

## Social Work Practice in Child Welfare

Child welfare is considered a special area of practice within the profession of social work, and the principles and values of the social work profession generally fit with policies that guide modern child welfare organizations. In most jurisdictions in Canada, social workers in child welfare agencies have a minimum of a Bachelor of Social Work degree and are registered with a provincial body that holds them accountable for competent and ethical practice.

The mandate of child welfare agencies is to work with the community to identify children who are in need of protection and to decide how best to help and protect those children. A fundamental belief is that government interference in family life should be as minimal as possible, except when parental care is below the community standard and places a child at risk of harm. *The major guiding principle is always to act in the best interests of the child.*

Social workers in child welfare agencies are involved with the planning and delivery of a variety of services for children and families, such as family support, residential care, advocacy, and adoptions and foster care programs, as well as child protection. The social worker's task is to understand a variety of factors related to the child, the family, and the community and to balance the child's safety and well-being with the rights and needs of a family that may be in need of help. The professional social work judgment involved in these decisions serves children and families well in the great majority of situations, a fact often lost when a case decision becomes the object of intense public and legal scrutiny. As in other professional work, it is difficult never to make a mistake, and most decisions about complex matters involve risks as well as benefits.

The typical referral to a child welfare agency involves a child who is the victim of neglect, not of physical or sexual abuse. Very few children who are known to child welfare agencies are removed from their homes. Social workers in child welfare believe that most children are better served within their own homes, with resources being used to shore up and strengthen families, and removing children from their homes is a measure of last resort. When a child is removed, it is usually for a temporary period with the idea of working intensively with the family so that the child can return home as soon as his or her safety can be assured. Chronic shortages of resources, however, make this work difficult. When a child is removed and the family's situation poses ongoing risks to that child, the court may decide to remove guardianship permanently from the parent or caregiver. Whether the child is removed temporarily or permanently, a home within the extended family is the preferred placement, but it is frequently necessary to place the child in a foster or adoptive home or in residential care.

Public child welfare agencies have evolved as a result of society's belief that all children have the right to stable homes where they are well cared for and are safe from abuse and neglect. But this cannot be solely the concern of government and those who work in human services. The public is not always aware of the lack of resources for children from impoverished homes who so often end up in the child protection system with concomitant poor success rates in school, poor employment opportunities, and a greater than usual chance of becoming involved in the mental health or prison system. It is not always easy to convince the voting and tax-paying public that spending on vulnerable young children and their families can save a huge cost down the road. Children need to be a priority not only for governments, but also for the communities in which they live.

Social work in child welfare settings is frequently stressful. Caseloads are often large and there are chronic shortages of needed resources, both within the child welfare system itself and in community agencies that support it. Sometimes social workers experience differences between the demands of the workplace and their own allegiance to the ethics of the social work profession, largely because the systems that employ them are driven by political and budgetary agendas. Nevertheless, there are many thousands of skilled and ethical professional social workers in Canada who are committed to their work in child welfare agencies and whose efforts

have made positive differences in the lives of countless vulnerable children and families.

**July 2005**