

# *Relationship-grounded, Safety-organized Child Protection Practice: Dreamtime or Real-time Option for Child Welfare?*

By Andrew Turnell, MA, BSWk

Andrew Turnell is an Independent Social Worker and Child Protection Consultant from Perth, Australia.

Constructive relationships between professionals and family members – and between professionals themselves – are the heart and soul of effective child protection practice. A significant body of thinking and research tells that best outcomes for vulnerable children arise when constructive relationships exist in both these arenas (see Cashmore, 2002; Department of Health, 1995; MacKinnon, 1998; Reder, Duncan & Grey, 1993; Trotter, 2002; Walsh, 1998). Yet, relationships are a contentious issue in child protection practice. (The article follows the English convention of using the term *partnership* for the relationships between service recipients and professionals working with them, and the term *collaboration* for the relationships between professionals themselves.)

## **Examining partnership and collaboration**

A very senior child protection policy advisor presenting at an international conference once stated, “Partnership doesn’t work!” The policy advisor went on to describe several case examples in which she believed practitioners, in their attempts to build good relationships with parents and in the name of working in partnership, had left children in highly dangerous situations. This advisor seemed to want to erase the notion of partnership from the child protection

lexicon. Her vehemence might have been somewhat unique, but her basic concern is frequently expressed by many academics, managers, policy makers, and front-line practitioners. The literature also relates this concern, describing relationships with family members in which professionals overlook serious maltreatment concerns as “naïve” (Dingwall et al., 1983) or “dangerous” (Dale et al., 1986).

While the concern about a relationship focus in child protection practice usually centers on working with parents, relationships between professionals themselves can also be problematic. At the extreme, examples of poorly functioning professional relationships are frequently highlighted in child death inquiries. Child death reports often describe scenarios in which a child has experienced a pattern of increasingly severe injuries or neglect within a family in contact with many professionals. Each professional usually holds only a partial picture of the situation, and when the professionals do not share their knowledge with each other, the child is placed at greater risk. It is not until the child dies that the review team, by talking to all the professionals, puts together a more complete picture. Frequently, the professionals say they were worried about the child; however, they believed one of their colleagues would ensure the child was at least minimally safe. Meta-analyses of child death inquiries such as Department of Health, 2002; Munro, 1996 and 1998; Hill, 1990; Reder, Duncan & Grey, 1993 suggest that poorly functioning professional relationships of this sort are as concerning as any situation in which a worker overlooks or minimizes abusive behavior in an



endeavor to maintain a relationship with a parent.

Some of the problems that typically befall child protection relationships are raised here not to dismiss the notions of partnership and collaboration, but to set the scene for a careful examination of what constructive child protection relationships might look like. Locating relationships at the heart of the child protection endeavor is neither problematic or naïve, although written accounts of how child protection relationships should function often display both these attributes (Healy, 1998 & 2000; Morrison, 1995). Too often, proponents of relationship-grounded child protection practice have articulated visions of partnership and collaboration that have been overly simplistic. To be meaningful, it is crucial that child protection relationships are framed in grounded ways that reflect the typically “messy” experience of workers, parents, children, and other professionals who are doing the difficult business of relating to each other in contested child protection contexts.

Part of the problem of framing relationships in a meaningful manner is that thinking and theorizing about partnership and collaboration are usually undertaken by academics and policymakers who are often very distant from the day-to-day specificities of child protection work. The people who know most about building relationships in child protection practice typically are the service deliverers and service recipients. Over the past 10 years, the voices of parents and children on the receiving end have been increasingly heard through careful research (see Butler & Williamson, 1994; Cashmore, 2002; Gilligan, 2000; Farmer & Owen, 1995; Farmer & Pollock, 1998; McCullum, 1995; MacKinnon 1998; Thoburn, Lewis & Shemmings, 1995; Westcott, 1995; Westcott & Davies, 1996) and also through the work of activist and self-help organizations representing service recipients

(e.g., Family Rights Group, 1991). This body of work stands as an important resource for framing constructive relationships from the perspectives of children and parents involved with child protection systems.

There is, however, no equivalent body of inquiry regarding the perspectives of front-line practitioners. Child protection workers primarily receive attention when their practice is seen to be problematic and, therefore, their knowledge and experiences of what works well are usually undervalued or ignored. The most notable exceptions to this assertion exist in the form of ethnographies prepared by practitioners themselves (see Crawford, 1994; de Montigny, 1995; McMahon, 1993). It is vital that researchers and policymakers work more closely with service deliverers and service recipients to better frame grounded and meaningful child protection relationships.

Child protection workers do in fact build constructive relationships with some of the “hardest” families – in the busiest child protection offices and in the poorest locations, everywhere in the world. This is not to say that oppressive child protection practices do not happen, or that sometimes they are even the norm. However, worker-defined, good practice with difficult cases is an invaluable and almost entirely overlooked resource for improving child protection services and conceiving what constructive child protection relationships might look like.<sup>1</sup>

In 1996, Murray Ryburn suggested that partnership is “an idea still in search of a practice” (p. 16). While there certainly are child protection models that locate partnership and collaboration at the core of practice (see Berg & Kelly, 2000; Department of Human Services, 1997a & b; Keys, 1996; McCullum, 1995; Morris & Tunnard, 1996; Scott & O’Neill, 1996;

<sup>1</sup>Author’s note: Over the past 12 years of creating and evolving the signs of safety approach with Steve Edwards, it has been a fundamental practice for me to elicit workers’ self-defined examples of good practice with “difficult” cases. More recently, I have begun to take the workers’ stories of what they view to be good practice and interviewing parents to compare and enrich the perspectives and insights (see Boffa, Parton, & Turnell, forthcoming; Turnell & Edwards, 1999, pp 148-154; Teoh, Laffer, Parton, & Turnell, 2003). This is a powerful process for generating rich descriptions of constructive child protection relationships.



Turnell & Edwards, 1997 & 1999), there is a very real sense in which the idea of partnership and collaboration must be reinvented and certainly reanimated in every new case. Rather like a marriage, partners can read many books about the subject but ultimately, the marriage relationship has to be lived on a day-to-day basis. In like manner, in every situation of substantiated or alleged child maltreatment, relationships with family members and between professionals need to be created afresh or refocused and re-energized in the attempt to build sufficient safety for the children in question.

The following case study is a good demonstration of building constructive relationships in a difficult child protection situation and was prepared by the author jointly with the caseworker and family.

### Case example

This case involved a North African family of Zeinab (the mother), Asha (the 14-year-old daughter), and Dawood (the 10-year-old son). Olmsted County Child & Family Services (OCCFS) and the county police became involved with this family when Asha disclosed to a school counselor that her mother had assaulted her with an electrical cord leaving bruises on her shoulders and back. Both the mother and the children explained that Zeinab had assaulted Asha to punish her for being out almost all night with a group of young men, including two in their early 20s who were reputed drug dealers. The situation was further complicated by the discovery that this family had previous child protection involvement in another county. That county's reports revealed that when Dawood was four, Zeinab had poured boiling water on Dawood's genitals as punishment for soiling.

At that time, both children were placed in care for 10 months.

Based on the past information and given the current incident, both children were removed into foster care and four assault charges were laid against Zeinab. Due to the severity of the assault, the previous incident involving Dawood, and the opinions of professionals from the other county, the investigating social worker and the court-appointed *guardian ad litem* formed the view that the children should be permanently removed from Zeinab's care.

With the investigation complete and the children placed in care, the case was handed to the OCCFS long-term team. Social worker Cindy Finch was given the case. Before meeting the family, Cindy and her supervisor Sue Lohrbach, with input from a cultural advisor, prepared carefully for how Cindy would build relationships with Zeinab and the children. As a result, and after introducing herself, Cindy asked Zeinab, "What needed to happen so that they could create a relationship where they could discuss and deal with the very difficult matters that had occurred?" Having been given the opportunity to guide how they began their relationship, Zeinab asked Cindy to come to her home to share a meal and also meet with the spiritual leader of her community. On the same day she met Zeinab, Cindy also met individually with Asha and Dawood to look particularly at what they wanted. Zeinab and the children wanted to get together, but since Asha and Dawood felt their mother might be angry with them, Cindy supervised the initial contacts. All parties requested more contacts promptly and Cindy worked with the children to explore simple safety plans that would enable them to feel comfortable. Cindy made sure Zeinab understood what she had negotiated

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with the children. All these things occurred within the first two weeks of Cindy's involvement and demonstrated well some of the careful efforts Cindy made to build constructive relationships based as much as possible on Zeinab, Asha, and Dawood's priorities and perspectives.

The careful relationship building that Cindy undertook laid a foundation for addressing the tensions and issues that had given rise to assault. At one point, Cindy asked Zeinab if she really knew how serious things were in regard to the charges and what might happen before the court. Zeinab became quiet for a time and then said she didn't really understand what had happened since her mother had hit her more severely and frequently than Zeinab had hit Asha. Zeinab emphasized that despite this she still loved and respected her mother and that this was the way it had always worked in her country.

Cindy also continued to spend time with both Asha and Dawood and allowed them to choose when and where they met and to end conversations if they felt uncomfortable. At the same time, Cindy was always clear with Asha and Dawood that no issue would be ignored. In this way, Cindy was able to talk to Asha and Dawood about the fact that at times they felt scared of their mother, that Asha was angry with her mother for wanting to control so much of her life, and that Zeinab's mother had organized an arranged marriage for Asha. Cindy negotiated with Asha and Dawood ways to then talk and resolve all these issues together with Zeinab.

From the outset, Cindy focused on how safe Asha and Dawood would feel in their ongoing contact with Zeinab and facilitated an evolving conversation with all three to find ways of dealing with future family problems that would not involve physical punishment. Over time, Zeinab, chose for herself to use disciplines such as time outs, removal of privileges, and groundings and, above all else, to focus on talking to her children more often. Cindy also created a unique

context for the supervised contacts, making it clear to Zeinab that she was not looking for her to be on her best behavior during the contact visits, but rather to react to the children as normally as possible. Cindy explained to Zeinab that when difficulties arose during the contact visits it would be an opportunity for them to explore specifically how Zeinab could respond to the children without physical force when she was frustrated with them. (Cindy believes that a situation that occurred in one visit when she helped Zeinab to draw back from striking Asha was a major turning point in helping Zeinab take up more fully the use of her own alternative punishment ideas.)

Cindy's direct work with the family was only one aspect of moving forward with this case. Given that the matter was before the court, the judge, attorneys, and the guardian were centrally involved in how the family's problems would be handled. When a case like this is brought to a court setting (or any other highly professionalized context) it is common that service recipients feel disenfranchised and the professionals dominate the proceedings. It is also not uncommon that competing perspectives and agendas dominate and undermine the professionals' relationships.

In Olmsted County, through a Federal Court improvement project called the Children's Justice Initiative, an innovative conferencing process has been created that fosters collaboration and partnership in child protection cases that are before the court. Working with county judges, attorneys, and guardians, OCCFS Director Rob Sawyer and supervisor Sue Lohrbach created a conferencing approach called the Parallel Protection Process (P3), which diverts matters away from the typically contested court process. The most unique feature of the P3 is that it privileges the family members' own perspectives regarding the problems and what should be done. (See Lohrbach and Sawyer's article on page 26 for a full description of this collaborative conferencing approach.)

In this case, Cindy prepared Zeinab for the P3



conference so she knew what to expect. The conference was a large affair, involving Zeinab, her attorney, and others including the conference chairperson Sue Lohrbach, the *guardian ad litem*, an attorney acting for the guardian, the prosecuting attorney, Cindy, and the foster parents. The children had chosen not to attend.

In her role as conference chair, Sue began by asking Zeinab to describe all the members of her extended family. This first step allowed Zeinab to begin by addressing a subject in which she was the expert. Zeinab surprised everyone by including a wide array of both friends and kin in her “family map.” Zeinab explained that in her culture she saw family in much broader terms than simply people with whom she had biological ties.

Following this, Sue asked Zeinab to describe the problems and incident that had led to her involvement with child protective services and the court. Sue also questioned Zeinab about the strengths she saw in herself and her parenting, children, community, and culture. Finally, Sue asked Zeinab to describe her ideas to improve her family’s life and to ensure the children were not physically punished again. Sue white-boarded all this information under the county’s key assessment criteria: danger/harm, risk to children, complicating factors, existing strengths/protective factors, and future safety. In this way, the parent’s rather than the professional’s voice was privileged and Zeinab led all the professionals through her own comprehensive risk assessment of her parenting and care. As a final step, Sue confirmed with Zeinab that she agreed with

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This work took more than 90 minutes, during which time the other professionals functioned as an audience to the process. (All participating professionals in the P3 need to be prepared for this.) In effect, this conference created a challenging but supportive context, in which, in order for her family to reunite, Zeinab had to speak directly to the key professionals. The P3 is structured so that the professionals can respond after a short break.

In this case, the county attorney spoke first and immediately stated that, on the basis of what he had heard, he would be dropping three of the four charges against Zeinab and that he would be seeking a non-custodial sentence in prosecuting the fourth charge. The guardian's attorney then stated that they had intended to recommend that the children be placed in care until they were 18; however, their position had shifted. While they would not yet recommend reunification, they were now open to that possibility.

The last task was to draw up a settlement agreement based on the proceedings. As part of this, it was decided that a family group decision making (FGDM) conference should be held as a follow-up to the P3 conference. (See Burford and Hudson, 2000, for more information about FGDM conferencing, which is effectively identical to what is called *family group conferencing* outside of the United States.)

Eighteen people whom Zeinab described as "cousins" came to the FGDM conference. During the "family alone time," the family and its network came up with the following plans:

- Zeinab was to spend time with two community members to help her talk and think through the issues surrounding raising teenagers in America.

- Plans were drawn up and people identified to whom both Asha and Zeinab could go if the situation in the family home became too stressful.

- People were identified to transport Asha and Zeinab to family counseling.

- People were identified to provide babysitting for Asha and Dawood so that Zeinab could pursue activities important to her.

- People were identified to support Zeinab with issues regarding school and translate notes and reports for her.

Within two months of the FGDM meeting, the children had returned home and Cindy was still visiting regularly on both an announced and unannounced basis for several months. In total, Asha and Dawood were out-of-home for just less than six months.

Zeinab was very keen for her family's story to be told in this case example. (The example as written here is a summated version. A fuller description of the case will be published in Boffa, Parton, & Turnell, forthcoming.) Zeinab held great fears about how she would be dealt with by the professionals and had talked to many members of her community in Minnesota and across America who advised her not to trust or even work with child protection services. From Zeinab's perspective, her trust in and respect for Cindy created a context with which the problems could be dealt.

As is well demonstrated in this case, forward-moving child protection relationships involve participatory processes that focus on building safety directly related to the maltreatment concerns.

### **A purposive focus: Organizing child protection work around future safety**

Child protection cases commence because there is a concern about the well-being of a child and it is vital that a thorough and detailed exploration of the maltreatment concerns and attendant issues is undertaken. However, for partnership and collaboration to remain forward moving, it is important that the problems are seen as the starting point, and not the organizing loci of the work. Child protection practice is always at risk of becoming dominated by everything that is wrong with the family under





investigation. When this happens the relationships between the professionals and with the family members tend to become debilitating and “problem saturated” (White, 1988).

For child protection relationships to be constructive it is vital they have a purposive focus. This purposive child protection practice begins when professionals and family members alike can look squarely and openly at the problems as well as strengths in and around the family. This focus, however, is simply a survey of the past. A purposive focus evolves only when the relationships are organized around building sufficient future safety to address the problems that will allow the child protection agency to close the case.

Over the past decade, as strengths-based thinking and practice have begun to influence the child protection field, a polarization of professional positions has sometimes arisen between being problem-focused and strengths-based. This has been an unproductive and unhelpful development. No meaningful relationship, whether personal or professional, functions well by solely focusing on everything that is negative or, on the other hand, by trying to optimistically focus on everything that is positive. Instead, the more difficult the child protection case, the more important it is that professionals and family draw on every ounce of hope, resource, and strength they can imagine to energize the collective capacity to honestly focus on the maltreatment concerns and build safety to the dangers.

The supposed disjunction between a problem and a strengths focus is a poor argument. In counter, it is suggested here that child protection practice is simply too serious to not be strengths-based. However, sensitivity to strengths does not itself solve problems. Information about both problems and strengths are best interpreted, and make most sense, when

considered in the light of a participatory exploration of solutions and safety. Professionals and family members do not really know the seriousness of the problems or the significance of the strengths and resources at hand until they collectively begin to envision and enact solutions. Put simply, if professionals and family members cannot work together to build safety, the risk equation worsens; if they can, the risk lessens.

This logic is well demonstrated in the case example. Cindy consistently took great care to focus on

how she, Zeinab, Asha, Dawood, and others saw the problems, while drawing on strengths to energize solution- and safety-building discussions. In the P3 conference, Zeinab’s ability to meaningfully describe her own ideas and actions toward building

safety significantly altered the professionals’ assessment of the problems and the strengths within the family. Cindy and Sue’s work also highlights that strengths-based practice is much more than generating lists of family members’ strengths. It is most crucially about approaching service recipients as people who can contribute meaningfully to the solution-building process.

The logic of safety-organized practice not only sharpens a purposeful focus for child protection relationships but also casts a different light on risk assessment. Risk assessment is central to the child protection task; however, risk assessment typically has a narrow problem focus. It privileges the professional perspective, excluding family members from the assessment equation, and leaves practitioners with a sense of seeing problems more clearly but with little guidance about what to do about the situation.

Over the past six years, a number of Australian child protection professionals in several state jurisdictions have sought to re-envision child protection risk assessment to create simple, yet rigorous,

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assessment formats that practitioners can use with family members to elicit, in common language, the professional and family members' views regarding concerns or dangers, existing strengths and protection, and envisioned safety (Boffa, Parton & Turnell, forthcoming; Department of Community Development, 2000; Department of Human Services, 1999; Turnell & Edwards, 1999). These formats deepen and balance the usual problem saturation of most risk assessment and see assessment as most constructive when it is undertaken between the professionals and family members. The idea that risk assessment can be, and in fact, is best done in partnership with parents and children is a profound challenge to the usual thinking in the child protection field. The theme of relationship-grounded risk assessment is developed more fully by Julie Boffa and Heather Podesta on page 36.

### **Constructive, participatory processes**

While the logic of problem-founded, strengths-based, safety-organized practice brings a purposive focus to the child protection endeavor, the capacity to do this depends on processes that underpin the relationships. There are very useful descriptions of constructive relationship building in child protection (Department of Health, 1995; Jeffreys & Stevenson, 1997; Trotter, 2002; Turnell & Edwards, 1999); however, there are three processes that are not always well articulated in the literature. These include the ability of professionals to:

- Exercise authority skillfully
- Make judgments constructively
- Use an inquiring approach and adopt a position of humility about what they think they know.

### ***Exercising authority skillfully***

Any grounded exploration of constructive child protection relationships needs to address the issue of using authority. Unfortunately, there has often been a

soft-shoe shuffle skirting around these issues in much of the child protection literature on partnership and collaboration. Some literature suggests that constructive child protection relationships are characterized by “choice in entering the partnership,” that there is “equality or near equality between the partners,” and even that “power is shared” (Department of Health, 1995). In like manner, Ryburn (1991) speaks of “service user control and leadership,” and Mittler (1995) speaks of “equality between service users and professionals.”

It appears ludicrous to talk about equality or near equality between parents and child protection workers when the latter have the statutory capacity to instigate investigations into the intimacy of family life, remove children, and undertake other powerful statutorily mandated actions. Further, service recipients do not in the vast majority of cases choose to enter the relationship with a child protection worker, and they certainly do not control the decision that determines when the relationship is to be concluded. Even family group conferencing, which is probably the primary international exemplar of relationship-grounded, safety-organized child protection practice, is not a process for which families and their networks volunteer. Despite the enthusiasm for this approach by proponents of strengths-based practice, families only participate in family group conferences in the context of being caught up in a child protection system, and there is inevitably always some level of coercion (hopefully, skillfully exercised) to garner their participation.

Partnership can best be achieved when all professionals (including those writing about it) are frank in their thinking about power and authority in the child protection relationship. In studies of child protection service recipients, the service recipient, like Zeinab, knows the statutory worker is the more powerful partner (See Farmer & Owen, 1995; McCullum, 1995; MacKinnon, 1998; Cashmore, 2002).





The service recipient consistently wants straightforward information about where they stand vis-à-vis the authority of the worker (hence the frequently asked question: “Are you going to take my child away from me?”). When the worker is both comfortable with and clear about the nature of his or her authority in the relationship, a solid and honest foundation is established for a working partnership between worker and family. On this foundation, partnership can be further enhanced by workers who then purposefully and skillfully minimize the power differential by building trust, involving the family as much as possible, sharing information, utilizing participatory planning processes, providing choice wherever possible, and fostering family input at every possible opportunity. These aspects of practice are well exemplified in Sue and Cindy’s work with Zeinab, Asha, and Dawood.

### ***Making judgment constructively***

Just as helping professionals are usually ambivalent regarding the use of authority they are also inevitably trained to believe that being non-judgmental is a core principal of their professional outlook. However, the reality for child protection professionals is that they must constantly make judgments. Furthermore, the day-to-day anxiety-provoking situations that child protection workers face escalate the instinctive human reaction to jump to judgment. Research in child protection and other areas affirms that humans naturally tend to make judgments very early in complex situations and subsequent events are organized to confirm the original judgments (Kahnerman et al., 1990; Munro, 1996 & 2002; English & Pecora, 1994).

The notion of being non-judgmental is a problematic professional aspiration, as human beings, whether professional or otherwise, cannot, *not* have opinions. In aspiring to be non-judgmental, professionals potentially distance themselves from being human. Instead, social workers need to reclaim and reenergize judgment, making it a vital and integral

aspect of good human service practice generally and constructive child protection practice in particular.

Ah Hin Teoh, a Chinese-Malaysian Australian with eight years’ experience on the receiving end of child protection services, including a four-year period when his children were in care, confirms this point. Ah Hin comments:

*I felt that the department and the residential home saw me as a useless person, just out of prison. They had decided I was some sort of Asian drug lord criminal, but they were not going to come out and say it openly; instead they hid behind talking about “the best interests of the children.” They were scared I was using my children to stay in the country and that feeling of theirs messed everything up, but we could never get to talk about it. It always felt like they had a hidden agenda because they’d get me to do one thing, then they wouldn’t be certain that that was enough so they’d come up with another thing (Teoh et al., 2003, p. 151).*

When professional judgments become hidden agendas, that “we could never get to talk about,” those judgments – however sound – create problems in the relationship with service recipients. Ah Hin recognized that the child welfare department had to make judgments about him, his parenting capacity, and his children. However, that was not of concern to him. The problem was the judgment-making process and how the judgments were used.

Judgment making tends to be more constructive when professionals clearly specify their judgments and find ways of making this information overt in the relationships between professionals and family members. Cindy continually worked with Zeinab and the children to convey the seriousness of the situation and to talk about the judgments that were and would



be made about her parenting. Part of the power of the P3 is that it brings together the key professionals and family decision makers and makes the judgment-making process a human, interactional, and participatory process. At a micro level, Cindy continually made judgments and exercised her authority in focusing attention on the key issues that she, Zeinab, and the children saw as contributing to Zeinab's use of violence. Cindy continued to take this further by requiring and ensuring that Zeinab and the children, with her help, discuss these issues together.

### *Practicing from a stance of inquiry and humility*

Paternalism, which most simply stated is a situation in which professionals act as if they are the experts in the nature of the problem and what is required to solve it, is the default setting of child protection. Not only do workers find it difficult to resist the temptation of professional certitude, there are innumerable systemic pressures on child protection organizations to "get it right" when facing the anxiety of child abuse. Professionals and agencies who believe they are right tend to be dismissive of other perspectives whether they come from other professionals or family members.

The most skillful practitioners are those who can be explicit about their role, concerns, and expectations while making their actions, assessments, and authority vulnerable to family members and other professionals. Munro (2002, p. 141) states it simply: "The single most important factor in minimizing error is to admit that you may be wrong." Workers who are best able to do this are ready to make judgments but continually try to approach their professional colleagues and clients from a stance of humility, informed through a spirit of inquiry. Gerald de Montigny, a Canadian child protection worker, articulates the same view when he writes "I learned that good social work is not marked by confident pronouncements, certain decisions, and

resolute action, but by an openness to dialogue, self-reflection, self-doubt and humility" (1995, p. XV). This surely is a stance that can serve to antidote the paternalistic default.

In the human services field throughout the past decade, some professionals have set themselves up as experts regarding what constitutes "anti-oppressive" and "culturally sensitive" practice. Adopting an expert stance about these aspirations is a concern, since, as ever, good intentions in child protection are a volatile medium for fueling paternalistic practice. In the case example, in contrast to taking an expert stance, Cindy demonstrated an inquiring stance by continually asking Zeinab and the children to guide how the professional-family relationships should be established and function to fit their culture and context.

### **Conclusion**

The American poet, potter, and educator, Mary Caroline Richards writes, "The world will change when we can imagine it differently, and, like artists, do the work of creating new social forms" (1996, p. 119). Partnership and collaboration located at the center of constructive child protection practice is a social form whose creation continues to require our best imagination and effort. Relationship-grounded practice is a philosophy that lies lightly on the surface of a child protection field that, because of myriad pressures, tends to constantly default to paternalism and managerialism. In this sense, partnership and collaboration continue to be ideas in search of meaningful practices.

The ongoing challenge is to imagine and create ways of building relationships between professionals and with family members that can function within the pressurized, day-to-day realities and imperatives of child protection organizations and the messy, uncertain business of going into the lives of families where children are at risk. In this endeavor, worker- and service recipient-defined rich descriptions of good



practice in difficult cases is an invaluable and almost entirely overlooked resource. It is crucial that the child protection field continue to imagine and build conferencing, assessment, and planning procedures that enhance partnership and collaboration.

The child protection field rarely gives much attention to the experience of front-line practitioners. The words of Gerald de Montigny may help remedy this a little:

*Social workers need to recognize the structured regulations posed by a clock and an organizational calendar; and they must struggle to build a practice regulated by the beats of a heart, the cycle of seasons and the paths of a social life. As social workers we must not abandon judgment, but we do need to identify the relations of power and inequality between the judgers and the judged. We need to judge our practice and our organizations alongside, or in solidarity with those who are clients and those who are poor, native, black and marginalized (1995, p. 226).*

Questions regarding this article can be directed to Andrew Turnell via Resolutions Consultancy, PO Box 56 Burswood, WA 6100, Australia; e-mail [aturnell@inet.com.au](mailto:aturnell@inet.com.au).

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