



## Whose Job is it Anyway?

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Cardinal Roger Mahoney, in his 1998 letter "Creating a Culture of Life" states, "any society, any nation, is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members- the last, the least, the littlest". Child abuse by consensus is a scourge on the moral fabric of society, a violation of one of the cardinal values of a civilized people- our veneration for life. Over the past two decades, rates of child maltreatment have steadily increased, even as our understanding of the precursors to the phenomenon has grown in sophistication. Of particular concern are rates of fatal child abuse, which persist despite the institutionalization of child protection systems in most industrialized countries. One can imagine scant objection to the premise that all children should be safe from violence in their own homes, and most reasonable citizens would affirm this as an inalienable right with which all human beings are endowed. Yet a coming together as a society to intercede on behalf of vulnerable children has not occurred. In fact, closer examination of social and bystander behavior indicates several areas of conflicting interest that may cause some to retreat from their civic and moral responsibility to protect children. These areas of conflict center on issues of whom we appoint as protectors of children, a lack of science to guide practice, and adult versus child rights.

The child welfare workforce is comprised of courageous, unselfish, yet extempore experts. Child abuse is a complicated, longstanding phenomenon characterized by multigenerational poverty, substance misuse, and severe mental illness. Those charged with the task of assessing danger and providing protection may do so without the benefit of appropriate education and training in how to identify risk, or assess the biopsychosocial factors associated with chemical dependency or mental illness. Furthermore, many states do not require child protection workers to be licensed or certified, a lesser standard than what is applied to cosmetologists, nail technicians or dental hygienists. The lack of professional standards applied to the child welfare workforce raises questions about the degree to which society values the work. This is further reflected in the accepted compensation schedule that is applied to those who make these difficult and often dangerous decisions on behalf of vulnerable children. According to Payscale.com, the average salary for child protection workers, even those with advanced degrees, is less than truck drivers, clerical staff and waiters. Low pay, and exposure to direct and indirect traumatic experiences make turnover high and the average tenure of the frontline worker low. As a society, we entrust the protection of the most vulnerable to the least prepared, inadequately compensated, and poorly protected group of workers. Yet in tough economic times, practicalities are privileged, and the voices with little

social and political capital may be drowned out by the roars of big business lobbyists, and competing special interest groups.

Child abuse as a field of interest, and child protection as a social action has never belonged to a single discipline. In fact, child abuse prevention and intervention relies on the collective efforts of the judiciary, medicine and social work. Cross-disciplinary collaboration must occur, in many cases, without formal structures to guide decision-making, cross-fertilization of knowledge, and coordination of prevention, investigation and intervention services. As Cradock (2011) suggest "the resulting collision of professional interests generates boundary disputes over responsibility, authority, and knowledge, both vertically within the professions, and horizontally across professions" (p. 365) [1]. Additionally, the state of science that guides most child abuse investigations is evolving, and sometimes inexact. For example, while advances in pediatric forensic pathology abound, it is a field that is plagued with controversy, sparked by diagnostic uncertainty surrounding Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and Shaken Baby Syndrome determinations. Any ambiguity introduced into child abuse risk assessment or cause of death determinations may create hesitancy to act to protect, difficulties securing convictions or orders of protection, and/or barriers to securing appropriate punishment for child abuse perpetrators.

However, as Cardinal Mahoney reminds us, child maltreatment is not just a governmental or institutional responsibility; it is a reflection of social mores [2]. The United States is a melting pot of values, cultures and social norms that create diverse perspectives on healthy parenting and acceptable discipline. A privileging of individual freedoms and adult rights may have created a confusing double standard that confounds straightforward labeling of violence against children as inappropriate and criminal. Bruce D. Perry seems to concur when he writes, "The majority of our violence initiatives and examinations of violence focus on violence of a specific type - violence committed against voters (typically property owners). Indeed if one man hits another man (especially one with a job), this is a felony - assault and battery, while the same physical violence against a wife or a child is culturally sanctioned, often rationalized as 'deserved' or 'discipline' (p. 2) [3]. Is it possible that as a society we view children as property, and their parents as property owners with indisputable rights? Or perhaps, upon suspicion of child abuse we worry more about the moral hazards of wrongfully accusing an adult, than the consequences of failing to protect the child (ren). One only has to review the 2012 trial of Jerry Sandusky, former assistant coach of the Penn State football team. While more than one bystander testified to witnessing the sexual assault of minors, few took action to protect the victims, or stop the violence, even when they had the opportunity. Research on bystander behavior suggests that not only do social observers have to recognize abusive behavior as a problem and interpret the situation as dangerous; they must take responsibility for helping. In this regard, social proclivities toward honoring adult rights and privacy, and concerns about overly intrusive action may trump an individual's sense of responsibility to protect a child. The

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result is that those with intimate knowledge of child abuse and endangerment remain silent, and children suffer, sometimes fatally.

The failure to professionalize the child welfare workforce, confusion about the role of the individual in enforcing community values, and the problems associated with interdisciplinary collaborations in a field of emerging and largely interpretive science are not singularly, intractable problems. Yet in combination, these issues create a perfect storm of conflict and confusion that, in combination with other factors, allows child abuse to survive and flourish. The responsibility for solving these community problems has fallen largely to the child welfare sector, with the unintended consequence of abdication of responsibility by many community leaders, social and professional groups, and private citizens. An expansion of the list of appropriate “agents of change” is required, and should include school leaders, neighbors, pediatricians, daycare providers, and all persons involved in the life of a child. Systemic

barriers to civic engagement in child abuse prevention, detection, investigation and response, such as unmanageable reporting systems and the lack of protection of reporting sources must be addressed so that communities can harness all available resources to protect children. Social and individual commitment to change, through action, wields power and influence on problems in ways that cannot be measured. Under these conditions, child abuse would become a problem that would forever be transformed by the dynamic pressure imposed by social will and influence. Whose job is it to protect children? Look in the mirror.

**References**

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