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Child abuse as a complex and wicked problem: Reflecting on policy developments in the United Kingdom in working with children and families with multiple problems

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ABSTRACT

In spite of significant public concern, professional efforts and financial expenditure, there has been a perceived lack of progress in reducing the incidence of child abuse, and in improving the outcomes for children in both the short and longer term. In this article the authors reflect on recent policy developments in the United Kingdom relating to children and families experiencing multiple adversities, and argue that the current conceptualisation of child abuse is flawed. In adopting a rational technical approach to the management of child abuse, there is a tendency to focus on shorter term outcomes for the child, such as immediate safety, that primarily reflect the outputs of the child protection system. However, by viewing child abuse as a wicked problem, that is complex and less amenable to being solved, then child welfare professionals can be supported to focus on achieving longer term outcomes for children that are more likely to meet their needs. The authors argue for an earlier identification of and intervention with children who are experiencing multiple adversity, such as those living with parents misusing substances and exposed to intimate partner violence.

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1. Introduction

There is international recognition that child abuse is prevalent in all societies, driven by both socio-economic (macro) and psycho-biosocial (individual) factors. Yet in spite of significant public concern, professional efforts and financial expenditure over the past three decades, there has been a perceived lack of progress in reducing the incidence of child abuse both within the United Kingdom[1] and elsewhere. Whilst Pritchard and Sharples (2008) argue that violent deaths of children have decreased in the United Kingdom and most other developed nations since the 1970s, and Finkelho;r and Jones (2004) argue that child sexual abuse is in decline, there continue to be significant numbers of children referred to state social work agencies and subject to child protection procedures. For example, in England between 2003–2007 there have been in excess of 500,000 referrals each year to social services with on average on any one day 28,000 children subject to a child protection plan (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007). Whilst there are competing discourses about the main causes for the abuse and neglect of children (Beckett, 2007) there remains disquiet in various countries, including the United States of America and the United Kingdom, about the ability of the current configuration of services to respond sufficiently to reduce both the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect within society and to ameliorate the long term social and psychological consequences (Spratt & Devaney, 2008).

This article seeks to explore the factors behind this by examining the current policy discourses in the United Kingdom and reflecting on the ability of the current child protection system to change. Indeed, it is posited that current government conceptualisations of the weaknesses of the system for protecting children from abuse and neglect in the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, are predicated on a falsehood — that the problems themselves are solvable, or are solvable as they are currently conceptualised. This article will start by setting out the main objectives of the child protection system, before moving discuss recent policy developments in the United Kingdom through the lens of the conceptual devices of 'tame and wicked problems', before drawing out implications for professional practice of the current focus on outputs of the system rather than the outcomes achieved for children and their families. The article will finish by arguing that to date, traditional approaches to responding to child abuse and neglect have been successful in protecting some children, but that the children who are the hardest to help, and for whom the long term outcomes are the poorest, require a different type of service response.

2. The system of child protection

Our collective knowledge with regard to the phenomenon of child abuse has expanded rapidly in the last forty years, challenging practitioners and policy makers to develop responses that are effective and balance the need to keep children safe, whilst also respecting the

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[1] The United Kingdom is comprised of the four separate legal jurisdictions of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each has its own child protection system, but for the purposes of clarity the term United Kingdom is used as a catch all term.

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autonomy of parents to rear their children without undue interference. In the United Kingdom the child protection system is a collective term to describe the organisational and procedural arrangements that facilitate individual professionals and their employing agencies to work together to protect children who are believed to be at risk of, and who are experiencing, significant harm. The overarching policy directive is contained within central Government guidance (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2006) and the arrangements for co-ordinating the strategic direction of services is delegated to Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCB). These are interagency fora established by statute that comprise key stakeholders from social services, health, education, police and other agencies with a child welfare remit. These arrangements are tasked with ensuring that a comprehensive system is in place to identify, intervene, support and protect those children most at risk of significant harm, whilst simultaneously striving to ensure that all children are supported to reach their potential through a range of preventative and supportive services.

The child protection system in the United Kingdom as developed in the early 1970s and refined since, has, according to Devaney (2009: 24–25), centred on five interlocking objectives:

- reducing the prevalence and incidence of child abuse and neglect through preventative approaches.
- reducing the child mortality rate as a consequence of having a system for identifying and protecting children at risk of significant harm.
- preventing children identified as being in need of protection from experiencing repeated harm.
- addressing the effects of the harm experienced by children on their development, and promoting their welfare resulting in improved psychological and social functioning and improved educational attainment.
- addressing the needs of other family members so that they are in a better position to provide for the care and future protection of the child.

The overall aim of the system is to reduce the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and the associated negative outcomes in both childhood and later adulthood (Anda et al., 2006).

Following the murder in 2000 of Victoria Climbié, a black west African child by her great aunt with whom she was living in London (Laming, 2003), central government in the United Kingdom began a process of "…fundamental transformation of the culture of children's services to shift the emphasis from child protection to a wider concern for all children" (Munro and Calder, 2005: 440). As such the term 'child protection' was subsumed within the term 'safeguarding', a concept that broadened the vision for children to include a wider range of problems alongside lower thresholds for intervention. This fitted with the general trend of British Government policy over the preceding decade that had sought to reduce the numbers of children entering state care whilst simultaneously seeking to better protect vulnerable children continuing to live at home (Devaney, 2004).

The introduction of the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales and The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 broadened the remit of statutory social services, placing a clearer duty on local authorities to provide support to children in need, thus reducing the likelihood of family crisis, breakdown and abuse, whilst at the same time ensuring that children requiring safeguarding from harm were protected. The legislation sought to steer a course between the often conflicting discourses of parents and children's rights by reframing them as complementary rather than competing:

> "The Act then had, in some way, to steer an acceptable course between the Scylla of children's rights and the Charybdis of the parents' lobby, and try to avoid being shipwrecked along the way." Jeffrey (2003: 23).

The reality though was that child protection concerns remained to the fore, fuelled by Ayre's (2001) 'unholy trinity' of media pillorying, detailed post mortem recommendations about the operation of the system on the heels of inquiries and the increasing prescription of practice, resulting in social workers and other child welfare professionals becoming focused on the need to avoid a non-accidental death which is the '…classic instance of a low probability/high consequence risk that leads to risk-averse cultures and practices in all walks of life' (Cooper et al., 2003: 10–11).

The widening of definitions as to what might constitute child abuse and the concomitant increase in identification of child abuse within western industrialised nations has stretched the resources available for managing the risks posed to children by carers (Liddell, Donegan, Goddard, & Tucci, 2006). Simultaneously there has been a growing awareness that a large proportion of the child protection referrals to social services departments are about situations in which parents are not coping with their responsibilities, and require support and guidance. This has formed the basis of the United Kingdom government's overarching family policy strategy (HM Government, 2007a) which views parents '…as essentially well meaning but over-stressed' (Tuck, 2004: 43). This policy framework has encouraged the development of earlier support services (Winter, 2008) and a less punitive approach by social workers and other child welfare professionals towards situations where parents seem to be struggling to cope (Platt, 2006). This has resulted, for example in England, in the number of child protection referrals having decreased along with the number of children who have their names included on the child protection register, even though the number of referrals of children to social services has been increasing (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007). The drive therefore from central Government across each of the four countries making up the United Kingdom has been to re-focus professional efforts towards a "lighter touch" (Spratt, 2001: 938). But this policy must be worked out in the organizational context of agencies where minimizing the likelihood of a fatal or serious case of child abuse, and the public and media opprobrium that goes with this, has been the overriding concern. This has resulted in the needs of vulnerable children being viewed through the prism of child protection frameworks, policy and procedures, with the result that risk has been the predominating factor in the assessment of children's circumstances, even where the primary reason for referral to social services is support (Hayes & Spratt, 2008). At the same time there is concern about the child protection system with '…no real indication that the quality of the day-to-day services being offered to children and families are better than ten years ago, or that outcomes for children and families have been improved' (Cooper et al., 2003: 18). As such the focus has been on identifying children at risk and keeping them safe, at the expense of providing services to ameliorate the risk factors or to address the long term consequences of having been abused or neglected.

3. Every child matters

It is in this context that the Government introduced the *Every Child Matters* initiative (HM Treasury, 2003), designed to improve the quality of services provided to all children, but especially children in need of support and protection:

> "New Labour has moved towards a progressively more targeted approach to child welfare in the last twenty years, from a generalised focus on social justice and inequality centred on social class and family, through a narrower focus on social exclusion and now to a more utilitarian focus on social investment." Fawcett, Featherstone and Goddard (2004: 159).

One of the architects of this social investment strategy, Anthony Giddens (1998: 117), has argued that state's should engage in 'investment in human capital wherever possible, rather than the direct provision of economic maintenance'. This strategy has been gaining global prominence as most advanced westernised democracies

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renegotiate the post-war social contract that goes beyond retrenchment and is no longer one of permanent austerity (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2002; Pierson, 2001). Part of the appeal of this strategy is that it advances a social justice agenda whilst simultaneously maintaining a market friendly orientation, as indicated by the current Prime Minister when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer (2003: Section 5.4):

> "Every child deserves the best possible start in life, to be supported as they develop and to be given opportunities to achieve their full potential. Children who grow up in poverty experience disadvantage that affects not only their own childhood, but also their experience as adults and the life chances of their own children. Support for today's disadvantaged children will therefore help to ensure a more flexible economy tomorrow."

As well as adopting this broad approach to children and child welfare which has resulted in what Gidden's (1999: 3) has called 'the era… of the prized child' whereby children are born into families not out of economic necessity but for more emotional reasons, the Government has identified particular groups of children who warrant special attention. There is a recognition that investing in children generally, through greater generosity in financial supports to parents, improvements in the standards of educational provision and easier access to universal support services, that some children will still remain on the periphery of society. Nearly ten years after the election of Tony Blair as Prime Minister he stated that:

> "…about 2.5 per cent of every generation seem to be stuck in a life-time of disadvantage and amongst them are the excluded of the excluded, the deeply excluded. Their poverty is, not just about poverty of income, but poverty of aspiration, of opportunity, of prospects of advancement." Blair (2006).

As such there seems to be a growing recognition that the needs of at least 140,000 families in the United Kingdom, who live in complicated situations and have complex needs, are still proving elusive to help with consequences for the child, their family and wider society (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007).

One consequence therefore has been the drive to involve the public services in both identifying and intervening with these hard to help groups in order to:

> "… bounce claimants and service users out of dependency, and to activate and motivate citizens for participation. If a public service occupation is not part of this solution to social issues, it is part of the problem." Jordan and Jordan (2000: 13).

There is an implicit assumption that social workers will be at the forefront of both identifying and intervening with children who are identified as being at risk of future social exclusion, with all of the moral and practical concerns about the appropriateness and feasibility of such an approach (Munro, 2007; Munro & Parton, 2007; Taylor, Baldwin, & Spencer, 2008). In addition, as noted by Glisson, Dukes, and Green (2006), structural change in the way services are delivered is pointless without an adequate understanding of the culture within which change is expected.

4. Performance management

As part of the Government project to improve the focus, delivery and quality of public services the Treasury in the United Kingdom has sought to link spending on public services to quantifiable measures of performance (H.M. Government, 2007b). The rationale for this approach is to ensure that there is clarity in the Governments priorities for services, thus focusing providers efforts on political goals and introducing a mechanism for gauging the success or otherwise of public services, and ultimately political achievements (Burnham, 2006). The extra money pledged to key public services, such as the child protection system, has been constructed as an 'investment' and as such services need to justify this expenditure through a system for measuring improvements in performance which can only be brought about through reform.

During the 1990s *quality* was the touchstone of Government reforms of public services (Adams, 1998) whereas the rhetoric of *performance* has become the overriding concept of the new millennium, with the legitimacy for this discourse resting on an appeal to rationality. As Klein (2000) has noted, during the 1990s in an attempt to improve the quality of public services simplistic information for 'consumers' of health services was provided, heralding the beginning of health performance management systems. But as Goddard, Mannion, and Smith (1999: 121) state '… information is not a homogenous entity but consists of a variety of different types of data from a wide range of sources' consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data. Whereas there has been an elevation of 'hard' (quantitative) sources of information over 'soft' (qualitative) data, they argue that the two types of data are intrinsically linked as they complement one another by identifying different aspects of performance.

This rational technical approach to policy making is seen as the solution by the Government to the ill's being experienced by public services. For example, by identifying key aspects of the child protection system, such as the length of time a child's name remains on the child protection register, it is possible to compare the 'performance' of different social services departments and to rate them, thus producing a dynamic whereby 'poorer' performing agencies will seek to improve their profile by addressing the factors causing the under performance in an attempt to join the 'better' performers and bask in the reflected approval of both Government and service users (Devaney, 2008a).

Yet, as Spratt and Callan (2004: 205) note:

> "We must leave aside the dubious practice of aggregating local authority statistics to produce performance means that become normative (what is the 'right' rate of children's names on registers?), for the purposes of such tables are primarily to pull the errant into line. In this way a measure of governance becomes an instrument of governance."

5. Child abuse and neglect as a wicked problem

The premise for these developments is that there is a 'right way' to both manage the social ill of child abuse and to measure this performance. As Chapman (2004) notes policy makers and managers want to believe that the outcomes of an intervention or policy are predictable and that the organisation which they are managing is controllable. Recent research in the United Kingdom (Devaney, 2009; Forrester & Harwin, 2008; Pugh, 2007; Spratt & Devaney, 2008) questions this premise, in that the issue of protecting children is a *wicked problem* – in other words, no matter how rational and well thought out a strategy for modernising and improving the child protection system may be, this will '… not prevent the emergence, and the intransigence of certain issues which it cannot apparently resolve' (Watson, 2000: 5). The concept of wicked problems dates back to the 1970s when Rittel and Webber (1973: 155) coined the phrase to describe a class of problem that defy solution in the context of social planning:

> "The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of those problems. They are 'wicked' problems, whereas science has developed to deal with 'tame' problems. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing like the indisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about 'optimal solutions to social problems' unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no 'solutions' in the sense of definitive and objective answers."

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The concept of wicked problems and the broader theory of social complexity theory (Haynes, 2003) has gained prominence in recent years as a means of informing analysis of social problems and the formulation of social policy (Byrne, 2001). Rittel and Webber (1973) point out that in attempting to solve a wicked problem the solution of one aspect may reveal another, more complex problem. Therefore, reducing complex issues into smaller components which are then tackled in the hope that this will diminish the bigger problem is unrealistic and ultimately futile.

The conventional approach to 'rational policy making' is linear, with most classic management texts delineating distinct steps or phases which must be completed in order to understand the problem, formulate potential options and agree upon a solution (Conklin, 2006:4). This 'waterfall model' is particularly suited to tame problems where there is agreement on the nature of the problem and the potential solution is bounded in terms of the scope, time and resources needed to address the issue.

The four steps of this reductionist process follow on from one another and assume that each phase is discrete and flows from the former (Chapman, 2002: 18):

1. Clarifying objectives (which are assumed to be unambiguous)
2. Identifying the alternative means of achieving those objectives
3. Identifying the consequences, including all the side effects, of each alternative means
4. Evaluating each set of consequences in terms of the objectives so that the best policy can be selected and implemented

According to Rittel and Webber (1973) wicked problems have certain characteristics which differentiate them from a tame problem:

1. *There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem:* The problem is often ill structured and can be conceived of as an interlocking set of issues and constraints. There is often broad disagreement over the nature of the problem, with different stakeholders holding competing views as to the nature of the problem and what constitutes an acceptable solution (Roberts, 2000). This is most apparent within United Kingdom over the issue of whether parents should be supported to care for their children, or children need to be protected from their parents. For example, in the area of intimate partner violence, services provided to children living with domestic abuse are premised on women's responsibility to protect the child from experiencing harm, typically by either leaving or forcing her partner to leave. Social workers do not often engage with the men who are the source of the problem, rather women are held accountable for allowing their children and themselves to be in this situation (Devaney, 2008b). And as Davies and Krane (2006: 415) have argued there is a need to exercise caution in the use of child protection legislation and procedures as a tool for addressing domestic violence, as the culture of fear that permeates child protection privileges the need to protect children rather than empowering women. In this view women's narratives as mothers are subsumed by the narrative of child protection, and the strengths that mothers bring to their child rearing role, even in the midst of adversity, are lost. Therefore, in offering a solution a new aspect of the problem is unveiled, requiring further adjustments of the potential solutions.
2. *Wicked problems have no stopping rule*: Since there is no definitive 'the problem' there is no definitive 'the solution', '…the problem solving process ends when you run out of resources, such as time, money or energy, not when some optimal or "final and correct" solution emerges' (Conklin, 2006: 7). For example, there has been considerable debate about eligibility criteria for services and thresholds for intervention within the United Kingdom (for example, see Munro, 2007 and Tisdall and Plows, 2007). Whilst professionals believe that early intervention and the provision of low intensity support services can prevent some children from experiencing neglect or adversity, there is a concern with ensuring that services are targeted at those most likely to benefit for both economic and social justice reasons (Spratt, 2008). Therefore, whilst Tony Blair (2006) has urged that 2.5% of children within the United Kingdom are targeted for special attention because of their heightened chances of experiencing poorer outcomes in adulthood, there is still very little understood about who these children are and how they can best be supported (Davidson et al., under review).
3. *Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong*: Solutions proffered are assessed in a social context in which '…different individuals and organisations within a problem domain will have significantly different perspectives, based on different histories, cultures and goals' (Chapman, 2002: 12). The determination of the quality of a solution is therefore not objective as they are dependent on the views, values and goals of the stakeholders who '…are equally equipped, interested, and/or entitled to judge them' (Conklin, 2006: 8), and thus require a different approach to dealing with these 'messy relationships' than to date (Chapman, 2002). Therefore solutions cannot be defined in absolute terms as either 'right' or 'wrong', but rather in relation to one another as 'better' or 'worse', 'good enough' or 'not good enough'. This has become apparent within the United Kingdom with the debate about a parents right to physically chastise their own child. Whilst there is an active and focal lobby arguing that the physical chastisement of a child should be made illegal on the grounds that it is a physical assault and demeans the child, there has been a backlash against construing this issue as a child protection matter (Beckett, 2007; Brownlee & Anderson, 2006).
4. *Every wicked problem is essentially unique*: There are so many factors and influences embedded in a dynamic social context that no two wicked problems are alike, and therefore the solutions to them will always be individually tailored. Over time key people may acquire the experience and skills about dealing with wicked problems, but they are always a novice in the specifics of a new wicked problem. Therefore whilst child protection services essentially deal with a small core set of issues – physical and sexual abuse, parental substance misuse, domestic abuse and parental mental illness – it is often the particular combination of these issues and the counter-balancing of protective factors that requires social workers and other child welfare professionals to constantly reinvent solutions to these endlessly metamorphosing and seemingly intractable problems (Pugh, 2007).
5. *Every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem*: Due to the dynamic social context within which wicked problems arise, they are often interlocking and dependent on one another with the result that attempts to change the characteristics of one problem can result in the appearance of other unanticipated problems (Dranove, Kessler, McClellan, & Satterwaite, 2002). This is most apparent with cases in the child protection system, where the majority of children are involved because of the complex interplay between a range of different adult located problems impacting on a parents ability to provide the standard of care required by a child (Cleaver, Nicholson, Cleaver, & Tarr, 2007). For example, Devaney (2004) found that 52% of cases known to the child protection system in Northern Ireland involved a combination of factors, with the most frequently co-occurring issues being parental substance misuse and domestic abuse in 40% of these cases. Attempting to address one issue, such as the misuse of substances by a female victim of domestic abuse, may lead to her becoming more vulnerable as she becomes blamed for the children in the family being considered at risk.
6. *Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'*: Rittel and Webber (1973) argue that wicked problems are a classic 'Catch 22' situation, in that it is impossible to fully appreciate the benefits and drawbacks to a potential solution to a wicked problem without trying the solution, due to the magnitude and complexity of the issue. They cite the example of the creation of a freeway. The lack of an opportunity to experiment and to adapt potential solutions in light of learning by trial and error, means that 'every attempt [at a

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solution] counts significantly' (Alleman, 2004: 1) and can cost significantly too if it is 'not good enough'. This is also the dilemma facing child welfare professionals in considering whether a child should be admitted to public care in order to provide safety whilst also attempting to better meet their needs.

7. *Wicked problems have no given alternative solutions*: There may be no solutions or a host of potential solutions that are devised, and a range of possible solutions that are never thought of '…Thus, it is a matter of *creativity* to devise potential solutions, and a matter of *judgement* to determine which are valid, [and] which should be pursued and implemented' (Conklin, 2006: 8).

By contrast a tame problem is characterised by a well defined and stable description of the problem under consideration; a definite stopping point, where one will know when the problem has been solved; a solution which can be objectively evaluated as either right or wrong; it belongs to a class of problem which can be solved in similar ways; has solutions which can be easily tried and abandoned; and comes with a limited set of alternative solutions (Conklin, 2006). Tame problems are not necessarily simple problems, as they may be technically complicated, but they tend to lend themselves towards rational policy making and solutions.

The result of this way of conceptualising the challenges facing the child protection system is that policy makers must change their way of thinking about how problems are to be tackled:

> "What makes prediction especially difficult in these settings is that the forces shaping the future do not add up in a simple system-wide manner. Instead, their effects include non-linear interactions among the components of the systems. The conjunction of a few small events can produce a big effect if their effects multiply rather than add…It is worth noting that the difficulty of predicting the detailed behaviour of these systems does not come from their having large numbers of components…For us 'complexity' does not simply denote 'many moving parts'. Instead, complexity indicates that the system consists of parts which interact in ways that heavily influence the probabilities of later events." Axelrod and Cohen (2001: 67).

The current approach to policy making in the United Kingdom seeks to effect a change in the operation of the child protection system that is mechanistic and reductionist, setting targets for the desired performance of the system (HM Government, 2007b) that are neither rooted in any agreed definition of what are acceptable levels of registration, re-registration and length of registration, or in any clear linkage between the needs of children and the outcomes sought (Devaney, 2009). Indeed, whilst the *Every Child Matters* initiative repeatedly mentions outcomes, the targets set are in relation to system outputs rather than the outcomes for children as a consequence of professional interventions, such as improvements in psycho-social functioning. By seeking to make improvements in the child protection system through a linear reductionist approach, the subtleties and complexities of the interplay between the many factors placing children at risk of significant harm and affecting their physical, social and emotional development can be overlooked (Stevens & Cox, 2008). As noted by Forrester (2008) policy makers need to move beyond a sterile positing of the child care system as either 'working' or 'not working' to a position that embraces the complexity and engages in a debate about what is happening in order to better understand children's needs and appropriate responses. The focus therefore shifts from one of ensuring the throughput of the workload to one of attempting to better understand and meet children's needs.

6. Focusing on outcomes rather than outputs

As a beginning to such a shift in thinking it would be helpful to challenge the current context of policy making and performance management which has been based on an output focused conceptualisation of the operation of the child protection system. It is seen that the cases of children in the child protection system follow a bell curve of normal distribution — some cases remain in the system for a relatively short time (less than six months); some cases remain in the child protection system for a relatively long time (in excess of 23 months); and the majority are in the middle (between 12–20 months). The policy focus has been on reducing the number of children known to the child protection system for either a short time or a long time, as it is assumed that these extremes represent either an over reaction to support needs (in the case of short periods of registration) or a woeful failure to meet children's needs (in the case of long periods of registration). In essence this is the wrong debate, where the system has focused on outputs rather than outcomes — if policy makers chose a different benchmark, such as the projected outcomes for a child in adulthood of adverse childhood experiences, then the distribution might look significantly different, for example resembling a hockey stick. In this scenario a relatively small proportion of the cases known to the child protection system then become the focus of longer term attention. The majority of cases are resolved with relatively short, intensive interventions, which are effective in terms of cost and also success, with few returning into the child protection system at a future point in time (Devaney, 2009; Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2001).

The focus then shifts to a minority of cases, given the higher costs in providing both protective and remedial services in the present, and the high legacy cost. The British Government has estimated that for each of the 140,000 hardest to reach families, the annual cost per family of additional services is between $100,000 and $220,000 each year (H.M. Government, 2007a,b), with the children experiencing the highest levels of problems in childhood having a seventy percent risk of experiencing multiple disadvantages in adulthood (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007).

In addition, there is a developing body of research that indicates that children exposed to *multiple* adversity in childhood are more likely as adults to have poorer outcomes in terms of mental health (Read, van Os, Morrison, & Ross, 2005; Davidson et al., in press); physical health (Anda et al., 2006) and social functioning (Farrington, 2007; Feinstein & Sabates, 2006; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). The initial evidence from this research indicates that it is the multiplicity of issues that increases the risk to the child of experiencing social exclusion in adulthood (Spratt, 2008) rather than any one overriding factor, although some factors may be more significant than others. Therefore child welfare professionals should become more focused on identifying and prioritising responses to these particular children.

7. Conclusion

To date the traditional approach to the identification and intervention with cases of child abuse and neglect has been successful in meeting some of the objectives of the child protection system. However, it must also be recognised that there is growing evidence to support the view that whilst children may be protected, they may not always be helped to deal with the consequences of the abuse or neglect or multiple problems they have been exposed to. In particular there is a need to ensure that the children who are most likely to have the poorest outcomes through childhood and into adulthood are both identified at an early age and provided with the right types of support to ameliorate the worst effects of these experiences. In some cases this may even be before the point whereby child protection services would traditionally become involved, for example, in cases of intimate partner violence or parental substance misuse.

There is a need to recognise that there are a significant proportion of children living in situations where they are experiencing multiple adversities, and that by better understanding their needs through practice and research that it will be possible to better provide for their needs. To do this will require professionals to think differently about how these needs are best provided for — by viewing these situations

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as tame problems then it is likely that solutions will be proffered that fail to address the key underlying issues and the complexity of the situations. In this sense different responses are required at both policy and practice levels to achieve better outcomes for these children and their families in the longer term. This is not to argue that the problems are too complex and as such are unsolvable. Rather, by recognising the complexity of the problems it is less likely that simplistic solutions will be proposed, that are ultimately likely to fail with repercussions for the child, their family and social services agencies. By accepting the concept of complexity it is more likely that professionals will be empowered to look towards outcomes in the longer term rather than 'quick fixes' that are unlikely to be successful. As such families could begin to expect to receive longer term support and services.

If this line of reasoning holds true, then it will require child welfare professionals to consider how best to identify and intervene with families ahead of the traditional intervention points at times of crisis. There will be a need to locate these children and their families in ways that will allow professionals to attempt to support families to address problems before they escalate and become more entrenched. This raises ethical questions (*should we do it?*), theoretical debates (*can we do it?*) and technical problems (*how will we do it?*) that need to be considered and addressed. In doing so though it heralds the possibility of reconceptualising the social ill of child abuse by focusing more on the outcomes for the individual rather than the output of the system. Policy makers in the United Kingdom are beginning to consider adopting this approach — we therefore need to engage with a debate about this.

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