine meticulously researched chapters, this book is a welcome change to the regular churning of books that bemoan the failures of a system with recommendations and solutions that are centered around trying to solve all the problems at once. Not history, but the understanding of history is one of the greatest tools for transformation. Myer’s historical accounts of the origins and the progressive nature of the protection system reveals significant insights into what could happen if we did not have the child protection system in place. This book’s detailed historical insights in the form of original quotes, cross references and carefully researched notes are clear testimony to the capacity of the human endeavor to develop solutions to complex problems.

There is little doubt that we’ve intended, and in many ways successfully created a system that cares enough to work in the best interests of every child that is brought to the attention of the CPS. The guiding principles of the system have remained intact since the
first White House Conference on children in 1909. Contemporary family reunification programs espouse the same principles advocated by the conference that stated unequivocally, “home life is the highest and finest product of civilization. It is the great molding force of mind and of character. Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons”. (Myers, 2004, p. 100) How we go about this lofty goal is a matter of ongoing discussion because of our difficulties in resolving the inherent conflicts of the “they-the social workers” or “that-the system” and “this-the law makers” so on and so forth. Recent efforts to bring child welfare agencies and service providers to the provisions of the Adoption and Safe families Act of 1997 is yet another attempt at reducing a complex problem to rules and more rules. Many social workers are skeptical of any new changes because of the plethora of changes that have already been introduced only to be changed again. Attending to the multiple needs of an abused child whose natural caretakers have shown themselves to be incapable of performing that function, in a non-intimidating and supportive way, hasn’t been an easy job at any time in history as evidenced through numerous examples in Myer’s book.

Policy makers and academics may reconsider their roles in the child welfare movement by focusing their energies on “being with the system” and supporting those who’ve beaten the odds. Furthermore they could learn from the success stories to strengthen local innovative approaches that are culturally competent in the system’s ameliorative, curative and preventive strategies. Possibilities for ameliorating large scale problems such as poverty; curing debilitative problems such as inter generational abusive and self destructive patterns; and preventing the descend of a nurturing family into a destructive and dehumanizing environment exists even within the confines of the much criticized CPS system. Myer’s presentation of the historical exchange of ideas that shaped the system evidences the fact that protective mandated services can help children and must complement preventive services on mandated or non-mandated basis with harm reduction of all concerned as one of the primary goals.

As quoted in Myer’s book, the report of the 1930 White House Conference on Children stated that, “some 253, 000 needy children were living in their own homes, cared for by
their own mothers through the operation of mother’s aid laws… it is difficult fully to 
comprehend the significance of so great a change. Many thousands of children, except for 
this aid, would have been taken away from their homes” (Myers, 2004, p.105). While 
there is little doubt that the current economic conditions of children and families need 
improvement, the measures for improvement can be a collaborative empowering web of 
services within the existing systems of social security, social supplemental income, 
welfare payments and other income maintenance and in-kind programs.

Myer’s exceedingly well developed chapters, beginning with the colonial period before 
institutionalization, acknowledges the Herculean task of balancing the inherent guiding 
principles of the system. Principles that focus on balancing the best interests of the child 
with a broader approach on the whole environment of the child including the fragmented 
parents who are unable to nurture and protect their children.

Under the popular sway of restructuring the system it is easy to position ourselves as the 
indignant expectants of the “cure-all” systemic transformation. Such expectations run the 
risk of being inauthentic and unmindful of the history that has preceded us. It is this 
mindful awareness of the need for surpassing superficial knowledge and arriving at a 
deeper understanding of the cyclical nature of frameworks for service delivery that this 
book promotes. Its contents are tools of great learning for all aspiring and current child 
welfare workers, policy makers, teachers, academics, legal and para professionals.