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PARENT-PRACTITIONER RELATIONS IN CHILD PROTECTION: A NEW FRONTIER FOR THE IDENTITY OF SOCIAL WORK?

The forensic approach to child protection, its narrow focus on specific definitions of child harm (Buckley 1999) and its associated interrogative approaches have predominated in the UK. The Munro Report (2011, 8) on the English child protection system points to the limitations of this approach and concludes that the 'centrality of forming relationships with children and families to understand and help them has become obscured' (p.8). Traditionally the exercise of care and control in UK social work has been characterised as dialectical, the tension between these two interacting elements underpinning professional practice and parent-practitioner relations.

This paper re-examines this dialectic and its significance for the identity of social work in child protection in light of the new currency given to 'relationship' in UK social work and child welfare policy after a period of dormancy and focus on technical solutions (Dore 1999). Its primary focus is on post-devolution social work and children's services policies in Scotland, which has seen a policy 'effect' locking child and family social work out of prevention and aligning it with the use of compulsory measures. This has profound significance for building and sustaining parent practitioner relations in child protection where social work is increasingly reserved for the 'hard cases' where control is to the fore.

Three specific characteristics found in child protection cases with consequences for practitioner-parent relations are discussed. These include first, demographics of family and practitioner populations, second, the highly charged nature of the subject as the origin of the parent-practitioner encounter (Sykes 2011) and third, dealing with the persistence of harm to children and its control (Cohen 1966). It is suggested that the primary mechanism to manage the potential for coercive action, the *soi-disant* care and control continuum, is through the medium of practitioner-parent relations. Risks and opportunities for both parents and practitioners lie within these relations challenging the frontiers of personal and professional identities.

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