The Future of CPS: 
A Vision for Tomorrow

WHERE WE BEGAN

WHEN WE BEGAN THIS BOOK, WE WERE HOPING TO OFFER YOU SOME IDEAS about skills and strategies, as well as our observations about what we thought might improve the current practice of child protection—helping to fix it rather than setting forth a vision for shaping a radically reformed CPS system. We both believe it would be a miracle of sorts to have a reshaped, well-functioning CPS system all over the United States—a system in which skilled and competent workers and supervisors respectfully supported families in their solution-building processes. Our experience tells us that we have a long way to go to achieve such system overhaul.

Child welfare is not a high priority on the national agenda, nor does it garner much attention locally unless a high-profile media case catches the attention of the public. While there is good will, hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm present in many CPS teams, it seems that a minimally acceptable job is now the national standard. Over 21 states are under federal court decree to improve their child welfare systems (Cutler, 1996).

Even in our current robust economy there are many competing priorities on the national radar screen: Welfare reform, education, community and juvenile violence, prison building, and health care seem to keep child welfare issues in the background—except, of course, if a child dies.

Recognizing that we are a long way away from a state-of-the-art child welfare system, our hope is that what we offer may lead us closer to a more radically reformed system. As we have mentioned throughout this book, we have met many competent and skilled workers and some superb managers who facilitate the nuts and bolts well. There is quite a
journey ahead for CPS to institutionalize solution-focused interviewing. Learning to engage families with respect for personal and cultural competence and understanding the special issues that add to the problems vulnerable families deal with every day. Mental illness, domestic violence, substance use, and poverty, all complicate the task of CPS. CPS is difficult work, requiring many skills. We hope this book contributes to shaping a child protection system that can and should be known for its excellence, not its difficulties.

We challenge administrators and supervisors to support and model respectful, inclusive, solution-building behavior with their staff. Our suggestions are not a panacea and we know that in and of themselves they will not “fix” the system. The CPS system must continue to look within and find the values and beliefs that will help one family at a time.

WHERE TO GO? BEYOND SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT TO SYSTEM REFORM

We have made many suggestions for an improved response by CPS. They include:

- reshaping training
- supervision that includes home visits, team-building, and case consultation
- learning to use risk and safety assessment tools as one part of determining a course of action
- implementing a “top-down, bottom-up” approach for administrators and managers
- using investigation as a preventive intervention during home visits
- including families every step of the way in determining their solutions
- recognizing that poverty brings many families to CPS because they need a helping hand, not necessarily because of abuse and neglect
- helping staff become aware of the richness of cultural and language difference

Beyond improving the CPS system from within by giving frontline staff the skills to help them respectfully and adequately protect children, there is a growing consensus that it is not just system improvement that is necessary, but also a radically new approach to child protection. Underlying the call for this new approach is the “belief that protecting children from harm is everybody’s concern,” not just the
responsibility of CPS (Shirk, 1998). Those calling for this new approach do not dismiss the need for traditional tools of child protection, nor do they sidestep the need for a continuing effective government role. What they do suggest is that child protection needs to add other family-building tools to the toolbox such as “clear assessment of family strengths, case work built on achieving solutions, participation of parents, individualized plans for children’s (and family’s) safety, a system of integrated services, help from community groups, and even good old-fashioned neighborliness” (Shirk, 1998). In a multi-year executive session on “New Paradigms for Child Protection” at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government (Farrow, 1996), a general direction for this community-based child protection movement was envisioned.

The current system of child protection is designed for the most extreme cases of abuse and neglect, yet in reality only a small percentage of CPS cases actually meet that criterion. Often these extreme cases, which should be in the CPS system, do not receive the attention they need because the system is so flooded with other, less risky cases. The result is that most families that go through the CPS system do not have their needs met thoroughly. The high referral rate to CPS and the relatively small percentage of actual removals by CPS are evidence of this reality.

Recognizing the human and fiscal cost of staying where we are, we ask, “What might a new approach look like?” The Harvard session suggested a vision including the following (Farrow, 1996):

- aggressively promoting safety at all points in the system
- emphasis on prevention
- a more flexible and comprehensive response once maltreatment is identified
- involvement of wider range of partner agencies, both in the public and private sectors
- reliably punishing criminal acts of child maltreatment
- moving from a single agency accountability for child protection to a collective community-wide responsibility

How different it would be if CPS handled only the 20% of cases that needed CPS services and had readily available a full array of community resources to meet the needs of the other 80%!

Getting from the system we have to the system that we envision is no easy task. The current approaches to CPS are entrenched in custom, law, and policy. Thousands and thousands of CPS staff have a stake in the effects of a changing paradigm. It is not easy to move from a
position of power that is based on child protection being almost solely the responsibility of the child welfare system to "a broadening of the overall responsibility for the mission of child protection (who is accountable)" (Farrow, 1996). That is to say nothing of the pervasive mentality and philosophy that question the competency of poor, underskilled families, regardless of the safety risk, to care for their children.

There is no "right way" to begin to implement such a vision or reconfigure the system, although many jurisdictions are beginning to see the wisdom of such an approach. In Michigan, statutory change to the CPS law in 1998 created a "tiered CPS approach," ranging from mandated responses for those egregious and extreme cases requiring firm and swift action by CPS to those deemed appropriate for a community response and services. Additionally, the Michigan legislature authorized several million dollars for local communities to begin to strengthen the front end preventive services for families who do not need CPS intervention. Certainly law alone cannot radically change a system, but it can provide the context for developing new capacities. Time will tell whether state or local jurisdictions are willing to own a different and new approach. It certainly cannot be developed or implemented by the child welfare agency acting alone. The most powerful argument for implementing a more flexible and comprehensive system of partner is that the "one size fits all" approach has not worked. A more responsive system can only enhance our ability to increase child safety.

CPS needs to be "nested in a broader community system designed to support and strengthen families and improve overall outcome for children" (Farrow, 1996). If every change we suggest in this book were implemented but not surrounded with a supportive system of community supports, we would be right where we are, with CPS workers alone, and feeling a responsibility to protect children. What a different system we would have if neighbors, relatives, friends, community residents, police officers, school teachers and principals, doctors, nurses, domestic violence and homeless shelters, apartment managers, day care providers, school counselors, substance abuse treatment centers, therapists, representatives from the faith community, and sport coaches saw it as their responsibility not just to refer at-risk families to CPS but also to provide support and a helping hand.

What if families got the help they needed earlier?

What if parents believed that they could build the solutions that were best for their families?

What if CPS were reserved only for those most desperate cases?

What if communities came together to promote child safety because they believed "we are all in this together"?
What if CPS workers felt more supported in their work?
What if those who come to the attention of CPS were given what they needed instead of only what the system has?
What if?
A miracle? Maybe.
Possible? Yes, of course.
References


Poole, D. A., & Lindsay, D. S. (1996, June). Effects of parental suggestions, interviewing techniques and age on your children’s event reports. Paper presented at the NATO Advanced Study Institute, Recollections of Trauma: Scientific Research and Clinical Practice, Port de Bourgenay, France.


