

Let's stop feeding the risk monster: towards a social model of 'child protection'

Families in poverty have taken the brunt of austerity measures since the global economic crisis began, resulting in growing social and economic inequality. In Britain stringent cuts in welfare and public services have led to significant hardship for vulnerable children and families. At the same time the numbers of children in care in England are at their highest level for twenty years, with child protection investigations and care proceedings continuing to rise. Parallel trends can be seen across Europe, where poverty is a major reason for children coming into care in many countries.

In this workshop we argue that the current child protection system in England ignores fundamental structural problems and the complex ways these impact on the lives of families, increasing marginalization. It is based on a philosophy of 'child rescue' and the individualisation of responsibility and risk that is inadequate to the task of protecting children. This task necessitates a socially just response to protecting children that upholds human rights and involves appropriate recognition of wider contextual issues and support for families. Drawing upon the social model, a framework that has not been applied in this area of work before, we outline why and how a social model for supporting families and protecting children has the potential to help challenge dominant perspectives.

In this workshop we draw upon a range of evidence from different sources and methodological approaches to analyse how policy and practice has developed, particularly in relation to families marginalized by poverty and other intersecting social inequalities. A critique will be provided of the current child protection system, and ideas about a model to support social work practice within a human rights and social justice framework will be presented.

The workshop will comprise of three inter-linked 10 minute presentations, followed by group discussion:

1. In the first presentation **Professor Brid Featherstone** will draw upon recent empirical evidence from the UK and international sources (e.g. Bywaters, 2015; Hood et al., 2016) to highlight the links between social deprivation and child welfare inequalities, and question the role of a child protection system that focuses on parental blame whilst ignoring the causes or consequences of poverty and gross inequality.
2. **Professor Brid Featherstone** will draw upon research with families who have had involvement with the child protection system, discussing their experiences of interventions by social workers and other professionals. She will also discuss the perspectives of family members on ways of promoting more effective and humane practice and the impact this can have on their lives.
3. **Dr. Anna Gupta** will present a summary of the social model of child protection and family support incorporating the Capability Approach developed by Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen (2009). She will bring together the ideas discussed in the presentations, highlight examples of models of service delivery and practice that involve family and community engagement, and discuss ways in which ideas from a social model of child protection can be implemented at national, local, and individual practitioner levels.

Workshop facilitators:

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References:

Bywaters, P. (2015) 'Inequalities in Child Welfare: Towards a New Policy, Research and Action Agenda', *British Journal of Social Work*, 45 (1): 6-23.

Hood, R., Goldacre, A., Grant, R., & Jones, R. (2016). Exploring demand and provision in English child protection services. *British Journal of Social Work*, early on-line publication.

Sen A (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Allen Lane.