

**SOCIAL POLICING OR SOCIAL WELFARE?:
A STUDY OF JUSTICE, POWER AND
PARTNERSHIP WITHIN THE INITIAL CHILD
PROTECTION CONFERENCE**

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ABSTRACT

The initial child protection conference is an interagency meeting held to consider an allegation of child abuse, and to decide whether or not the child should be registered 'at risk'. In line with the principles of parental responsibility, participation and partnership underpinning The Children Act 1989 and other legislation, parents are involved in the child protection investigation and the conference. Their involvement has been largely welcomed by the families and professionals, but a number of issues of principle, policy and practice are raised. A central dilemma concerns the degree to which the rights of parents to be involved in decisions about their children might conflict with the child's right to be protected. There are other difficulties. In undertaking the child protection work social workers have to consult different interests and perform contradictory and ambiguous tasks. They are required to balance care and control within the context of limited resource provision and fear of public scandals if they get it wrong. The basis on which the child is registered is not clear to the parents as it has no legal authority, and the families are often traumatised by the experience. The question arises whether it is possible to combine a procedure designed to classify risk with an attempt to work in partnership with the families.

This study explores the effect of involving parents on the conference process, on the decisions and recommendations made and on the views and experiences of the professional and families involved. It is based on a research project undertaken in 1991 to 1993 in a Northern industrial city to evaluate their pilot scheme to involve parents. The design involved comparisons of conferences held before and after the implementation of the scheme, and of areas where parents were invited and those where they were not. It is unique in this respect. Generally, the findings are positive. Parents who had been to the conference felt fairly treated and were more positive to the on-going social work intervention than the parents who had not been. Nevertheless, conference attendance per se was not the strongest determinant of attitude overall. The findings also highlight the potential for conflict within the conference task, as well as for the professionals. There are limitations to the degree to which working in partnership with parents is possible, and to the extent to which the process could be described as empowering.

Some ways forward, both for the initial conference as it now stands, as well as for alternative models, are identified. However, it is argued that the success of the initiative depends also on government policies which should promote the development of a broad based child care service, within which entry to the child protection system is reserved for cases of serious abuse.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

The work contained in this thesis is my own. The assistance given by Ian Sinclair, who supervised the empirical study on which the thesis is based, has been acknowledged. A brief summary of the empirical findings was reported to the Nuffield Foundation, who funded the research. The summary report has been circulated. Parts of the material in Chapters Five, Six and Seven have been published as journal articles. I was the sole author.

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

The research on which my thesis is based was one of a number of studies undertaken in the aftermath of The Children Act 1989 on a key component of the child protection system, the initial child protection conference. The conference is an inter-agency meeting held to assess risk to children who may have been abused or neglected, to decide whether to register the child as being at risk of future harm and to make a child protection plan. The Children Act 1989 and its associated guidance, Working Together, 1991, was unequivocal in the requirement that:

".... children and adults are fully involved from the outset in all stages of the child protection process" (6.11.p 43.)

Some more progressive local authorities, such as Lewisham and Hackney, had been involving parents in the initial conference for some years preceding the Act. Professional reactions were mixed. Many welcomed the opportunities provided by the guidance to work in partnership with parents and families in a way that would be empowering to them. Others feared that the dual objectives of offering parents rights in the decision making process and adequately protecting the child would conflict.

This study set out to evaluate the first year of the implementation of the policy of involving parents in a northern city. The initial aims were to examine the impact of involving parents on the decisions made and the conference process. Further, I wished to explore the experiences of all the participants, with a view to assessing the claim that involving parents would be more likely to result in their cooperation in the ongoing intervention. As my research progressed, and other research in the area was published, my aims developed and the conceptual framework took shape. In his enquiry into the death of Kimberley Carlile, Blom-Cooper (1987) described the initial child protection conference as 'the crucible of the system'. This analogy took on meaning for me as my detailed findings on the conference threw up central issues about the direction the child protection system has taken in response to the legislative requirements of The Children Act 1989.

These issues have become the subject of wide debate by government, by policy makers, by practitioners and by researchers. They encompass philosophical discussions about the nature of moral judgments, about conflicts of rights and about power and justice; detailed questions about practice, particularly with regard to the concept of working in partnership; and policy issues on a national level, as well as for Area Child Protection Committees to address locally. More fundamentally, as Messages from the Research (1995) has graphically illustrated, the issues raised by the empirical evidence of this and other research studies suggest the need for a fundamental rethink of the present system of child protection in England and Wales.

This thesis is being written at a time when it seems as if too much of the work undertaken for children in need comes under the child protection banner. A number of major studies researching the child protection system, commissioned by the Department of Health following the publication of The Children Act 1989, have recently been published, (Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings, 1995, Gibbons, Conroy and Bell, 1995, Farmer and Owen, 1995, Hallett, 1995, Cleaver and Freeman, 1995). They all suggest that a more useful perspective would often be provided if the investigation and ensuing conference was viewed as an enquiry to establish whether the child in need would benefit from family

support services, rather than as an investigation to establish whether or not abuse has taken place, (see Platt and Shemmings, 1996).

I hope that this account and discussion of what happened in eighty three conferences in a northern city when the policy of involving parents was implemented will help toward a more reflective and realistic understanding of what families need and value in the intervention. I hope, also, that it will demonstrate the immensely challenging and often contradictory tasks the professionals face in setting up partnerships with families who may have abused their children. Social workers are expected to be all things to all men. As Cleaver and Freeman (1995) have suggested, they need " the skills of Machiavelli, the wisdom of Solomon, the compassion of Augustine, and the hide of a tax inspector". Generally they succeed, but moral panic and professional failure ensue when they do not. It seems timely, therefore, to examine further the rhetoric of partnership and optimism by reference to a research study which reveals that there are some child abuse situations where the procedures and the principles underlying them work well, but there are others where they do not. The detailed analysis that is presented here suggests the reasons why, and this can only be helpful to this debate.

My objective overall, then, is to use my research to build upon and augment other research in the area and to take forward the debates outlined above. The thesis begins by describing the background to the research study that was undertaken between 1991 and 1993. The history of the initial child protection conference, and the involvement of parents and family members within that is described. This account is placed within the context of the emerging concerns with civil liberties and increasing consumer involvement in social welfare that marked the 1980's. It then follows through into the preoccupation with partnership issues that have marked developments in policy and practice in the 1990's. It is argued that the themes that emerge from this account are located within the ambiguities and conflicts that are inherent in the child protection system, and that these are enacted in the conference arena. They concern issues about rights, justice, power and conflict. These themes are discussed and given more detailed attention in Chapter 2, preliminary to presenting the research findings.

The study involved the collection of data from a variety of sources and using a range of methods, and the design and methodology for this is explained in Chapter 3. Essentially, the design was intended to facilitate the exploration of the issues identified above from the perspectives of all the participants. The views of the consumers and their experience of being involved were considered to be as important as those of the professionals. The bulk of the thesis comprises the subsequent five chapters that report on the empirical findings from the different aspects of the study. The first of these, Chapter 4, reports on the study of the attitudes of the professionals at two points in time - before the implementation of the policy of parental involvement and after. This study is the only one involving a design to evaluate the attitudes of the same group of professionals before their experience of involving parents and after, and makes a particular contribution in that respect.

This study of changing attitudes provides the backcloth to the analysis of the conferences, entitled 'the monitoring study,' which comprises Chapter 5. The monitoring study collects and analyses information about the children and families conferenced, and about the conference structures. This provides the context for the more detailed presentation of the experiences of the professionals case by case, in Chapter 6. The analysis of this data, combined with the observation of twenty two of these conferences, enables the conferences to be grouped, according to the degrees of difficulty experienced by the professionals. In this respect, also, the research charts new ground and adds to the knowledge base in this field.

Chapter 7 reports on the experiences of the parents. The research was designed to allow for a comparison to be made between two groups of parents, one group who had been invited to the conference, and a second group who had not been invited. The research is unique in having this comparative study, which enables clear conclusions to be drawn about the impact on the professionals and the parents of their involvement in the conference. The last of the chapters to present data provides a detailed account of the social work practice in twenty two cases where parents attended the conference. Finally, the thesis is concluded by drawing together and identifying the main findings and discussing them in relation to the themes identified in Chapters 1 and 2.

THE CONTEXT

The principle of involving parents in decisions that are made about their children has fundamentally informed recent government policy on child care and is now a dominating principle in welfare provision underpinning a wide range of social policy legislation. The Children Act 1989 sets out a clear framework for services to be built upon the participation of all family members, requiring their involvement in the consultation and decision making processes at every stage of the child care work. Although the word partnership is not specifically used in the Act or the Guidance, (it was used in the White Paper "The Law on Child Care and Family Services" and the Department of Health "Principles in Practice" in Regulations and Guidance, 1990), the emphasis is on the local authority supporting parents in caring for their children, rather than providing substitute care, "the State being ready to help, especially where doing so would lessen the risk of family breakdown" (Parton, 1991). More recently, The Challenge of Partnership in Child Protection (1995) has spelt out ways in which partnership with parents should be managed, sustained and developed throughout the decision making processes, and the provision of services for children in need.

Previous Government documents have been no less emphatic in requiring the involvement of parents, as in the Code of Practice (1983) governing the access of parents to children in care. Nor is this emphasis confined to social service provision. The Education Act 1981 requires local authorities to take into account the wishes of parents in determining services for children having special educational needs. The service framework of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 also lays substantial emphasis on strengthening users' rights to participate in decisions, for example by exercising choice in the package of services to be delivered. There is a strong emphasis in a wide range of welfare legislation on consulting users, on participation by users and carers in decision making and on promoting partnerships between users, carers and providers.

Consumerism

The requirement to promote parental involvement which permeates the legislation referred to above, and its associated guidance, is part of a wider political movement

toward strengthening civil liberties and increasing consumer involvement in social care - trends which have been encouraged by judgments in the European Court of Human Rights (1988). Concerns about citizenship and rights are also reflected in the legislation governing the computerisation of records and access to personal files carried on computer, as required by the Data Protection Act 1984 and Access to Personal Files Act 1987. In the personal social services and in the health field open records are now the norm. In the National Health Service the patient's right to see his/her records forms part of the citizen's charter, although some Doctors continue to maintain that the practice raises serious ethical and practice issues in their work. In the field of social work the principle is less controversial. Most practitioners agree that good practice requires them to be aware of and to promote their clients right to see their records, not only in the interests of natural justice, but also because they view the process of the client's involvement in record keeping as part of a therapeutic process which is empowering. Research on written agreements (Cordon and Preston-Shoot, 1987, Aldgate, 1990) suggests that successful participation in casework is facilitated by using records and written agreements. Nevertheless, in practice there are a number of situations where social workers find it very hard to put in writing opinions which may be perceived as derogatory by their clients. They need to be very clear indeed what the purposes of the record are for, and to be skilled in the art of shared recording.

Values

While the concepts of partnership, empowerment and advocacy that have emerged from the recent legislation feel new, they have a long and respectable pedigree. The recent legislation can be seen as providing an operational framework for the traditional social work values of respect for persons, dignity and client self-determination as laid down by Biesteck in *The Casework Relationship* (1961), and encapsulated in the principles of the earliest caseworkers (Hollis, 1966);

"What we really mean by the concept [self-determination] is that self-direction, the right to make his own choices, is a highly valued attribute of the individual. The more

he can make his own decisions and direct his own life the better, and the less the caseworker tries to take over these responsibilities the better" (p13)

So while new terms are now being used, and their incorporation into the ideology underpinning the legislative framework may mark new ground, the value base of social work has not changed. A glance at reports such as the BASW Working Party Report "Clients are Fellow Citizens" (1980), at Berrys' work on complaints procedures (1988), and at the earlier research studies, such as that conducted by Stein and Ellis (1983) on the views of four hundred and sixty five young people in care demonstrate this point. Other studies have consistently found that both clients and practitioners have valued access to information and shared recordings (see Ovretiet, 1986; Shemmings, 1991) The work of Sainsbury (1989), Etherington (1986) and Banks (1995) furthered the growing preoccupation with the wider ethical formulations impacting upon practice, especially taking into account a user perspective, and suggested that practice was more likely to be effective when based upon an agreed perception of need and a negotiated contract.

Other research supported these findings. In this country the work of Mayer and Timms (1970) on differing perceptions between clients and workers suggested that clients and workers had their own agendas, and that the goals of the intervention were commonly not shared. This finding was later replicated by Lishman (1988) and, again, by Sainsbury (1982). More recently, the thread running through two key government publications, Social Work Decisions in Child Care (1985), and Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placement (1991) also endeavours to relate clear and negotiated goals to better outcomes for children.

User Involvement

User involvement in service provision and delivery is thus now not only a legislative requirement in many areas of social service provision, but is also regarded as being an essential component of good practice. Beresford and Croft (1992) describe a number of ways in which better services result from the greater public accountability and democratisation to which the involvement of users leads. They also argue that the process

of involving users is empowering to them as individuals, and to the groups and communities they represent. The theme of user involvement, especially in relation to the effectiveness of service provision and developing models of practice based on partnership principles, is being widely researched across a range of settings and with different client groups. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council is currently funding a project on consumerism and citizenship amongst users of health and social care services in the fields of mental health and physical disability. Work is being undertaken in York on the views of users on the services provided for them in their last year of life, and on the perspectives of parents and children on the nursing service provision for school age children, as well as on children's experiences of being looked after. The Dartington Unit has recently published two major research studies on the views of families on the early stages of a child abuse investigation, (Farmer and Owen, 1995, Cleaver and Freeman, 1995). Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings (1995) have also recently published a Department of Health funded study of the views of parents on their involvement in the child protection process.

Partnership

*"Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong,
Under the shade of a coolibah tree,
And he sang as he sat and waited till his billy boiled,
'You'll come a-walzing, Matilda, with me."*

Waltzing Matilda, Paterson, 1864.

The concept of partnership that emerged from The Children Act 1989 can thus be seen as deriving from the more traditional value base of practice, but also as representing a more proactive model of practice based on the values of shared care, empowerment and advocacy for individuals and communities. As suggested above, there now seems to be widespread agreement that taking users views into account produces more effective services and that this requires social workers to develop and use particular practice skills. Marsh and Fisher (1993) have developed a list of practice skills which they regard as being fundamental to partnership practice. In their view:

"Goals should be negotiated, explicit and observable....Tasks should form the central working tool...active intervention should be brief...records should form the principal means of sharing the purpose of intervention" (p13)

This task centred approach, with its reliance on openness, clarity of mandate and negotiated agreement obviously addresses the issues raised by the research studies mentioned above regarding lack of clarity about the basis, purposes and methods of intervention. It is also helpful in pinning down some specific practice skills which enable practitioners to begin to find concrete ways of operationalizing a principle in which they believe, but are less sure how to operate. However, as Katz (1995) has observed, since the tasks are generally determined by workers rather than clients, client participation is no more likely to be guaranteed by the task-centred model than by other approaches. None really stand the acid test of being beyond the boundaries of manipulation, persuasion or coercion within the unequal balance of a relationship which inevitably has a power dimension (see Bell, 1993).

The recent research studies (Thoburn et al, 1995, Farmer and Owen, 1995, Westcott, 1995) on practitioners' perspectives on their child protection work suggest that, while the principles of partnership have liberated social work thinking by providing a framework for practice which is participative rather than paternalistic, social workers are continuing to struggle with how to do it, and to define more accurately what it is. Reporting on a conference at Brunel University, Kaganas (1993) comments on the confusion arising from the multiplicity of perspectives:

" There is no consensus on precisely what [partnership] means in practice, whether it is desired and, indeed, whether it can be achieved...some thought it could never be more than a fond hope."

Delegates at the conference saw constraints upon partnership practice as including absence of cooperation between social services and departments such as housing, lack of resources, bureaucracy, the adversarial nature of the legal system and, most strikingly, the

power imbalance between professionals and parents. More importantly, they did not know how to do it.

Whatever the professional's view on partnership, other research has suggested that clients have a different perspective altogether. A study by Barnado's (1993) found that, while their clients valued their relationship with their social worker and saw it as embodying friendliness and accessibility, staff viewed partnership as a strategy to empower users. This gap in perceptions interestingly puts flesh upon the distinction suggested by Daines (1990), who comments that the partnership process can be both instrumental, as judged here by the staff, and expressive, as judged by the users. Staff thus defined partnership as an end, something which led to an empowered client; whereas clients understood it to be a means, a quality of relationship. While this relationship was valued, what the families most wanted, but did not get because it was not within the power of social workers to provide, was "an adequate income, more skills and better housing" (1993). Further if, as Bradshaw (1972) has suggested, there is a relationship between assessment of need and available service provision, social workers assessments and interventions are more likely to reflect the available service provision and their own value position and favoured skills rather than the views of the client, or some agreed objective standard of 'good' child care.

Clearly there are limitations to the ideal of partnership. Marsh and Fisher (1993) concede that where clients decide that "even 'minimal choice' is not relevant....work will assume the characteristics of surveillance and maintenance without consent, with attempts to move back to partnership at appropriate intervals" (p19). It has to be said, further, that not all practitioners would agree that their practice either does or should meet the requirements that Marsh and Fisher outline, or that these skills are an essential prerequisite to partnership practice. Social workers are required to perform a huge range of different tasks, to sustain relationships of differing duration and intensity with immensely different individuals and client groups and for very different purposes. For this they need a repertoire of skills and available resources which will enable them to establish the trusting relationships on which partnership work depends, and which may or may not be task centred or based on negotiated agreement.

There are other difficulties with the concept of partnership. It seems that where clients are in agreement with social services that there is a problem, and about the cause, the opportunity exists to build a voluntary partnership based on their shared perception. However, Thoburn et al (1995), in addressing parent's understandings of the requirements agreed at the initial child protection conference, found that many families did not understand that, technically, their cooperation was voluntary. If they had, they may well have withdrawn their cooperation. There are a number of situations where a social services intervention is not welcomed by families, or by one or more of the family members, but where the social worker is required by law to intervene. Further, these situations may involve a fundamental conflict of rights, for example the rights of children to be protected from further abuse may well conflict with the rights of parents to be self-determining. In these situations it can be extremely difficult to determine who the partnership and negotiated agreement should be with; the child, the non-abusing parent, other carers, let alone whether the partnership approach under discussion is the most appropriate intervention, or is possible or practicable.

The Challenge of Partnership (1995) has helped by providing more detailed guidance on how to implement the commitment to partnership with families. It sets out issues relating to the organisational framework, as well as examining the concept of partnership in practice. The concept of partnership outlined in the document is similar to that constructed by Thoburn et al (1995) in suggesting that partnership with parents takes place, essentially, on three levels; providing information, through a more active involvement such as consultation, to participation in decision making. However, while the optimistic tone of the government publication suggests that full partnership with parents is a realistic objective, Thoburn et al's recent study (1995) takes forward the debate by demonstrating that, in practice, it is extremely difficult to achieve. The conclusion of the researchers in the study of two hundred and twenty cases which reached child protection conferences in seven authorities, was that only 16% of the parents could be described as participating in an arrangement which could broadly be described as a full partnership. Of

the remainder, 42% of the main parents and 10% of the non-resident parents were rated as being informed or consulted, and 13% were not involved at all.

The common theme emerging from the research is that practitioners are more likely than their clients to believe that their work is participative. Practitioners value the principle of partnership, but are not always clear how it can be operationalized. Clients are generally satisfied with their practitioners, but are unclear about the mandate for social work interventions. The balance of power within the relationship is uneven, and clients do not feel powerful.

Involving parents and family members in the initial child protection conference

It is within this context that there has been a growing emphasis on the attendance of parents in case conferences. There is now widespread agreement, in support of the basic premise in The Children Act 1989, that the interests of the child are best served when they remain within the family unit. Since children are, and wherever possible should be, looked after at home, their parents' knowledge and expertise should be acknowledged and built upon, and their voluntary cooperation sought. The concept of "parental responsibility" is clearly intended to support this principle, and the premise that each family is the expert on itself is now well established in the literature. The work of Maluccio (1986) in America, and Wilcox (1991) on family group conferences in New Zealand, strengthened the argument that families are experts on themselves and should be given more responsibility for the protection of their children. Reporting on the work in New Zealand on family group conferences, Wilcox writes:

"We found that [family] change could be dramatic when the professionals begin to grasp an understanding that while their training and expertise gives them general knowledge about children and families, it does not make them experts in specific families, other than their own " Wilcox et al.

Families should be regarded as the experts on themselves and as Jane Rowe (1991) suggests, their "potential as a resource" should be exploited.

Further arguments in favour of parental involvement in the early child abuse investigation are provided by research undertaken by the Dartington team and other researchers from Bristol University. A number of their studies have provided evidence that the great majority of children who are case conferenced following an allegation of suspected abuse either remain at home or return to it. In Farmer and Owen's study (1995), two thirds of the children who had suffered from physical abuse, neglect and emotional abuse continued to live in the same household as the abusing parent. In March 1992 73% of children on child protection registers lived at home with at least one parent. Even in the most extreme cases, where children enter the care system, the most likely outcome at the point of separation is that the children will return home; Bullock and his colleagues (1993) suggest that 87% will return home within five years, and 92% eventually. Milham's research (1986) emphasised how quickly parents can be frozen out of the care process and feel disempowered when professionals take over. Milham identified the early stages of care as being crucial to the maintenance of contact between children removed from home and their parents. Such evidence suggests that parents have a continuing role to play and children, parents and professionals have to work together if a good outcome is to be achieved

Practitioners also argue that it is essential and, indeed, logical, (with certain notable exceptions, such as in cases of sexual abuse) to involve parents in the treatment of their abused children. Effective child care practice is, on this account, seen as being built upon careful and sensitive family work, which includes all members of the family in treatment choices and, where appropriate, in the intervention. Kempe and Kempe (1984), Tunnard (1983) and Dale (1986) are among a number of exponents of this position.

Underlying this practice development and research work, and a key to it as well as to the legislation, is a theme common to a number of the inquiry reports into the abuse of children. This is the extent to which parents should be included in the decision making process in child protection work. In the inquiry reports this theme can be traced as a swinging pendulum. The Maria Colwell Inquiry (1974) questioned the principle of parents' rights after Maria was returned to her parents against her will. In contrast, in

Cleveland (1987), the concern was that parents' rights were being denied because the judicial system favoured the rights of the child. The Children Act 1989 can be seen as an attempt to manage the inherent conflict in child protection work between the rights of the parent to have a say in what happens to their children, and the rights of children to be protected from the inherent harm in a firmly grounded social attitude that still regards children as the property of their parents, (Aries, 1973, Archard, 1993)

To summarise, the three main strands making up the argument for the involvement of parents in conferences are that practice is more effective when parents are involved, that parents have a right to be present and it is unfair to exclude them, and that the principle of natural justice requires them, as human beings, to be treated with respect. These arguments underlie much of the discussion in this thesis, and will be the subject of more detailed consideration in the next chapter.

THE CONFERENCE

Within this context and in response to the themes outlined above, the child protection conference has developed as the crucible of the child protection system. In this section, I chart in more detail the historical development of the conference and the involvement of parents up to the present day. This is a necessary preliminary to setting out the issues that are raised.

History and functions of the conference

While case conferences in their present form were set up following the publication of the Maria Colwell Inquiry Report (1974), meetings convened for communicating interagency concern about neglected and maltreated children have been held for over fifty years. Stevenson (1980) points out that even before the 1950 Home Office circular ('Children neglected or ill-treated in their homes') recommended the establishment of children's coordinating committees to discuss children who had been ill treated, conferences were held in clinical settings, with the psychiatrist as 'the team leader', to discuss the diagnosis and treatment of children. The advent of Childrens Departments in 1948 had the effect of bringing the case conference out of the medical arena, and throughout the 1950's case

conferences were increasingly used as a mechanism for improving inter-agency cooperation.

In 1974 the death of Maria Colwell focussed attention more keenly on the inter-agency component of child protection work. Following the Inquiry Report, the DHSS (DHSS 1974 (a)) advised local and health authorities to form Area Review Committees(now Area Child Protection Committees) to oversee local policy and training arrangements, to ensure that case conferences were held after every suspected case, and to set up central registers containing information about children considered to be at risk of abuse. As in 1950, the way forward was seen mainly in terms of ensuring better inter-agency collaboration.

The status of the register and its purposes were ambiguous. There was no legal duty to report cases, and no requirement as to how authorities should operate and use the register. It was, therefore, hardly surprising that they were not widely used and had limited value in the identification of cases. (ADSS, 1981, 1987, DHSSI, 1990) In addition, the inclusion of suspected cases raises issues of civil liberties and privacy. Issues of fairness and justice were highlighted further by the fact that different authorities operated widely differing criteria for registration, since there was no standardisation of the criteria. Some writers suggested that the registers provide a 'gatekeeping' function for scarce resources. (Corby and Mills, 1986; Jones et al, 1986) Others (Geach and Szwed, 1983) expressed concern that the bureaucratic procedures associated with registration do not in themselves protect the child or ensure good social work practice.

Government circulars remained unclear as to the procedures that should be adopted for the holding and managing of case conferences until 1988. In 1988 Working Together made it clear that the protection of the child was the main purpose of the conference, again stressing its purpose as a 'forum for the exchange of information between professionals'. The guidance is developed in 1991, when the second version of Working Together was produced after The Children Act 1989. Here it is made clear that the purpose of registers was not to measure the incidence and prevalence of child abuse, but

was a tool for case management within the child protection system. Essentially, the register was to provide a record of children needing an inter-agency protection plan:

"The purpose of the register is to provide a record of all children in the area for whom there are unresolved child protection issues and who are currently the subject of an inter-agency protection plan.....The register will provide a point of speedy enquiry for professional staff who are worried about a child and want to know whether the child is the subject of an inter-agency protection plan"

(Home Office et al., 1991 para 6.37)

The name of the conference is changed to the child protection conference, which is required to assess risk, decide whether the child's name should be put on the child protection register and devise a child protection plan. There are four categories to be used for registration: neglect, physical injury, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. Grave concern as a category was abolished in 1991, during the year of my research study.

"Before a child is registered the conference must decide that there is, or is a likelihood of, significant harm leading to the need for a child protection plan. One of the following requirements needs to be satisfied:

I) there must be one or more identifiable incidents which can be described as having adversely affected the child. They may be acts of commission or omission. They can be either physical, sexual, emotional or neglectful. It is important to identify a specific occasion or occasions when the incident has occurred. Professional judgment is that further incidents are likely.

or

ii) Significant harm is expected on the basis of professional judgment of findings of the investigation in this particular case or on research evidence"

(Home Office et al., 1991 para 6.39)

Gibbons et al (1995) observe that the combination of a clearer definition of the register's purpose, with a better defined threshold and more specific categories will probably mean

clearer evidence will need to be brought to the conference to demonstrate the need for a protection plan. However, while harm is defined under The Children Act 1989 as "ill-treatment or the impairment of health or development", the addition of the term significant introduces a higher threshold, but without stipulating when this is reached. This, she claims, has wide reaching implications for the operation of the child protection system. If the threshold is set too high, some children will be unprotected; conversely, if too low, the system will become overloaded, failing to concentrate resources on children at risk.

History of the involvement of parents

Up to Working Together 1988 government guidance had been clearly against the attendance of parents at conferences. Thoburn et al (1995) observe that in the early 1980's there was very little mention of parental participation in the literature on child abuse. In 1985 a BASW policy paper on the management of child abuse stated:

"Parents, however, should not attend entire conferences, which are basically meetings where professionals take information and advice from each other and form recommendations for action - some being related to statutory duties. It is most unlikely that the best interests of the child can remain the objective focus of a conference if the parents are present"

(BASW, 1985)

However, the impetus in the late 1980's to include parents in decisions about their children came from a range of directions. Events in Cleveland acted as a major catalyst, placing parents' rights high on the agenda. Butler Sloss regarded parents' attendance as critical to child protection work;

"Parents should be informed of case conferences unless, in the view of the Chairman of the conference, their presence will preclude a full and proper consideration of the child's interests"

(Report of the Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland" 1987, p.246.)

Some short time later, the Social Services Inspectorate at Rochdale (1991) expressed criticism of local authorities who had not developed a policy of inviting parents to the initial case conference. In many respects Working Together 1988 can be seen as an attempt by government to address the issue of rights and, to some extent, to circumscribe the powers of professionals by opening their workings to public scrutiny. Morrison et al (1990) suggested that the guidance was produced apparently in response to a ruling in the European Court of Human Rights (1988) about the lack of parental involvement in recent child care cases. It heralded a major change of policy.

"Parents should be invited wherever practicable to attend part, or if appropriate, the whole of the case conference unless in the view of the chair of the conference their presence will preclude a full and proper consideration of the child's interests"

(Home Office et al, 1988 para 5.45)

However, what is conspicuous by its absence from this paragraph is any reference to parental participation. Indeed, as Morrison et al (1990) point out, the guidance goes on to talk about parents "being informed" of the inter-agency plan and the purposes of registration, and does not refer at any stage to their participation in the decision making process.

The publication of The Children Act 1989, with its wide ranging requirements for local authorities to work in partnership with parents, marked a shift in government philosophy to a more full blooded position. When the guidance was later produced, in Working Together 1991, it stated unequivocally that parents and children should have a seat at the conference table:

" This guide emphasises the importance of professionals working in partnership with parents and other family members or carers and the concept of parental responsibility. These principles must underpin all child protection work. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that involvement of children and adults in child protection conferences will not be effective unless they are fully involved from the outset in all

stages of the child protection process, and unless from the time of the referral there is as much openness and honesty as possible between families and professionals"

(Home Office et al, 1991) para 6.11

Only certain criteria for exclusion were suggested, for example where there is risk of violence, or where a potential participant is suffering from a mental illness. The guidelines are clear and detailed and have had considerable impact on local action even though they have no legal mandate. Allen (1991) suggested in his editorial in the contemporary Practitioners Child Law Bulletin, that government had deliberately left the status of the conference and the rights of parents to attend on a non- statutory basis. He observes that this does not seem to have been an oversight, but a deliberate effort to avoid statutory regulation.

"Detailed legislation, had it been put in place, would have meant an end to the degree of flexibility inherent in the present arrangements.....and that flexibility is essential to allow agencies to deal with the infinite variety of situations that are brought to them"
(p.51)

I will discuss the significance of this point later, as I believe it is an important indicator of government thinking in relation to parents' rights. Nevertheless, local authorities in England and Wales have treated these guidelines as if they were legally binding, and different models of family participation have evolved. Implementation was initially slow and patchy. Some areas encountered opposition to the policy from some of the workers involved. For example, in Rochdale, the police withdrew their support because they thought it improper to present a person's criminal record in public; in Newcastle the consultant paediatricians expressed grave doubts about the adverse affect on the assessment of risk, and the difficulties inherent in declaring information they regarded as confidential. Other professional groups, such as health visitors, feared that they would be denied access to the child if the parents heard what they really thought of them. Teachers said it would interfere with their relationship with parents and so adversely affect the child's education, (Wattam,1989)

Present situation

Now many of these teething problems have been ironed out, and it is generally agreed that levels of parental participation at conferences are an indicator of good practice, (see Messages from the Research, 1995). Parents and, to a lesser extent, other family members are now routinely involved in the conference. Generally, parents are allowed to stay in the meeting for its duration, but practice varies as to whether they are consulted about whether they wish their child to be registered. Estimates suggest that the proportion of parents who attend is approximately 80% (In the authority studied, it is now 85%). The inclusion of children continues to be rare and is thought to be appropriate only for some adolescents. Age plays a part but the literature reports general unease which goes beyond that and, as Stevenson (1995) points out, children themselves may not be keen to attend. Some authorities, such as Herefordshire, are piloting the more radical New Zealand model of family group conferences, where the families develop a protection plan with the help of the professionals, rather than the other way round. Other areas are using 'core group' meetings after the conference where parents and the key professionals agree on the detail of the child protection plan and how it will be resourced.

Thoburn et al (1995) caution that the register is not a record of actual abuse, as some children are registered because of concern about future abuse, whereas others who have been the victim of abuse may not have been registered because it was decided there was no need for a multi-agency child protection plan. Gibbons et al (1995) have suggested that 160,000 children each year are subject to enquiries under Section 47 of The Children Act 1989. Most of the abuse is relatively mild, but within that group there are about 100 child homicides and 6,000 children who have to be looked after away from home. Only a quarter of these referrals result in a child protection conference.

For the year ending March 1st 1992 there were estimated to be 38,600 children and young people on child protection registers in England, representing 3.5 per thousand of the child population under the age of eighteen years. Regarding prevalence, according to Gibbons' research, there is significant regional variation in the rates of children on and added to registers, ranging from 2.1 (Thames Anglia) to 8.1 (Inner London). Categories

of abuse also vary: for neglect, from zero to 38%; for physical abuse, from 7% to 64%; for sexual abuse, from 3% to 34%. Mixed categories are rarely used, so official records do not reflect the way concerns are clustered together. In cases of physical abuse a substantial minority of apparently serious and substantiated cases were not placed on the register, whereas few high risk sexual abuse cases were not registered. Although serious neglect cases were less likely to reach the conference, those that did were more serious.

Are the registers used? The most recently published research relates to information collected in 1991, when Gibbons et al (1995) undertook a postal survey of one hundred and seven English registers. The conclusion was that 80% of the respondents in her sample considered the register to be an essential part of the system for improving the detection and prevention of child abuse. They found it was used for the purposes for which it was established. For example, the mean number of enquiries over six months in six authorities was two hundred and eighty one; it was used to support reviews in three-quarters of the authorities; and the number of enquiries to the central register was seen as reflecting high levels of inter-agency cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the political and moral climate in which The Children Act 1989 was written and has explored the philosophy of welfare consumerism and user involvement underpinning a range of social legislation. The legislation and practice imperatives are seen as reflecting international concerns about civil liberties which find expression in, for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The principles of partnership, parental responsibility and no order underpinning The Children Act 1989 are set within this context and seen as proactively promoting positive change. However, the principles are also seen more negatively, as a reaction to the public scandals and moral panics of the 1980's, when social workers were castigated for riding roughshod over parents rights, on the one hand, and failing to protect the child on the other. - Too much too soon, or too little too late. I suggest that the ambiguities inherent in the system are a product of this history and are acted out on the playing field

of the conference, and this thesis will provide evidence for this view from the empirical findings.

Involving parents in decisions that are made about their children by the health and welfare agencies was, thus, seen as simultaneously meeting the demands of natural justice while at the same time opening up the workings of the child protection system to public scrutiny. Professionals - particularly social workers - also believed that involving parents and family members in the child protection plan would result in more effective practice based on partnership principles. In discussing the literature on partnership, I observed that social workers are committed to the principle, but find it difficult to operate in practice. The research studies presented suggest that parents often have a different view, both of what partnership consists in, and also of what would best meet their needs. There does, however, seem to be general agreement that best practice results where there is congruence between the views of professionals and clients on what the problem is and how to tackle it.

Finally, an exploration of the background to Working Together 1991 suggests that a number of the opportunities and dilemmas of working in partnership with parents who may have abused their children became, at that time, entombed in the system. Working Together 1991 lays out the guidance for enacting the principles of The Children Act 1989. It provided policy makers and Area Child Protection Committees with the framework to be used in setting up procedures for involving parents and families in the child protection investigation. Top of the ladder came the requirement that parents should be involved in the initial child protection conference. The conference holds a central place within the system for detecting and reporting child abuse and establishing an inter-agency plan for the protection of the child. Local procedures and practices for involving parents and family members in the conference were developed cautiously at first. While many practitioners were genuinely committed to the principles of working in partnership and parental participation, in practice there were concerns and there were some difficulties.

Today some of those difficulties have evaporated or been addressed, while others have not. Different ways of meeting with parents are being tried out, (Atherton and Ryburn, 1996) although it is not within the scope of this thesis to explore these in detail. Recent research (Gibbons et al, 1995) suggests that the registers are being used effectively for the purposes for which they were devised, and that children are being protected by the system. At the same time, all the research studies cited have found that too many children are being drawn into the child protection system. While their need for protection is generally met, their welfare needs are not. Further, the experiences of the families of their involvement in the process is not a happy one and so, it is argued, other means should be found for managing child abuse investigations.

Having presented the context in which my research was carried out, in the next chapter I will explore the main underlying themes in more detail. The methodology and design of the research study will then be explained, prior to the presentation of the findings.

TWO

THE ISSUES

In the previous chapter I outlined the reasons why the initial child protection conference has developed a pivotal role in the child protection system, and the context in which this has taken place. I explained why policy makers and practitioners heralded the involvement of parents in the conference as providing a timely opportunity to operationalise the philosophy of The Children Act 1989, particularly in relation to the principles of partnership and parental responsibility, believed to underpin good practice. In describing these developments I have suggested that a number of critical issues are raised. The purpose of the ensuing chapters is to present the research findings, and to explore the issues raised with reference to the eighty three conferences researched.

In this chapter my intention is to outline and debate the issues within the context of the recent Department of Health funded research studies previously cited. These studies reflect the growing preoccupation of the Department of Health with measuring the effectiveness of service provision (see Cheetham, 1992), and with outcomes (see Parker, 1991). The findings have led to a wide ranging and concerned debate about a child protection system that has been constructed in response to the alarms raised by the child death inquiries of the 1980's, rather than the welfare needs of children and families in the 1990's. The issues raised encompass philosophical discussions about the nature of moral judgements, about conflicts of rights and the related issues of power and justice. They also encompass, as I observed in the previous chapter, detailed questions about practice

with respect, in particular, to the concept of partnership. I suggested that practitioners were faced with contradictory demands because of the ambiguities inherent within the procedures and legal framework they are required to work within. Since these issues form the basis to the consideration of my research findings, here they will be explored in some detail. Those which I consider key are relativity and the nature of moral judgment, rights issues, justice as fairness, power and ambiguity. I will consider these in turn.

RELATIVISM: COGNITIVE AND MORAL

" 'Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?' Alice asked.

'We called him Tortoise because he taught us,' said the Mock Turtle"

Carroll,(1865) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. 1

Working Together 1991 defines the purpose of the conference as being:

" a forum for sharing information and concerns, analysing risk and recommending responsibility for action,.....not for a formal decision that a person has abused the child" 6.1.

In the guidance a distinction is drawn between information and concerns. The implication is that information is about the representation of fact, whereas concerns are about their interpretation as being abusive *and that the two are different.* (My italics) The issues raised here relate to concepts of relativity - how 'facts' are defined, and about the validity of what philosophers call " first-order moral judgment" (see Blackstone, 1968). The recent postmodernist debate (see Thorpe, 1995, Parton, 1994, Wattam, 1992) has focussed attention on the moral nature of the discourse in child protection work. These writers have suggested that definitions of abuse are relative and derive more from the professional's moral judgements than from an objective or absolute standard. The debate is an important one, and is obviously of central importance to my thesis. Clearly, the perspectives of all the participants in the conference on the way parenting behaviours are

presented and perceived will critically determine the decisions and recommendations made, and the willingness of the families to cooperate.

While to do justice to the debate on absolute and relative concepts of child abuse is not within the scope of this thesis, I will endeavour to draw out the points essential to my purpose. Messages from the Research (1995) has most helpfully drawn together the main arguments, and the research studies that support them. The overview begins:

" Any discussion of child abuse and child protection services will benefit from agreement about definition. Unfortunately, there is no absolute definition of abuse. If, from a list of behaviours, ticks could be put against those which are abusive and crosses against those which are not, the task of practitioners and researchers would be made easier. In this list, hitting children might be ticked, indicating that such behaviour is abusive. But some might argue that in certain contexts it is good for children to be hit and, as at least 90% of children have this experience at some time, the behaviour could be said to be 'normal'. The tick might be replaced by a cross or, at best, by a question mark"

Messages from the Research, (p11)

While we would almost all of us agree that neglect, sickness and death among children are undesirable, as the above quotation illustrates, we would also all agree that child abuse is not an absolute concept. Hitting children provides a good example of how parenting styles and societies perspectives on what is good and bad change, and what is considered normal and abnormal change over time and between class and culture. Newsom (1989) found that 95% of the parents in their survey hit their children in 1960, and 80% thought that was alright; in the 1990s', when they repeated the survey, 81% hit, and half thought they should not. Another example is provided by Smith and Grocke (1995), who looked at patterns of sexual behaviour within English homes. Their findings expose a gap between what is actually occurring - behaviours such as touching mothers' breasts and drawing genitalia which occur frequently but in moderation - and popular images of family life, where they do not occur at all. Further, while some behaviours, such as watching a

sexually explicit video might be undesirable, the effects are not necessarily harmful. In searching for a definition of abuse Smith found that charting patterns of punishment in families did not help either. While some factors previously found to be associated with physical maltreatment, such as the mother's age, were mild predictors of frequent or severe punishment, other factors - specifically those arising from daily stressors - such as sibling fighting, were stronger. Conversely, as Waterhouse (1993) discovered, some situations that are not perceived as abusive, such as marital breakdown, can have dire effects.

The latter point also highlights the influence of culpability and intent in defining abuse. In situations of physical abuse the parents culpability may be fairly clear cut. By contrast, in situations of marital breakdown, or domestic violence, the children may suffer serious emotional abuse which remains undefined because it is hidden, and because it is not intended, (see Fantuzzo, 1989, Bell, 1997). Dingwall (1981) found that, in identifying and confirming child abuse, two types of evidence were used initially; the child's clinical condition and the nature of his social environment. The third, and concluding factor was whether the parents' behaviour was intentional. 'Evidence', in all of these three types, is rarely clear cut and generally open to interpretation.

Turning in greater detail to the factors that contribute to differing perceptions of what constitutes abusive behaviour, or good enough parenting I will consider class, race and gender.

Class

Standards and patterns of child care practice vary across class dimensions, as well as by race and culture. Children from working class households, for example, are more likely to experience health problems, (Blackburn,1991), or to be involved in road traffic accidents, (Wynne,1992). Their parents may well have experienced, learned, or assimilated as children, models of parenting based on values and social structures very different from those enjoyed by the middle classes, where employment, educational and health advantage and social mobility provided very different experiences of family life and parenting

behaviours. Their perception of what constitutes good parenting and abusive behaviour is therefore very likely to be influenced by factors associated with class. Further, since working class families are more likely to be living in poverty, in substandard housing accommodation, and to have a less healthy diet, stressors which are known to contribute to the conditions in which abuse is more likely to take place, they are also likely to contribute to an overall assessment of a situation as potentially abusive. (Blackburn, 1991, Korbin, 1991)

Culture and Race

There is some evidence that parents from different cultures also have different views on what constitutes abuse, (Korbin, 1981, Newson and Newson, 1976) Again, differing racial and cultural family patterns may incline white professionals to perceive as abusive a situation which is accepted within the culture as the norm. British social work is essentially Eurocentric, and white middle class norms or stereotypes may be used to judge the parenting behaviours of other cultures negatively, (Ahmed, 1986) The perception that black families are more likely to be judged negatively is supported by studies that show the over representation of black children in public care, (Barn,1990), although the situation is more complicated than Barn implies. For example, other studies have shown that Asian children are under represented in the care system, (see Rowe et al, 1989)

Other writers have suggested that practitioners, because of their non-judgmental value base, may put children at risk by taking an overly optimistic and essentially amoral stance to behaviour which they perceive as being 'normal' within another culture. As Dingwall (1983) has pointed out, this can have equally damaging consequences.

Further conflicts in judgements about behaviour arise where the values of the parent and the child have begun to diverge. Examples are where they hold different belief systems about acceptable sexual and marital partners, female circumcision, or family rites of passage. From the professionals' point of view, as well as the child's, some firmly established cultural practices may seem oppressive and potentially abusive, whereas from the parents' point of view they are essential to the culture. Shared perceptions are

particularly difficult to establish across the culture gaps of class, language and race, and misunderstandings and distorted communications are likely to permeate the ways in which the situations are defined by the different parties.

Dutt and Phillips (1996) point out that even where social work practice is culturally sensitive, it can not address the impact of racism on the attitudes and responses from black families. Their response to a child protection investigation will be based on experiences they have had of hostility and marginalisation (Butt, 1994), and this will also colour their response to the investigating social worker's assessment. Culture and race therefore both play a part in the subjective interpretation of events as abusive.

Gender

"It is indeed a burning shame that there should be one law for men and another law for women".

Wilde (1895), *The Ideal Husband*,

Gender issues may also contribute in subtle and not so subtle ways to the definition of some situations as abusive. The gender stereotype of males as abusers, and females as protectors of children is as pervasive in social work theory and practice as it is in society, resulting in unreasonable expectations being placed upon women. Farmer and Owen (1995) found in their study of investigations of child abuse that the focus on mothers pervaded all aspects of the child protection system. This seemed even more surprising in consideration of the fact that it is men who have been responsible for the majority of well publicised deaths. Where there is not, as is often the case, the resource provision to support mothers who are single, or who are living with violent and abusive men, incidents happening in these families are more likely to be defined as abusive by the professionals. Race is an added factor, especially in Asian families, where many women do not speak English, and where the daughter's role may be narrowly defined by her parents ; or for women from the middle east, whose role is sometimes subservient to their husbands.

Childhood experiences

Finally, one of the most powerful influences on an individual's understanding of what is acceptable behaviour in a family stems from their own experience of parenting. Much of the literature relating to work done with parents who were abused as children describes the work as enabling the victims to grasp, firstly, that their abusive family behaviour was not normal, secondly, that it was wrong, and thirdly that it was not their fault. The long term effects on families of child abuse is well documented in the literature (Lieberman, 1979, Egeland, 1991).

To summarise this discussion, it seems it is the context that determines whether the behaviour is seen as abusive, or not. ...where it takes place, who else is present, and the age of the child, rather than simply the behaviour itself. The context may also determine the outcome. As Messages from the Research concludes, in a warm, supportive environment hits and short periods of neglect are unlikely to have harmful long term effects. It is in families "low on warmth and high on criticism" that negative incidents accumulate. The threshold for determining abuse therefore involves deciding the point at which, firstly, behaviour and/ or parenting style is maltreatment, and, secondly, whether it is necessary for the state to intervene.

These judgments are not strictly determined by the facts. The post-modernist debate referred to earlier has, at its most radical, sometimes seemed to suggest that, in the manner of Dostoevsky where all things are possible, no act is abusive and no truth valid. However, as the philosophers Krautz and Meikland (1987) have pointed out, relativism is different from scepticism:

" Relativism, like scepticism, gives up the pursuit of a single truth which is the same for everyone - which is objective, absolute and knowable. But relativism, unlike scepticism, does not conclude that there is no such thing as truth or that truth is not knowable. Instead the relativist maintains that truth may be and often is different for each society or each methodological approach or even each individual." (p2)

Even if it is true that moral judgements are nothing but expressions of attitude, it does not follow that it is mistaken or fallacious to express the attitudes we have, or that there can be no agreement on the morality of the attitudes expressed. What is important to this thesis is to understand that, as Cleaver and Freeman (1995) have suggested, these attitudes form an essential part of the perspectives that operate in the conference. An understanding of their etiology and influence can only help the struggle to understand the complexity of the dynamics that operate around the conference table, and this will be looked at in detail in my research findings.

RIGHTS

As described in the previous chapter, the involvement of parents in the conference resulted from a range of factors, one of which was the strongly held ideology that parents had a right to participate in the conference. I observed, however, that in spite of the moral fervour for the right of parents to be involved, they have no right in law to attend. The guidance in *Working Together 1991* made clear the intention that parents should be included, but was deliberately vague in defining participation. This has meant that Area Child Protection Committees have devised models of parental participation which generally allow for parents to contribute information and respond to information that is presented, but vary widely in the degree to which parents have a say at the crucial decision making stage. In other words, there is an effective distinction in practice between a right to be present - which is generally upheld, and a right to influence decisions - the operation of which is left to local procedures. This raises questions not only about rights, but also about justice.

It seems clear that the confusion about parent's rights in this matter arises because people are talking about different rights. Becker (1982) argues that there is a difference between the specialised and unspecialised use of the term 'right'. In the unspecialised use, "I have a right to do it" may mean no more than "I am justified in doing it". In some respects this is the tone of the ideological arguments presented. In the specialised use of right, however, "I have a right to do it" carries with it a moral claim, which entails a correspondent duty. Rights are generally regarded as belonging to individuals, and if

respect for persons is regarded as a moral principle, then it follows that individuals have certain rights which society has a duty to respect.

The most widely used distinction of different sorts of rights was made by Hohfield (1923), an American legal theorist, at the beginning of this century. He distinguished four sorts of rights, as follows:

Claim rights. A claim right is a right which has a correlated duty. For example, if I have a right to be paid for my work, my employer has a duty to pay me. Other philosophers, later, drew a further distinction between positive claim rights - rights against a person, and negative claim rights - rights against the world at large. Positive rights are claims against someone else to do something, such as medical treatment. Negative claim rights relate to the freedom to do something without interference. Free speech would be an example.

Liberties. Liberty rights are privileges in the sense that they do not have correlated duties. An example is that, in this country, women can have an abortion, but no person has a duty to perform one.

Powers. A power is a right conferred by law, carrying with it a corresponding liability. For example, in my will I can appoint an executor and give him the power to act in a particular way.

Immunities. Immunities are barriers against powers, such as the right of silence.

Schematically, Hohfields distinctions look like this:

CLAIM RIGHTS	LIBERTIES	POWERS	IMMUNITIES
correlate with	correlate with	correlate with	correlate with
DUTIES	NO RIGHTS	LIABILITIES	DISABILITIES

Turning to the parent's rights to attend the child protection conference, it seems that from a legal point of view parents do not have claim rights, powers or immunities. There have been cases where parents have tried to claim their right to attend. In 1988 Mr. Justice Lincoln did not agree with a mother's application that 'the case conference was vitiated by her absence and that there was a breach of natural justice in that she was not given the opportunity to persuade the participants of her innocence.' (*Regina v Harrow L.B.C, 1988*). It was his view that Working Together 1988 and the Cleveland Report only expected that parents be kept informed. While this judgment is far more restrictive than current thinking or practice would advocate, the legal situation has not changed.

We are therefore left with the right to liberties. Essentially the debate here is about the extent to which the parents' rights vis a vis the conference are based on the moral claim of their absolute rights as citizens, rather than a legal right. Macdonald (1984) argues that doctrines of natural law have a long and impressive history, from the Stoics and Roman jurists to the Atlantic Charter and Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. However, the argument that people are entitled to make certain claims by virtue simply of their common humanity has been punctured by a number of other philosophers, such as Hume, Marx and, in particular Bentham. So, it seems, the right invested in civil liberties arguments is one that, however closely it touches our hearts and moral souls, is not generally agreed by philosophers, and is difficult to uphold in law. The European Court did uphold the right of a parent to attend, but the injunction on British Law is moral, not legal.

A way forward has been suggested by Dingwall, Murray and Eekelar, (1983). They moved the debate away from parent's absolute rights as citizens, by introducing the concept of 'duty rights' as parents. These authors assert that:

"Parental rights must be exercised for the child's benefit. They are duty - rights which parents are not free to abandon, extinguish or waive as long as the child is in their care. If we accept such rights for children, we must accept corresponding restrictions on parents rights and on family autonomy. Most mistreated children are physically unable to initiate their own remedies. Other must be licensed to do it for them".

This scenario returns us to the field of relativity. If parents' rights are instrumental to the benefit of the children, they are not absolute and they are contingent. The suggestion is that they can be waived when parents do not exercise parental responsibility in a way which accords with the best interests of the child. However, as we have seen, judgements about the child's best interests are, themselves, relative. The logical conclusion of this position is that parents who (for whatever reason) are mistaken about what is in their child's best interests would be derelict in their duty and hence forfeit the right to attend the conference. This position seems untenable. It does not resolve the rights issue but pushes further consideration of it firmly into the domain of justice.

JUSTICE

"'I'll be judge, I'll be jury,' said cunning old fury: 'I'll try the whole cause, and condemn you to death.'"

Carroll (1865) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

As with human rights and civil liberties, the principles of natural justice are also reflected in the arguments for parental participation in case conferences. The principles of natural justice in this arena were laid down as early as 1982, in the Barclay Report.

" Many agencies have legal and quasi-legal functions and important decisions about peoples lives are often made within the agency and outside the framework of the courts. It seems reasonable where such decisions are being taken that the rules of natural justice should apply in the agency as they would in the court room. That is, the person so affected should have the right to know the grounds upon which the decision has been taken and to present his own case personally or through a representative to question any disputed facts or to appeal against the decision"

Barclay (1982).

Morrison et al (1990) observe that four elements are contained in the natural justice argument; information, representation, fact disputation and appeal or complaint.

Presumably, if these four elements can be identified in the conference process, it could then be said that the process was just. I will examine each in turn.

As stated previously, information sharing is a primary task in the conference. The research studies have all found that there is agreement that parents should hear and contribute to the information base; not only is this just, it achieves better outcomes. Representation is more tricky. Again, there is general agreement that the views of all the family members should be represented. At the same time, there are a number of difficulties in operationalising representation in the conference, and these will be demonstrated by the research findings. Suffice to say, at this stage, that the difficulties are such that the quality of representation that actually takes place would not accord with the principle of natural justice. Fact disputation, again, presents problems for similar reasons. Technically, parents can dispute the facts that are presented if they are there. However, as will be seen, the power imbalance is such that they are disadvantaged to the degree that they could not claim to have been justly treated in this respect.

A further complication here has been suggested by the research studies which observe that, when parents are present, there is rarely disputation of the facts by any of the participants in the conference. For various reasons that will become apparent in my presentation, conflict is avoided and consensus prevails. Finally, in accordance with natural justice, parents have a right to complain. This is a claim right, but it is a negative right since it depends upon the authority providing the parents with the information and the support to make the complaint. Again, we shall see from the empirical data that the potential for injustice is ripe.

Returning to Mr Justice Lincoln's judgment in the case of *R. v Harrow L.B.*, he expressed doubt if the term natural justice was appropriate to the process of a conference, preferring to ask if the conduct of the conference was unfair or unreasonable. Clearly, issues relating to justice as fairness, and the relationship between empowerment and whether people feel they have been fairly treated are raised by including parents in the conference. Philosophers with such widely disparate views as Aristotle, Kant and Hume agree that the

formal concept of justice rests on the idea of equality. Equality, treating like cases alike or giving each her due relative to rights or needs, is the cornerstone of distributive justice. However, philosophers ask, even if everyone is treated the same, what is it justice is trying to achieve, or equalise? Attempting to adjudicate on what it is best to achieve has taxed philosophers for centuries. Further, if justice depends upon producing the best consequences, best for whom?

One of the most influential political philosophers, Rawls' (1971) argues that justice is about the way institutions address due process, rather than about the distribution of deserts. The example he gives is from aristocratic and caste societies, which are unjust because the basic structures of these societies incorporate "the arbitrariness found in nature", rather than because nature is arbitrary. Applying these principles to the way the conference is managed, it becomes clear that justice, for the parents, is more likely to be determined by their experience of the process, rather than outcome. Justice, in this sense, is not an end in itself but relates rather to the means of administering justice. As Lord Devlin said,

"If it can be shown in any particular class or case that observance of a principle of this sort does not serve the interests of justice, it must be dismissed, otherwise it could become the master instead of the servant of justice"

The issues to be explored in my research in relation to justice as fairness, then, relate to how the conference process is managed, rather than simply to the outcome of, for instance, whether it is just that the child is registered or not. A focus for the data analysis will therefore be upon whether or not the users felt fairly treated, and upon aspects of the conference task and management which could be said to facilitate fairness. For example, were the parents encouraged to present their view; what methods existed for representing the views of other family members; or were the rights of parents and children to be kept informed supported? Since fact disputation and representation seem essential components of procedural justice, did they exist?

AMBIGUITY

I) For the conference

The preceding discussion has suggested that the rules of natural justice do not apply automatically to the conference because it is not acting judicially or functioning as a tribunal. The tone of Working Together 1991, and the way conferences are perceived and managed, certainly reinforce the view that the conference is an inter-agency meeting "*for sharing information and recommending responsibility for action.....not for a formal decision that a person has abused the child*" (6.1). However, the guidance continues by saying "*before a child is registered the conference must decide that there is, or is the likelihood of, significant harm.....there must be one or more identifiable incidents which can be described as having adversely affected the child.....Significant harm is expected on the basis of professional judgment*" (6.39).

The research to be presented here, and the studies already cited, have suggested that information presented in the conference is treated as evidence, and it is then used to construe the parents' responsibility or culpability for the alleged abuse, (see Farmer and Owen, 1995). There does seem to be a massive ambiguity in the task presented to the conference, which on the one hand is told that the task is to share information and not to make a judgment, and on the other is instructed to identify harmful incidents and to decide that significant harm has happened, or is likely to. Only when that judgment has been made can the conference decide whether to register the child as being at risk of significant harm. This leaves open the possibility that the conference is effectively fulfilling a judicial function. Matters of fairness and rights to parents, then, have to be seen in the context of the ambiguous nature of the task. The question posed in this thesis, 'are parents fairly treated', can more easily be addressed with reference to the way the parents are treated, and not to whether a just decision has been made.

Turning away from discussions about justice and fairness, there is another major ambiguity in the nature of the task presented to the professionals which has caused concern and wide debate. This concerns the primary purpose of the conference. Everyone agrees that the primary purpose is to protect the child. The way this is done is by collecting information

about the incident and about the family background, by analysing risk, by registering the child and by recommending protective action. However, the research is suggesting that the sharp focus on the assessment of risk has the consequence that the families needs are not addressed. Messages from the Research (1995) has illustrated powerfully the massive welfare needs of families drawn into the child protection system. Yet there is no reference in Working Together 1991 to how needs will be addressed in the child protection conference, or any acknowledgement that the division between risk and need is in many respects artificial. Further, the time given to discussing the child protection plan is minimal - it has to be, because it can take between one and three hours to present the information. The ambiguity the child protection system is facing here is whether the structures in place for running the conference meet the families needs in such a way that they will be better helped to exercise parental responsibility, or not.

ii) For the social worker

Turning to the social workers involved I will argue that the ambiguity of the conference task is reflected in the ambiguities inherent in the social work role. I will, further, suggest that the parent's presence in the conference can serve to highlight these ambiguities, and that the chairperson deals with these by avoiding conflict and promoting consensus. Again, there are various dimensions to this. One ambiguity for the social worker is the inherent conflict of role between being an investigator for the conference, on the one hand, and being a therapeutic partner for the parent, or child, on the other. All of the research studies have found that families experience shock and bewilderment when the allegation of abuse is made public, (see also Dingwall, 1982). The social workers' attention, however, is not on helping the family with the emotional impact of the crisis that has hit them, but is on gathering information to present to the conference. Moreover, in pursuit of this, they closely follow the guidance relating to procedural regularity and inter agency collaboration. As pointed out in the last chapter, while bureaucratic procedures are important they do not, in themselves, protect the child or facilitate direct work with the family, (Geach, 1983). At the end of the day it is the family who protects the child, not the social worker.

Another ambiguity inherent in the social work task concerns the conflict between their role as an employee of the authority - meeting the demands of the state, and their role as advocate or mediator for the parents, or child. The conflict here is more intense than that faced within the traditional care/control dilemma, (see Satyamurti, 1979; Day, 1981), because of the additional duty of advocacy placed on the social worker in the conference. In various respects these roles may conflict. For example, the social worker may have a different perspective on the alleged abuse than the parent or, as sometimes happens, the social worker holds a different view to the authority. Equally, parents may disagree with each other, or with the child, both about what has happened and about what to do to put it right. There are no rules for the social worker to follow in these conflictual situations. As Allsopp (1994) has observed, "*the chronic dilemmas endemic to social work practice seem to be encapsulated in the concept of partnership rather than solved or made easier by it.*"

Finally, there is a longstanding and basic ambiguity concerning the nature of the social work task, and what it is possible to achieve which is highlighted by the role of the social workers in the conference. Although social workers know that there is a relationship between poverty and discrimination and child abuse, they have neither the means nor skills to meet the social needs of a number of their clients. This research will suggest that these ambiguities make for quite specific difficulties in cases that are, themselves full of ambiguity and uncertainty.

POWER

" ' When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I chose it to mean - neither more nor less' "

Carroll, (1871).Through The Looking Glass.

Bullock et al (1995) have suggested that the participation of parents in conferences is "the best place to monitor the balance of power between the key players". As discussed in the previous chapter power is a key theme to be pursued in this thesis, and the

conference is a critical meeting where the balance of power between professionals as well as between parents and professionals operates and can be examined.

The danger of the conference taking the shape of a pyramid, with a pecking order of different professional groups and parents at the bottom was raised in 1992 by Moore. Within a process that aims to prevent the abuse of power, it is important not to mirror the abuse of power within the system. On the other hand it is equally important to use the powers the conference and the professionals do have to attempt to redistribute the power dynamics in the family system that have led to the abuse. Frequently this will mean empowering the mother and the child and disempowering the abuser. Whether having the parents in the conference is empowering is a question to be addressed by my research, but already a number of the difficulties have been suggested.

The centrality of power in professional work in general has been recognised for some time by a number of writers, (Etzioni, 1962, Wilding, 1982; Cousins, 1987). More recently, Hugman (1991) has analysed the interconnection of power and caring in health and welfare provision, while writers such as Stevenson and Hallett (1992) and Murphy (1995), have analysed the dimensions of power in inter- agency work in child protection. The literature suggests that power is exercised in several ways. By members of a profession in relation to each other; by different professional groups; by those who control resources; by those who use the services; or by wider institutions, including the state.

Power issues between different professional groups in child protection were discussed in 1980 by Hallett and Stevenson. They pointed out the ways in which different organisational structures and differing professional trainings and traditions created and maintained differing professional perspectives which contributed to issues of inter-professional power. In relation to the conference Hallett's more recent research (1995) has shown that difficulties arise when there is 'an outer circle' of conference attenders who encounter abuse less often, but who are expected to participate fully. This creates confusion because while these attenders, such as teachers, feel they lack the

knowledge and experience necessary, their contribution is perceived by others as very important.

The discomfort and confusion caused by power issues in the conference is, further, reflected in the role of the chairperson. Lewis (1994) has suggested that the power invested in the chair has three dimensions. Power is focused in their personal authority, in their role as the social services spokesman, and is effected by the style with which they manage conflict and anxiety in the conference. Some of the research studies suggest that by appointing their senior managers as chairmen, social services is stood at the top of the pyramid. The effect of this is to make the other professionals feel less powerful. Hallett (1995) has argued that this has had the effect of contributing to the high degree of inter agency consensus in relation to conference decisions. She suggests 'the outer circle', or the less experienced defer to the experts because they are anxious about 'getting it wrong', and because "working within any system or organisation limits fundamental questioning of its dominant paradigm"(p.281). In other words, the system is disempowering for some while supporting the position of those who hold and distribute power.

An alternative approach to issues of power in the conference is provided by the philosopher, Habermas (1977). Habermas also perceives power as being invested predominantly in social relationships. However, in his analysis power is exercised through the manipulation and/or distortion of communication. He sees communication as being directed towards the achievement of ends and not towards reaching agreement. For example, where a parent is asked to agree to family therapy the request is directed to accomplishing professional goals, not to reaching an agreement with the parent. This would certainly fit with the understanding of process and power in the conference that has so far been suggested. By this view, power is exercised in the structuring of the social framework within which ideas, interests and issues are formed and known. The power of the professionals is, then, based in the control of language and the discourse.

Applied to the conference, this analysis would suggest that, because the content of the meeting is controlled by the professionals, the professionals are in control of what issues

get pursued. Fairclough (1989) shows that this can be done by body language, clothes and the use of particular words, as well as by 'scripting' the dimensions of the communication. The uncooperative parent, then, is defined by the professional as being the one who does not follow the professional rules of the discourse. Discourse is about the interplay between language and social relationships, in which some groups are able to achieve dominance for their interests in the way in which the world is defined and acted upon. This analysis also sits comfortably with the earlier discussion on the relativity of definitions of child abuse. This discussion, it will be recalled, addressed issues of class, race and gender in the construction of definitions of abuse. Such issues are also fundamental to considerations of power. In the conference the dominant groups are likely to be white and middle class, and the chairpersons are more likely to be male. In Lewis' study, there were ten men and four women, thirteen of whom were white Europeans.

To summarise, power is not an isolated element of social life, but one which interweaves occupational and organisational structures with the actions of professionals. The professionals enter the conference with differing personal and professional values and backgrounds, and with varying degrees of power - situational power, and dispositional power. Many of the social negotiations that go in the conference highlight differences in power. The clothes, the rooms, the language used are all vehicles for these messages to be communicated. The research studies have generally suggested that the balance of power is heavily weighted against parents in the early stages of the investigation, including in the conference. They have no control over the agenda and are dependent on the chairperson to manage the process. However, taking into account parental perspectives to some degree involves surrendering a degree of control to the powerless, although professionals cannot surrender this if the child is put at risk.. So the parents who are empowered are those whose views are congruent with those who hold the power. The degree to which this happens, and how, will be a theme to be explored throughout this thesis.

CONCLUSION

In this Chapter I have identified the themes which will form the basis of the analysis of this policy initiative. A number of the themes arise from moral issues which are central to the way judgements are formed and made, as well as being focal to concerns about rights and justice. Different approaches to justice, and the relationship between power and justice were also discussed as a means of understanding both what the conference is trying to do, as well as how it sets about its task. Finally, an attempt is made to explore and identify the conflicts that the conference faces in addressing the dual tasks of classifying risk and addressing need, and the ambiguities this raises for social workers with regard to conflicting roles and meeting different interests.

The research was designed to allow these themes to be explored. Much of the debate on this initiative had been polemical, and, in my view, based on a simplistic view of rights, claims and liberties. My design was intended to enable an evaluation of the benefits of the initiative from the perspectives of all the participants and a more focussed and detailed understanding of the difficulties, within the framework discussed above.

The main points that are at issue concern process and outcome. With regard to process, how were the issues perceived by the participants, and how did this appear to influence their behaviour? With regard to outcome, there are three main avenues to explore. Did the process contribute to the assessment of risk, for example through the provision of information, or by allowing the views of the parents to prevail? Did involving parents make them feel they had been more fairly dealt with? Thirdly, were outcomes affected in the sense that parents were more likely to collaborate with the future plans?

The next chapter will describe the research design and methodology.

THREE

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This research was conceived and carried out in 1991-1993, at a time when there was great interest nationally in how family involvement in child protection would work in practice. Local authorities were struggling with a number of issues relating to the procedures and the organisational framework of child protection conferences. Bradford, for example, initially operated a policy which excluded all cases of sexual abuse, (Fisher, 1990). North Tyneside required all written reports to be formally submitted and discussed with parents forty eight hours in advance of the conference, (Taylor and Godfrey, 1991). More commonly, in many areas parents were only allowed into the meeting at the beginning and at the end. Local authorities were, therefore, at the stage of experimenting with different models, and anxious to share what they were learning as a result of their experiences.

From the research perspective, the initial child protection conference provided researchers with an arena in which a number of the critical issues that were being debated about partnership in child protection could be explored. The research undertaken on the involvement of parents and family members in the conference falls into two blocks; that published before Working Together 1991, and that completed after. All of these studies are of relevance to mine in that they provide comparative data and were influential in identifying the main issues to be pursued. Prior to describing the setting up and design of my research study I will therefore present an account of the other related research.

An overview of the other research

1. Research published before 1991

The first published research of parental attendance at conferences was that undertaken by Housiaux, in Coventry (1984). Debates in the ensuing years were carried on in the literature, the most notable of which were the proceedings of the conference of the British Association for the Study of the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (BASPCAN), written up by Brown and Waters and published in 1986. In that same year McGloin and Turnbull (1986) published the results of their study in Greenwich, analysing seventeen review conferences to which parents had been invited. They found that professionals felt inhibited and were concerned about the effect on parents, about confidentiality, and that the conference could become a pseudo court of law. Phillips and Evans (1986) furthered the debate. Corby's (1987) study of fifty five conferences was the most wide ranging. He looked at the decision making processes and social work practice, as well as the views of some parents. He found evidence to suggest that conferences were not achieving the tasks they were intended to achieve, and described a scene of some confusion and conflict, particularly over the issue of parents' rights and the protection of the child.

Other related research provided similar results. McDonnell and Aldgate (1984) studied review meetings in seventy five social service departments, and emphasised the lack of opportunities for social workers assertions to be challenged and alternative views put forward. Other work (Sinclair and Webb, 1983) recommended that client participation in important meetings be increased in order to act as a check on the quality of the decisions taken. Evidence was provided by Vernon and Fruin (1986) that where adolescents in care or their parents had attended review meetings expecting active participation, professionals regarded them as being there to provide information rather than to participate in the decision making process. While there was excitement in some circles about the way that policy and practice was developing, in 1990 Morrison and his colleagues produced a monograph for the NSPCC which urged caution.

In the same year Thoburn and Shemmings (1990) evaluated a pilot project in Hackney, where they identified an "extremely favourable" response by the parents and the professionals to attendance. A number of other small scale studies, many of them in-house, were producing similar findings, concluding positively for the involvement of families in conferences, despite the difficulties. (see Burns, 1991, Smith, 1990, Merchant and Luckham, 1991, Taylor and Godfrey, 1991, Lonsdale, 1991). Atherton (1984), for the Family Rights Group, surveyed a number of social services departments, but found it difficult to be clear what was happening because different areas meant different things by participation in conferences. She suggested that parents were uniformly positive about being invited to conferences, and negative about being asked to withdraw.

To summarise, these studies evaluated the growing practice of inviting parents to decision making meetings. The main findings were that family members generally find the experience difficult, but nevertheless want to be present. Partial attendance was not welcomed by the parents, but professional opinion was divided on this. The majority of the professionals believed that parents have a right to be present, and that the intervention is more likely to be effective if they have been involved in the proceedings. The role of the chair in managing the conference and preparing the parents for it was seen as being crucial to a favourable outcome.

2. Research published after 1991

Following the publication of The Children Act 1989 and Working Together 1991, the Department of Health funded some major studies of the child protection investigation, including the initial conference. Two studies were set up at Dartington, two at East Anglia, and one at Stirling. These studies take a wider perspective to those described above, and to mine, although they all analyse in detail what happens in the conference. The conference process is seen as being seminal to understanding the investigation before and the monitoring after, as well as the experiences of all the participants.

Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings (1995) looked at a total cohort of two hundred and twenty children from seven local authorities who might be in need of protection. Thoburn

and colleagues identified some cases where full partnership was a realistic possibility, some where a lesser model of participation was more practicable and a small number where the objective of partnership was unattainable. The likelihood of involvement bore a direct relation to the sort and severity of problems that existed in the family. Where a high degree of participation was achieved the contributory factors were the attitudes, skills and efforts of the social workers. They were more likely to succeed in working in partnership where they had agency backing. A number of recommendations are made for the chairing and management of the investigation and the conference which were found to be factors critical in determining the parents' experience.

Gibbons, Conroy and Bell's (1995) study was designed to identify variations in the numbers of children on registers in similar authorities, and to determine the extent to which these resulted from discrepancies in professional practice. They found wide variations between areas in the amount and type of services provided, and in deregistration rates. In every case, those registered received more services. Most disturbingly, Gibbons and colleagues observed that too many families struggling with child rearing in difficult socio-economic circumstances were prematurely defined as potential child protection cases, rather than as families with children in need.

Hallett and Birchall (1995): This study is of a large empirical investigation into inter-agency collaboration. Profession was identified as the factor most affecting individual perception of cases. Inter-agency coordination was found to exist in the early phase of the investigation, comprising mainly information exchange, but fell away after the conference.

Cleaver and Freeman (1995): This study surveyed five hundred and eighty three child protection cases in one authority, and thirty families over two years in two authorities. Many allegations were not substantiated, and fewer than one third of these children ended up being registered. Parents felt invaded and humiliated, and a mood of recrimination sometimes beset the home. Social workers were swept along and lost sight of the emotional impact on the family in their desire to follow procedures. Ultimately, these

researchers felt there was a fine balance to be drawn between the benefits of intervention, and doing potential harm.

Farmer and Owen (1995): One hundred and twenty conferences in two authorities were observed, and interviews held with parents, children and social workers. Distinctive patterns in the process of the risk assessment were identified. They found that methods of assessment did not provide a basis for long term care planning. Parents felt unhappy about the treatment they had received and social workers faced an uphill battle in engaging their cooperation afterwards. Where the child protection plan was thought to be adequate, the child was more likely to be safe. The researchers concluded that the priority given to child protection often obscured the children's broader therapeutic and developmental needs and the severity of their parents' disadvantage.

In summary, these studies draw similar conclusions about the direction interventions in child protection have taken, and how attitudes and experiences acquired early in the process have long standing effects. The early investigation is stressful for all the participants, reaching a zenith in the conference. The professionals are obliged to work in partnership with each other as well as with the families. It seems the demands of one partnership system may obscure the other. The needs of many of these families for welfare services are not met initially, or in the longer term because of the exhaustive concentration on risk assessment. Perspectives fashion how behaviour is defined, and these are influenced by profession as well as by psychological and sociological factors. The conference is seen as having a central place in the system, but positive opportunities for intervention are missed because of the preoccupation with procedures. Children are generally protected by the system, but too many are unnecessarily drawn into the net.

My research was carried out at the same time as these studies and so influenced my design and methodology. While building on and adding to this research, it is designed to also fill some gaps.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Setting it up

I have already described the context in which the policy of involving parents in the conference was implemented, and the concerns of local authorities in devising procedures which enhanced the benefits while limiting the potential difficulties. By the time *Working Together 1991* was published, most Area Child Protection Committees in England and Wales had devised models for involving parents, and, as described in the previous section, some set up evaluations of how their models worked in practice.

The research this thesis is based on was carried out in response to a request by the Area Child Protection Committee in a large, industrial northern city to evaluate their pilot project. The pilot project was based on the inclusion of parents in conferences in four teams in the city for a six month trial period, commencing May 1991. The Area Child Protection Committee wished to test out and monitor their model (see Appendix 1) of policy and practice for the conference on a small scale before implementing the policy across the city. The Area Child Protection Committee wanted an independent evaluation, and asked me to submit a research proposal.

The opportunity thus presented itself to set up a study which compared two groups of parents in one city - the group who were invited to conferences, in the pilot teams, and a group of parents from teams where they were not, then, invited. No other research study had used a control group. This meant that no analysis had been possible of the effects of parental involvement in the conference per se. The opportunity provided here to compare two groups of parents subject to child protection procedures in one authority and differing only in respect of their involvement in the conference was rich from the research point of view. Additionally, the timing of the approach meant that the design could also incorporate an analysis of the conferences and the attitudes of the professionals before and after parents were invited. In this respect, also, the research was unique.

An outline research proposal was therefore submitted to the Area Child Protection Committee, who agreed that the research should proceed. Initially the local authority had

intended to fund the research, but in the event the funding was not forthcoming. A more detailed and sophisticated proposal, incorporating the original aims of the project but developing others, was then submitted to the Nuffield Foundation. They agreed to fund the research over a two year period. The first year of the project ran concurrently with the year of the implementation of parental involvement in the pilot teams, and the research timetable allowed for the development of the research instruments and the collection of the data during that year. The second year was dedicated to analysing the data, writing the final report, and disseminating the findings by presentations in the region, and by publication in academic and professional journals.

The teams

As described, the research was to take place over two years in the four neighbourhood teams undertaking the pilot scheme and two comparison teams. The four teams were similar in that they all served inner city areas. One of the areas selected for the project included a high proportion of Asian and African-Caribbean families, and this provided the opportunity to include an assessment of issues raised in the conference that may be attributable to race and culture.

To obtain the control groups, I asked the steering group to select two teams which resembled the pilot teams in as many respects as possible. While the selection was not based on scientific criteria, the two teams nominated were also inner city areas, similar in respect of their demography, size, and housing stock. A key feature in their selection was that the chairmen chaired conferences in both pilot and control teams, so ensuring some standardisation in relation to the management of the conferences, as well as the completion of the research instruments. This had the added bonus of ensuring reliability.

Since only four teams were involved in the pilot area it was necessary to ensure that any differences between them and the control areas did not arise from their idiosyncratic characteristics. The opportunity to analyse changes over time enabled me to identify a number of objective indicators in place before the research started. This allowed me to see whether differences between the two sets of areas changed in character or became more

pronounced with the introduction of the scheme. Theoretically it could be difficult to disentangle the effects of the experimental nature of the project from the effects of parental involvement per se. However, in practice, because of the number of areas involved, differences between the pilot and control groups would not be likely to be explained by such factors. Moreover, the duration of the project would allow for comparisons to be made between early and later performance.

The conferences

The research was undertaken when this authority began to implement parental participation. The majority of the staff in the pilot areas had received in-house multi-agency training and were familiar with the procedures. The format of the conference was the same for the pilot and the control teams, excepting for the involvement of parents. Based on a chronological approach to the investigation the conference started with information sharing about the alleged abuse, moved on to a discussion of the family background, and ended with the decision making about registration and the child protection plan. In the pilot areas, parents could be present up to the decision making stage, returning after the meeting to be told the registration decision and the skeletal child protection plan. Arrangements in the pilot areas were made for separate reception facilities, some child care support, translation of letters into different languages, and interpreters. The chairperson took responsibility for managing issues regarding confidential information, for deciding who should be invited and for meeting the parents first and last.

The chairmen of the conferences comprised six male child protection workers, senior managers, employed by the social services department. Three were key to the project because they chaired conferences in the teams both with and without parents. They were also involved in the questionnaire design and in devising the means for contacting families and engaging their cooperation. While the procedures that the chairs followed for all the conferences were the same there were some differences in process resulting from different styles of chairing and the nature of the area in which the conferences were held.

Negotiating research access to the child protection agencies

" Negotiations to set up a child abuse project are of little interest in themselves. But in a context where there is a mandatory requirement for inter-agency work and where uncertainties about good practice abound, the difficulties of mounting such investigations have wider implications. They illuminate the contrasting ideologies of the professionals involved, highlight the problems of achieving cooperation and further elaborate the context in which investigations are undertaken."

Cleaver and Freeman (1995), (p21).

It quickly became obvious that the initiation of the research by the Area Child Protection Committee was a key to its success. The difficulties in undertaking research in this sensitive area are obvious and have been well described by other researchers. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that, despite intensive preparatory work with the agencies in their research areas, " several months into the project we were still struggling to comply with the request from the Area Child Protection Committee that we should gain the understanding and cooperation of all agencies involved in child abuse enquiries" (p.23). Gaining access and cooperation for my research also required me to convince staff at all levels in the main agencies of the integrity of the research and the efficacy and value of the study. This was important in achieving their cooperation to filling in the questionnaires and agreeing to interviews, as well as enlisting support for the family interviews.

At all stages of the project, therefore, details of the research proposal and the methodology were negotiated and agreed with the implementation sub-group of the main committee, who acted as a steering group throughout the project. In addition, I took part in a number of training events organised both by the Area Child Protection Committee on an inter-agency basis, and by the managers of the area teams included in the research. This had the advantage of allowing me to observe how the authority organised its training, and at the same time to make contact with a number of the professionals contributing to the research. In this the dual objectives of collecting valuable illustrative data, while at the same time ensuring the cooperation of the professionals in the research were achieved.

My participant observation of the Area Child Protection Committee implementation sub-committee throughout the year of the data collection was invaluable in providing support and guidance on the development of the research instruments. Two of the chairmen involved in the research sat on the committee, and they were closely involved in the development of the instruments used for collecting the basic information that formed the context for the research. In addition, the group provided me with access to the authorities information base, and to the administrators who could retrieve essential information for me. The methodology required that I receive detailed information about child protection conferences in the six months prior to the starting of the pilot project, as well as receiving notification of, and the minutes of, all the conference held in the research teams during the duration of the research. The logistics of this exercise proved to be time consuming and complex for the authority, upon whose good will I was entirely dependent. My preparedness to take part in training sessions, to feed back findings as they emerged and to contribute to the ongoing policy discussions fits the model of participant action research described by Whittaker et al (1991), and was a factor contributing to the success of the data collection. Everitt et al (1992) likewise support the view that the more successful research is practitioner, and not just researcher led. The contact with professionals from all agencies and at all levels was invaluable in giving me the opportunity to check out my ideas as they developed, and in directing me into the more contentious issues as they arose.

The sub-committee consisted of senior practitioners from the main agencies so that I was a party to the inter-agency discussion of policy and practice issues as they emerged from the policy initiative. For example, after some weeks it became clear that the role of the local authority solicitor in the conference was problematic because of the potential conflicts of role. On the one hand, the solicitor was present to advise the conference on the legal options available to the authority to protect the child. On the other, where court proceedings were possible, the solicitor was also responsible for collecting the evidence to support their case. This they did by asking the parents detailed questions in the conference. The potential for injustice, unfairness and disempowerment is obvious - especially since parents at this stage were not allowed legal representation for themselves.

For a number of the professionals and the parents this practice was antithetical to the spirit of the enterprise, and raised grave concerns about injustice. Such concerns were being played out in other local authorities. Lewis (1994) interviewed chairpersons from fourteen different authorities, and describes the following statement as expressing a common view regarding the potential for injustice in the conference: " a kangaroo court with a touch of the Old Vic".

The above example is apt since it serves a dual function. It illustrates the value from the research point of view of my being a party to these ongoing discussions which informed developing policy and practice. At the same time it enabled me to consolidate my hypothesis, that issues around power and justice were key to an understanding of the subject. More importantly, this debate raised the possibility, which became a key question for the thesis, that the contradictions which were emerging in relation to the functions of the conference were endemic to the nature of the task. The issue provided a clear example of how the interaction of the professionals and the content and process of the conference had to change to accommodate the new objective of the conference - viz achieving partnership with parents. It also called into question the assumption on which partnership is based - that the dual goals of working in partnership with parents and protecting the child are complementary. Perhaps there were some cases in which they were, and others in which they were not? At an early stage of the research I was, thus, alerted to many of the key issues and able to form hypotheses which could be incorporated into the questionnaires and interview schedules.

The research objectives

The overall aim of the research was, therefore, to evaluate a pilot scheme involving parents in the initial child protection conference by exploring the effect on the decisions taken and the attitudes and views of the parents and professionals involved. Comparisons would be drawn between conferences with and without parents present to determine the degree to which it was involvement in the conference per se which determined outcomes, such as the attitudes of the parents to the intervention. My general hypothesis was that it was the skill with which the policy was implemented in the conference proceedings, rather

than simply its existence, which would determine the quality and experience of the enterprise. My aim overall was to identify procedures which facilitated the genuine participation of parents in the process, and to assess whether practice was more oriented to partnership principles when parents were involved. Further overall objectives were to explore the attitudes of the professionals toward parental involvement before and after the implementation of the policy, and to see if conferences with parents present presented particular difficulties or opportunities to them. I also hoped to suggest models of good practice which could be fed back into policy, procedures and training.

Within this general framework, the objectives of the research were to appraise parental involvement in the initial child protection conferences in relation to:

- *the conference process
- *the decisions and recommendations made
- *the views of the parents and professionals involved.

1. The conference process

Stevenson (1995) has suggested that the research now available "tells us less about the dynamics of the conference than it does about the attitudes of the participants and the steps taken in reaching decisions and recommendations." The previous research studies and the literature cited at the beginning of this chapter drew my attention to inter-agency issues. The differing views of the professionals on the involvement of parents led me to believe that their presence could have a profound effect on the process of the conference. In the previous chapter I explained why the conferences raised professional anxiety with reference to the Inquiry reports and inter-agency issues. The early research on parental involvement had, further, suggested that the professionals' anxiety was heightened by the prospect of the parents' presence. This had been confirmed by experience in some areas.

A focal area of my enquiry would therefore be on scrutinising process, particularly in relation to the management of anxiety and uncertainty by the chairman and to the implementation of the procedures devised for involving parents. Some writers (Fisher,

1990, Lewis, 1994) had suggested that the way the chairperson ran the meeting was key to the management of conflict as well as in supporting parents within the partnership spirit. The presence of parents was likely to greatly increase the difficulties of chairing, and the effect on process may show by comparing the experience of the participants in the pilot and control areas, as well as on the decisions and recommendations made.

Other aspects of the conference process that I wished to monitor related to the contentious area of exactly how the involvement of parents, as opposed to their attendance, was managed. As Atherton (1984) had already suggested, participation took many forms and meant different things to different people. I therefore wanted to explore in detail the policy and practice of this authority on receiving parents into the meeting, facilitating their contributions, and asking them to leave the conference at the decision making stage. I believed that the way these key stages in the process were managed would have a significant effect on process. For example, in this authority parents were to be excluded from the decision making part of the conference; they were generally not to bring a friend.... and so on (see Appendix 1). These policy initiatives offered key points for the analysis of the participatory element of the parents involvement, thus allowing me to explore the issues of justice and empowerment within the conference.

There were other specific issues I wished to pursue which had a bearing on the themes of this thesis. For example, in how many conferences was confidential information withheld, and how was this managed by the chairman? Finally, there would be other concrete indicators, such as size and length, which would be measurable and would bear comparison across the pilot and control areas. Other research (Vernon and Fruin, 1986) on meetings with parents present, such as review meetings, has suggested that size is a deterrent to their and their child's attendance and adversely affects the quality of the participation. Length may present difficulties to professionals who have other calls on their time, especially groups such as general practitioners whose primary task is health care and not the management of child abuse, (Hallett, 1995). If conferences with parents present lasted longer and were bigger, this would have resource implications, as well as some

quite specific effects, and this would be demonstrated by comparing the findings from the pilot and control areas.

2. The decisions and recommendations made

The second main objective of the research was to evaluate whether the involvement of parents affected the decisions and recommendations made by the conference. The existence of the control group would enable a direct comparison to be made between decisions and recommendations made in conferences with and without parents present. Additionally, information collected on conferences in the same teams before the policy was implemented would enable other comparisons to be made across time which could be explained with reference to the involvement of parents.

As explained in the previous chapter, the conference has one decision to make - whether or not to place the child's name on the child protection register as being at risk of future harm, and which category to use. One of the major concerns about involving parents was that fewer children would get registered because of the fear that professionals would be inhibited and deterred in front of them, (Phillips and Evans, 1986). Additionally, it was thought that the category under which children were registered might reflect the parents' presence. Some professionals, such as those in Bradford (Fisher, 1990), for instance, believed that cases of sexual abuse - especially where parents were denying their culpability - would present particular difficulties in front of parents, and may result in different categories of registration being used. Here, also, answers would be provided by comparing the conferences by area, and across time.

The conference can make a number of recommendations in relation to the child protection plan. In later chapters, the place of the child protection plan in the conference is discussed at length. It is a contentious issue, touching again on the functions and purposes of the conference in relation to children's and families' welfare, and the legitimacy of the decisions and recommendations made in the meeting. An aim of the research, then, was to collect information about the child protection plan and the views of the participants on it. It has been suggested (Gibbons, 1995) that conferences are used to gatekeep scarce resources,

and I particularly wished to collect data which would allow me to explore whether this was the case.

A further objective was to compare the differences in views of the different participants on what help was proposed by the professionals in the conference, which could then be compared to what the parents said they wanted. As described in Chapter 1, research studies going back as long as that undertaken by Mayer and Timms (1970) have illustrated that effective practice is built upon the client's definition of the problem and its resolution, not the workers. I wished to explore the nature of the congruence between the views of the families and the professionals on the recommendations, and to see, by comparing the findings from the pilot and control areas, what factors other than parental involvement in the conference affected their willingness to cooperate.

Finally, I believed there could be a relationship between what the conference decided and recommended and the attitudes of parents to the ongoing work. I therefore needed detailed information about what the conference had specified in relation to the keyworker and the basis of the ongoing work, in particular whether statutory action was recommended. The ambiguous nature of the status of the conference recommendations, and how this was understood by parents in relation to their ongoing cooperation seemed important to explore in relation to such fundamental partnership principles as negotiation.

3. The views of the parents and professionals involved

In looking at how partnerships are established at a time when parents are angry, bitter and shocked and the professionals primary concern is the safety of the child, two approaches were indicated. I needed to establish what went on throughout the course of the enquiry into the allegation. The early research studies (see Thoburn and Shemmings, 1990) had suggested that the preparation of parents for the conference was important in determining their experience, and hence their attitudes to what happened to them. I was interested to explore whether there were differences between the two groups in, for example, the amount of information they had been given, as well as their feelings about being invited to the conference or not. How sensitive issues were managed in the conference could be

another determinant of attitude, as would whether parents agreed about the need for the conference, and thought the information brought to it valid and fairly presented.

Turning to the professionals I wanted to collect data on what they had done. Other areas, such as North Tyneside, had altered the time limit between referral and conference from seven to fifteen days so that there could be more time for preparation and assessment. In making their assessment, I wanted to know what information social workers relied upon, which family members they had seen, and what professional consultations had taken place. Some of the professionals on the steering group believed pre-conference meetings would be held in the pilot areas, where the 'real decisions would be made, and this could be tested with reference to the control areas.

I was particularly interested to explore the extent to which professional practice was child centred, and how conflicts of interests between parents and between parents and children were managed. One possibility that could be explored with reference to the control group was the extent to which having parents in the conference made it easier, or more difficult, to work both with the parents themselves, and also with the child. I wished, further, to determine the views of professionals on the involvement of parents at two points in time - before and after their experience - and to see if particular difficulties presented themselves in certain cases.

Finally, other writers (Hallett, 1995, Lyth-Menzies, 1988) have drawn attention to the connection between agency policy and structures and the quality of the workers experience and practice. An additional area for exploration was, therefore, the training, preparation and support structures, such as supervision, provided by the agency. The documentation produced to support the initiative, both for parents and for the professionals, needed to be reviewed from the perspectives of all the participants in relation to whether it had been received, as well as how it was rated.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1. Design

Clearly the design of the research and the methodology used must reflect the research objectives. The objectives were ambitious and comprehensive and required data to be collected from different sources and in different ways. The design, as has been said, included a comparison of all conferences held in the six research teams between May 1991 and June 1992. Additionally, it included a comparison of the attitudes of the professionals attending all the conferences held in the research teams in the six months before, and the six months after the implementation of the policy. Finally, the experiences and perceptions of all the parents and other key family members involved in the conferences in the research teams following the implementation of the policy were to be compared. As has been said, the research is unique in having a control group and in gathering information on professionals attitudes at two points in time. The design thus builds upon and adds to other contemporary studies of parental involvement.

2. Methods

Table 1 sets out the methodology, and the sources of data collection.

*** Monitoring study**

A monitoring system was set up in the four pilots and the two control areas. A questionnaire was designed (see Appendix 2) to be completed at the end of each conference by the six chairmen involved. This recorded details and characteristics of the child and the family, information about the alleged abuse and the pattern of the investigation, and the decisions and recommendations made. Where more than one child in the family was conferenced additional questionnaires were completed, but for the purposes of the analysis the index child was nominated by the chairman. The questionnaire also collected information about the conference, such as the timing, the location, attendance rates, as well as specific issues such as whether it had started late. Some questions required a judgement by the chair, such as whether the abuse was proved.

MONITORING STUDY

All cases in 6 teams held between 1.5.91 and 30.6.92

83 cases
50 pilot
33 control

OBSERVATION

Randomly selected in pilot area 22 conferences

ATTITUDE SURVEY

All professionals who attended a conference in the research teams

6 months before implementation 141 respondents (62% response rate)

6 months after implementation 119 respondents (60% response rate)

PROFESSIONALS OPINION SURVEY

All professionals attending 36 conferences with parents present

261 respondents (88% response rate)

INTERVIEWS WITH SOCIAL WORKERS

All cases in pilot teams, January - June 1992.

22 interviews

INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS (AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS)

All families of children conferenced in the research teams

51 families responded (61% response rate)

33 from pilot teams (65% response rate)

18 from control teams (59% response rate)

71 interviews in all

Table 3.1: SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTION

The chairmen were meticulous in completing and returning the questionnaire, resulting in a 100% response. As shown by Table 1, completed questionnaires were received for fifty conferences in the pilot area (in 72% parents had attended), and thirty three conferences in the control areas.

*** Attitude survey**

Names and addresses of all the professionals that had attended conferences in the research teams in the six months prior to the implementation of the policy of parental involvement were obtained from the social services department holding the records. A brief postal questionnaire was designed (see Appendix 3) and piloted by the professionals on the subcommittee. It collected information about the views of the professionals on a range of questions about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of involving parents and about the training and preparation received. It was sent to all the professionals whose names I had received. Response to this was relatively slow, and I engaged in a series of follow up telephone calls. These did produce more completed questionnaires, but also revealed that the main reason for non - completion was that the professionals had moved job or were on sick leave. In some cases the records were inaccurate. Eventually, one hundred and forty one completed questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 62%.

Six months into the project, the process was repeated. The same questionnaire, slightly amended to take account of those cases where professionals had attended conferences with parents present, was sent to all the professionals who had attended conferences in the previous six months in the research teams. There were methodological problems with this which will be explored in the chapter describing the results. In brief, a comparison between the pilot and control groups was not possible for the second questionnaire because some professionals went to conferences in both areas. However, the primary purpose of identifying changes in attitude over time could be explored. The process of tracking down the respondents was the same, but this time I offered an incentive. The names of all those who completed their questionnaires were entered into a draw, and the lucky winner - a health visitor - was delighted to receive a bottle of champagne! This time the final response was one hundred and nineteen, a response rate of 60%

*** Professionals Opinion Survey**

In order to collect data on the professionals' opinion of the involvement of parents in the particular conference, rather than their overall attitudes to policy and practice, a brief questionnaire (see Appendix 4) was designed for each professional to complete at the end of every conference where parents had attended. A further aim was to see if some cases were particularly difficult. The questionnaire asked the professionals whether they felt the parents' presence had been helpful in assessing risk to the child, to what degree it had affected their participation and whether the decision to register or the recommendations were influenced by the parents' presence. The questionnaire was designed and piloted in the early conferences. Although some ambiguities in the questions were picked up and put right, one or two, with hindsight, remained imperfect. The completed questionnaires were returned to me in confidence either by post, or in person where I also was attending.

There were some conferences where the chairman forgot to hand out the questionnaires, and others where the parents did not turn up. Generally my attendance did not have the effect of increasing the response rate, except perhaps in one case. A head teacher said she would not have put her completed questionnaire in the post because her school budget did not run to unexpected stamps! Two hundred and sixty one questionnaires were returned from a total attendance of two hundred and ninety eight at thirty six conferences, a response rate of 88%

*** The Interviews**

The interviews were carried out by three interviewers. All three were social workers, two were experienced in research interviewing, and they were briefed on the project and trained with the interview schedules at the beginning of the research project. The interview schedules were piloted by myself and the interviewers. As the interviews were completed the returned schedules were checked to ensure that the findings made sense, and for reliability. Reliability could be ensured by checking details from the completed interview schedules against the conference notifications and minutes received from the authority. Further details about the interviewing of the social workers and the families is presented in the chapters describing those parts of the study. In brief, two sets of

interviews were carried out by means of semi-structured interview schedules (see Appendices 5 and 6):

Interviews with social workers

In order to gain more detail about the social workers' perspective on the enquiry into those cases where parents were involved, I wished to interview as many of the social workers as possible. For this purpose, I designed a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 5) which collected data about the work they did with parents and children and other professionals before, during and after the conference. In addition I included questions about the support they had from their agency in carrying out the work. Because of the need to have the other research instruments in place, and because I wanted the social workers to have gained as much experience as possible of the policy initiative, these interviews took place in the last six months of the project.

Twenty two research interviews were completed. Some of the social workers worked with more than one family, and some of the interviews were cancelled at short notice because of emergencies.

Interviews with parents and family members

A key aim of the research was to identify the views of the parents and other family members, comparing those who attended the conferences with those who did not and drawing implications for practice. All the parents whose children were conferenced in the research teams *during the full year of the research were notified about the research at the time they were notified about the conference*, (see Appendix 6).They were given an opportunity to withdraw at this stage, which very few did. With those few exceptions, all the families were then written to and invited to take part in the research project by being offered an interview, for which they would receive a small payment. A separate brief schedule was designed to be sent to families who did not want to be interviewed (see Appendix 6), but in the event none of these were returned.

The interviews took place in the family home between one and four weeks after the conference. The methodology underpinning the design is explored in greater detail in the chapter reporting on the parents' experience. In the event, we interviewed fifty one of the families from the eighty three conferences researched, thirty three from the pilot area and eighteen from the control area. The response rate was 62%.

In all seventy one interview schedules were completed: fifty one for the nominated key carer in each family, and an additional twenty on interviews with partners, fathers, grandparents and a few adolescent children. Separate schedules were completed wherever possible, resulting in two samples; the fifty one key carers and the seventy one interviews. The analysis was undertaken on the two samples, but since there were no significant differences between the two samples the detailed analysis was concentrated on the fifty one main cases.

*** Observation study**

In order to get a complete picture of the conferences with parents present, I observed as many as I could get to during the year of the research. Thoburn et al (1995) have pointed out the difficulty for researchers of getting to conferences within the tight time schedule, and this was also my experience. The letters notifying me of the conference sometimes only arrived a day or two before they were to take place (a finding, incidentally, shared with some parents who also had difficulty in making the arrangements). Once or twice, the parents were unsure about my presence in the meeting, and this also had to be managed carefully by the chairmen. In the event, I attended twenty two conferences.

The next difficulty I experienced was in designing an instrument for recording what I was observing. I began by process recording everything that was said, and then tried to organise my material into themes. These themes formed the basis of an instrument (see Appendix 7) which allowed me to collect data in a more consistent way and along the lines that I had by then determined were important, such as who spoke when. At the same time I did not want to lose sight of some of the emotional content of the process by process recording key moments, such as what happened when parents were upset.

One of the main themes was about the information base of the discourse, and its relationship to power. Who contributed and to what, including the parents? I was interested in how disagreements about information and assessments were handled, whether the contribution of parents was facilitated, and did it count for anything? Another theme was about conflict. Were the decisions made based on a consensus, did they reflect the judgment of the chairman, and what role did he perform in managing conflict between professionals and between parents and professionals? What appeared to produce conflict? Another theme I pursued was the nature of the meeting, and how this was reflected in the dialogue; was it a business meeting, did it feel like a court room, did presentation and performance count?

ANALYSIS

The research study combined an in depth qualitative analysis with a design which allowed for statistical analysis. Both approaches are essential to allow for the findings from the different research instruments described above to be drawn together to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture. In addition to the data analysis, my observations of the conferences and my involvement in the sub-committee and training events were used to inform my understanding and develop the themes. Such a pluralistic approach is advocated by Smith and Cantley (1985) as being a key requirement for research into the complex area of child protection work. Cheetham et al (1992) have also emphasised the importance of taking into account the concerns and interests of all parties in conducting research into social work effectiveness.

The statistical analysis allows for an overall evaluation of the effect of the new policy, as well as providing detailed information about the process and the experiences of all the participants. All the questionnaires were coded and the computer analysis was undertaken with the use of the statistical package for the social sciences, SPSS. The data was analysed using a mixture of statistical techniques, such as chi square and analysis of variance. Where the numbers were small, the Mann-Whitney test was applied. Compared with many of the research studies in this area, the statistical analysis is sophisticated. For example, a procedure for summing up and scoring the parents' attitudes enabled me to

discover that their attitudes to intervention were influenced more by factors extraneous to the conference, such as whether statutory action was recommended, than attendance at the conference per se. Cross tabulations of the data from the parents interviews with that from the monitoring study allowed for other connections to be drawn. Similarly, the analysis of difficulty in the professional opinion survey depended upon a complicated and detailed statistical analysis which threw up some of the most interesting findings. This has enabled an analysis of the features and characteristics of families and of conferences which professionals find difficult (Bell, 1996). This is interesting for researchers, as well as suggesting important guidelines for policy and practice.

The in depth analysis allows a detailed consideration of issues which concern practitioners, parents and policy makers but do not easily yield to a statistical approach. By tapping the experience and views of the participants, and by drawing upon the qualitative material from the observations, impacts which are not picked up statistically are nevertheless recorded. For example, the statistical analysis of the most difficult conferences revealed that professionals found situations of uncertainty and ambiguity particularly difficult to handle, and the observations suggested some reasons for this. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis makes it possible to assess a wide range of possible effects, such as the degree to which the involvement of parents is associated with a sharp change in the pattern of decisions.

CONCLUSION

This research study was set up in response to a request from an Area Child Protection Committee to evaluate a small scale pilot project to involve parents in four area teams in their city. The research was designed so that basic information about individual conferences in the four pilot and two control areas would be routinely gathered and the experience of all the participants would be tapped at different points in time. A number of different instruments were designed to allow comparisons of the routine monitoring of the decisions taken and parental involvement, a repeated attitude survey of professionals before the policy was implemented and after, and a study of the professionals views on conferences with parents present. In addition, the design included interviews with parents

and other family members - including children where possible, interviews with the investigating social workers and observation at conferences with parents present. Data was collected in the first year of the research by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interview schedules, and the data was analysed by a combination of in depth qualitative and statistical quantitative methods.

The research design is unique in having a control group, and in gathering data at two points in time. Additionally, the statistical analysis is sophisticated and enables important conclusions to be drawn about conference attendance per se. It builds upon and fills gaps in the existing research. The aforementioned studies range widely, exploring aspects of the investigation and follow up work for up to two years after the conference. While this is equally important in contributing to the knowledge base in child protection work, these other studies do not yield definitive evaluative conclusions on the policy of parental involvement at conferences per se. These studies, such as Thoburn's (1995), deliberately contrast areas which have adopted different approaches to involving parents, thus making it difficult to be sure whether any differences found reflect the characteristics of the area, the effects of different approaches to involving parents or the skill with which different workers carry out their tasks. They are, therefore, complementary to mine.

FOUR

MONITORING STUDY: 'THE CRUCIBLE OF THE SYSTEM'

The previous chapters have sought to explain why the initial child protection conference plays such an important part in the investigation and management of children at risk of abuse. Blom-Cooper, in the Kimberley Carlile Report (1987), referred to the conference as the 'crucible of the system' for the future. This chapter, the first to report on the findings from my research study, presents the basic information on the children and families and on the conference procedures collected from the eighty three conferences that make up the study. This information provides the context to the research study by monitoring the effects on the conference of involving parents. It yields information about the children and their families, the sources and types of referral, the decisions and recommendations made, and features of the conference itself such as attendance and length.

This information, in itself, provides a useful and detailed picture of child protection work. For the particular purposes of this study the data also provides the opportunity to explore the issues previously identified. For example, the concerns of the professionals that the involvement of parents might result in a drop in the number of conferences held, or change the characteristics of the children conferenced could be tested by comparing the results from the pilot and control areas. The findings reported here are unique because they allow a direct comparison to be made of conferences with and without parents present. This provides a particularly useful means of quantifying the effects of involving parents. The monitoring study also lends itself to some direct comparisons with the other research studies cited. Comparisons are made, and they add weight to my findings. They

also generate discussion about both the particular and the wider issues raised by the present child protection system, with particular reference to the impact of the parents' involvement in the initial child protection conference.

METHOD

Data was collected from all initial conferences held in the research areas in 1990, the year before the policy was introduced. This was available from the annual Area Child Protection Committee Report (Leeds, 1991/2), and covered the numbers of conferences held, the numbers of children registered and the categories of registration used. Following the implementation of the policy of parental involvement the monitoring study was set up to collect more detailed information from all the conferences held in the same areas over a period of one year, 1991/2. The information was collected by means of a questionnaire designed in conjunction with two of the principal chairmen and the implementation sub-group of the Area Child Protection Committee, and completed by the chairmen at the end of each conference.

This authority, like many others, did not have a policy of using independent chairpersons. Following the criticism in the Beckford Report (1987) of the practice of line managers chairing conferences, (see Hallett and Birchall, 1992, and Kendrick and Mapstone, 1989), Working Together 1991 recommended that the chairperson "should be of at least Assistant Director status" , (2.9.) All six chairmen involved in this project were employed by the social services department as senior child protection coordinators. None had line management for the case. All six were male. Because the teams were organised in Divisions, and the chairmen worked across Divisions, three of them chaired conferences in the teams both with and without parents present, and three chaired conferences only in the control teams.

As described in the last chapter, the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) required the chairmen to record basic facts, such as the age of the child, as well as to make more complicated judgments, such as whether the allegation was proved, and why they thought parents who were invited did not attend. Specific questions about incidents that might happen with

parents present were also asked. For example, did they leave early, was their behaviour disruptive, or was confidential information withheld? To allow for difference in the conferences with and without parents present to be recorded, the questionnaire was designed so that the information common to all conferences could be collected in separate sections. The questionnaires were piloted in the early conferences, and amended. Separate questionnaires were completed for each child in the family, but for research purposes the analysis was undertaken on the questionnaire completed on the child nominated by the chairman as the index child.

Over the thirteen months of the project, fifty questionnaires for the index child were completed for conferences in the four area teams in the pilot area involving parents, at thirty six of which parents were in attendance. In the two teams in the control area where parents were not yet included thirty three were completed for the first child. All conferences held in the research areas were monitored, a response rate of 100%. The completed questionnaires were analysed quantitatively by means of SPSS, and the analysis was informed by the written comments of the chairmen and the researchers observation study.

RESULTS

Numbers

Once a referral has been received, an investigation is carried out under Section 47 of The Children Act 1989. All of the cases included in this research concerned referrals that reached the conference. Gibbons and colleagues (1995) suggest that 160,000 Section 47 enquiries take place annually, of which 40,000 are conferenced, resulting in 25,000 additions to the child protection register. It is without the scope of this study to speculate about the referrals in this authority that did not result in a conference. The focus of enquiry in the research described here is whether the policy of parental involvement resulted in a reduction in the numbers of conferences held.

Table 1 illustrates the numbers of conferences held in the research teams during the year the research was carried out. The number of teams taking part in the pilot area was four, double that of the two comprising the control group.

TEAMS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Pilot area(with parents)	50	60
Control area(without parents)	33	40
Total conferences	83	100

Table 4.1: NUMBERS OF CONFERENCES HELD BY PILOT AND CONTROL (May 1991 - June 1992)

Table 2 demonstrates that the *number of conferences* held in both the pilot and control areas dropped in the year following the introduction of the policy. This drop was also experienced in other areas of the city, and so was part of a trend city wide. This was thought to be due partly to the introduction in the city of new criteria for calling conferences. A further influence was the introduction of the Children Act 1989. The 'no-order' principle, which was intended to result in a reduction of the number of cases brought before the court, and the principle of parental responsibility required agencies to develop new ways of working in partnership with parents. The immediate impact was of a down fall in court activity. It seems likely that the same reasons influenced the reduction in the numbers of conferences held nationally, from 45,300 in 1991, to 38,600 in 1992 (Children Act Report, 1992). In this study, the reduction in numbers was more pronounced in the control than in the pilot areas (see Table 2). There was therefore no evidence that the introduction of the policy had lowered the number of conferences held.

YEAR NUMBERS HELD	TEAMS		
	Pilot N	Control N	Total N
Year 1 (April'90-March'91)	66	48	114
Year 2.(April'91-March'92)	43	22	65
% during year 1 to year 2	109	79	179
$\frac{(48 \times 43) - (66 \times 22)}{109 \times 70 \times 65 \times 114} > 3.84$			

Table 4.2: NUMBER OF CONFERENCES HELD BEFORE AND AFTER PARENTAL PARTICIPATION (April-March)

Referrals

A report of child abuse becomes a child protection case when a referral is made. As discussed in Chapter 2, the process by which this happens is complex and depends upon a range of factors, such as whether the child is believed, how the person hearing the report interprets what they hear, and whether they fear the consequences of telling (see Wattam, 1992, Gibbons et al, 1995). One way of furthering the debate about the way abuse is constructed would be to explore in detail the sources of the referral, and the perspectives of the referents. Information about referral behaviours can also be used to further our understanding of particular aspects of the child protection framework. Wattam (1992), for example, argues that the way in which reporting comes about is a crucial variable when scrutinising the testimony of children for validity in court testimony. The presence of parents in the conference could also influence referral behaviours, and that is the primary focus in this analysis.

Two stages in the referral process were identified to determine the effect of involving parents on referral patterns; the point when the first concern was raised, and when the referral for investigation was made to social services. Clearly the referrer at those stages might differ. For example, a child may raise the first concern by disclosing abuse to the teacher, whereas the teacher may act as the formal referral agent to social services. Wattam (1989) provides us with a number of reasons why teachers do not refer cases of abuse to social services. It is possible, and suggested by recent research (Gibbons et al, 1995) that, because the threshold for determining maltreatment moves over time, much abuse is undetected and unreported. While this study did not allow for the uncovering of unreported cases, the methodology was informed by the belief that the dynamics suggested by the above studies also operate at different stages of the referral process. One hypothesis was that referrals to social services could drop, or the patterns change, where the referrer believed the parents could be party to this information at the conference. Neighbours, for example, or partners intimidated within a violent relationship, may not want a parent to know of their report.

As can be seen from Table 3, leaving aside those cases already known to social workers and referred by them (21%), the largest group initiating the first concern was self (13%) and family (12%). Although the numbers are lower, the finding that the largest source of referrals was a parent, followed by the child, compares with findings from the other research studies described in the previous chapter. Thoburn et al (1995), Farmer and Owen (1995) and Corby (1987), all found that the family were the most likely to initiate the referral. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) also found abuse came to official attention through the disclosure of the child or family (51%); by professionals already working with the family (39%), or by unrelated incidents, such as a home visit (10%)

Returning to my study, and the influence of parental involvement on the people initiating concern, there were no major differences in the profile of those judged to have *raised the first concern* in the control and pilot areas. The numbers are small making analysis difficult and the differences revealed are slight. For example, in the pilot area, no health professionals are shown as raising the first concern. The study did not allow for these

trends to be tested further. They could, for example, have arisen by chance, or been already established patterns in the areas. The strong suggestion is, however, that parental involvement did not deter people from expressing their concerns.

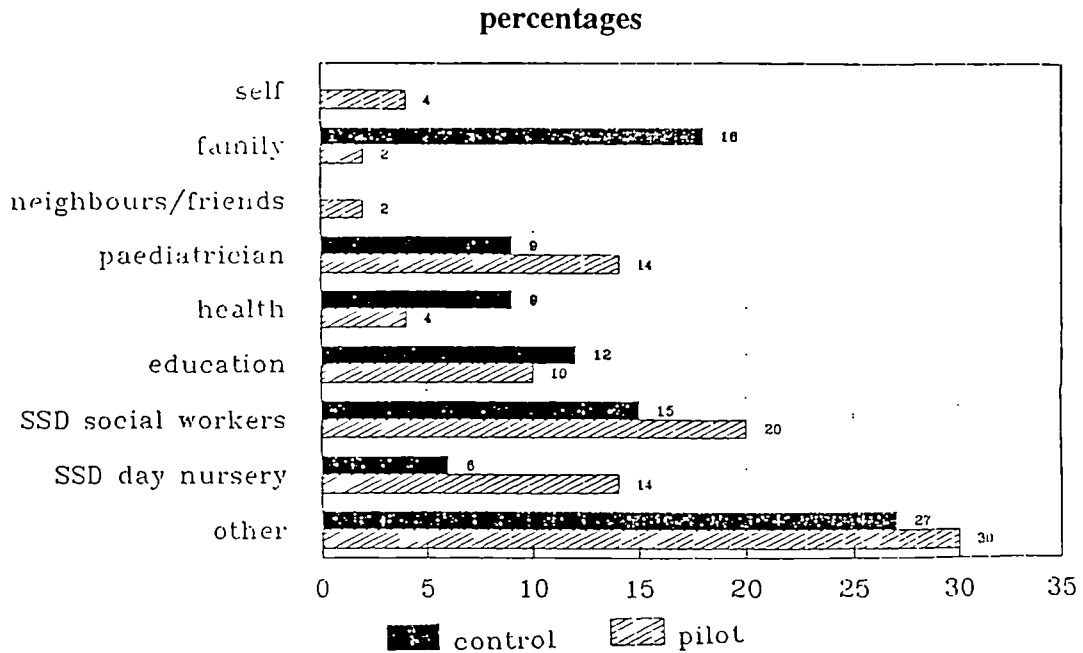
The second stage, *who referred to social services*, is regarded as the most important step in a child protection investigation, for it is then that it becomes public property (Dingwall et al, 1983). In the other research cited, initial concerns were generally passed through intermediaries to social workers. Teachers and day-care workers played the major part in Thoburns' (1995) study, followed by health professionals. Gibbons et al (1995) group the sources of referral into those closest to the child - teachers, school nurses and education welfare (23%), health visitors, General Practitioners and hospital staff (17%), household members and other lay people (17%), social services (13%), police (12%), other (18%). The groupings in Gibbons' study are slightly different to the groupings in my study, so comparisons are tentative. However, her findings are similar to those laid out in Table 3 when the pilot and control areas are taken together, and the categories assimilated.

The most notable difference between the first and second stages in my study is, as would be expected, in relation to children. Only four refer themselves at the second stage - all from the pilot area. Of particular interest is the reduction in the number of families in the pilot area who refer on to social services, and here there is a difference between pilot and control areas that could be explained by parental attendance. However, there is no means of testing this further.

**PROFILE OF REFERRAL:
FIRST STAGE; WHO RAISED FIRST CONCERN;**



SECOND STAGE; WHO REFERRED TO SOCIAL SERVICES;



**Table 3: PROFILE OF REFERRAL TO THE CONFERENCES 83 cases; 50 pilot
33 control, 1.5.91-30.6.92.**

Another trend worthy of comment is the large number of referrers (28% and 30%) within the 'other' category. This includes police and voluntary agencies, such as the NSPCC, who might be expected to be more confident in taking on this more formally responsible role. As the catch-all category, it also includes a smattering of the more unusual referrals that make up the welfare net, such as one made by the owner of a riding school who noticed severe bruising on a child's arms. Interestingly, the percentages in the pilot and control areas under 'other' are similar.

In summary, the patterns of referral identified in this research compare with other research studies. It is possible that one effect of involving parents was to reduce the number of referrals from parents to social services, but this could not be established definitively by this methodology.

Attendance

1. Attendance of professionals

As suggested in the previous chapter, research findings (McGloin and Turnbull, 1986, Bedford, 1986) and events in other areas had demonstrated that some professionals stayed away from conferences with parents present. Police and paediatricians in some areas had concerns about disclosing confidential information, or believed the child's safety could be jeopardised. Teachers and nurses feared that speaking openly in front of parents might jeopardise their relationship with the family. Attendance was, therefore, thought to be an area of the conference activity which could be profoundly effected by the presence of parents (see also Farmer and Owen, 1995).

Other aspects of interest emerging from studying the attendance of professionals concerned the rates of attendance and roles of senior and managerial staff. Additionally, it was thought the attendance of professionals who are routinely invited but only occasionally attend, such as Probation Officers and General Practitioners, the attendance of professionals such as teachers who may only attend one conference in their career, and the inclusion of community leaders in the case of families whose ethnic origin was non-European could be effected. As Hallett and Birchall (1992) pointed out, the

conference is a meeting comprising a core group of professionals whose key task is child protection, such as social workers, and others who are more or less closely tied in to the child protection framework, such as teachers and hospital staff. The issues of power and control that are raised by this mix of professional groupings has been a subject of considerable debate (Stevenson, 1980, Hallett, 1995) and will be a theme to be explored throughout this thesis. The research was therefore set up to allow for a careful inspection of who was invited and who attended.

Data was collected on the attendance of professionals in relation to who had been invited, and is laid out in Table 4. As can be seen from Table 4, the range of professionals involved in the conference is wide. Certain professional groups, such as the police, probation and nursing officers, are routinely invited; others are invited where they are known to be involved in the case - such as the community midwife, the teacher, and Family Service Unit staff. Social Services are clearly the key agents. They generally have present the principal social worker, who works in a managerial capacity across Divisions, the principal case worker, who is the senior in the team, acting with and responsible for supervising the investigating social worker. In addition any residential or day care staff who know the family may also be employed by social services. Apart from the social work representatives, nurses (including Health Visitors) and the police occupy key roles, attending most of the conferences they are invited to, as do teachers. The rates of attendance for the Doctors - General Practitioners, consultant paediatricians and community medical officers - are surprisingly low given the essential nature of much of their evidence or, as in the case of General Practitioners, the likelihood of their involvement with the family. This finding is in common with that of Farmer and Owen (1995), Stevenson (1980) and Hallett (1995). Hallett suggested that, although General Practitioners commonly reported time pressures as a reason for not attending, other reasons could be their lack of familiarity with the work, the pace, and divided loyalties. Lastly, the local authorities solicitors attended any conference where it was thought legal advice might be necessary, which was in half the cases.

PROFESSIONALS	INVITED		ATTENDED	
	pilot	control	pilot	control
	(Percentages)			
Principal social worker	100	100	90	84
Principal case worker	100	100	59	55
Social worker	100	100	94	94
Residential social worker	21	23	24	25
Nursing Officer	100	100	67	91
Health Visitor	86	71	74	62
School Nurse	51	69	47	54
Midwife	17	37	15	23
Police	100	100	92	88
Probation	98	88	26	21
Teacher	62	73	54	48
Education Welfare Officer	90	94	22	46
Educational Psychologist	56	23	0	0
Community medical officer	88	67	2	11
General practitioner	96	100	19	14
Paediatrician	62	65	15	18
Family service Unit	4	3	7	4
NSPCC	92	93	11	11
Other voluntary agency	15	8	18	0
Local authority solicitor	92	97	50	48
Other professional	31	29	27	63

Table 4.4: PROFESSIONALS INVITED TO AND IN ATTENDANCE AT 83 CONFERENCES, 1.5.91-30.6.92

One aspect of attendance that is not pursued in this thesis, but was raised by Farmer and Owen (1995), is that professionals varied in the extent of their influence over the proceedings. They found that, although Probation Officers did not attend most of the conferences to which they were invited, their attendance at the few they did attend was associated with a high registration rate of 82%. This compared with a registration rate of 50% when General Practitioners attended. They conclude "either the Probation Officers brought with them more damaging information than the General Practitioners, or else they were successful in selecting conferences which really justified their attendance" (p103). Another possibility is that they communicated their concerns more successfully, being used to the quasi-legal nature of the proceedings.

In summary, there was no difference between the pilot and control areas in the percentage of *professionals who were invited to attend*, and who did so (55% in each).

2. Attendance of Parents

Turning to *the parents* two questions were important to determine. Who had been selected for invitation to the conference, and who had come? One critical factor in determining who gets invited is how the definition of 'the parent' is constructed. In this authority, the chairperson decided who to invite on the advice of the investigating social worker. As will be observed in Chapter 8, the family may be already known to the investigating social worker, or the referral may be new. Even where families were already known to the social services Department - 60% were - information relevant to the child's key attachment figures may not be recorded, available or accurate. (see Thoburn et al, 1995). The issue of how the 'effective parent' is defined is, therefore, extremely complicated. A feature both of modern society and, in particular, of families who abuse their children (Gough, 1993), is that family units and reconstituted family units often do not contain both parents. Different children in a family may have different parents. In some cases, the primary attachment figures for the child may not be the parents or the carers, and may not be in the household at the time of the alleged abuse. Other factors also come into play, as this thesis will reveal.

The matter of who is thought suitable to attend is determined to a degree by the policy of the Area Child Protection Committee. The policy in this authority (see Appendix 1), in common with a number of others, was to exclude parents suffering from a defined serious mental illness, parents in the process of a criminal investigation, or known to be violent. During the time of the research study, ten 'effective' parents were excluded on this basis - four undergoing criminal investigations, and six known to be violent. The chairmen did exercise discretion, so that in a few cases men who were known to be violent were invited. Cases where police were considering prosecution were particularly difficult where an investigation of a single parent carer was ongoing, as Thoburn et al (1995) also found. In one conference observed by the researcher where the police were preparing criminal proceedings against the mother for neglect, the police felt obliged to caution the mother in the middle of the conference.

Further complicating factors affecting attendance were raised by other family characteristics. Where the parents' first language was not English (9%) an interpreter was required. For one Asian family an interpreter was necessary to translate for the mother, but the father spoke English. An interpreter was present in 6% of the conferences. Community leaders of ethnic minority groups were able to be present in a supportive capacity, and one or two African-caribbean families brought them along. While it was not policy at the time of the research to allow parents to bring a friend, the particular needs and problems of parents with learning difficulties was recognised, and they were encouraged to bring an advocate: most did. Lastly, while members of the extended family were not, as has been said, routinely invited, in one or two cases a grandmother and an Aunt were present. The inclusion of these individuals, in addition to the parents, increased the numbers present at the conferences, and had other effects which will be discussed later, (see Bell, 1996)

Table 5 illustrates the attendance rates of the parents who were invited.

PARENT OR OTHER	INVITED		ATTENDED	
	TO CON.		CON	
	N	%	N	%
Mother	47	94	35	70
Father	22	44	12	24
Stepfather	9	18	6	12
Others	2	4	2	4
Friend	0	0	3	6
Interpreter	0	0	3	6

Table 4.5: INVITATIONS TO, AND ATTENDANCES OF PARENTS AND OTHERS AT 50 CONFERENCES, 1.5.91-30.6.92

A number of issues are revealed by these figures. Firstly, the attendance rate of 72% is low compared to the national figure of 80% (Messages from the Research, 1995). It was also low in Thoburn et al's (1995) study, where 20% of those invited did not attend. In Farmer and Owens' (1995), parents or other family members were present at only 59% of the conferences. These low rates of attendance can be partially explained by the newness of the policy at the time in the authority studied. In my study, analysis of data from the parents' interviews suggested that there were other reasons for non-attendance, such as *fear and difficulties in making child care arrangements. In some cases, particularly in one team known for its poor administrative back up, the parents had not received the letter inviting them to the conference, or the notification had been inaccurate.* The issues arising from this will be pursued further in Chapter 7, describing the parents' experience.

Secondly, the data reveals who was selected for invitation. A striking, although not unexpected finding, is the prominence given to mothers. 94% of mothers were invited, as against 44% of the fathers. Possible explanations for this discrepancy are that the child

lived alone with mother, or had no meaningful contact with father. In fact, only 21% of the children lived with their mother alone, 34% of the children lived with both parents, and a further 32% lived with other parental or family combinations. Even where step-fathers are included, the percentage invited creeps up to only 62%. A further factor in the absence of fathers was that separated fathers were not pursued, even where contact between child and father had been maintained. Some fathers (20%) were excluded on a policy basis. However, in some cases, social services did make strenuous attempts to include fathers, such as timetabling the conference so that a father who was in prison could attend.

Only a tiny percentage of the extended family - 2% - were invited, even where the child had very close contact. In one conference observed by the researcher, for example, the mother read out a letter from grandparents who were clearly attached to their grandchildren, but had not been invited to be present. The reasons for this are explored with the social workers and reported in Chapter 8.

In this context, it is not surprising to find the focus on mothers reflected in the attendance. In only one of the parental attendance conferences was the mother formally excluded because of a serious depressive illness, and in this case the father attended alone. In over one third of the conferences the mother attended alone. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that the mother attended alone in 30% of their conferences, and in only 18% were two parent figures present. Here is another example of the gendered nature of the subject.

Size and length

"If everyone minded their own business,' the duchess said in a hoarse growl, 'the world would go round a deal faster than it does'".

Carroll, (1865) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland..

Other studies on the numbers in attendance at conferences have reported rates of attendance as being between eight and twenty (Corby, 1987). Questions have been raised about whether all those present need to be there. Corby found that 10% of those in attendance at the fifty five conferences included in his research made no verbal contribution, and that many agencies sent more than one representative for support purposes. Size has also been found to be an important variable in higher registration rates (Farmer and Owen, 1995), and was associated in Corby's research (and, as will be later discussed, in mine) with more difficult conferences.

One effect of including parents in the conference is that the conference may be bigger; and because there are more people to speak and manage it could take longer. Table 6 demonstrates these effects. As can be seen from Table 6, where parents were in attendance the average number present increased from eight to ten. There were fewer conferences in the pilot area with less than ten in attendance. 76% of conferences in the pilot area had over ten participants, compared to 63% in the control area. These figures in fact under represent the size of conferences with parents present because they include those conferences in the pilot area (28%) where parents did not actually attend

Related to size was the *length* of the conference. Those held in the pilot area lasted, on average, twenty nine minutes longer than those in the control. Some lasted up to three hours. Again, these figures are under representative for the reasons outlined above. A few conferences were longer because parents were disruptive. For example, one conference was held up for fifteen minutes after the mother left the room in an upset state. The main reason associated with increased length is increased size - there are more people to speak and be heard. Stevenson (1980) suggested that another reason for conferences being longer was the means used by the chair for facilitating the process. The observations in this research lend support to this suggestion. Where parents were present, the chairperson took great care to ensure that parents were treated with sensitivity and dignity, and accorded every opportunity to speak. It is, therefore, not surprising that including parents makes some conferences longer.

ATTENDANCE BY AREA	PILOT	CONTROL
	%	%
Percentage professional attendance at conference	55	55
Average number of professionals attending	8	8
Percentage of parents attending	72	
Average number of attenders (inc. parents, etc.)	10	

SIZE BY AREA			
Percentage size of conference:	under 10	24	36
	11 - 14	62	48
	over 15	14	15

LENGTH BY AREA			
Average length of conference (hours)		2.25	1.96
Percentage length of conference;	under 1 hour	10	12
	1- 2 hours	53	79
	2 - 3 hours	35	9

Table 4.6: ATTENDANCE, SIZE AND LENGTH OF CONFERENCES BY PILOT AND CONTROL, 83 CONFERENCES,1.5.91-30.6.92

Other features significantly associated with long conferences were the presence of a paediatrician, the consideration of neglect, the ethnic origin of the family, and whether or not their first language was English. With the exception of language there was no

evidence that these characteristics distinguished the pilot and control areas, and so (again with the exception of language) they could not have accounted for the greater length of conferences in the pilot areas. The numbers of parents who did not speak English was in fact very small and the difference between these two kinds of areas remained if the parents were omitted.

Registration

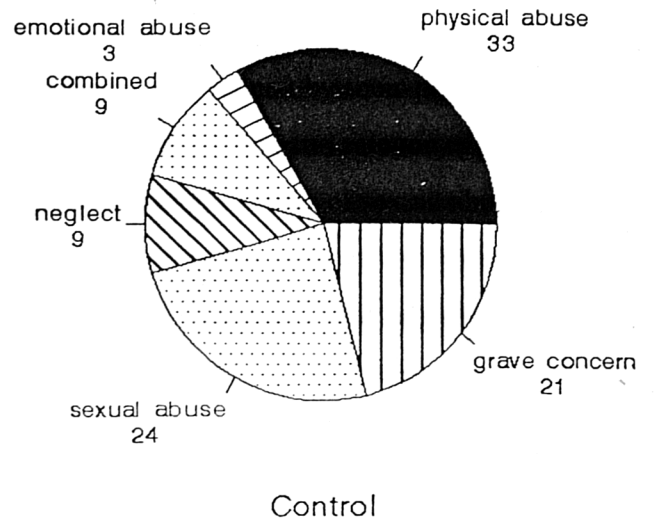
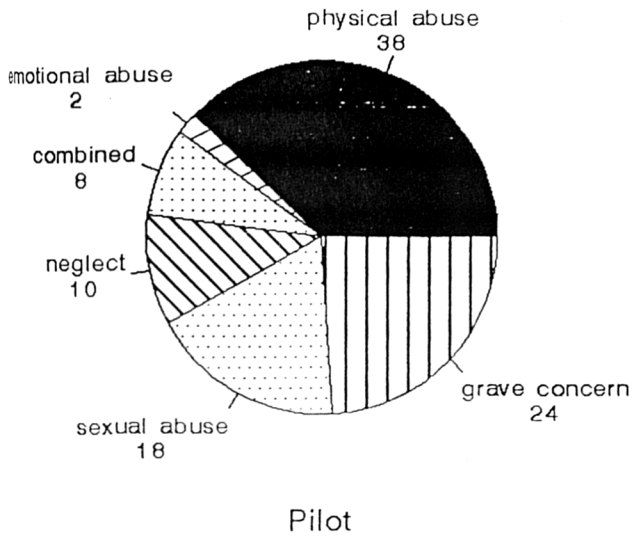
"Messages from the Research" (1995) makes it clear that the register is seen by professionals as an essential tool in the planning of child protection services. "It gives case conferences a focus and fosters inter-agency cooperation" (p 31). Outcome measures (see Farmer and Owen, 1995, Cleaver and Freeman, 1995) show that, whatever the deficiencies of the system, most children are protected from reabuse. Studies of registration rates and the factors underlying them are important in themselves. They are also, clearly, an area where the presence of parents could effect the decisions made. Before presenting the data collected on registration in the conferences studied, however, the limitations of child protection registers require mention;

"It should be emphasised that the Register is not a record of the extent of child abuse as some children are registered because of concern about future abuse and will not have been the victim of actual abuse, whilst other children who have been the victim of abuse will not have been placed on the Register because there was no need for a multi-agency protection plan under child protection procedures." Thoburn et al (1995) p.2.

Research has demonstrated that a number of variables operate in levels of registration. Gibbons et al (1995) identified two sets of factors: socio-demographic, such as unemployment rates and poor service provision; and operational factors, such as no regular updating of the register. What is clear is that professionals are basing their decisions to register not only on what they interpret as abusive behaviour, but also on the environmental factors in a child's life, and on the resources available (Dingwall, 1983, Thoburn et al, 1995). Some of these factors are revealed in my study, also.

Table 7 outlines the numbers of cases registered in the study and the categories of registration.

MAIN FOCUS OF CONCERN AT REFERRAL



REGISTRATION

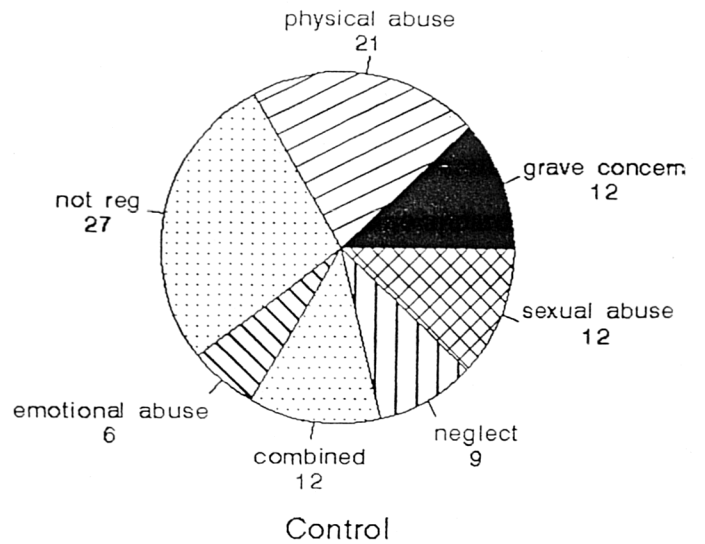
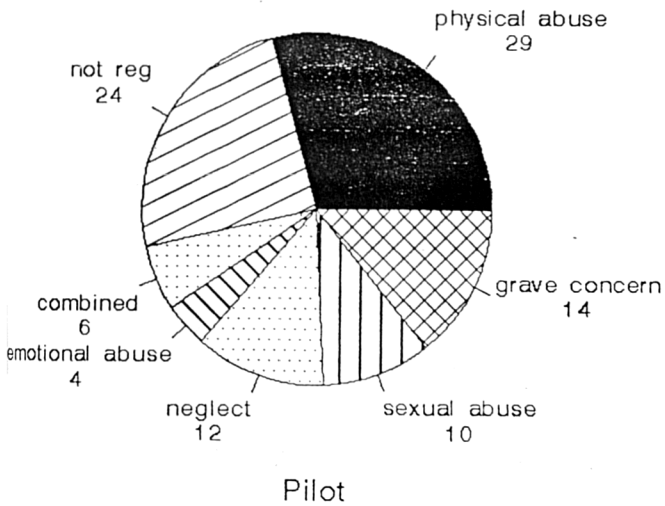


TABLE 7: REGISTRATION RATES

The four main categories of registration suggested in Working Together 1991 are neglect, physical injury, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. In the authority studied, the combined category was also used. Grave concern was in the process of being withdrawn, so the effects are difficult to determine. As with the referral process, different stages in the process of registration were defined as a means of determining the impact of parental presence. The hypothesis was that certain cases might present particular problems which would effect the registration decision. For example, in cases where children had disclosed sexual abuse, but this was denied by their parents, the conference might find it more comfortable to register the case in the category grave concern rather than sexual abuse. Wattam (1992) points out that cases of sexual abuse are materially different from other types of abuse because the evidence is usually so difficult to get at and because they raise such painful and complex emotions. It might therefore be expected that they would be more difficult to address and determine in front of the parents.

As has been observed, there was also a general fear that information might be withheld in front of parents - either because it was too difficult for the professionals to say openly, or because it was feared the child or other family members might suffer as a result of hearing things not previously known. The monitoring questionnaire therefore asked the chairmen to describe the main concern at the point of referral, the indicators of abuse that were presented to the conference, as well as the numbers and category of registration.

As can be seen from Table 7, there was no apparent difference between the areas either across time, or by area, in the initial foci of concern, the proportion of those registered, or the categories of registration used. At referral the main focus of concern in both pilot and control areas is physical abuse, comprising over a third of all referrals. Grave concern accounts for the next chunk (23%), followed by sexual abuse, comprising just under a quarter of all referrals, and lastly neglect (10%). The remainder constitute emotional abuse, and the combined category - neglect and physical abuse, neglect and sexual abuse, and physical and sexual abuse, which, if added together, outweigh neglect alone, but of which neglect is a key feature. These findings are broadly comparable with Thoburn et al (1995), with the exception of sexual abuse, which is more frequently categorised in the

authorities she studied (27%). One possible explanation for this difference is that grave concern was more widely used in my study at this pre-conference stage - ie. before the allegation had been investigated. This was born out by my observations, and there was some evidence for this possibility in the data analysed in the early days of the research, but this pattern later changed. In addition, some of the combined category included sexual abuse cases.

At the point of registration, just over a quarter of cases in both the pilot and control areas are not registered. This rate is low compared with that determined by both Farmer and Owen (39%) and Thoburn (35%). However, the categories of registration recorded in my study do compare with the national averages for that year (Children Act Report, 1992) The registrations for neglect, emotional abuse and combined have increased slightly from the first stage, whereas in all other categories the rate has decreased. Physical abuse, sexual abuse and grave concern receive less registrations proportionate to the higher rate at the initial stage. The effect of the phasing out of grave concern as a category can not be determined. However, there was a clear trend for the professionals to be more likely to register cases of neglect and emotional abuse than physical and sexual abuse. Gibbons et al (1995) offer an explanation for this which seems plausible. Her research demonstrates that, because the risk assessment of neglect is particularly difficult, the cases that reach the conference stage are severe and therefore more likely to be registered. In contrast, some physical injuries turn out to be a one off incident; and sexual abuse is notoriously difficult to prove.

Turning to the potential impact of the parents' presence, there is no difference between the registrations in the pilot and control areas, and therefore no evidence that the presence of the parents has any impact on the decisions made. This is surprising in view of Farmer and Owen's (1995) suggestion, that decisions not to register were heavily influenced by the way people responded to the investigation and what they looked like. There was no evidence for this in my findings. Cross tabulations revealed that there were some differences between children who were registered and those who were not. Children were more likely to be registered if they were female, aged under five, in cases of neglect, and

where the family were already known to the social services department and previous abuse had been confirmed. 60% of the families were known to social services in Leeds at the time of the conference, and some to other areas. Farmer and Owen (1995) drew similar conclusions, but added severity, which was not a variable taken into account in my study. The pilot and control areas did not differ in the proportion of conferences with these kinds of children, so these variables are not relevant to the lack of differences between the areas.

Recommendations

In addition to making decisions about registration, the conference *makes recommendations* for the child protection plan for those children who are registered. These include whether further inter-agency meetings should be held, whether statutory action should be taken, who the keyworker will be and what resources should be made available. Table 8 lists the recommendations of the conference by area.

RECOMMENDATIONS	Pilot		Control		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strategy Meeting	30	60	22	67	52	63
Statutory Action (Sec.47)	13	26	14	42	27	32
Keyworker	39	78	24	73	63	75
Resources	18	36	11	33	29	35
Other	5	13	4	17	9	14

Table 4.8: RECOMMENDATIONS OF CONFERENCE BY PILOT AND CONTROL, 83 CONFERENCES, 1.5.91-30.6.92

In this authority the recommendations of the conference in relation to the child protection plan were intended to be only skeletal. Other studies have also found that the average

time spent on the child protection plan was minimal. In Farmer and Owen's (1995) study, it was nine minutes. In this authority, the strategy meeting, comprising the key professionals involved in the ongoing work and the parents, was seen as being the appropriate place for the detailed child protection plan. Strategy meetings were set up in 62% of all cases. Not surprisingly, the most frequent recommendation - in 75% of all conferences - was to nominate a keyworker, invariably a social worker. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that the main intervention recommended in registered cases was social work contact, and that for a number of families no new resources were suggested.

These findings lend weight to the view that child protection procedures are preoccupied with protection, rather than welfare. This suggestion is further supported by the figure of 35% for resource allocation, which seems remarkably low relative to the massive welfare needs of a number of these families, over half of whom were on income support. The low rate of resource allocation could be seen as reflecting a number of differing factors, such as the scarcity of available resources, the perceptions by the professionals of what the families need, as well as what the families are prepared to accept. In a few cases, for example, families refused ongoing social work involvement - even when the child had been registered. Different perceptions of need may be a factor affecting resource allocation. Although the evidence for this hypothesis is not forthcoming from this data, it was suggested by the interviews with the parents and will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

Interviews with the parents also put flesh upon the bare data reported here, that statutory action is recommended by the conference in 32% of all the cases. Interestingly, this recommendation is the only one which throws up a difference between the pilot and control areas in the recommendations made. Statutory action was more likely to be recommended in the control area. Since, as is known from the parents interviews, the possibility of statutory action was their greatest fear, it seems reasonable to speculate that the reduced rate in the pilot area may be influenced by the parents presence. Their presence could have had an inhibiting effect, making it more difficult for the professionals to recommend. Conversely, it could have had the positive effect of increasing the

professionals confidence following the parents' presentation in the conference. This suggestion is supported by the observations of Farmer and Owen (1995) on the reasons for not registering children.

Children

A detailed profile of the children conferenced was collected, containing basic information about age, sex, ethnic origin and family composition and characteristics, as well as who the child lived with at the time of the conference. Table 9 provides this profile.

AGE AND SEX	Pilot		Control		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
AGE						
unborn	2	4	2	7	4	5
1 - 4	20	45	8	29	28	38
5 - 9	10	18	5	16	15	20
10-15	13	29	13	46	26	36
not known	5	-	5	-	10	-
SEX						
female	26	52	22	67	48	58
male	20	40	7	21	27	32
unborn	4	8	4	12	8	10

Table 4.9a: PROFILE OF INDEX CHILD: AGE AND GENDER (numbers and percentages)

1. Age and Gender

Over half of all the children conferenced were female. Nearly half of the children (43%) were aged 4 and under. There were some differences between the pilot and control areas in relation to age, 45% of children in the pilot group were aged under 4, compared to only 29% in the control group. The reverse was the case for 10-15 year olds where there were 48% in the control group and 28% in the pilot area. However, these findings are not statistically significant, and could be explained by chance. The percentages for age and gender are in line with other areas in the authority studied, and the national average.

The numbers of unborn children, children conferenced because of proven harm to other children, or because, for example, the mother was on hard drugs was small and the same for both areas.

2. Number of siblings

*"There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,
She had so many children she didn't know what to do;
She gave them some broth without any bread;
She whipped them all soundly and put them to bed"*

Gammar Gurton's Garland, 1784.

Families containing two or more siblings living in the household featured, proportionately, more highly in equivalent rates in both pilot and control groups. This finding is, again, in common with other studies of families subject to child protection procedures (Miller and Fisher, 1992), where rates of abuse are higher where there are two or more siblings in the family. The representation of children with one or no siblings was similar, at approximately 25% for both areas. Research has suggested that risks to siblings are known to be underplayed (Farmer and Owen, and Miller et al), and it is of interest to note the high number of children in this study (one hundred) living in households subject to a child protection investigation. Further research on these children is called for.

NUMBER OF SIBS	Pilot		Control		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
0	11	26	7	24	18	25
1	12	28	9	31	21	29
2 - 4	19	44	12	41	31	43
5+	1	2	1	3	2	3

Table 4.9b: PROFILE OF INDEX CHILD: NUMBER OF SIBLINGS (numbers and percentages)

3. Ethnic Origin of families

ETHNIC ORIGIN	Pilot		Control		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pakistani	2	4	1	3	3	4
Chinese	1	2	-	-	1	1
Caribbean	4	8	1	3	5	6
Mixed race	6	12	-	-	6	7

Table 4.9c: PROFILE OF INDEX CHILD: ETHNIC ORIGIN OF FAMILIES (numbers and percentages)

The percentage of families whose ethnic origin was not European was small - fifteen (18%) - comprising three Pakistani families, one Chinese family, five African-caribbean and six of mixed race. However, the proportion of children from ethnic groups is higher than the 9% for the population of children under aged eighteen in England and Wales. As

in Thoburn et al's (1995) study, children of mixed race parentage seem to be particularly over represented (1% for the population as a whole.) Thirteen of these families were from the pilot area, a finding likely to reflect the fact that the areas served by these teams were part of a deprived inner-city area. There were, however, particular problems for the professionals in a number of the conferences involving these families, and the reasons are analysed and discussed in Chapter 6, (see Bell, 1996)

4. Family Characteristics

"Messages from the Research" pulls together the research findings on the characteristics of families where children are maltreated;

" Gibbons and colleagues found that over a third were headed by a lone parent and in only 30% of cases were both natural parents resident. Nearly three fifths lacked a wage earner and over one half were dependent on income support. Domestic violence and mental illness within the family also featured prominently and, in Thoburns study, nearly a quarter had suffered an accident or serious ill health during the previous year. One in seven parents under suspicion were known to have been abused themselves as children. Most (65%) children had previously been known to social services and a previous investigation had been undertaken in almost half of the cases"(p 25)

In my study the most frequently recurring associated features were families containing adults with a history of violence (44%), with a criminal record (42%), including previous abuse of others (47%), families on Income Support (58%), and families where a parent was mentally ill (17%). Farmer and Owen (1995) found evidence of mental illness in the mother increased the chances of children entering care or being accommodated as it was viewed as substantially increasing the risks to the child. The presence of a Schedule 1 Offender in the household - 21% of cases - requires the removal of the child. However, in some of the cases in my study (10%) the offender had left, but was visiting; or the mother was a prostitute whom sex offenders may well have been visiting.

The family composition of the children conferenced has already been discussed, particularly noting the high percentage of children living with mother alone. The family composition of the children in Thoburn et al's (1995) study was similar. There were notable differences between the pilot and control areas in the family characteristics of these two groups of children. This is likely to be a reflection of the social composition of the areas served; what Gibbons terms the socio-demographic factors. More families with a history of violence and a criminal record and on Income Support featured in the pilot than the control areas.

FAMILY COMPOSITION ; WHO CHILD LIVES WITH

	Pilot		Control		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mother only	8	16	10	30	18	22
Father only	2	4	0	0	2	2
Stepfa/cohab'ee	2	4	1	3	3	4
Mother and father	16	32	11	33	27	32
Other family combination	17	34	7	21	24	29
Foster/res'al	-	-	1	3	1	1
Other	5	10	3	9	8	10

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

	N	%	N	%	N	%
psychiatric illness	7	15	7	22	14	17
learning difficulty	8	17	10	31	18	23
history of violence	26	55	9	8	35	44
criminal record	23	51	9	28	32	42
drug abuse	7	15	4	13	11	14
Sched 1 Offr	12	25	5	16	17	21
previous abuse of others	20	43	17	53	37	47
on IS	32	70	13	41	45	48
Number of cases	50	100	33	100	83	100

Table 4.9d: PROFILE OF INDEX CHILD: FAMILY COMPOSITION AND CHARACTERISTICS (numbers and percentages)

To recap, there were few significant differences in the *kinds of children and families* involved in conferences in the pilot and control areas. There was little difference in the gender or family composition of the children conferenced in the pilot and control areas, and the percentages for age and gender were in line with other areas in the city and the national average. There were, however, some differences in the family characteristics of the children from the pilot areas; there was more likely to be a history of violence, a higher proportion of the families were non-european in ethnic origin, and a slightly higher proportion were on income support. These differences probably reflected differences in the social composition of the areas rather than resulting from the new policy.

DISCUSSION

On the evidence of the monitoring study initial fears over the policy of inviting parents to case conferences proved largely unjustified. Some conferences were particularly difficult (Bell, 1996) and the reasons for this are analysed in detail in Chapter 6. The number of conferences did indeed drop but this apparently had nothing to do with the policy itself. Evidence that the source of referrals and the kinds of referrals were unaffected was slightly less convincing since it was possible that the research design did not allow for demographic differences between the pilot and control areas. Nevertheless the evidence did not suggest that the introduction of the policy led to different sources of referral, types of case or rates of professional attendance at the conference - consequences which would have suggested that some professionals were hanging back from involvement in the conferences because of the possibility of awkward confrontations with their clients.

Although parental participation did not apparently affect professional behaviour in the way that had been feared, there were other consequences. An effect of the length of the conferences was that professionals sometimes had to leave before the registration decision. Others, such as General Practitioners (see Stevenson, 1995), may have avoided the conference altogether because of the time implications. Another undesirable consequence is the difficulty for all the participants in concentrating for long periods of time, with the risk that important information gets lost. The more radical protagonists of parents rights, such as the Family Rights Group (Atherton, 1992) have campaigned for

the conferences to be held at times to suit parents, for example in the evenings. It is likely that this would increase the number of professionals who do not attend.

The monitoring study demonstrated the range of professionals in attendance. Other parts of the study suggested that, where parents are present, the purpose of their attendance needs to be explicit and clear. Observations suggested that it was not always clear why some professionals were present and raised the question whether some were occasionally there more to cover the backs of their departments than to contribute to the discussion. Parents also questioned the numbers present, and the relevance of some of them whom they did not know, such as nurse managers. Further issues were raised with regard to the roles of interpreters, advocates, friends and community leaders. Interpreters and community leaders, for example, must share the professional ethics - especially in respect of confidentiality - yet it was not clear how this could be ensured, or what their lines of management and accountability were. Farmer and Owen (1995) found that a difficulty in their study was that no-one could be quite sure that complex meanings were being accurately relayed. They point out that "In some Asian languages the words necessary for the description of sexual abuse do not exist, or are so rarely used that a balance has to be maintained between politeness and clarity." (p.114) Observation demonstrated that friends and advocates did indeed provide support, but it was unclear who carried responsibility for putting boundaries round the advocacy role. In one conference, for example, of a girl who had been sexually abused, the friend's son had been a regular baby sitter and one of the few males known to have access to the girl.

A major difficulty highlighted by this part of the study had to do with resources. Conferences which parents attended were on average longer, and required costly back up services. The other research referred to has also demonstrated the importance of providing back up services for the conference. For example, since it is not appropriate for parents and professionals to share the same waiting facilities separate reception areas have to be provided. When this research was conducted parents were asked to leave the conference at the decision making stage, and asked to return at the end to hear the decision. Sound proofed facilities were needed for them to go to, with the minimum of

disruption to the conference. Other resources were needed for child care, for printing information and letters in languages other than English, and for training administrative staff to take minutes.

Discussion of resources goes beyond what is necessary for effectively managing conferences, to the provision available to meet the welfare needs of the children and families identified in the conference. The monitoring study has illustrated that some vulnerable children are filtered into the child protection system who are found to be not at risk, and that the focus of concern in 'the crucible of the system' is not on the identification of need, but on the assessment of risk. Many of the research studies cited question the appropriateness of the relentless concentration on risk which, as has been shown has two effects. Firstly, the concentration on risk demonstrated by this research meant that little effort was devoted to considering in detail the recommendations for future interventions. The effects are circular; information is presented in terms of risk, rather than need, and intervention is therefore focussed on risk, rather than need. The high rate of recommendation for a keyworker, a primary function of which is to monitor, compared to the low rate for services, can be seen as a reflection of the preoccupation with risk assessment over provision for the child's welfare needs.

In addition to the low rate of recommendations for service provision, another aspect of the preoccupation with risk over need is the lack of time and attention accorded to the child protection plan in the conference. Given the complexity of the conference task and process, and the length of time taken for decisions to be made, it seems understandable and sensible on the face of it for the more detailed child protection plan to be made at a future meeting. However, the parents' presence does create a golden opportunity for this plan to be discussed at a critical time, as the interviews with the parents reported upon later will show. Crisis theory suggests strongly that interventions are most effective at critical turning points in a families career (Caplan, 1964, O'Hagan, 1986), and here is one of them. Support for this theoretical position comes from Farmer and Owen's (1995) finding that there was a close relationship between the adequacy of the plan made in the

conference and the child's subsequent protection - especially in cases not already known to social services departments.

The second effect of the relentless concentration on risk that emerged from this and the other research studies cited is to refocus attention on the purposes, roles and powers of the conference. As discussed in the previous chapter, the findings reported here lend weight to the observation that the conference is presented with an ambiguous task. The research has shown that the conference time is spent on sharing information with a view to making a judgment about what has happened in order to make a sensible decision about registration. Leaving aside the moral dimensions of risk assessment (Thorpe, 1994, Wattam, 1992, Parton, 1996), it seems that the conference is, effectively, exercising a judicial function. The presence of the local authority solicitors and the absence of the parents legal representatives reinforces this possibility.

As previously suggested, the attendance of the local authority solicitor in the majority of conferences focuses concern on issues of justice and equality. The local authority's solicitor (and the police) had the right to ask questions in the conference, and to use the information gleaned there to prepare their case - and they did. Parents also had the right to ask questions, or to refuse to answer - and they did. However, following the debacle of The Cleveland Enquiry they could not have their solicitors present. Being there to prove their capacity as parents, and to make a good impression they were doubly disadvantaged - hardly an equal relationship, or basis for justice.

This discussion raises an issue pursued throughout the thesis concerning the difficulty of combining a procedure designed to empower parents with a procedure designed to protect the child. The evidence of the monitoring study suggested that the introduction of parents did not change the likelihood that children were registered as at risk. It is possible, of course, that different kinds of child were registered under the new procedures but this seems a more complicated hypothesis and no evidence was suggested here for it. So there arises the question of whether the parents were truly empowered by a process on whose outcome their attendance appears to have had little impact.

Another crucial issue regarding the empowerment of parents that is raised by the monitoring study arises from the data concerning which family members get invited, and who attends. The Government has recognised the need to give further guidance on this matter by their publication "The Challenge of Partnership", 1995. This guidance attempts to address the problems of the definition of a parent, as well as reinforcing the requirement to include all family members. The section 2.16, "Who do we mean by Families" lists family members who should be included. This includes people who do not have 'parental responsibility', such as grandparents, previous partners of parents, close friends, to be decided in consultation with parents and children.

What is not addressed by guidance is that in many conferences the mother attends alone. Theoretically, this raises issues around gender which are culturally and socially based. Evidence for the unequal burdens on mothers was also uncovered by Farmer and Owen's study. They found that where mothers were regarded as responsible for the abuse, the child's name was more likely to be placed on the register than when the male carer was blamed. But the problems are also practical. What can be done to relieve mothers of this burden; and how can the fathers views be represented if he is not present. Social workers struggle with this dilemma, as evidence drawn from other parts of the study will show. Again, there are resource implications for social work practice. To do the necessary work with mothers, fathers and grandparents before the conference, social workers need training, protected time, quality supervision, and administrative back up. To provide the appropriate welfare help afterwards, they need a massive injection of resources - from housing and health services to skilful family and child centred therapy.

So the final question raised by this part of the study is whether this policy is not something of a halfway house. Useful in itself it requires to be implemented in a way which does not greedily consume professional resources. Of itself it does not - and perhaps should not - make a readily apparent difference to the pattern of decisions. And so questions arise over whether the policy should be either applied in a more radical way - perhaps on the New Zealand model - or whether at the least it requires a greater injection of resources designed to assist rather than assess.

FIVE

PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDES SURVEY: 'A LONG FILAMENT OF PLAITED STRING'

*"I am a part of all that I have met
.....that which we are, we are".*

Ulysses, Tennyson.

In his book 'Working Together in Child Protection' (1995), Murphy refers to the work of Peace (1991), who compares multi-disciplinary work to a long filament of plaited string. Where the agencies work well the strands will be closely woven and strong; where they are not the strands will be loosely connected and the filament weak. The importance of effective inter-agency work has been the subject of a number of the child abuse enquiries (Colwell, 1974, Beckford, 1985 Carlile, 1987, Cleveland, 1988), formed a major plank of The Children Act 1989, and takes up the main part of the two Working Together (1988 and 1991) The attitude of professionals to working together in the child protection arena is thus a critical area for scrutiny.

As has been previously stated, government guidance on the centrality of inter-agency work in the initial conference has been unequivocal.

"The conference symbolises the interagency nature of assessment, treatment and the management of child protection",

Working Together 1991 (6.1).

Reference has also been made to the literature and research on inter-agency work. Hallett and Birchall (1992) have described in detail how professionals bring different priorities to each case, and it was suggested that this gives rise to confusion about roles, and issues of power and status. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) observed the confusion caused to parents by the health visitors' preoccupation with the health of the children, the policemen's concern with law enforcement, and the social workers' less straightforward role of balancing the child's protection with the need to support the family. Dingwall's earlier work (1981) yielded helpful insights into the role of professionals in identifying and confirming child abuse. He found workers in purely health settings drew upon evidence from the child's clinical condition, and this was found to lead to under-identification of abuse. Social workers, in contrast, looked to the family's "moral environment", and drew upon judgments of *normality*. On this basis, Dingwall suggested, health visitors were likely to identify more cases than social workers confirmed.

Professionals, then, bring to the conferences preformed attitudes and dispositions that influence their judgments about the diagnosis and management of the case, as well as their relationship with their colleagues. In their search to understand the forces determining the perspectives that parents and professionals bring to the *child protection arena*, Cleaver and Freeman (1995) draw upon the ideas of social psychologists, such as Harre. Harre (1985) suggests that much behaviour is predictable. In choosing a course of action, he says, we are more likely to choose what worked before. Social interactions are thus, to a degree, routine and explicable within their historical and cultural context. So if a parent's experience of social workers was previously negative, they are likely to approach and frame new interactions with social workers in a negative way. Similarly, the way in which a social worker defines a parent/child interaction will be determined by a complex set of personal social constructs derived from culture and past experiences.

The idea that the meaning of events is varied by the way different versions are produced clearly also draws upon concepts derived from social construct theory (Foucault, 1977), and discourse analysis. Discourse analysts, such as Potter and Wetherell (1987), suggest that a description of an event serves two functions. It discredits other accounts while simultaneously justifying one's own. In considering attitudes this framework provides some beginning concepts for understanding what Cleaver and Freeman term an "operational perspective":

"that collection of socially oriented perceptions which people hold, use and have the power to modify in order to make sense of their daily lives and help them cope with an abuse accusation " (p. 68.)

Attitudes, then, are organised, enduring, socially and emotionally constructed perspectives. In the previous chapter we identified some of the influences professional attitudes had on behaviour in the conference. It was suggested that the initial conference is a set piece - a critical point in the intervention, when operational perspectives are modified by different experiences and new information. Reference was made to crisis theory in relation to the parent's openness to change. This part of the research seeks to establish whether professional attitudes to the involvement of parents changed as a result of their experience at this critical time.

The first function of this part of the research was, therefore, to establish the attitudes of the professionals to parental involvement before it happened, and to determine the levels and quality of training and preparation accorded to the different professional groups. Secondly, the intention was to see if the professionals attitudes changed as a result of their experience, and to explore the factors affecting attitude change. Two dimensions were identified; attitudes across time, and by agency. It was also intended to chart the differences between the areas involving parents (pilot) and those not(control), although in the event this proved to be not fruitful because the respondents attended conferences in both areas.

METHOD

As explained above, the attitude survey aimed to establish the attitudes of all the professionals present at all the conferences held in the six neighbourhood research teams at two different points in time, before parents were involved and after, by means of a postal questionnaire. In the chapter presenting the research methodology, I described how the questionnaire was designed and piloted, and how the names of all the professionals who had attended were obtained. The questionnaire was then sent to all the professionals who had attended thirty four child protection conferences in the six teams (four pilot and two control) in the six months before parents were invited, (November-April, 1991). Non-respondents were followed up by telephone. Then, one year later, the same questionnaire was sent to all the professionals who had attended at least one of the forty conferences in the same areas, (December-May, 1992). They were encouraged to respond by the offer of a lucky draw, and, again, non-respondents were telephoned to encourage them to complete the questionnaire. By this time the four pilot teams had involved parents, training had taken place across the city and the knowledge arising from the experience was widespread. The differences between the pilot and control groups therefore became blurred as the year progressed, and did not play an important part in the analysis.

The questionnaire (see Appendix 3) was designed to allow me to determine the attitudes of the participants in two ways. Firstly, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a series of statements which reflected the most commonly debated arguments for and against parental involvement (see Brown and Water's, 1986). These were outlined in Chapter 3. Negative statements suggested that, for example, in the presence of parents the worker/client relationship would be damaged, the interests of the child become less central and the collection of evidence would be more difficult. Positive statements centred around the greater likelihood that parents would cooperate more closely and that their presence would improve the quality of information shared. These statements, and the responses to them, are laid out in Table 6.

The respondents were then asked a number of open ended questions designed to check consistency, and to provide opportunity for more detailed comments from personal experience. For example, they were asked their views on the advantages and disadvantages of parental participation, on the local procedures, and whether any parents should be excluded. To enable other determinants of attitude to be taken into account, questions were also asked about experience of other meetings with parents present, involvement in policy planning, training and seniority. The open ended questions were coded, and a quantitative analysis of the completed questionnaires was undertaken using SPSS. The quantitative analysis was informed by the qualitative material obtained from the open ended questions, and by the researcher's systematic observation of 22 conferences with parents present, and involvement in the authorities planning and training before and during implementation of the policy.

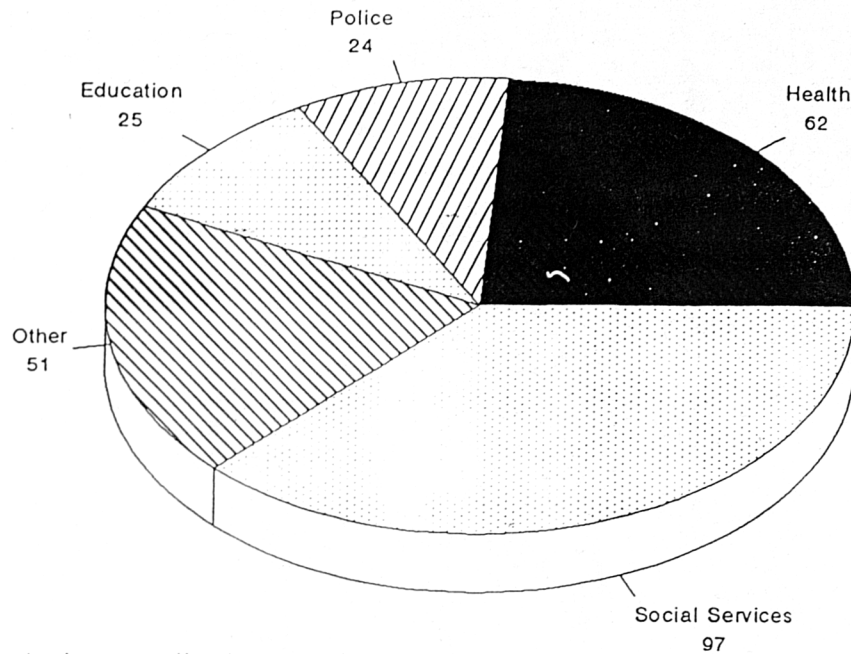
RESULTS

THE SAMPLE

Respondents by agency

Table 1 illustrates the respondents by agency to both questionnaires. As can be seen, the greatest number of respondents was from social services (37%), followed by health (24%), education (10%) and police (9%). The range of different workers from each agency making up the sample has been described in the previous chapter, when professional attendance at the conference was considered. It can be seen that the size of the different professional groups corresponds to the four layers, identified by Hallett (1995), commensurate with their involvement with the primary task. The largest group, social services, for example, includes the managers, the field workers and their team leaders, as well as residential and day care staff. Health respondents represent the second largest professional group after social workers. This includes nine Doctors and fifty three nurses. The nurse respondents comprised twenty four Health visitors, fourteen school nurses, two community midwives and thirteen nursing managers or officers. Education (25) included primary, junior and secondary school class teachers, sometimes the year tutor or head teacher, as well as Education Welfare Officers. The police respondents were

mainly specialist child protection officers. 'Other' includes voluntary agencies, such as NSPCC, Probation, Guardians ad Litem, and solicitors.



Health: includes medical practitioners
Total No. of respondents = 259

Table 5.1: NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS BY AGENCY

In total, two hundred and fifty nine replies were received from the range of statutory and voluntary agencies involved in seventy four conferences, representing a response rate of 61% overall. The response rate from the pilot areas was slightly higher, probably reflecting their familiarity with the research as a result of the researchers involvement in training. Approximately two thirds of the social service employees and health professionals who were sent questionnaires responded. Teachers were the least likely to respond, their reason being lack of time. Other reasons given for not responding included that the worker had left or was sick. Police, although small in number, had a high rate of response.

Respondents by Time

Table 2 demonstrates that three samples were produced:

RESPONDENTS	PRE		POST		MATCHED	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Social Services	49	34	48	40	10	40
Health	31	22	32	27	4	16
Police	12	9	12	10	3	12
Education	14	10	10	9	3	12
Other	35	25	16	14	5	20
TOTAL	141	100	118	100	25	100

Pre\Post implementation of the policy

Table 5.2: SAMPLES BY AGENCY AND BY TIME

The three samples comprised one of one hundred and forty one professionals who attended thirty-four conferences during the six months before parental involvement was implemented (pre-implementation); one of one hundred and eighteen who attended forty conferences after parental involvement had been implemented, including twenty eight with parents present (post-implementation); and a third, comprising the twenty five respondents who had been to conferences both before and after parental involvement (matched). The matched sample comprises workers mainly in senior or managerial positions with the most experience of conferences. The post sample differs from the pre sample in that the professionals by then had more experience of conferences generally, more had been involved in other meetings with parents and a higher percentage were trained.

TRAINING

*"Tis Education forms the common mind,
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined"*

Pope, (1743).Moral Essays.

"Education and training are not luxuries; it is essential that all members of staff working in child protection are properly trained for the jobs they are expected to do. Inter-agency training is essential if inter-agency procedures are to function satisfactorily"

Working Together (1991) (7.7)

Training in preparation for parental involvement was undertaken for the Area Child Protection Committee by the training section of the authorities social services department and provided on a multi-disciplinary basis. There were differences by agency and over time in the amount of training relevant to parental involvement received (see Table 3). Before implementation 41% of all the respondents were trained. As would be expected, more were trained in the pilot group at this stage than in the control. Health professionals were the most likely to be trained (80%), and the teachers the least (23%) At the post-implementation stage 62% had been trained, the increase being mainly for social services staff. No difference was found with regard to training between the professionals who had and had not attended conferences with parents present, largely because by the time the second questionnaire was received, training and preparation had been carried out on a city wide basis.

Respondents rated the training they had received as good, especially valuing the opportunity to share differing professional perceptions in an inter-agency forum. Training was regarded as providing an opportunity to relieve anxiety and to acquire the necessary knowledge about the legislative framework and local procedures. A principal social worker expressed this succinctly;

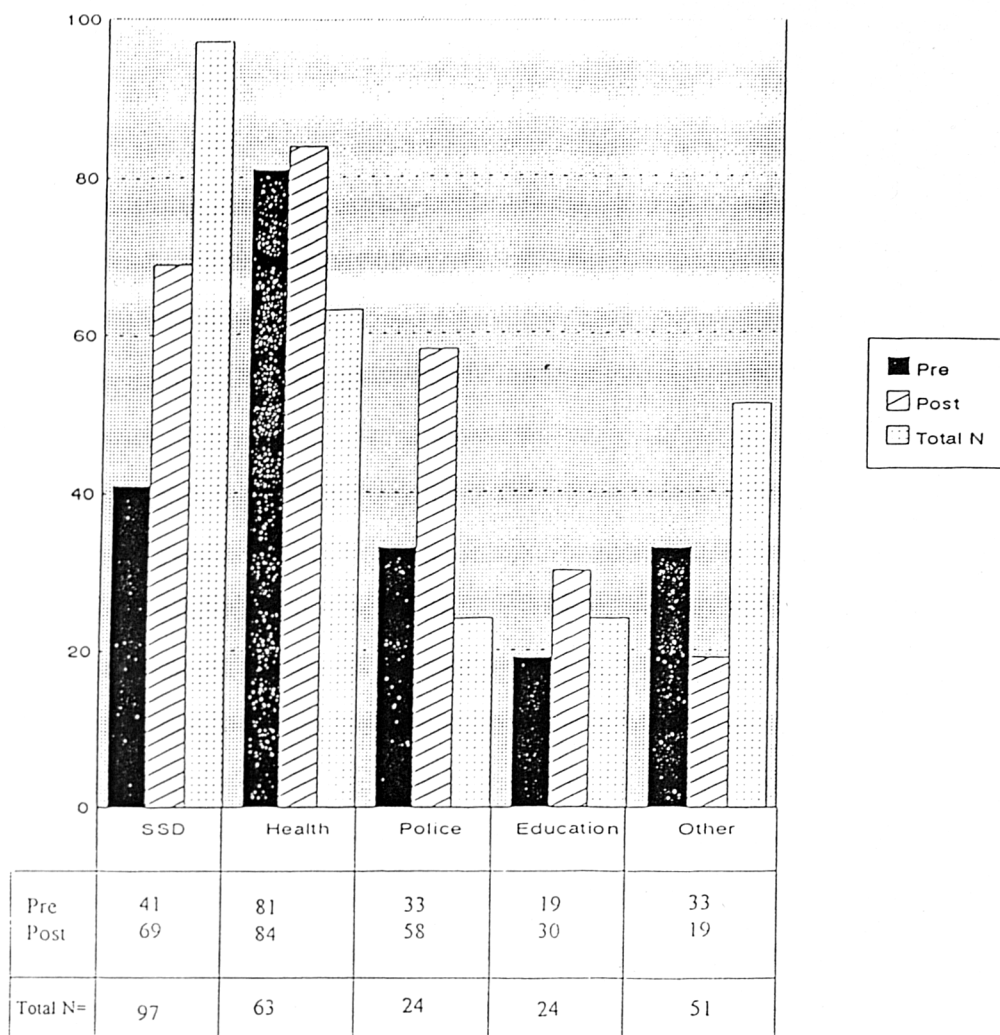
"Training should include the rules of procedure, preparation of reports, what is and is not admissible at conferences, and how to protect a child who is making an allegation against parents who are attending a conference"

Principal social worker.

Pre-implementation of the policy, only 39% of all the respondents had seen the authorities documentation, and only 26% been given an opportunity to discuss the issues. Post-implementation a half of all the respondents had seen the documentation and a third discussed it. This emphasis in training on procedures is, therefore, not surprising.

Discussion of the role of the chair was also considered an important aspect of the training. In her research on chairing conferences, Lewis (1994) found that the chairperson was seen as key in containing the anxiety of participants. This study also suggests that the participants expect the chairperson to manage difficult situations carefully, and to contain the high level of anxiety that is generated. The fear of provoking violence, either during the conference, or afterwards on home visits, was tangible and strategies for managing and defusing violence were high on the training agenda. Skills training was appreciated, particularly the opportunity to role play a difficult situation involving parents, such as *"how to say nasties nicely"*. The value of role play as a method of learning was commented on, providing opportunities to test out, for example, ways of presenting sensitive information about the abuse. From a senior nurse:

"Perhaps not all the full facts will emerge if workers have not had preparation on being used to sharing information with their client, and have tried this out"



Health: includes medical practitioners
 Pre/post: implementation of policy
 SSD: Social Services Department

Table 5.3: PERCENTAGE TRAINED BY AGENCY

Table 4 illustrates the respondents views on what the content and method of training should include. There were differences between what the first and second questionnaire respondents chose to highlight which suggested that the level of anxiety had been reduced as a result of positive experiences. The sharp focus on skills training at the first stage was

on the management of self: how to be assertive, how to be sensitive to cultural issues, how to use language and avoid jargon. By the second stage respondents were more interested in the management of particular issues, such as what to say when one parent had a secret from the other. An example was where a pregnancy had been terminated. There was a greater preoccupation with the special needs of those participants who only rarely attended conferences, such as teachers. They found it useful to share good practice guidelines with staff who had already been to conferences with parents present. The view of what was needed therefore changed over time, from wanting input on procedural issues and skills training, to a preoccupation at the second stage with the management of particular issues.

TRAINING CONTENT	TRAINING METHOD
<p>An information base:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> of the legal situation of Leeds procedures of the role of the chair 	<p>Formal input</p>
<p>Skills Training - especially:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assertiveness being open help in report writing presentation of self and material 	<p>Role Play</p>
<p>Sensitivity awareness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> awareness of how participants are feeling awareness of racial/religious issues awareness of use of language, jargon, etc 	<p>Role play and interagency discussion</p>

Table 5.4: RESPONDENTS VIEWS OF WHAT TRAINING SHOULD INCLUDE

There were also differences by agency in what was wanted and what was valued, reflecting the differing value and knowledge bases of the differing professional groups (see Hallett and Birchall, 1992) As was suggested at the beginning of this chapter with reference to by Dingwall's work, social workers more commonly focussed on the parents' feelings:

"thinking about how parents will feel at conferences, and preparing them before the meeting"

Social Worker

The nurse respondents were more specific in their identification of training needs, citing help with report writing and training in presentation and communication skills, especially on how to be assertive and how to challenge parents in the conference without upsetting them. Nurses feared that parents would deny access to the child if they knew what the nurses really thought of them, particularly in matters of cleanliness, (see Smart, 1992). Training was seen by the nurses as an opportunity to share experiences, and to explore the emotional impact of the experience on themselves. Sometimes this was considerable. School nurses, in particular, and some health visitors, raised in training events their feelings of isolation following a conference when no support was available to them in their agencies. The debriefing available to the small specialised group of police officers, and to social workers through their supervision arrangements, was not available to a number of the nurses, especially those working in non-social work agencies, such as schools. The same was true to a degree for the teachers, but generally their Head teachers were involved, or other support systems were provided within their service by designated staff.

The main anxiety expressed by the teachers in the questionnaires was that their relationship with the child and the family would be damaged as a result of their involvement in the child protection work, (see Webster, 1992). This belief could help to explain their low response rate to the questionnaires and level of attendance at the training events. The reasons given by teachers in other studies are mainly logistic, for example lack of time and the difficulty in reorganising the timetable, (see Hallett and Birchall,

1992). More sophisticated explanations for this behaviour were suggested in the previous chapter, (see Wattam, 1992).

The police saw training as an opportunity to think together about how to manage sensitive information:

"How to be upfront with all the information throughout the investigation. And how to eliminate fear at the conference"

Detective Sergeant

Their preoccupation with managing information is not surprising because of the primacy of their investigative role. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 requires that a person committing a criminal offence should be warned that any statements they make about the offence may subsequently be used in evidence if trial ensues. However, information is invalidated as evidence if a caution has not been issued, (see Kenward, 1992). Training events were used by the police to consider how these issues could be managed in an inter-agency forum, and to consider the importance of planning and preparation beforehand, for example, in sharing confidential information with the chairperson.

In summary, the training needs of the respondents differed by agency, reflecting professional backgrounds and priorities. Training was valued, and was seen as an opportunity to share and modify perspectives. While inter-agency training does engender a more collaborative approach to working together in the conference, it seems likely that it also reduces inter-agency conflict and promotes consensus.

PREPARATION

In common with other areas, the Area Child Protection Committee in this authority produced a policy document outlining the policies and procedures to be used for involving parents in the conference (see Appendix 1). The consultation and planning process was ongoing throughout the year of the research, and a research objective was to ascertain the

agencies' levels of involvement in the process. This information would reveal details about management and communication patterns within agencies which could further understanding of the professionals' attitudes to parental involvement (see Hallet and Birchall, 1992, and Thoburn et al, 1995).

Information about preparation covered four areas of activity. The questionnaire asked respondents if they had:

- * **seen the relevant documents**, such as the policy and practice statement, or the leaflets and letters for parents;
- * **been given the opportunity to discuss them** in their own agency;
- * **been consulted** about them;
- * **been involved in planning** the implementation.

Again, there were differences over time, and by agency. The numbers involved on all four aspects increased over time. For example, by the time of the second questionnaire more of the respondents had seen the documentation (56%, over 39%), the biggest increase being in social services personnel. This finding compares with Thoburn et al's (1995). In her study 57% of the social workers were fully aware of agency policy, and team leaders had a key role in communicating it. It is of some concern to note from my study, however, that even at the second stage the numbers involved in planning(14%) and consultation (22%) remained very small, and only 34% had discussed it in their teams. This finding implies a remarkably bureaucratic approach to a sensitive issue closely affecting fieldworkers daily lives, and will be discussed later.

As with training, nurses were more likely than other professionals to have seen the documentation (62%), compared to the police (40%), and the social workers (38%), and they were more likely to have been consulted and involved in the planning. The situation was reversed when respondents were asked if they had been given the opportunity in their agency to discuss it: 50% of the social workers had discussed it at a meeting compared to 33% of the nurses, and 10% of the teachers. Clearly, there were particular problems for workers in the voluntary sector in accessing information. Since they make up a sizable

proportion of the sample this needs to be addressed. As the Officer in Charge of a Mother and Baby home put it:

"It would have been helpful to have received the policies behind the decisions and been a party to some discussions before the event"

Officer in Charge.

In summary, these findings suggest that agencies differ in the ways in which they disperse information. Social services appear to rely as much upon informal as formal means of communication, and over time information is communicated. Within the nursing profession, there was a pattern whereby nurse managers were commonly involved in planning and consultation, while their fieldworkers were less likely than social workers to have been given an opportunity to discuss the documents. There were particular problems for teachers who may only attend one conference in a career, and their preparation and training attempted to take account of that by providing designated staff within the school who would be available for consultation.

ATTITUDES

Overall, the findings on the attitudes of professionals to the involvement of parents confirms the largely positive findings from other studies mentioned (Thoburn, 1991, Thoburn et al, 1995) In my study the views expressed by this officer in charge nicely represent the common attitude to the strengths of the policy, as well as some reservations:

" Involving parents opens up professional relationships. The parents role as primary carers is acknowledged. It ensures information given is recorded and given objectively, and should lessen value judgments. However, it could be threatening for parents, and sometimes for staff - especially if violence has been threatened"

Officer In Charge, Childrens Home.

Table 6 lays out the responses to the negative and positive statements. In the first questionnaire (pre-implementation), more than two thirds of all the respondents believed that parents would be more likely to cooperate (82%), that working relationships would improve (70%), that the quality of information shared would be improved (68%), and that parents would be encouraged to maintain contact with their children (68%). There was, nevertheless, a strong concern (72%) that discussion would be inhibited, and lesser concerns that conferences would become pseudo courts of law (46%) and that evidence would be more difficult to collect. There was also a shared view that parents should be excluded from some conferences, and that they should leave at the decision making stage. The issue of parents leaving at the decision making stage is controversial, and will be discussed in the chapter on parents interviews. Agencies differed in their attitudes at this stage, social services being the most positive of the four main agencies, and police and teachers the least.

By the time the second questionnaire was returned (post-implementation), there were differences over time and between agencies. Table 7 demonstrates that, overall, attitudes became more positive over time in response to all the statements, so that by the end of the project 92% of all the respondents were in favour compared with 79% at the beginning.

" This is the first time I have been at a case conference with parents in attendance. I can only applaud the policy"

Midwife.

Social workers are the most positive on the first survey, and there was less room for attitudes to change. Since they readily identify with the caring elements of the protective function, and form the 'core group' (Hallett, 1995), this generally positive attitude is to be expected. Health professionals are nearer in attitude to social workers on a number of points. The biggest attitude shift is demonstrated by the police. Writers have suggested that the professions of social work and police have moved closer together as a result of such initiatives as the recent joint interviewing procedures (Thomas, 1986, Parton, 1995).

The evidence of my research into the way different professional groups have aligned in their attitudes supports this view.

ATTITUDES PRE AND POST IMPLEMENTATION, BY AGENCY

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES	Confidential info can't be shared		Case confs will become pseudo courts of law		Discussion will be inhibited		Collection of evidence will be made difficult		Construction of CP plan will be more difficult		Interests of the child will be less central	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
					PERCENTAGE IN AGREEMENT							
SSD	19	12	33	17	59	58	27	21	10	13	29	26
Health	33	32	43	26	69	58	50	23	15	10	45	39
Police	81	75	67	25	100	75	75	50	25	0	42	17
Education	35	20	57	20	84	50	42	30	14	10	43	10
Other	54	25	54	31	71	63	53	47	34	20	57	53
Total	38	26	46	22	72	60	45	28	19	11	42	30
Matched	32	28	40	8	64	64	48	28	12	8	36	40
POSITIVE ATTITUDES	Quality of info shared will be improved		Working relationships btwn workers & parents will be improved		Parental cooperation will be more likely		Parents will be encouraged to maintain contact with their children		Parents should be excluded from some case conferences		Parents should leave decision making stage	
					PERCENTAGE IN AGREEMENT							
SSD	86	81	77	88	85	88	72	72	37	65	20	15
Health	50	84	60	87	71	87	64	83	81	47	61	39
Police	25	83	58	58	92	58	50	42	92	73	58	50
Education	79	70	57	90	76	90	64	80	64	60	79	40
Other	71	81	80	44	85	44	74	67	60	20	60	56
Total	69	81	70	79	82	84	68	72	60	53	49	32
Matched	56	84	56	76	84	84	68	72	72	56	56	44

NUMBER OF SAMPLE	Pre	Post	Matched
SSD	49	48	10
Health	31	32	4
Police	12	12	3
Education	14	10	3
Other	35	16	5
	141	118	25 (all p)

Overall, in favour	Pre	Post
whole sample	79	92
matched sample	68	96

Table 5.5 ATTITUDES TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, PRE AND POST IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY, BY AGENCY

IN FAVOUR	SSD	Health*	Police	Education	Other
Pre-implementation	93	80	66	78	62
Post-implementation	92	93	92	100	87
Total Replies;	N = 95	62	24	24	47

*** includes Doctors**

Table 5.6: PERCENTAGE IN FAVOUR, OVERALL, OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Turning to the other professional groups, particularly those whose primary focus is not child protection, their views generally became more positive. An exception is the 'other' group, comprising solicitors, community workers and probation officers, who declared the impact on working relationships to be negative:

"Both parents and agencies may be intimidated from expressing opinions. Parents may say things that are prejudicial. Impossible to discuss future options openly"

Solicitor.

This data suggests that there is a relationship between the four layers identified by Hallett (1995), and attitude. Those professional groups closest to the core - to the task of child protection - are the most positive, at least in principle, to the involvement of parents. At the same time, the analysis suggests that attitudes move closer together with experience. Social workers modify their principles in response to the difficulties of practice, and the other professional groupings become more positive toward the principle.

Turning to the specific issues, Table 6 illustrates how attitude shifts vary by agency and over time in relation to the specific positive and negative statements. For example, the fear that conferences involving parents will become like pseudo courts of law is dramatically diminished, whereas the concern that discussion will be inhibited by the parents presence continues to be held by 60% of the second sample.

"I feel other information may have been presented and considered regarding the child's home situation, especially mother's lack of protective skills, if parent wasn't there....Many views were muted"

Health Visitor.

Related to the fear that "people present may not 'dare' say something", was the conviction that in some conferences parents should leave for part of the discussion, and in others be excluded altogether. Categories mentioned included cases of sexual abuse where both partners were perpetrators; where the child had made allegations unknown to the parents and where parents may be disruptive. A sizable number of the health professionals (39%), teachers (40%) and the police (50%) continue to think some parents should leave at the decision-making stage.

" I feel members of such a mixed group need the opportunity to discuss sensitive areas together before the parents are involved, particularly where the situation is not clear cut"

General Practitioner

The view that parents should be excluded from some conferences also continues to be held, and in the case of social services increases significantly from 37% to 65%. By the end of the project 59% believe that some parents should be excluded altogether. The reasons for this seem to connect with quite specific difficulties, and these will be explored in the next chapter which looks at the professionals response to each case, rather than to the policy in general. It seems possible that the very positive arguments in favour of

parental involvement are similar to those relating to partnership identified at the beginning of this thesis. Social workers are, in principle, strongly supportive of the ideology, but find problems arise with the implementation.

The preoccupation certain professional groups had with particular issues remained. One third of the health respondents and three-quarters of the police maintained their concern about the sharing of confidential information, although this concern was not shared by social workers (12%). Nurses were also more likely than other professionals to find conferences with parents more stressful, partly because they were bigger and longer.

"Parental attendance lengthens the time taken and increases stress to professionals already under pressure"

Health Visitor.

Nurses remained uncertain how to handle hearsay or opinion in their reports, especially where this could not be substantiated. Some felt obliged to dilute negative statements and overstress the positives, which could seriously hinder the assessment of risk. And they shared the concern of other professionals that attention could move onto the parents and away from the child.

"Parental attention can fudge the focus of the case conference by concentrating on fairness to the parents rather than risk to the child. "

Solicitor.

Some professionals expressed concern that parents' distress in the conference was communicated, thus affecting their concentration by arousing unhelpful feelings of helplessness, fear or sympathy.

"I found it difficult to separate off feelings of sympathy for the mother from risk to J. We eventually decided not to

register on the basis that the mother was accepting help voluntarily and admitted the incident"

Social worker.

At the same time there was consensus on the benefits of parental involvement, especially regarding improvements in the quality of information shared, and in working relationships. Parents' contributions were seen as adding to the information available, as well as correcting false information, and, in most cases, it was felt the professionals were more focussed and precise when presenting material in front of parents; "less unsubstantiated opinion and more facts."

Professionals from all the agencies also felt it was valuable for the parents to see an inter-agency perspective, and this made them feel less isolated:

"It certainly makes parents more aware of just how many agencies are involved with decision making. I'm sure very few know the school nurse is in any way involved".

School Nurse.

Professionals clearly felt that they worked more closely as a group in front of parents. As previously observed, the role of the chair in managing the group dynamic has been explored by Lewis (1994), and has also been found to be critical in dispersing conflict (Hallett, 1995). While this was seen as helpful in that it defused anxiety by spreading responsibility for the decisions made - Farmer and Owen (1995) describe this as "a form of insurance cover....which many experienced as protective" - it raises the possibility that conflict will be minimised. It will be remembered that the move toward consensus was also seen as a product of inter-agency training events. Issues arising from this observation will be developed as the thesis progresses.

While the questionnaires elicited information about attitude trends, as suggested above the attitudes described here are not directly connected with the characteristics of the particular

conferences attended. A study of this was undertaken and forms part of the analysis in the next chapter (see also Bell, 1996). It is important to note here that there is a divergence between the general attitudes recorded and the views of the professionals on a particular conference. The following comments from workers on one case illustrate this point:

"This case conference was too difficult for the professionals to hold with the parents present. Information was not forthcoming and had to be prized out of the professionals at various stages"

Consultant Paediatrician

At the same conference, however, the social worker and the Health Visitor had very different observations:

"I had nothing controversial to say at this case conference but may have felt different in a more difficult situation"

Health Visitor.

"This was the first case conference I have attended with parents present. It was extremely positive to have them there. I did not feel restricted, and was able to speak honestly and openly while they were there."

Social Worker.

DISCUSSION

The initial child protection conference is a crucial element in the protection of children at risk. The way in which the involvement of parents in this meeting is prepared for, managed and experienced by the professionals is therefore critical if the dual objectives of protecting the child and building a partnership with parents are to be achieved. This study demonstrates that the four main agencies - social services, health, education and the police

- are generally in favour of parental involvement and they become more positive as a result of their experience. Health professionals, and nurses in particular, are closest in their attitudes to social workers, occupying the middle ground between them and the police and teachers. While health continue to share with the police a specific concern about confidentiality, their anxiety that discussion will be inhibited, and that the interests of the child will become less central are shared with all other groups. The professionals suggested, further, that there were particular cases and situations where consideration of the child's protection was made more difficult by the parents presence and this is explored in a later chapter. The question as to whether including parents at this early stage of a child abuse investigation forms an essential component of partnership practice will also form a central plank for discussion in this thesis.

The interagency consensus on the *advantages and drawbacks of involving parents* is important. This part of the research has suggested that both experience and inter-agency training brings perceptions closer together. Agreement on the benefits is likely to engender a shared commitment to the task, which is factor known to contribute to good inter-agency relationships. Hallett and Stevenson (1980) have drawn attention to the difficulties arising in work where professionals with no common background in training or agency structure have to find ways of communicating in a conference "in an hour or two, without the kind of shorthand that is used by those who share a knowledge base or frame of reference". A shared commitment to the ideology of working in partnership with parents does provide a common language and value base, as well as an objective that is agreed by all the agencies and supported by the legislative framework of the Children Act 1989. It is significant, therefore, that one of the benefits professionals mentioned was that they felt less isolated as a result of being seen by the parents as a member of a working group.

Of equal importance is an acceptance that there can be drawbacks. Pressure to underplay the professional anxieties that these questionnaires revealed comes from a number of sources - the polemical nature of some of the literature, the emphasis in the research studies on the positives, and the understandable need of the agencies to present a united

front. As previously observed, the need for all the agencies to demonstrate a commitment to collaboration and coordination came not just from Working Together. It was a response to the high level of criticism in a number of child abuse enquiries on poor interagency coordination and a reflection of the increased importance that the initial child protection conference had taken in the system. Involving parents heightened anxieties about interagency conflict, as it was felt that *risk to the child might increase if parents observed chinks in the armour*. The attitude survey illustrated the anxiety of the professionals on this point.

"Parents will see that decisions are joint" (Social Worker).

"The meeting could end up as a battle ground if the professionals don't agree" (Education Welfare Officer).

"The possibility of parents seeing hostilities of the agencies could increase risk to the child" (Detective Sergeant)

One consequence of the strong emphasis on working together is the push toward consensus. A number of writers in this area have expressed concern about this (Hallett and Birchall, 1992, Stevenson, 1995, Farmer and Owen, 1995). Hallett found a striking absence of dissent and conflict between professions (1993), as did Farmer and Owen (1995). They wrote; " One important aspect of the conference was that it helped to cement relationships between agencies. Little overt disagreement was expressed about risks or registration, and there was a strong prohibition against any criticism of professional performance. As a result, some important dissenting information was not utilised, and deficiencies in the current handling of ongoing cases were occasionally glossed over" (p 101). Support for this position is provided by my research.

A further concern in relation to the push for consensus is discussed by Hallett and Birchall (1992) in their consideration of the work of Weiss (1981) and Steele (1976). These writers warned of the danger that communication and clear information sharing could

become an end in itself. The risk that the conference becomes preoccupied with process, and neglects outcomes was discussed in the preceding chapter in relation to the lack of attention paid to the child protection plan. It will also be pursued in more detail in the chapter on the parents interviews. Murphy (1995) has suggested that a focus on procedures masks interprofessional problems, and risks marginalising the needs of the child. The emphasis on procedures that emerged from the findings on training provides further evidence in this debate.

The attitude study provides an original contribution to knowledge about *the training needs* of the different agencies. Thoburn et al's (1995) research raises the question of training with the social work managers, all of whom were committed to the idea of further training, and believed the resources were available to do it. However, there is no comment on the content or value of the training they had received. In my study, the value of inter-agency training, and the role of the Area Child Protection Committee in supporting that, was emphasised by all the agencies. The study also illustrated that training needs change over time, with the need for cognitive information and the opportunity to share anxieties shifting to a preoccupation with particular issues.

In addition to the information on content, the views on methods of learning highlight the different training orientations that the agencies bring with them. Nurses, for example, commented that they valued experiential methods of learning, and that they were less used to this learning technique than the social workers. Nurses also most valued the skills training, especially in being assertive. They also needed help to own their expertise and to present it in a confident manner in front of parents who might be hostile, upset or in disagreement with their definition of the situation as abusive. Tattersall (1992) has drawn attention to the impact on communication of power relations between the professionals involved. Because Doctors and some other professionals round the table are perceived to have a higher professional status than nurses and health visitors it can be difficult for the latter to speak and be heard. Nurse training, in particular, should therefore include teaching on how to communicate assertively. The issue of power is raised in all parts of the research, and will be a theme to be pursued in this thesis.

The attitude study also drew attention to the impact of the *different organisational and management structures* on the professionals' experience of attending conferences, especially when anxiety was high. There was a clear connection between training needs and departmental organisational structures, since what was wanted in training - information about local procedures and the opportunity to discuss them - was not routinely provided within the agencies. Of course, discussion in an inter-agency forum will be beneficial, but should build on top of and not substitute for basic communication within agencies. A particular issue for management raised by the respondents related to supervision and support structures. The essential part played by supervision in child protection work is now widely acknowledged (Sheldon, 1987, Jervis, 1988, Gibson et al, 1989, Working Together, 1991). Respondents in this study, particularly those not in the main core group, such as teachers and school nurses, vividly communicated their need for debriefing and support after the emotional experience of the conference. Supervision goes much further than merely providing support, however; it is often the only place professionals can be enabled to become aware of the feelings and inhibitions around the table, and of their source.

Drawing on Mattinson's work on the reflection process (1975), and Mattinson and Sinclair (1979), in their action research project tracing dynamic links between clients, practitioners and agencies, Woodhouse and Pengelly (1991) focus attention on the power of these unconscious processes in professional encounters; *"A case discussion group for example, can also be a reflecting medium whereby psychological features in one relationship system - the client - are unconsciously conducted, via the 'bridging' worker, into another adjacent one - the group"* (p

Professionals catapulted into a situation fraught with risk and anxiety, and working with children who have been seriously abused, require time, space and quality supervision before the conference to manage these feelings so that they do not get turned into inter-agency issues in the conference, thus affecting the assessment and consideration of risk. This is particularly true in cases of sexual abuse, which respondents mentioned as being among the most difficult cases, and included in their list of which parents should be

excluded. Furnis (1991) draws attention to the particular problems raised by cases of sexual abuse: "The disclosure of child sexual abuse often leads to a crisis in the professional network which can be greater and sometimes more complex and confusing than the family crisis" (p.16). The effect of the mirroring process on the professionals experience will be returned to in the discussion on difficult conferences, (see Bell, 1996)

Agencies differ in the ways in which they provide *support and supervision* for their members. In their work on dangerous families, Dale et al (1986) drew attention to the importance of team working; "Teams need to allocate time to look after themselves. The teams need to meet the individual emotional needs of its members is of crucial importance" (p 208). In my research, the relationship between supervision and management in the agencies represented seemed to be most comfortably held in the Social Services Department. This is not to say that all the fieldworkers were happy with the quality and amount of supervision they received, as the commentary on the interviews with the social workers will later show. But the recognition and structures were in place. The difficulties referred to by social workers were not structural. The monitoring study suggested they related more to lack of resources, such as administrative back up, adequate time and space for supervision, and facilities to offer to families. The police, also, worked closely as a specialist team and did not express lack of agency support.

The findings show that, in contrast, the nurses were less likely than workers from the other professional groups to have had these opportunities within their own agency structure. Lyth-Menzies (1960) has suggested that nurses have traditionally organised themselves so that feelings do not interfere with the successful completion of practical tasks. This research suggests that the management structure of the nursing profession served them well in the consultation and planning process in which their senior members were involved, but did not so adequately meet the emotional needs of the fieldworkers. Nurses said that they needed the opportunity to prepare themselves for parental involvement by discussing their apprehensions beforehand, and that they needed support and debriefing afterwards.

Moreover, evidence from the parents interviews suggests that the attendance at the conference of managers as supervisors has implications for all the conference attenders, (see Bell, 1996) While some nurses may experience their managers' presence as supportive, others perceive it as a threat to their professional autonomy and feel constrained and deskilled by it. This finding supports the work of Parkinson (1992), who found in studying the supervision of community nurses in child protection in Tower Hamlets,

" that the managerial and professional elements of the supervision function can be contradictory in that staff will not necessarily want to reveal their innermost anxieties to their line manager who has a personnel function in respect of them. And yet they actually need to share and explore such concerns if they are able to develop both personally and professionally."

The other agencies also had line managers present, but their roles were different. In the case of social services, for example, the team leader may also have had contact with the family, and the principals were present to offer expert guidance on the case, not as supervisors.

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICE POINTS

This part of the research has suggested that the professionals involved continued to have some reservations about the advantages of parental involvement in all cases, as well as strong and often complex emotions about the families who are attending, and the abuse that is being investigated. (Baglow 1990, Dale 1986, Finklehor 1985) Woodhouse and Pengelly (1991) have suggested that these powerful feelings may be carried into the conference in ways that are destructive to good decision-making. The attitude study has identified the nature of the hopes and fears the professionals carried in to the conference. The location of these feelings needs to be properly understood to prevent their interference with the child protection task. Some arose from general attitudes to policy and procedures, others were located in professional and inter-agency dynamics and others were more specifically rooted in emotions aroused by the particular family.

In the following chapter these findings will be pursued further in relation to individual cases.

A number of practical suggestions emerged from the attitude survey. The role of Area Child Protection Committee in supporting interagency training, in ensuring efficient circulation of documentation to the ae agencies, and in reviewing and refining policy and practice is underlined. Senior Child Protection Coordinators, in their role as chairmen, need to attend to issues raised by professionals in this study. For example, ensuring there are separate waiting facilities for families and professionals, ensuring that issues arising from confidential information are resolved before the conference; or by making special provision for the situations identified here which cause particular difficulties, such as where the child has disclosed but the parents deny the abuse. This may require that parents are asked to leave for part of the conference, or that other ways are found for presenting their views. Such measures would be supported by inter-agency training events, employing experiential learning and skills training, and by managers taking responsibility for ensuring that all staff receive the necessary documentation, and are given opportunities for group discussion. Special attention should be given to the provision of support networks for staff in agencies whose primary function is not child protection, such as school nurses.

SIX

THE PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS ON THE 36 CONFERENCES IN WHICH PARENTS PARTICIPATED: 'SHARING HONEY WITH THE BEAR'

*"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and the entrances;
And one man in his life plays many parts."*

Shakespeare, As You Like It.

The last chapter described the attitudes of the professionals involved in all conferences in the six neighbourhood research teams before and after the implementation of the policy. Professionals approved of parental involvement and attitudes became more positive over time. There were abiding concerns over the degree to which discussion in the conference might be inhibited, and the view that some parents should be excluded from some conferences prevailed. There were some differences in attitude between the four main agencies involved.

The concept of the operational perspective was used to explain why and how the different professional groups bring their differing professional perspectives to the conference, and it was found that attitudes did change in response to the experience of conferences with

parents present. In line with the other studies mentioned, (Thoburn 1995, Farmer and Owen 1995, Cleaver and Freeman 1995 and Hallett 1995), the findings were basically positive.

The purpose in this chapter is to undertake a more focused exploration of what it was like for the professionals' to 'share honey with the bear' (Blom-Cooper, 1987) in conferences where parents were present. Additionally, it will construct a more detailed analysis of cases where the presence of parents was thought to affect the participation of the professionals, the assessment of risk and the decision to register. The cases are then further analysed to reveal which conferences the professionals found the most straightforward, and which the most difficult. The aim is to determine whether any characteristics in the management of the conference, or in a particular family situation, or in a particular location were associated with negative responses.

METHOD

At the end of every conference held where parents had attended during the research period each professional present was given a brief questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire (see Appendix 4) was designed to be easy and straightforward to fill in to ensure a high completion rate, and addressed the main concerns that had emerged from the first attitude survey. The professionals were asked whether the parent's presence had been helpful in assessing risk to the child, to what degree it had affected their participation and whether the decision to register or the recommendations were influenced by the parent's presence. Additionally, it asked the professionals to judge whether they thought the conference, and the registration, was necessary to protect the child, and for any other comments.

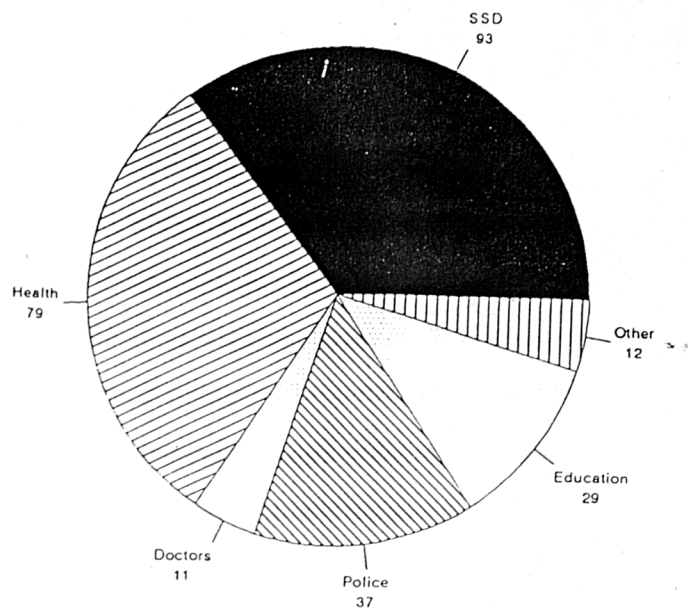
The questionnaires were completed in confidence and either returned by post or handed to the researcher at the end of the conference. As with questionnaires used in other parts of the research, the comments were coded, and the completed questionnaires were analysed quantitatively using SPSS. A more sophisticated statistical analysis was undertaken to assess the degree of difficulty by case, and this is explained in the relevant

part of the text. Additionally, the analysis of this data draws upon my observations of twenty two of these conferences, as well as being informed by data collected in the other parts of the research, in particular the attitude survey, the monitoring study and the interviews with the parents.

Thirty six conferences involving parents were held during the period of the research. From a total attendance of 298 professionals, 261 questionnaires were returned. The number of questionnaires received per case varied from one to fourteen, an average of seven per case. The response rate was high, at 88%.

The sample

The respondents represented a diverse group of professionals from all agencies which may be involved in a child protection investigation, and with varying amounts of experience of conference attendance and training for it. As can be seen from Table 1, and, as would be expected, the professional groupings are in similar proportions to the attitude survey. Social services form the largest group of respondents (36%), containing social workers (16%), principal social workers (16%), as well as workers from day care and residential establishments (4%). The second group comprises health personnel (27%): health visitors (13%), school nurses, community nurses and midwives (7%), and their managers (7%). Paediatricians, community medical officers and General Practitioners also responded, but only formed a small part of the sample (4%). The police attended nearly every conference, but comprise a relatively small proportion of the sample because they attended alone (13%). The same was true for the local authority solicitors (4%) Education was represented by primary and secondary school class and head teachers, special needs specialists and Education Welfare (9%). Other (5%) comprised the same groups as have been described previously.



Total N = 261

Table 6.1: NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS BY AGENCY

RESULTS

Overall opinions

Table 2 shows that, overall, the respondents found the involvement of parents helpful in over threequarters of the conferences researched (83%), and thought it provided a sound beginning platform for working in partnership. There was little difference between agencies, education being the least positive (73% said helpful) and the police the most (94%). Ninety per cent of the respondents believed it was correct to hold a conference.

"Parental attendance greatly enhanced the chances of the child and parent being helped effectively."

Principal social worker.

In some cases the professionals did not think that the parents' presence had any effect:

"I didn't think parental attendance made any difference whatsoever to the conference and was neither helpful or unhelpful."

Woman police constable.

However, 12% of the respondents considered the assessment of risk to have been hindered, and seven per cent reported that the participation of some professionals was adversely affected.

"In all case conferences where parents have attended I feel it has worked against the interests of the child, except where some of the evidence has been given in camera. In other discussions I feel strongly that parents should attend, but not at case conference level."

Special needs coordinator, Education.

Generally the findings in this part of my study consolidated those already presented, and were similar to those reported in the other research studies cited. In my study, as in the others, the respondents believed that parents:

- * had a right to attend;**
- * that involving parents resulted in more effective conference practice and decision making;**
- * and that interventions were more positive because parents had been included.**

A number of the general comments in the questionnaires (often from social workers) reflected the strong value position held by some workers, that it was unjust to exclude parents and that the implementation of the policy was long overdue:

"Feels like taking parents with us, rather than doing things to them... makes us more precise... concentrates the mind."

Principal case worker.

"It is impossible to consider the child's future without full participation and involvement from the parents themselves."

Officer in charge, day nursery.

The proportion of respondents in my study who found parental participation, overall, helpful, is higher than that found in similar studies in Lewisham (63%) and Hackney (53%). In both of those London boroughs, a higher proportion of professionals said the parents presence neither helped nor hindered - it made no difference. However, in Lewisham and Hackney, as in my study, only 10% reported parents presence as being positively unhelpful.

Turning to the other research, Farmer and Owen (1995) reported that the social workers they interviewed subscribed to the notion that participation would be therapeutic for the parent. Thoburn et al (1995) found that the social workers they interviewed strongly supported, in principle, the attendance of parents at conferences, the most frequently given reasons being rights and effectiveness arguments. Thoburn rates 49% of the social workers in her study as backing the effectiveness argument, 38% favoured the rights argument, and 9% the therapeutic argument. These arguments will be returned to. The similarity between my and Thoburn's findings in this respect are striking, and her comments are worth quoting:

" Over half the responses were that the presence of parents resulted in less gossip, and more accurate and clear information. Other positive responses were that the conference was a more honest meeting, more professional and more focussed....and better organised....The negative replies contained views that the conference was more contentious, uncomfortable and longer; that it was daunting for parents; that some

professionals colluded publicly with parents or browbeat them...The largest group suggested that the professionals were inhibited." (p. 113)

OVERALL, PROFESSIONALS VIEWS:

Parental attendance was:

helpful	81%
don't know	10%
unhelpful	9%

Was consideration of risk:

improved	45%
unaffected	42%
hindered	12%

Was participation of professionals affected:

beneficially	18%
not at all	67%
adversely	7%

Was decision to register affected:

yes	11%
mixed	6%
no	74%

Were recommendations influenced:

yes	20%
mixed	9%
no	67%

Table 6.2: OPINIONS OF 261 PROFESSIONALS ON THE PRESENCE OF PARENTS AT 36 CONFERENCES (percentages)

Taylor and Godfrey's (1991) survey of the views of professionals on Tyneside was also positive. *"Professionals were asked about the contributions of parents. All those who replied felt that the parent had made a contribution, and that they humanised the conference"*. (p 21).

The advantages of parental attendance

The respondents in my study were able to be quite specific in describing the ways in which they thought conferences improved as a result of parents involvement. The following benefits were mentioned by all the agencies represented:

a) The quality of the information shared

The quality of the information made available to the conference by both parents, and by workers, was thought by the majority of the respondents to be better. Information was provided by parents which:

- * corrected wrong information, such as the age of the child;
- * added information not previously known, for example about the criminal background of a possible perpetrator;
- * and clarified by, for example, explaining the status of the parent's relationship:

Last year (without the parents there) at a similar meeting it swayed the decision against registration - a decision which I felt was wrong for J."

Head Teacher.

Information contributed by workers was said to be more focussed, objective and candid. A respect for privacy and the dignity of the parents combined with a strong sense of fair play resulted in the workers paying special attention to their language and the authenticity of their judgments. Workers were careful about the language they used and the relevance

of the material introduced, providing evidence for their judgment. This led to a sharper focus on purpose.

"Case conferences involving parents are less woolly.

There is less unsubstantiated opinion and more facts.

The parents see the decision as fair, and as a multi-disciplinary one."

Principal social worker.

The social workers in Thoburn et al's (1995) study, and in Farmer and Owen's (1995) also found that the presence of parents resulted in less gossip, fewer value judgments and clearer information.

b) Parents saw an inter-agency perspective

A number of the respondents reported that the parents perceived the conference decision as reflecting a shared view. This was thought to reduce the possibility of one agency being scapegoated.

*"a very good conference in terms of multi-agency consideration
of concerns which are directly shared with parents"*

Social worker

It was also seen as removing from this arena inter-agency or interpersonal disagreements originating in other sources. Social work respondents commented, as did those in Thoburn et al's (1995) study, that they felt parents would see them as part of a team. They also felt it was helpful to convey to parents a shared view on the abuse.

Professionals in this study generally perceived the drift toward consensus and a united front as being beneficial, although it is concerning if disagreements are subdued. The question arises as to whether professionals face a potentially conflictual role in being required to work in partnership. Is the partnership with parents, or is it with colleagues, or with both? Do the dual requirements sit comfortably together? Is it possible for the

professionals to face in both directions? And, at the core of this thesis, can the dual goals of partnership and child protection realistically be pursued within this arena?

c) Enhanced the assessment and child protection plan

Assessments and plans for intervention were regarded as being more realistic as a result of consultation with the parents in the conference. Observing parent's reactions and interactions enhanced the professionals understanding of the dynamics of the relationship, both in cases where they were able to see parents together, but also where one parent came and spoke about the other. Who came, as well as what they said or did not say, offered important diagnostic clues for assessment and intervention. Forty five per cent of the sample considered that the net effect of these factors was to enhance the consideration of risk. Valuable diagnostic clues were provided, as the following example illustrates:

"Mother's attendance was useful as an illustration of functioning, and nature of couple interaction similarly helpful."

Principal social worker.

While the difficulty of making a detailed child protection plan in the conference has already been discussed, nevertheless respondents commented positively on the opportunity provided to explore the parent's attitude to intervention. In some cases this was taken into account in the child protection plan.

"The interest the parents showed and mother's willingness for psychiatric follow-up and social worker's help were reassuring as we did not register the child."

School medical officer.

Case examples later in this chapter further illustrate the benefit to the assessment process of involving parents.

It has previously been suggested, however, that because of the power imbalance in the conference and the high emotional content, it is unfair to parents to use this arena for assessment purposes. Parents who are frightened and feel under scrutiny may not put their best foot forward. A confrontation about suspected child abuse is hardly a normal or relaxed social encounter, as the interviews with parents will illustrate. Like Coriolanus, they forget their lines:

"Like a dull actor now

I have forgot my part"

Coriolanus, Shakespeare, 5,3,40.

Here again we confront a key issue in the thesis. In giving parents the right to attend, do we risk disempowering them? The previous discussions about the way perspectives operate demonstrated that judgments concerning role and competence do take into account appearance and presentation. To return to the analogy with theatre, performance matters. The observations of the conferences in this study, and the questionnaires, suggested not only that it was impossible for workers to ignore the parents presentation and performance in making their judgments, but that it would have been inappropriate so to do. Juries, of course, are faced with the same dilemma; but in the court room the power imbalance is openly addressed. It is arguable that, as some of the respondents suggested, at least in some cases the difference in power between parents and professionals is reinforced by their presence in the conference. This is a point to which I will return.

d) Improved chairing skills

There was, generally, consensus in the respondent's views on the management of the conference by the chairmen.

"This is the second case conference I have attended with parents present.

.. great improvement in chairing of meeting and professionals willingness to be honest."

Health visitor.

The importance of the role of the chairperson was discussed in the previous chapter. This finding is reflected in other studies, such as Birchall's, where two hundred and four conference attenders rated chairing as the fourth most important item in a list of fourteen items (Birchall, 1992, p98). Farmer and Owen (1995) observed that the chairperson was most often mentioned by social workers as being influential in decision-making. He was seen as occupying a position of considerable power, and as possessing a range of skills. Lewis (1994) believes that with the presence of family members, the chairperson's role has now become that of key actor.

"The Children Act 1989 ushered in the era of participation and partnership and the public role of the chairperson is to be seen as a symbol or model of those principles"
(p.9)

Lewis (1994) found that all of the fourteen chairpersons she interviewed were in favour of parental involvement, in principle. Their responses ranged from being pro-active to paternalistic. The anxieties expressed were whether the parents would cope, whether social workers and other agencies would cope, and whether they as chairpersons could cope.

The way the chairperson conducts the meeting clearly is instrumental to the process of managing anxiety. The respondents in my study suggested that the presence of parents inclined the chairmen to be more business like in order to keep the emotional content low. Lewis (1994) suggests that the chairperson is stage managing a meeting with elements of theatre. One of the chairpersons she interviewed described the conference as " A kangaroo court with a touch of the Old Vic - something stage managed", (p 100). The idea that the conference contains elements of different public occasions - the theatre, the court room, the business meeting, an old boys club - is fruitful because it conveys something of the complexity and nature of the arena into which parents are invited to enter, and which the professionals have to manage.

The disadvantages of parental attendance

Only nine per cent of the sample said they found the involvement of parents unhelpful in the conference being reported on. Twelve per cent thought the assessment of risk had been hindered in a particular conference, and 7% reported that their participation had been adversely affected. There was no significant difference by agency, although education and health tended to be more negative, overall, than social services or the police. The disadvantages the professionals in this study mentioned are similar to those reported in the other studies referred to.

a) Upsetting for parents

The attitude survey suggested that one of the anxieties held by professionals from all the agencies involved was that parents would be upset. In this more detailed study, there were some conferences where parents became distressed, withdrawn or angry and this had a number of implications. Firstly, there was concern that causing parents distress may hinder a parent's therapeutic progress:

"The conference hindered greatly mother's progress and struggle to obtain qualifications after a lifetime in care. Because of this she gave up her course and Jean lost her place in the nursery."

Social worker.

A small minority in Thoburn's study also considered that it would be too upsetting for parents, or would interfere with the development of trust between worker and parents.

Secondly, a number of respondents in my study reflected upon the uneven power balance between parents and professionals, which they felt was unhelpfully reinforced:

"I felt the meeting served to reinforce the power difference between the parent and the professionals... the important discussion took place after she had left... it didn't feel like a good experience for her."

Social worker.

Power and justice are clearly interlinked, and this response again raises issues about the potential for disempowerment in the meeting. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) describe the fear that parents bring in to a meeting they see as being crudely judicial. This fear was echoed by the parents in my study, as the interviews with them will illustrate. This thesis has already suggested that there is an inherent difficulty in the nature of the decision making process in this meeting, and the presence of parents highlights this. It has, further, begun to provide evidence that the process and nature of empowerment, and the related issue of partnership, is far from straightforward. This point will be further discussed in the chapter on parents interviews.

Thirdly, like Miranda in *The Tempest*, who "suffered with those I saw suffer", some respondents found their own emotions aroused by what they heard. The questionnaires and the observations suggested that the professional's concentration was affected by the arousal of feelings of helplessness, fear or sympathy. Some were aware this distracted them from the main purpose:

I found this a difficult case conference... parents presence hindered the (assessment of risk). I found it difficult to separate off, feelings of sympathy for mother from risk to J... eventually recommended to register on basis that mother was accepting help voluntarily and admitted the incident."

Principal case worker.

Others were, perhaps, not always aware of the influence on their judgment of the emotional content of what they were hearing. Or, they were aware of it but not able to control it. The impact on professionals of hearing the detail of exactly how, where and when a child has been abused has been well described in the literature, (Morrison, 1992, Dale, 1989, Furnis, 1991). Having parents present did, in a number of situations, arouse conflicting and confusing emotions. The implications of this for the conference will be developed later in this chapter.

Fourthly, management issues became critical when, for example, parents walked out or become disruptive. The task of the chair in these cases was particularly difficult, and highlighted the complexity of attending to process as well as to content.

"Mother walked out at point when deciding to register under sexual abuse. In this case mother had been operating under a number of aliases and been subject to concern, but no action had been taken over a long period. I feel her presence inhibited the primary consideration - Tracy."

Social worker.

In this case, there was concern that the chairman's attention would be diverted to attending to the parent's and the worker's distress, and that this would be at the expense of focussing on the information content; this was seen as being professionally dangerous. Eisenhardt (1989) identifies confidence and anxiety as key factors in decision making groups, and describes the handling of emotional content as critical to the quality of the decisions made. Clearly, all this makes the management of anxiety, stress and upset extremely important, and requires good chairing skills (Lewis, 1994)

b) Inclination to therapy

Another affect the respondents described was that professionals who felt uncomfortable sometimes emphasised the parents' strengths and played down their weaknesses. This had the further affect of shifting the focus from the child to the parents. This was seen as being particularly dangerous in the context of child abuse, especially where the parents did not share the professionals concern.

"I did notice that following parents departure from conference, professionals were more negative re prospects for future. This hadn't been expressed so forcefully earlier."

Principal social worker.

"The focus seemed to be on the family not on the issue of child protection. After the conference two people said they were not going to be the ones to say the hard things that needed to be said. Very worrying."

Officer in charge - day nursery.

The danger of some professionals colluding with parents was voiced by some managers in Thoburn et al's (1995) study. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that there was some tendency for the chair to avoid raising contentious issues with the parent and to concentrate on subjects that were emotionally neutral. This finding adds support to the view that conferences avoid conflict, and that the chairperson is more likely to achieve consensus when parents are present.

c) Case conferences become longer, bigger and more complex

Evidence from the monitoring study was that conferences with parents lasted, on average, twenty-nine minutes longer than those without parents present, and the average size increased from eight to ten. The increased time taken was said to cause stress, and the size was daunting, especially for inexperienced workers. It also created particular problems. For example, in some cases Doctors had to leave early for prearranged clinics, thereby missing the important discussion on registration and the consideration of risk.

"Parental attendance lengthens the time taken and causes increased stress to professionals already under pressure."

Health visitor.

"Drastically protracted"... "seriously extended"... "too many people"

The discussion in the previous chapter suggested that, while there are serious time implications as a result of involving parents, some professionals - particularly Doctors - use time as a reason for not attending. Although this hypothesis could not be tested by my

data, my findings also lend weight to the suggestion that professionals who have negative views about parents attending may well be less likely to come themselves.

A further difficulty identified here relates to the fact that because of the length of time involved, some professionals leave before the decision about registration is made. As things now stand, the decision to register is the most important function of the conference. Yet key participants in some cases are not heard. It has also been suggested that, while professionals will contribute information to the conference in front of parents, they are less happy to express opinion on the registration. In consequence, the chair has to take a more active role, and this is reflected in the decisions made.(see Lewis, 1994)

d) Adverse affect on professional participation

The most heartfelt comments received referred to the inhibiting effect of the parents presence:

"I feel other information may have been presented and considered regarding child's home situation especially mother's lack of protective skills, if parent wasn't there."

Health visitor.

"many of professionals were careful and hesitant about offering information."

Social worker, voluntary agency.

"I felt many views were muted by parental attendance."

Health visitor.

"There was less discussion between the professionals than usual - less testing of available information. Several professionals started to talk when parents left."

Doctor.

There were a number of reasons why important information was not shared. The reasons were, firstly,

- * that the worker did not know the agreed procedures.

For example, in two of the conferences observed the police did not know that information about a parent's criminal record should have been divulged to the chair beforehand, and it was withheld from the conference until the parent left. The conference then debated whether it was fair and just for the information to be introduced at this stage. Hobson's choice for the chair; but the heated discussion about the potential for injustice took time and emotional energy and made people uneasy.

Another, and more common reason, described in detail in the attitude survey, was:

- * a lack of confidence in saying harsh things in an acceptable way: "*how to say nasties nicely*", (see Bell, 1995).

Some respondents lacked confidence in backing up a professional opinion in the absence of clearly established fact. This meant some assessments were thin and some important diagnostic gut reactions failed to be expressed.

Finally, professionals from all agencies had

- * anxieties about making public confidences and secrets shared in the privacy of the relationship.

These anxieties reflect the professional perspectives derived from their agencies primary task, as identified in the previous chapter. Teachers, for example, feared that they would lose the families cooperation if they disclosed information in front of them. Health Visitors were concerned that they would be denied access to the child. Social workers thought parents might withdraw their cooperation in the ongoing work, thus making their monitoring task more difficult. In some cases, especially where there was known to be a violent man in the household, the workers feared reprisal.

Many of the professionals who believed that certain things did not get said when parents were present were reassured by the existence of a safe zone, when parents were asked to leave and there was scope for private discussion of the issues. This finding, in relation to specific conferences, reinforces the same finding already presented from the attitude questionnaires and has important implications for policy and practice. The departure of the parents at the decision making stage - the policy operating in this authority during this research - was generally favoured by the respondents. Some commented that it freed them to express an opinion which they felt inhibited in expressing in front of the parents, important in the consideration of risk. Others, however, were made uneasy by this practice because it symbolised, for them, the acute tension being held between the rights of parents to hear everything and the need to adequately protect the child. For the chairmen it produced particular problems. In a number of cases he had to judge in the course of the meeting whether or not to allow new information to be introduced. In some cases, and in anticipation of changing policy, the parent was allowed to remain; in others, the information was not heard. Either way, the actions of the chair did not please all the participants. Respondents also commented, in the few cases where parents were present for the decision making, that workers were reluctant to engage in the discussion of risk and the need for registration. In those situations, the role of the chairman appeared to become more powerful in the decision making process, and this, also, raised concern.

In conclusion, the professionals generally welcomed the involvement of parents, but they shared common concerns about particular difficulties in particular cases. Asking parents to leave at the decision making stage was welcomed by some professionals but not by others, and while it solved some problems it created others. This issue is controversial, especially from a rights perspective. It will be explored from the parents' perspective in the chapter reporting on the parents interviews. The next section describes how the difficulties identified by the respondents were analysed.

DIFFICULTY BY CASE

"This case conference was too difficult for professionals to hold with the parents present. Information was not forthcoming and had to be prised out of professionals at various stages."

Consultant paediatrician

To determine whether any characteristics in the case could be associated with negative responses a summary variable of difficulty was created by adding together the negative comments on all the questions on the questionnaire. This produced a mean score for each case, and resulted in their division into three groups (see Table 3).

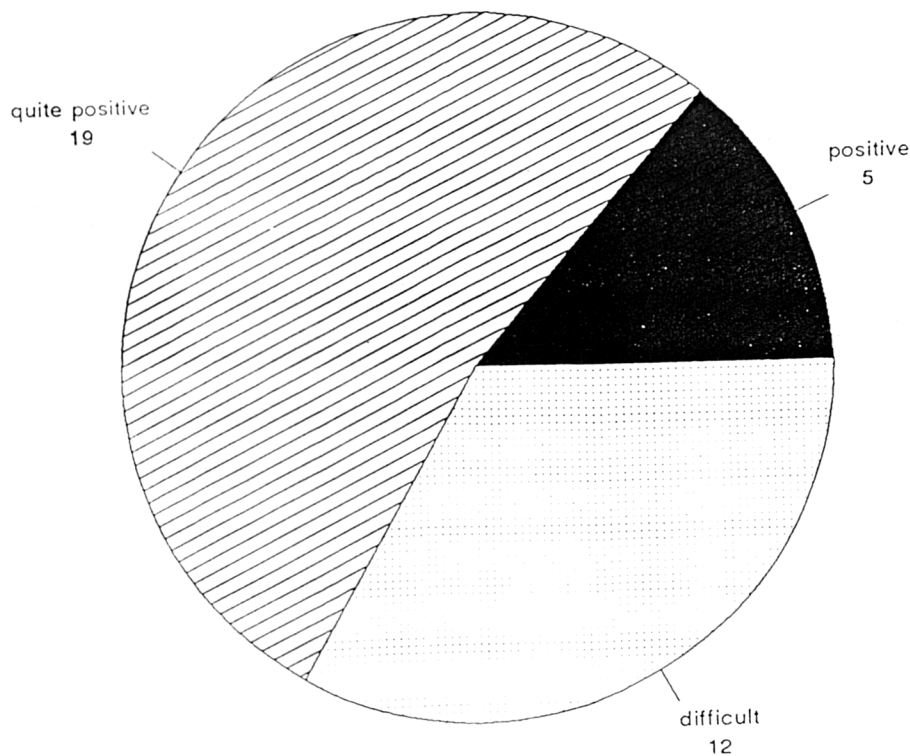


Table 6.3: CASES BY DIFFICULTY (numbers)

The three groupings that were defined were as follows:

Group 1, the positive group, contained five cases (seventeen per cent) where the respondents were unanimously positive about the involvement of parents. The professionals in these cases found the inclusion of parents very helpful, the consideration of risk was said to have been improved and professional participation actively enhanced.

Group 2, the quite positive group, formed half of the cases (nineteen), where the overall profile was positive but there were some negative responses in each case. In some cases the views of the professionals were strikingly at variance.

Group 3, the difficult group, comprised the remaining twelve cases (33 per cent). In each of these cases a number of the respondents expressed concern about the negative impact of parental attendance on the consideration of risk, the professionals' participation and the decision-making process. The views were not confined to one agency.

Thoburn et al (1995) also rate the cases in their study into three groupings, named best scenario, middle scenario and worst scenario. Although the basis of her ratings and the information she combines to form them are different to mine, there are important similarities in that there is a relationship in both studies between perceived difficulties and attitudes to intervention. Thoburn combined information about whether there was agreement about the nature and responsibility for the abuse with information about the stress and difficulties the families faced. She then produced a rating to judge the extent the identified difficulties would create for working in partnership. The researchers judged 27% to be best scenario, 45% to be middle and 28% to be worst. As can be seen the percentage groupings in her study are similar to mine. As will become apparent, there are also similarities in the criteria used to construct the rating of difficulty.

Returning to my study, analysis of the data from this part of the study was combined with data from the parents interviews. This showed that, in Groups 1 and 2 - the positive and quite positive groups, professionals and parents were more likely to be in agreement with

the facts presented - in other words, to share an operational perspective. It seems reasonable to propose that, since by definition these cases did not produce overwhelming difficulties for the professionals, a partnership approach to the intervention in these cases would be appropriate. This hypothesis will be pursued later.

The data were further analysed by seeing whether cases with particular characteristics scored 'on average' more heavily on an index of difficulty. The analysis used the Mann-Whitney U statistic to ensure that the statistical significances occurring did not occur by chance. This showed that eight characteristics were associated with 'difficulty' (see Table 4). Each of these characteristics was common in the twelve most difficult cases. They can be grouped broadly into those associated with family profile, and those associated with particular features of the conference. Some 'difficult' families tended to come from an area where the conferences also had difficult features so that it is not possible to disentangle these effects by statistical analysis.

12 CASES CONTAINING AT LEAST ONE OF THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS

1. Presence of a violent man in the household (11 cases)
2. Absence of (male) partner at conference (9 cases)
3. Denial of abuse, especially when linked with disclosure
by child (9 cases)
4. Type of abuse (8 cases)
5. Disruption of conference (7 cases)
6. Area team (8 cases)
7. Ethnic origin of family (5 cases)
8. Size and length of conference (10 cases)

Table 6.4: THE MOST DIFFICULT CASES.

Table 4 lists the features which were of significance in the most difficult cases, and they were as follows.

1. Presence of violent man in household

The presence of a violent and/or abusing man in the family, or in the family network, was a feature in eleven of the twelve cases. Violence had been directed against adults and/or children on this or on a previous occasion. The pattern varied, including sometimes a criminal record for indecency or grievous bodily harm, or evidence of abuse of other children, either in relation to this incident, or in the past. In two cases siblings had died.

Data from the monitoring study showed that, in three of these cases, the violent parent had not been invited to the conference. However, even where the violent man did not attend, workers commented on the fear it induced in them.

"Fathers violent behaviour has meant that social services no longer visit the home and his threats inhibited workers from fully discussing the facts in mothers presence. People were clearly scared of father finding out what they had said so wouldn't speak in front of his wife"

Health Visitor

As this quote makes clear, workers were frightened for their own safety, and also for that of the mother, as a consequence of information made public in the conference. This conference considered the alleged physical abuse and neglect of a child in the family. The link between domestic violence and child abuse is well established by research, (Mullender, 1996). Farmer and Owen (1995) found that men who physically abused their children were frequently also violent to their wives, (see Bowker et al, 1988). They see this as one of the reasons why women become the focus of attention - even when more commonly for the abuser is the male partner. This has the additional difficulty "of allowing men's violence to their wives or partners to disappear from sight" (p.223). The next difficulty described strongly supports this view.

2. Absence of (male) partner at case conference

In nine of these cases (75%) the mothers attended the case conference alone, although three quarters of the children lived with both parents or a parental combination. As was discussed in the monitoring study, other research has demonstrated that this pattern is common. Farmer and Owen (1995) found that 30% of their conferences were attended by mothers alone, and only 18% by two parent figures. While the presence of mothers alone is strongly associated with difficulty, conversely, the presence of fathers at the conference was correlated with positive responses. More commonly, fathers were present in the Group 1 cases.

Three concerns emerged regarding father's absence:

- * concern that the mother was inevitably (and unfairly) targeted as the child's protector;
- * anxious speculation as to why father was not present;
- * frustration that his views could not inform the intervention plans.

"A lot of people attended the conference. A lot of personal relationships were discussed. This caused too much pressure on the mother on her own"

Health visitor.

"I felt great sympathy for Mrs. S. who seemed to be bearing the brunt of the problem while not being involved in the possible non accidental injury"

School nurse

The anxiety induced in the workers by the attendance of the mother alone is created in part by uncertainty. The findings have suggested that, when both partners attend, uncertainties about the relationship and about the quality of concern for the child can be tested out by the workers, enabling them to be more confident in their risk assessment.

A further concern was identified in Farmer and Owen's (1995) research; and this links with the next area of difficulty. When a single mother denied responsibility for the abuse and there was no other person in the household to take the blame, the worker could feel uncertain how to proceed. Uncertainty, as we shall see, was a hidden component in the difficult cases.

3. Unacknowledged abuse, plus disclosure by child

The proportion of children disclosing abuse in this group of cases was, at 71%, proportionately much higher than in the other groups. In a number of the same cases the parents did not acknowledge that abuse had taken place. The inability of the parents to acknowledge abuse was connected to a number of factors, including disagreement on the facts as well as on their interpretation of them as abusive. Differing standards of child care, sometimes including cultural factors, played a role.

"It is really difficult when people say different things...issues get watered down... and there is a conflict between actual evidence and explanations of parents, particularly where there are cultural differences. In this case Liz wanted to be registered to protect herself [from physical abuse by her father], but her mother did not think the beating had been abusive. So there was no basis for cooperative work with the parents."

Social worker.

There are many facets to unpack here. Obviously protection of the child is seriously compromised in cases where the parents do not acknowledge that abuse has taken place. These cases create huge anxiety in the workers because they fear there is no one to protect the child. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found situations where parents denied culpability presented special dilemmas to the participants

Another aspect is the sense of betrayal workers are left with when the child discloses but is not believed by the parents. Gibbons et al (1995) found that the child's own confirmation was the most important factor in substantiating allegations of abuse. Yet where the child is not believed by the parents s/he is not protected, and there is no basis for trust or for establishing an agreed child protection plan. As has already been argued, families that are dysfunctional at this level can set up a mirroring process in individuals and in interagency groups. Dale (1986) has identified such a process as an important constituent of professional dangerousness.

As we have seen, the situation is complicated by the difference in perspectives that are operating, producing different versions of the truth. Class, gender, race all determine how the story will be told and 'the truth' defined; so even where there is agreement on what has happened, there is disagreement when it is interpreted as abusive. For example, a mother who had herself experienced poor parenting as a child was unable to appreciate the concerns of the conference about the dangers her child was exposed to as a result of her prostitution. In this case her 12 year old daughter had been seen having oral sex with a client waiting in the car outside the house. The child was registered as being at risk of sexual abuse, despite mother's insistence that she was safe.

Another example illustrates the effects of culture on judgements about parenting. In this case the fifteen year old daughter of a Chinese family had been severely beaten by her father with a kettle flex. Her mother did not dispute the fact that her daughter had been beaten by her husband. She explained to the conference - through an interpreter - that this was a normal way of dealing with difficult adolescent children in her community. Her daughter was difficult and needed to be punished. In the event, it was the expressed wish of the child for protection, verbalised by her teacher in the conference, which gave the conference the clear mandate to register this girl at risk of physical abuse.

Finally, as will be discussed at greater length in the conclusion, the inability of a child's mother to hear the child's disclosure of abuse, or to accept it's existence needs to be set

in the context of the existence of a violent man in the household and the social deprivation in which families live.

4. Type of abuse

There was some suggestion in the data that difficulty was connected with lack of specificity, so that cases of neglect and emotional abuse scored higher on an index of difficulty than those involving physical and sexual abuse. Physical abuse was experienced as the most straightforward, followed by sexual abuse. Six of these conferences considered an allegation of neglect, and a further four considered non specific concerns arising from abuse to other children in the family, or from mothers lifestyle, particularly prostitution.

" In this case [neglect] there was dispute between the agencies over the need to conference let alone register. I was worried about what the nursery staff would say - they sometimes make wrong assumptions and judgements and act on them where the issues are not clear cut."

Social worker.

Two issues require discussion here. The first relates to the uncertainty caused by the lack of specific injuries, as is a feature of neglect cases. In cases of physical and sexual abuse, such as the ones described above, the medical and witness evidence may be unequivocal in so far as the injuries and incident are concerned. However, where the abuse is not so clearly defined, and is more difficult to substantiate because it is more openly subject to matters of interpretation and definition, the workers become uneasy. Neglect happens over time; but the conference agenda is built around a snapshot of the present. Other research studies have also evidenced the particular difficulties professionals face in investigating and substantiating allegations of neglect. Gibbons et al (1995) found that, of all referrals for suspected neglect in the eight local authorities she studied, only seven percent reached the child protection register. This demonstrates the unique difficulties of agreeing on the benchmark in neglect cases as well as substantiating the allegation.

A further difficulty in the management of neglect cases is the issues it raises for professionals with regard to cause and effect. Professional interventions aimed at changing family interactions clearly have to be directed at the cause of the abuse which is generally attributed to poor parental skills or dysfunctional families. Corby's work (1987), however, demonstrated that external stress factors were rarely referred to in the conferences he observed, whereas "deprived childhood theories were used in a loose way to justify a belief that a parent had injured a child". This finding was replicated by Farmer and Owen (1995) and by Gibbons (1995), who also found little reference to material factors in the conferences they studied. This is odd, since the evidence of the massive welfare needs of the families in this and other studies, and of the scarce resources available to meet them is overwhelming. Neglect cases confront workers in a very direct way with their helplessness in meeting these needs within the child protection system. One effect of the parents' presence was that these needs were verbalised and became a part of the interaction in the conference. The case examples illustrate well how discomfoting this is for workers who, after all, are there because they want to help.

5. Disruption of case conference

Four of the five cases where parents left early fell in the most difficult group.

"Mrs T walked out at point when deciding to register Samantha. Her presence inhibited the primary consideration: the child".

Head Teacher

Disruption involves more than physical departure. In some of the other difficult cases, parents became distressed, or made a strong statement pleading innocence or impossible circumstances, presenting workers with a daunting picture of social disadvantage as well as an often distressing account of a child's abuse.

As suggested above, one possible effect of involving parents in the conference is that they present the professionals in a very direct way with the social deprivation that contributes

to the families stress, yet which the professionals are not well equipped to redress. This may induce a strong sense of powerlessness, and make the distancing strategies referred to earlier ineffective. This finding is important when set alongside the research included in Messages from the Research (1995) which demonstrates that when family support is offered, parents find questions about abuse less traumatic and are more likely to cooperate with professionals.

6. Team

A significant number of these cases (53 per cent) came from one area team. The families, as reported in the monitoring study were characterised by a higher rate of violence, and in this inner-city neighbourhood also subject to multiple disadvantage and discrimination. The team was served by the same office, noted in the research as having poor facilities, accommodation and administrative backup for case conferences.

" A horrible old reading room, not pleasant, crumbling plaster...appalling facilities for children."

Social Worker

Firstly, the area. The two neighbourhood teams where these families lived served a deprived inner city area with poor housing, high unemployment and a high proportion of families from ethnic minority groups. The links between poverty and child abuse are well established (see Blackburn, 1990).

Secondly, the accommodation. A number of the respondents commented on the lack of adequate reception areas and child care facilities in the building, as well as the poor quality furniture, ventilation and lighting of the conference room. The effect on participants of poor accommodation and facilities has also been described by Thoburn (1995) and by Cleaver and Freeman (1995). Anxious people like to be looked after and feel cared for when they are. Clearly the physical conditions in which the meetings are held are influential.

7. Ethnic Origin of family

Five of the seven families whose ethnic origin was non-European were among the most difficult cases. This is a significant difference as against the families whose ethnic origin was UK European. (see Table 5)

	Difficult	Quite Positive	Positive
Non European	5(71%)	2 (29%)	0(0)
UK European	7(25%)	16(57%)	5(18%)
Total	12(34%)	18(51%)	5(14%)

Table 6.5: NON-EUROPEAN BY DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY

A number of factors contribute to explain this finding. Four of the 5 ethnic minority families in this study lived in the inner city area also associated with difficulty. The problems they brought to the conference therefore have to be contextualised, so that the families social circumstances receive as much attention as the family pathology.

Another factor which has been already discussed and is further illustrated in the case examples is the difficulty for the conference of addressing differing cultural patterns of parenting. The way abuse is constructed and the referral made (Wattam, 1992) was explored in the monitoring study where it was established that ethnic minority families and families of mixed race children were over represented among referrals. Gibbons et al (1995) found that black and Asian families were over represented among referrals for physical abuse, but under represented among referrals for sexual abuse. However, it was the form the punishment took and not the nature of the injuries that initiated the referral. She believes this illustrates cultural differences in child rearing, and the difficulty of determining acceptable physical punishment.

The ten cases involving ethnic minority families in Farmer and Owen's (1995) research were also generally experienced as stressful. They describe the difficulties as being compounded by language problems, differences in the cultural value base, and a high number of investigations ending in uncertainty. They draw attention to the work of writers, such as Phillips and Dutt, 1991, and Jones, 1993, who have pointed out the relationship between black people, material deprivation and low educational achievement and child abuse and neglect. For many black people educational success is difficult to achieve, and low economic status and all that implies is not unusual: "the main deficits in these cases....were attributable to the disadvantaged circumstances of many families and the services which were available to them" (p.321).

Clearly when concerns about the abuse of black children are raised the context of the parent's responses within a racist society must be taken into account. There was evidence from the observations that the mainly all-white workers did not always feel competent and confident when challenged by family norms different from their own. As Ahmed (1986) wrote:

" The important point for Asian clients... is not against an over reliance on cultural explanations.....the centrality of racism needs to be more explicitly acknowledged in the assessment process, and cultural explanations need to be considered in the context of racism."

8. Size and Length of conference

In ten of the cases there were over fourteen people present at the conference; and nine of them lasted over an hour and a half. This was experienced as stressful by a number of the participants, and also meant some people left early. As has been discussed, having parents present increased the size and the length of the conference. The effects have been discussed earlier in this chapter and will not be rehearsed here.

CASE EXAMPLES

The following case examples draw upon findings from the questionnaires, the keyworker interviews, the monitoring study and the observations. They have been selected from different teams and the conferences were held at different times in the research project. They demonstrate how the features associated with difficulty enmeshed to produce uncertainty, confusion and anxiety for the professionals.

CASE 1 was held in the inner city area office noted for its poor facilities. This was one of the first conferences involving parents, with the result that reception and child care arrangements were inadequate and the conference began late and amid some confusion. Both parents arrived, accompanied by an interpreter for mother who spoke no English. Mother left at an early stage to attend to her two young children who could be heard crying in a nearby room, and the interpreter was asked to present her point of view. The conference considered the neglect and suspected sexual abuse by her father of a four year old Pakistani girl. Bruises to the child had been noted at nursery school and the girl was reported as being unusually quiet. The nursery teacher felt the quietness could be explained by the girls lack of confidence in speaking English. The medical evidence was that the child had been sexually abused and that she was neglected. This evidence was all that was available to the conference because the family had not previously been known to the agencies, and because the social work investigation had been hampered by language problems and by the parent's lack of cooperation. As the social worker commented;

"I found working toward parental attendance particularly difficult with this family. The sexual abuse had to be denied because girls [in Asian families] have to be virgins when they are married, so mother sleeps with them. Therefore the barriers to disclosing and cooperating are huge."

Father actively disputed the medical diagnosis of sexual abuse, saying that the marks were caused by the child sliding down the bannisters. He made a strong statement declaring his

innocence, expressing his concern that "all you lot are trying to see things in a suspicious way", and describing the negative impact the investigation had on the family which added to their burdens of stigma and racism. The child was registered under the category, sexual abuse, but father made it clear he would not cooperate with any monitoring under registration procedures.

The respondents reported that this father's involvement, combined with the mother's absence, made this a particularly difficult conference. It contained seven of the characteristics associated with difficulty.

CASE 2 has a number of similar features. It also illustrates how cultural factors can determine how facts are perceived and given significance, and challenge the competence and confidence of all white workers when confronted by family norms which differ from their own. A seven year old Afro-Caribbean girl was found wandering in the middle of the night. There were concerns about the mother's lifestyle - she cohabited with men known to be violent, and appeared either unaware of or unconcerned about the potential risks to her child. A previous child had died of natural causes while unattended. This girl was conferenced, although already registered, as being at risk of neglect. In making their case, the white day nursery staff reported two additional concerns; they were unhappy about the quality of the mother/child interaction, which they described as containing too much "teasing", and they were concerned that an Aunt or Grandmother generally collected the child from nursery, not her mother. Their concerns were countered by the family's black social worker who suggested that the pattern of parental interaction described was commonplace within the culture, and informed the conference that Aunt and Grandmother were also attachment figures for the child, providing much of the caring. However, the fact that the child had been found wandering alone in the early hours was a matter for legitimate concern, and the child was registered.

These two cases have some similar characteristics; the area is the same, the families are non-European, and the parents do not agree with the professionals that the child is neglected. In both cases there was disruption in the conference - in Case 2, the

Grandmother and Aunt became upset. There was also evidence that cultural factors, including different patterns of child rearing, made it particularly difficult for the professionals to assess and reach a decision about risk factors, especially with respect to neglect and emotional abuse. In both of these cases the presence of the parents created particular problems, though of a different nature.

CASE 3 shares some features, but is chosen to demonstrate how the communication of oppression, linked with strong affect, and where the definition of abuse is not shared by the parent, produces in the workers a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. In this example, a three-year old white boy was conferenced because of severe bruising and neglect. His mother said;

"I do smack my children, and I believe in smacking them...But I love them. I try to keep them clean, but it is impossible where we live. And how would you manage as a single parent with three boys under five, no money and a stinking, damp house? You've made me feel dirty ."

She conveyed a powerful picture of her Amazonian efforts to raise her children in extreme poverty, in poor housing conditions, unsupported and under constant threat of violence. Observation suggested that this made the workers uneasy. Possible reasons were that it aroused their sympathy for the parent, thus making it more difficult for them to focus on the child and to assimilate all the information. Also, their access to material resources was limited, thus restricting the help available for them to offer. The social worker described how, in her opinion, certain information was discounted;

" I felt mother's beliefs were not really considered, for example, she mentioned that the older child missed his father, which was ignored. Very obvious related facts, such as the mothers severe ill health, were also ignored."

Social worker.

This little boy was not registered following a protracted discussion between those who felt registration would provide mother with a target - to work toward deregistration- and those who argued that voluntariness would empower mother to be more adult, thus enlisting her cooperation. Other factors discussed included the relationship between registration and priority social work help, and its leverage on other agencies, such as housing; and the need to maintain the register at a manageable level. This suggests that there is a range of factors determining who gets registered, especially in cases of neglect where standards of child care are seen to reflect poverty and oppression rather than lack of parental love. It is argued that these factors contribute to the professionals discomfort, since they are very directly confronted with the difficulty of meeting the welfare needs of children within a child protection framework.

CASE 4 The last example has been selected to demonstrate the impact of class and communicative performance on risk assessment. The parents were articulate, middle class professionals. This case met the following criteria of difficulty; denial of abuse, alongside a coherent disclosure by the child; disruption during the conference, and length and size: seventeen people were present. Two white girls, aged 8 and 10, were conferenced as being at risk of sexual abuse following their friends disclosure of sexual abuse by the girls step-father during a holiday stay. No medical evidence was available because of the time lapse between the alleged incident and the disclosure, but the investigating social worker presented a detailed report in support of the allegation. Evidence of previous police and social services involvement in the family was offered by other professionals. Mother became extremely distressed and ran out: "Thats it....its all lies", and stepfather delivered a speech pleading his innocence. From the professionals;

" I felt somewhat confused as to what the outcome should be"

Health visitor

" The conference was polarised in terms of views of abuse. I felt that the professionals view of the parents as 'nice' people affected their judgment about whether he was capable

of sexually abusing children. Having taken the role of comforting mother, I felt more ambivalent about the decision making and had to push myself to suggest the children may be at risk."

Principal social worker

"The decision regarding the child was, in my opinion, perhaps too heavily influenced by what the parent said and did ie. burst into tears. I was not wholly convinced by her protests".

Head teacher.

These comments illustrate how class factors and verbal ability provide a frame in which workers find it difficult to locate abuse. In this case the parents presence meant this dynamic was acted out in the decision making arena. The stepdaughters were not registered.

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of parents in the thirty six conferences studied was generally welcomed by the workers involved, and in two thirds of the cases there were felt to be positive benefits in involving parents. In a small number of cases (17%) it was thought by all the professionals to actively improve consideration of risk; in half it was regarded by most as helpful; and in the remaining third there was concern that the involvement of parents was at best problematic, and at worst seriously hindered the consideration of risk to the child. These conferences were found to contain clusters of particular characteristics and were rated as the most difficult by an index scoring the negative responses of the professionals. The nature of the responses can be linked to a degree with agency and the worker's concomitant experience of child protection work, social services and police being the most positive, and health and education the least; but this is within a framework which welcomes the policy, and is confident, in the main, with the way in which it is being implemented in the research areas. With regard to policy, the inclusion of parents at the

decision-making stage was the most contentious issue, and some respondents felt that a private discussion was essential in some cases.

However, in a third of the cases the involvement of parents raised professional concern. The features that are associated with these cases suggest that for a number of reasons they are particularly difficult from the assessment and the decision making points of view. Where certain features associated with the family and certain characteristics of the conference mesh the professionals experienced difficulty. In these conferences, the presence of parents introduced a dimension which some workers said made it even harder for them to participate freely, to attend fully to the consideration of risk and to focus on the needs of the child without distraction. Others, especially those with substantial experience in child protection work, such as principal social workers and the police, reported that these cases were among the most difficult anyway, irrespective of the parents presence. Some case examples served to illustrate how the presence of parents can heighten the difficulties in risk assessment, but also suggests that these cases would always be difficult.

DISCUSSION

This part of the research has provided evidence that, in the majority of the cases studied, professionals and parents were in general agreement with the facts presented. This shared perspective provides an important base for the building of successful partnerships between parents and professionals. In Cleaver and Freeman's (1995) study it was identified as being a critical factor in positive outcomes, such as the future safety of the child. This research also found that the conferences that went well were those where the participants agreed on the what had happened and with the professionals judgment. In a number of the cases, Doctors were able to bring scientific evidence to support their opinion that "it could [not] have happened when he fell, Doctor" (Hobbs, 1994); the police provided evidence based on previous convictions; the social workers provided assessments based on an accurate family history, and so on. Also shared by professionals and parents across the chasms of class, culture and context were some moral judgments.

This is reassuring since it suggests that there are limits to the usefulness of the more radical postmodernist, deconstructionist perspective which sees no act as being abusive and no truth as valid outside the context of the event. (Parton, 1994) However, this part of the research has also provided evidence that the conferences the professionals found most difficult were those where there was uncertainty and disagreement about what had happened, and where there was uneasiness about the relevance of employing child protection procedures to meet the overwhelming welfare needs of some complex and stigmatised families. These difficulties were, in a number of the cases, compounded by the presence of the parents.

Gil and Parton (1991) have argued the need to contextualise reported child abuse, so that the social circumstances in which the families live receive as much attention as family/individual pathology. This part of the research has suggested that involving parents in the initial child protection conference has precisely this effect, but that this is problematic because *it confronts professionals with their own powerlessness. Case 3* provided a good example of the mother communicating her sense of hopelessness. Observation suggested that this communication of oppression, linked with strong affect, and where the definition of abuse was not shared by the parent, produced in the workers a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. It seems that where there was disagreement and uncertainty about the abuse and where the multiple oppressions that the families experienced were contextualised, symbolised or communicated by the parents in the conference, the professionals were confronted with ambiguities which challenged their competence and professional integrity, and which could be said to mirror the parents powerlessness and sense of oppression. Jordan (1990), and others, have suggested a dynamic explanation for this phenomena, and this has been explored in the analysis. The more radical structuralist analysis of postmodernism, however, also offers understanding of the complex emotions the professionals must manage in making risk assessments. The position taken here is that these theories are complementary.

Stevenson (1995) has argued that "the very concept of risk assessment at the heart of the conference process is distorting to sound welfare practice" because the assessments are

of risk, not of need. This part of the research suggests that professionals operating the risk assessment system feel this mismatch acutely in some cases, and this undermines their professional integrity and expertise. It seems likely that this would also contribute to the sense of helplessness that Morrison (1992) identified as being at the heart of the emotional stress experienced by staff working with abused children. The finding that cases of neglect were among the most difficult is relevant here. As we have seen, various factors are involved. The first relates to the differing operational perspectives that operate. Different standards of, for example, hygiene may be applied in constructing a diagnosis of neglect. Secondly, professionals from different agencies may be applying different indicators of vulnerability ; so, to put it crudely, nurses look at hygiene, Doctors at bruises, teachers at learning problems and social workers at parenting skills. Is the allegation of suspected neglect a compound of these factors, or a measure of degree, or both? We have noted the particular problems in achieving an agreed standard because of class, gender and culture

Thirdly, an allegation of neglect raises contentious issues over the cause. It makes sense to talk of physical and sexual abuse, and sometimes emotional abuse, as being 'deliberately' caused by acts of commission or omission (Dingwall, 1983) *Neglect is different. If, as is now recognised, (Blackburn, 1990) there is a close relationship between poverty and the problems associated with neglect, such as poor health, overcrowded housing, unemployment...and so on, then the cause is not necessarily poor parental skills or dysfunctional families, but the social deprivation in which the majority of these families live. Thorpe's (1994) research supports this view by providing evidence that single parents and Aboriginal families - families known to be subject to extreme poverty and social stigma - are vastly over-represented in child protection investigations. The positivist approach that is entrenched within the child protection system seems wrongly directed with regard to both diagnosis and intervention in a number of neglect cases, which may be more appropriately tackled at a societal rather than an individual level.*

Fourthly, and related to this last point, the alternatives to parental care available to children within the child care system are imperfect. In making judgments about exposure to risk from neglect, social workers have somehow to balance what they know about

systems abuse, and what they know about the importance for mental health of secure attachments, with what they know about the quantity and quality of the resources that will be made available as a result of the child's registration on the at risk register. Impossible mental equations, to which there are no right answers. Hardly surprising that only seven percent of all referrals for suspected neglect reach the register (Gibbons et al, 1995), and that cases of neglect feature in my 'most difficult' cases.

Parton (1994) frames the challenge to workers making risk assessments as being "to respond positively and with imagination to the prospect of living without securities, guarantees and order and with contingency and ambivalence". A feature these most difficult cases shared was that they required the professionals to manage layers of uncertainty, contingency and disagreement. The operational perspectives of the participants did not come closer together. Parents, children and professionals, especially in cases where parents denied that abuse had taken place, presented different versions of the truth. There was a high degree of uncertainty about what had happened, further compounded by disagreement at its interpretation as abusive. A number of factors were seen to operate here. In cases where the evidence was unclear and where, as we have seen, class, culture and gender informed definitions of abuse the moral nature of the discourse was tangible. The professionals were then faced with the daunting task of avoiding 'cultural relativism' (Dingwall, 1983) and promoting 'cultural sensitivity' (Pardeck et al, 1995), while simultaneously maintaining a moral position which others did not share.

PRACTICE POINTS

While the use of specified risk factors for screening purposes may be limited because of the diverse nature of the variables involved (Browne, 1994), and could be stigmatising, it would be naive to ignore the commonality of the research findings on the causes of child abuses, and, now, on what cases professionals find difficult. One implication is that Area Child Protection Committee conference procedures and local practice should reflect the fact that there may be a need in certain cases to a) ensure the case and conference management is discussed with the chair beforehand (for instance, who should attend), and, b) provide a safe zone where the professionals can share their concerns in private, if

necessary. While parents do not like being excluded from part of the conference, recent work by Thoburn (1995) and Bell (1996) suggests that if partial exclusion is managed sensitively and within a genuine commitment to partnership, the effect on parents is not as negative as was originally thought. It is the professionals commitment to working in partnership throughout the investigation process - both with each other, and with the parents and the child - that is the determinant of good practice and the critical factor in the parents experience.

The importance of effective agency systems for managing and supporting their workers through the emotional turmoil of child protection work was raised by the attitude survey, and is further highlighted by this more detailed analysis of the conferences. Agencies need to take very seriously the impact of family factors and the workers emotional response to them by providing adequate support, supervision and training. Training should provide all the professional participants with an awareness that their emotional reactions can be unhelpfully brought into play by parents attendance at the conference, taking into account the impact of cultural and class factors on the assessment and definition of abuse and on the experience of the families conferenced. Professionals need to be sensitive to the dynamics influencing their decisions, they need to understand and tolerate difference, but they also have to hold on to their wits and make "professionally accountable decisions...which offer a means of filtering which is guided by more than hunches, organisational politics and situated moral reasoning...and which offer a means of detecting the right child" (Wattam, 1995).

This part of the research has demonstrated the power of the operational perspectives the professionals bring to the conference with them, and the ways in which perspectives can clash. Ways of enabling them to manage these constructively have been suggested, and it has also been acknowledged that a number of the difficulties described are inherent in the ambiguous nature of the task. It is acknowledged that the way the child protection system is currently managed makes it difficult for the professionals to meet the families welfare needs. However, this chapter has also suggested that as far as the professionals are concerned, the majority of initial conference achieve their aims with the help of the

parents. What has been uncovered are the aspects of the conference that are disempowering for the professionals, and it has been suggested that the factors contributing to the professionals disempowerment are the same for the parents. The next chapter will, therefore, turn to the experiences of the parents to explore this hypothesis further.

SEVEN

THE PARENTS' VIEWS : 'LIKE CASTAWAYS TO A FOREIGN SHORE'

"I'm one of the undeserving poor, that's what I am. Think what that means to a man. It means he's up against middle class morality all the time"

Dolittle. Shaw (1913), *Pygmalion*.

In the last chapter we explored the professionals' experience of the involvement of parents in the thirty six conferences where one or more of the parents was present. As we have seen, this was largely positive. Most of the professionals welcomed the inclusion of parents. However, there were some enduring concerns about particular situations. On an index of difficulty it was judged that the professionals found one third of the conferences more difficult as a result of the parents' presence. These difficulties arose from a compilation of characteristics of the family, the type and nature of the abuse and whether or not the parents acknowledged it and the area in which the conferences were held.

Discussion of the findings centred around the difficulties for professionals in defining abuse, particularly in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity, in making risk assessments which did not meet the overwhelming welfare needs expressed by a number of the families, and in managing the contradictions inherent in the conference task. The concept

of the operational perspective was used to provide a framework for understanding the ways in which the different participants constructed the diagnosis of abuse and acted upon it. Other themes central to the thesis, such as justice, partnership and empowerment were also developed.

This chapter turns to the experiences of the parents and other family members involved in the conferences. The themes of partnership, justice and empowerment are explored in relation to the parents experience, and the analysis focuses on the impact of the conference attendance on these issues. Involving parents in the early stages of a child protection investigation is widely regarded as being essential to "partnership practice" (Thoburn, 1995, Marsh and Fisher, 1995). However, as this research is suggesting, the relationship between participation and partnership is neither direct nor straightforward.

This chapter will explore whether partnerships with parents can be achieved when there are real and severe difficulties, and where the safety of the child is paramount. If, as researchers have found, for many parents the experience of conference attendance is "the very opposite of the cosy encounter which simplistic talk of partnership may suggest" (Stevenson, 1994), is it realistic to pursue the goals of partnership in this arena? Cleaver and Farmer (1995) interviewed thirty families about their experiences of a suspected child abuse investigation, and found that most of the parents felt frightened, ashamed, guilty and powerless. Other studies, including the one reported here, had similar findings - that parents would rather be at the conference than not, but that the experience was painful for them.

It is now widely accepted that families experience acute distress during the early stages of the investigation. Being implicated in the abuse of children, either by acts of commission or omission is a frightful experience for a parent. Farmer and Owen (1995) found that for many parents, hearing about the investigation came as a complete shock. The impact of the investigation on mothers whose children had alleged sexual abuse was particularly marked; *"They experienced shock, bewilderment, anger and the onset of profound feelings of loss"* (p 55). Farmer and Owen (1995) compare the experience of

parents in the conference to " *castaways to a foreign shore* ". One purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore how parents can be empowered when they feel cast away and alienated, and whether it makes sense to talk about working in partnership in this arena.

A further purpose of this chapter is to determine the degree to which the conference attendance per se affects the parents' overall attitude to intervention. This seems important to establish given Cleaver and Freeman's (1995) finding that the initial enquiry can have "profound and negative effects on families". My research replicates and builds on the work of the other researchers in the field by examining parents' experience of the conferences but pays particular attention to the difficulties which parents might experience and the degree to which participation in the conference affected their attitudes to overall intervention. My study is the only one to include a comparison group, enabling comparisons to be made between those parents who were and those who were not invited to attend. This chapter explores the experiences of the parents in the eighty three initial child protection conferences included in the research study, and recounts and compares the experiences of the two groups of families, those who attended the conferences and those who did not.

PURPOSE

The study of the parents' experience of participating in the initial child protection conference forms the central plank of the research. The purpose was to compare the experiences of the two groups of families involved in the eighty three conferences researched. The pilot group consisted of the fifty families in the four neighbourhood teams who were invited to attend the conference up to the decision making stage. The control group comprised the thirty three families of children being conferenced in the two neighbourhood teams where families were not, then, invited.

As has been suggested above, the experiences of the families are determined by the whole investigation. The way in which the parents are prepared for the conference affects their view of it - irrespective of their participation. Farmer and Owen (1995) identify three common developments in the run up to the conference, and suggest that the way these are

handled increases or decreases the possibilities of partnership. These are the extent to which the families influence 'the official view' before the conference, the way the social worker handles the investigation, and the way in which the conference was presented to the parent. Returning to the concept of crisis intervention, clearly the form the intervention takes after the conference is also pertinent to an exploration of the way partnerships are constructed and managed throughout the process. In reviewing the research studies cited in my thesis, 'Messages from the Research' suggest that as cases progressed an inquisitorial stance was less than useful, and that professionals held on to their power longer than necessary. In order to place the conference event in the context of the whole child protection investigation, therefore, data was collected on the parents' perceptions of the process, from the first social work contact following the allegation, through the preparation for the conference, the conference experience and the ensuing weeks.

METHOD

Data relating to the families' experience of the conference was collected by interviews with the family members. These were conducted by means of a semi-structured questionnaire, and took place in the family home between one and four weeks after the conference.

The Sample

The sample consisted of all the families living in the six neighbourhood research teams whose children were conferenced during the year the research was undertaken, from May 1991 to June 1992. From the eighty three conferences held, fifty one families were interviewed, thirty three from the pilot area, where parents were invited, and eighteen from the control area, where parents were not then invited (see Table 1). This represents an overall response rate of 62%. This is high considering the difficulties involved in interviewing families about such personal and sensitive material, and taking into account that some are chaotic and some move address frequently. The response rate compares very favourably with that from similar studies. Thoburn et al (1995) approached eighty five families for their help in completing a questionnaire shortly after the conference and

received a positive response in 39% of the cases. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) interviewed thirty six of the forty four families included in their intensive sample.

TEAMS	CONFERENCES	INTERVIEWS	FAMILIES	RESPONSE RATE
	N	N	N	%
Pilot	50	46	33	65
Control	33	25	18	59
TOTAL	83	71	51	62

Table 7.1: FAMILY INTERVIEWS BY AREA

As can be seen from Table 1, the response rate in the pilot area is higher than in the control area. This may reflect the familiarity of these families with the research project as a result of their attendance at the conference. Another slight trend was that mothers were more likely to agree to be interviewed if they had attended the conference. Obviously, bias could be created if account was not taken of the characteristics of the respondents and the non-respondents. Cleaver and Freeman (1995), for example, believed that their families' agreement to be interviewed might reflect the nature of the alleged abuse; so families accused of sexual abuse, for example, would be less likely to respond to the researchers request.

In my study, the most striking finding in relation to who did and who did not participate in the research interviews was that parents were more likely to agree to be interviewed if they disagreed with the allegation of abuse. Forty five per cent of the respondents, as against 19% of the non-respondents, denied the alleged abuse, irrespective of whether or not they participated in the conference. No explanation for this finding can be found in the methodology. A possible hypothesis is that these families felt very angry about what

had happened to them, and found it therapeutic to share their feelings and have them made public. This suggestion is largely speculative; but it is supported with reference to the similar behaviour displayed by the families who engaged with the pressure group, Parents Against Injustice (PAIN, 1992), to recount their distress and anger about what had happened to them.

Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that the experiences of different family members in a child protection investigation could be very different. They point out that previous studies of child abuse (Browne and Saqi, 1987) have concentrated on the child's mother. This focus on the mother I also wanted to avoid. The methodology used in my study was designed to take into account the differences in the experiences of different members of the same family. The researchers therefore interviewed as many members of the family as were willing and that they could contact. This resulted in seventy one interviews from the fifty one families. The seventy one family members interviewed comprised forty mothers, twenty three fathers and eight others, including adolescent children. Table 1 illustrates how the sample of the fifty one families who were interviewed was made up: forty six interviews from the thirty three families who had been invited to the conferences, and twenty five from the eighteen families not invited.

For each family who was interviewed I made a judgment on the basis of the available data as to who was the key carer of the child. Fifty one key carers were identified. The difficulties in determining the child's primary attachment figure have already been discussed in the monitoring study in relation to attendance. In the event, my definition of the key carer in most cases matched those of the chairperson determining who should be invited. Generally, the parents invited were the carers of the child, and their primary attachment figures. In nearly every case this was the mother with whom the child lived, or had lived with in the six months prior to the conference. Sixteen of the remaining interviews were held with the child's other parent: the father or stepfather, who in some cases was separated and/or divorced from the child's mother; or with the mother's present cohabitee. A small number were also held with the grandparents, where they were closely involved in the child's care, and with the adolescent children conferenced, where this was

felt by the social worker and the research interviewer to be appropriate. In 20% of the cases it seemed a key carer had not been invited. As has been previously stated, sometimes this was based on Area Child Protection Committee policy, for example, the mother was mentally ill; in others the situation was less clear and it seemed separated fathers had not been pursued, or critical extended family members, such as grandparents, had not been included. In others, the parents had not received the notification.

In all, 72% of the parents who were invited chose to attend. The rate of attendance in Thoburn et al's (1995) study was low - 36% of main carers attended. Likewise, in Farmer and Owen's (1995), family members were present in only 59% of the conferences. Farmer and Owen raise the further issue as to whether what they witnessed could accurately be described as involvement. However, in both of the studies cited the lower rates operating at the time of the research and the style of the participation are believed to reflect the newness of the policy at the time the research was conducted. The rate of attendance nationally is generally now about 80%. In my study, the higher rate of attendance and the participatory style of the involvement is more like what is common practice now.

The Interviews

The ethics of conducting research interviews in this most sensitive area of peoples lives while simultaneously engaging their cooperation is complex, (see Smith and Cantley, 1985) In some respects it mirrors the dilemmas facing the practitioners and requires similar skills. The value base of client self-determination may well conflict with encouraging clients to talk about very private areas of their lives and to disclose information which may be damaging or restrictive once it enters the public domain. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's debate in 'The Soul of Man' about the effects of making public intensely private information, in his case by journalists:

"The harm is done by.....dragging before the eyes of the public some incident in private life...and inviting the public to discuss the incident, to exercise authority in the matter, to give their views, and not merely to give their views, but to carry them into

action, and to dictate to the man on all other points...The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public."

The Soul of Man

The means of engaging parents in the research project therefore had to reflect the dependency on the social services department for access to confidential information, to offer choice, and at the same time to stress the independence and confidential nature of information disclosed to the researcher. It was also important to tell the families exactly what would happen to the information acquired and they had to be assured that their contributions were anonymous and would not be relayed back to the authority. At the same time I needed to appeal to their altruism. A genuine partnership is reciprocal, and I wished the respondents to know their contribution was valued. In the event, a number of families said that the interview had been a positive experience for them, and this set the tone for the research project. One of the interviewers reported some parents declaring '*it doesnt happen everyday that people from the University want to talk to us*'. One father offered to make a video to be shown to social workers in training! Other families asked to see the final report.

Notifying the families

In the first instance the families were notified about the research project by the social services department, and invited to withdraw at that stage if they so wished. The letter from the chairperson notifying the families about the conference also informed them about the research project (see Appendix 6) It made clear the independence of the researchers and that parents who did not wish to participate could withdraw. This method of approach had the obvious drawback that it associated the research with the authority. However, since only the local authority knew of the allegation, they had to be the source of the information and also supportive of the research. A letter outlining the aims and methods of the research project, offering a small remuneration and requesting an interview was then sent from the researcher (see Appendix 6). This payment underlined the value of the parent's contribution by acknowledging their time commitment, and had the additional

benefit of differentiating the research interviews from the social services department investigation. Families were very happy to receive it.

Who was interviewed

The interviews were carried out by a trained team of three qualified social workers, two of whom were also experienced research interviewers. Conscious that the interviews were taking place at a critical time in the intervention, we informed the social workers when we were visiting the family. While we did not wish to be in the position of asking for their permission, we took seriously advice they gave. In some cases this meant we did not interview the children. It proved to be very difficult to access the children for a number of reasons. This is an important point arising from this study, reflecting the general problems that exist in including children in conferences at all, as well as the specific difficulties in the methodology of interviewing children - especially in the sensitive area of child protection. This point will be pursued in later chapters.

Although a few parents formally withdrew, a number chose not to make themselves available at the time of the appointment, or had moved house and could not be traced. In all, thirty two of the eighty three families were not interviewed. There were particular difficulties (for us as well as the social workers!) in finding separated and divorced fathers, some of whom lived out of the area. This, also, illustrates a difficulty in working with families in child protection, and is reflected in the findings. Thoburn et al (1995) also found that very few of the parents and step parents living away from home were involved in the social work task in any way. There were also a small number of parents who were not interviewed, either because they were known to be violent, or because they were mentally ill. Interpreters were used in the case of a Chinese family, and a deaf couple.

For the reasons given earlier, the perceptions of all the family members on the same situation were regarded as equally valid. Where the parents or carers lived together, however, it was generally not possible to interview them separately. Separate schedules were completed for each parent in an attempt to acknowledge differences - and there were some - but it is recognised that a drawback of this method is that some differences

may not have been expressed. The collusive nature of some adult partners in child sexual abuse cases is well documented, (Furniss, 1983, Bentovim et al, 1988). In the last chapter there was evidence that mothers felt intimidated within a violent relationship. So there were situations where differences between the different family members would not be accessed by this method. Within those constraints, in most cases where both parents were interviewed together their views generally coincided. Where they did not this was picked up by the schedules. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that parents had a good many experiences in common, and they also treated their cases as one.

Format of the interviews

The interviews lasted about an hour and were conducted by means of a semi-structured questionnaire containing open-ended and closed questions, (see Appendix 6). The format was designed to collect information about the issues I thought important, but also to enable the families to tell their own story in their own way. The approach was informal to encourage the parents to talk, and followed the progress of events chronologically to make it easier for them to remember. We wanted them to tell us in their own words what had happened, and how it felt at each stage of the investigation. So the schedule was constructed with some closed questions, such as 'did you know what registration meant?'; and other questions encouraged respondents to put their own views, so 'how did it feel when you heard about the conference?'. Other sections encouraged recap, or checked out the interviewers understanding. The interviewers had been instructed to record verbatim pertinent aspects of the parent's story, and this material proved to be very rich. Generally, the interviews went with a swing, and the qualitative data recorded was of a high quality.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information about the degree and accuracy of the knowledge held by the parents regarding the allegations and the conference process, as well as their feelings about what was happening to them. The aim was to determine firstly, whether parents who attended conferences had more, or more accurate information than those who did not and to judge whether this engendered in them a sense of empowerment. Secondly, and related, a further aim was to measure the impact of the families experiences on their relationship with the professionals and their willingness to cooperate with the

consequent child protection plan. The themes of justice and influence, seen as being core to the concept of partnership from the families perspective, were pursued by asking the parents whether they felt they had influenced the conference decisions and recommendations and whether they felt fairly treated. A key purpose was to determine the degree to which outcomes related to conference attendance and the parents' experience of the process.

Timing of the interviews

The complexity of interviewing parents at home, after the event, should be apparent. For this reason, a number of the earlier studies (see Chapter 3), relied upon interviewing parents on location immediately after the conference. It was key to the methodology of my study, however, that the parents had space after the conference to formulate a more considered and reflective response. As stated earlier, the trauma experienced by parents in the weeks following the allegation, and during the conference, has been universally documented (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995, Farmer and Owen, 1995, Thoburn et al, 1995). Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that as the enquiry proceeded, however, parents began to overcome their earlier sense of hurt and violation. In this way operational perspectives initially miles apart began to converge. One aim of my study was to see if feelings changed when the immediate trauma was behind, and whether the parents' attitudes to the professionals and to their own families altered as time went by. It was also hoped that interviewing families at home would put them more at ease, and at the same time help to distance the research interview from the management of the event. It was hoped, further, that this method would net a wider range of family members. It did, but not to a great extent.

A further aim of timing the interviews at least a week after the conference was to gather information about the process of the investigation, including the preparation for it and the immediate aftermath, such as what written information had been received and the quality of the social work support offered. As described earlier, previous research studies have suggested an association between the quality of the pre-conference preparation and the conference experience (Thoburn, 1991), and it seemed important to pursue this after some

reflection had taken place. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) also found a relationship between the way the early investigation was managed - in particular whether parents felt they had influenced the early perceptions of the professionals - and the possibilities of an on-going partnership. They found that the way the early intervention was handled had a notable effect on the parent's feelings about the intervention. The most recent research has also attempted to place the conference experience in the wider context of the child protection work, and I wished to explore the relationship between conference attendance and attitudes to the longer term intervention.

Reliability

Of the seventy one interview schedules completed, only 5% were deemed unreliable by the researchers. In twelve cases (16%) the interviewers judged that the parents had some limitations in their understanding. Reliability was addressed by careful piloting of the questionnaires, and also by *cross-checking the schedules completed by the three interviewers*. Regular meetings were held with them to check out their views and experiences. This was helpful in terms of gaining an overall picture of the families experiences, and what stood out. One interviewer commented, "*they don't expect anything good; they only react to what is bad....but they really appreciated the sense of fair play*" Another summed up his impressions as follows; '*a common feature of a number of these families was that they lacked a sense of responsibility - they didn't own what had happened. Their view was coloured more by the procedures they had gone through, than what they thought of the social workers*'. The regular meetings also helped to maintain some standardisation in relation to the completion of the schedules and general approach to parents. They also provided the opportunity to iron out the inevitable difficulties that arise in research interviewing in this highly sensitive area. For example, one social worker complained that the researcher had overstepped her boundary by advising a family to seek legal advice. In another case, the family complained that the social services department had disclosed information to the researcher without their permission. For their part, the emotional impact of the engagement on the researchers also had to be addressed. Sometimes they felt angry with the parents; on other occasions with the social worker; on

yet others, with the system. Addressing their feelings diminished their impact on the schedules and proved to be important in maintaining objectivity.

Validity

The research design allowed for the collection of data from a range of sources on the same cases. This meant that the recordings of the interviews with the family members could be checked against a number of other completed research instruments. In every case where parents were interviewed there was a monitoring study containing the information about, for example, the alleged abuse, the family profile, and whether they agreed with the professionals. In every case where parents had attended the conference, there were questionnaires completed by each professional in attendance on their views on the parents involvement. In addition, I had observed twenty two conferences, and in twenty two of the cases there also existed completed interview schedules with the investigating social workers. The completed schedules were cross checked for each family in order to ensure that the inferences made were valid on the basis that the information collected from the different sources made sense.

Finally, validity was ensured by the continuing process of discussing the emerging themes with the expert practitioners, the steering group engaged in the project and with other researchers in the field. The fact that many of the findings were in common also suggested that the findings were valid.

Analysis of the Interviews

The analysis of the interviews was undertaken on the two samples, the individual interview (71) and the key carer for the family (51). The distribution of replies between the two samples was very similar, and for simplicity this presentation will concentrate on the data from the smaller sample in which each family is represented only once. This part of the study is based mainly upon the family interviews, and their analysis is informed by the data collected in the other parts of the research, and by the researchers observations of twenty two conferences with parents present.

RESULTS

THE PARENTS VIEWS

Parent A; Invited and attended, positive:

"Now that I've been to the case conference I understand everything. I'm glad I heard what I heard. I'm a lot wiser today, and its helped Joanna that I know everything. Otherwise I would have known nothing".

Parent B; Invited and attended, negative:

"I don't think parents should go because its too upsetting....loads of people going through the same problem....If they'd understood how awful it was they'd have supported us . It felt like a trial with the police there "

Parent C; Invited, did not attend:

"We didn't want to go alone with so many people there - too overwhelming. I think my views were represented there by the social worker and the letter"

Parent D; Not invited:

"I wish I had been invited. I would have been able to talk to people myself which would be much better. I think they would not have gone for the care order if I had been there."

The analysis of the research findings follows the natural chronological stages; the preliminary investigation following the allegation of abuse; the conference; and the four weeks immediately following.

PARENTS' PREPARATION FOR THE CONFERENCE

The open sharing of information is fundamental to justice, feelings of fairness and empowerment. "Systems abuse" is defined by Parents Against Injustice in their recent

study of thirty families who came to them for help (PAIN,1992), largely in terms of information about the investigation process being denied. The parents in this authority were therefore asked what they knew about the social services department's concerns, what they had been told about the conference, how this information had been communicated and about the preparation received.

i. Knowledge of, and agreement with the allegation

Almost three quarters of the parents (72%) said they knew what social services was worried about. In over 80% of the cases the researcher judged that the parents views were largely accurate regarding the nature of and the grounds for the allegation, and the identity of the abuser.

" They had the case conference because I stayed out overnight. I was leaving her until she was hungry, and because my Dads got a criminal record"

However, only a third (38%) shared the concerns, and only one quarter (25%) accepted that the allegations constituted sufficient grounds for concern. For example, where the injury had been to another child, or the abuser lived outside the household, the parents thought they could protect the child without outside help. This finding is replicated by Cleaver and Freeman(1995), who found that there was often disagreement between the professionals and, in particular, mothers about what had happened. They write "*all the parents were unhappy about the power wielded by professionals and inclined to dispute the legitimacy of the abuse enquiry*", (p 126)

In my study, this view, expressed with great bitterness by a parent who was not invited, was held by a number of the respondents:

" We didn't need the case conference or social work help. Social services have gone over the top. They made us out to be right ogres. Jim is not at risk"

There was no difference between the pilot and control groups regarding their knowledge about the concerns, or their views about calling a conference. In all, 44% of the whole sample thought it right to call a conference. While this percentage denotes parents who thought a conference was necessary, it is striking that the researchers in Thoburn et al's study (1995) rated an almost exact proportion, 60% of the conferences, as necessary. These findings lend support to the view that, in some cases, parents as well as professionals believe child protection systems are activated too readily. This is a point to which I will return.

Some parents in my study equated the holding of the conference with removal of the child into care and could not assimilate what they were told about the conference process. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that mothers feared care proceedings were on the agenda, even in a case of minor abuse or neglect. In my study, this quote from a mother who was not invited illustrates this point:

" I knew it could put a care order on the baby or make her a ward of court. I didnt know nowt about anything else"
" There was no help at all. All we got was blackmail.....social services wanted the child in care"

ii. Knowledge about what conferences could do

Moving on to knowledge of the conference, parents were asked what they understood about its powers and remit. Eighty-eight per cent of the sample, a higher proportion than the 66% in Thoburn's study (1995), felt they had a good understanding about what was happening, as expressed by this mother:

"Having a case conference was a cooperative plan agreed together in view of the past. The social worker explained what will happen and the new Children Act."

**WHAT PARENTS KNEW ABOUT THE CASE CONFERENCE AND
REGISTRATION;**

ABOUT THE CONF.	KNEW		ABOUT REGISTRATION.	KNEW	
	N	%		N	%
Could register	39	78	Name goes on list	46	89
“Take stat. action.”	42	82	What happens to list	14	27
Name a keyworker	37	74	Monitoring implications	39	75
Allocate resources	24	48	How to deregister	19	36
			How to complain	15	29

Total N = 51

**Table 7.2: PARENTS’ KNOWLEDGE ABOUT REGISTRATION AND
CONFERENCE RECOMMENDATIONS.**

A large number (80%) knew that the conference was about registration, and that statutory action could be considered. 72% also understood that registration would entail monitoring by social services in the form of a social worker. Like the parents in Farmer and Owen's (1995) study, they were unable to be clear what the detail of this would entail; but they saw it as a small price to pay for keeping the child at home and were prepared to 'play the game'. A smaller number (47%) of the parents in my study were aware that the conference could recommend the allocation of resources, although many were seeking concrete help with, for example, housing and day care.

However, as Table 2 illustrates, while parents had a clear idea about the registration procedures, less than one third had any idea what happened to the list, how to deregister, or about the complaints procedure, although such information would be essential to any empowering process. Again, there were no discernible differences between the pilot and the control groups.

iii. Feelings about the preparation for the conference

Questions about the preparation for the conference focussed, firstly, on what information had been received. The language letters were written in and their presentation was important. The Area Child Protection Committee had set aside funds to translate the written information into several languages, and the leaflets were user friendly, (see Appendix 8). Seventy three percent of the parents we interviewed had received the letter and explanatory leaflets informing them of the conference, and half of them found it helpful. Secondly, it was important to know what help the families had received by way of preparation. The manner in which information is communicated and acted upon is an important indicator of a partnership approach. 72% had been visited by the social worker, who in some cases had gone through the procedures, suggesting to the parents ways of presenting their point of view.

"I felt I was well prepared for the conference. The social worker talked to me about what to expect and my solicitor helped me to write down a statement. I was anxious about going. "

Although 76% of the parents said that they had felt able to put their point of view to the social worker before the conference, most felt that what they had said had had no effect. They did not believe that their views had influenced the social workers judgment or decision as to the management of the case. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) also report upon the parents sense of impotence both in the lead up to, but also in, the conference.

"Parents often told us they felt trapped because everything they did or said was given a hostile interpretation. They felt guilty until proven innocent..... To most parents it is apparent that professionals not only hold all the cards but control the rules of the game" (p85)

This point will be pursued in relation to the issue of empowerment later in the chapter.

Thirty per cent of the parents had turned to their own families for support. This percentage seems low and probably reflects both the families' social isolation, and their anxiety not to have damaging information seep out to other members of the immediate family. Where parents had a good relationship with another worker, such as the nursery worker, they undertook the preparation. Surprisingly, only 27% of the parents reported that other sources of help, such as a solicitor, had been suggested. The reluctance of the investigating social workers to advise the families to seek legal help is possibly an expression of their anxieties following the Cleveland Enquiry, but again raises issues about the limitations on empowerment, the ambiguity of the social workers role and the function of the process in managing professional anxiety as well as creating partnerships.

Parents were rarely invited (20%) to put their views in writing, even when not attending. The same question arises; if social workers are genuinely seeking to empower parents by ensuring their views are put forward, why are so few of the parents who do not attend helped to find alternative ways of expressing their views? This finding is not unique to this study. It is also an issue in work with children, for example in preparing them for participation in a review, where cassette recordings, pictures, letters need to be used to take the place of the spoken word. One explanation is that the time schedule in the run up to the conference is too tight to allow for this degree of engagement with the family. In Thoburn et al's (1995) study many of the social workers and managers found it difficult to complete the necessary work in the time. Although eight days is recommended between the allegation and the conference, Gibbons et al (1995) found the interval was thirty four days on average. Another possibility is that the social workers do not see preparing the parents as a priority because their concentration is on ensuring the correct procedures are followed. These discussions are clearly relevant to the issue of partnership and will be pursued in the next chapter which presents the data on the interviews with the social workers.

Parents in both the pilot and control groups were given detailed information about the conference process, for example who would be there and about registration. Specific information in relation to the participation of family members, including when they would

be asked to leave, was given to the parents who would be attending. As has been said not all the information was assimilated at this stressful time and fears that the child would be removed surfaced throughout. However, there was no difference between the two groups in their understanding about who would be there and what concerns would be discussed, or the possible outcomes. This suggests that the invitation to attend the conference is not a strong determinant of parental attitudes to the intervention at this stage. Further, it raises the possibility that it does not affect social work practice at this critical point in the investigation. This is surprising in the light of the firm value position held by social workers about the rights and effectiveness of parental involvement that was described in the previous chapter. The interviews with the social workers reported in the next chapter will look at this issue from the social workers perspective.

In response to a series of closed questions about the preparatory meetings, the parents expressed both positive and negative feelings; 64% said that they felt understood, and a similar proportion that they had felt involved and respected. *At the same time, 49% felt they had been fobbed off and felt blamed.* Key to the theme of partnership was to determine the effects of these feelings on the families' relationships with the protagonists. In particular, was the relationship with the social worker influenced by what happened at this stage? Is it sensible, as is the case, for the social worker to always be the keyworker? What might the implications be for inter-agency work after the conference? Hallett (1995) and Thoburn et al (1995) found that it was unusual for the ongoing work to be inter-agency. Is this pragmatic in terms of partnership if the relationship with the social services department or the social worker is damaged in the process of the investigation? As stated in the overview to 'Messages from the Research; *"Many professionals gather to decide the best course of action but it is social workers who usually put plans into effect"* (p 27).

EFFECT OF CALLING A CONFERENCE ON PARENTS ATTITUDES TO PROFESSIONALS AT THE PREPARATION STAGE

	IMPROVED		UNCHANGED		IMPAIRED		NO COMMENT	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
ATTITUDE TO:-								
Social worker	3	6	30	57	14	27	5	10
SSD	2	4	31	63	13	27	3	6
OTHER PRO'S	1	2	34	71	8	17	5	10

Total N = 51

Table 7.3: ATTITUDES TO THE PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION BEFORE THE CONFERENCE

Table 3 illustrates the ways in which the parents' relationship with their social worker, the social services department and the other professionals changed at this pre-conference stage. Fifty seven percent of the parents said their relationship with their social worker was not changed by the pre-conference investigation, while 27% said it was made worse. Only 6% thought it improved, and the remainder could not comment. The profile was similar for attitudes to the social services department, suggesting that the parents do view them together. With regard to the other professionals there was some evidence that relationships were less likely to change. At this stage of the process there was no evidence of a generally more positive attitude to the professionals in the pilot than in the control areas, supporting the suggestion made above that attitudes at this stage are not determined by the conference attendance per se.

PARENTS' EXPERIENCE OF THE CONFERENCE

i. Feelings about receiving an invitation to attend

Although receiving an invitation to attend the conference did not appear to affect attitudes to the intervention in the early stages of the investigation, it was extremely important to the families as the investigation proceeded. The importance of being invited is a finding in common with all other studies. Over threequarters of the parents invited (76%) said they were pleased to receive the invitation, and most of them attended. Many of them said that they felt it would have counted against them if they had not turned up. This finding supports the suggestion put forward in the previous chapter that all the participants on the stage are aware of the power of performance on the judgements made, as well as feeling strongly that they have a right to be present.

"We were really pleased to receive an invitation. It's not nice being stuck here not knowing what is being said. At least you know exactly what's being said"

Seven families who were invited chose not to go, claiming late or inaccurate notification, practical difficulties, including child care, and fear. With hindsight, most of them wished they had gone. They said they knew very little about what was going on, and felt negative.

"I didn't see her (social worker) before and wasn't told anything.....They(SSD) are totally useless.....I got a letter. It was just a note saying there was a case conference. It had ny name on and where it was, nothing else....I was pleased that I was actually invited but my partner (common law husband) should have been.....I don't think my views were represented....It wouldn't have made much difference (to the decisions) if I had attended"

Ninety one per cent of the parents in the comparison group wished they had received an invitation and felt angry at being excluded.

" If I had been invited I would have felt involved in what was happening. People can make a better judgement of you if you're there..the decisions were already made before the case conference. I would like to know how they decided what to do...who said what"

ii. Feelings about attending

The questionnaire was structured so as to obtain information about the experiences of the different groups at this stage. The parents who attended the conference had both good and bad things to say about it. While finding the experience of being present extremely difficult and often painful, they, like the parents in Thoburn et al's study (1995), were almost all pleased they had gone, feeling it was better to hear what was said than not, even if they disagreed with it.

" I saw the case conference as a means to end the problem. Everyone helped as much as they could, introduced themselves and so on. We welcomed the invitation in order to say what we wanted to say. We found it difficult to reply on the spot....it was awesome for us; so many people there, some not known. "

Justice requires both that information is shared, and that it is accurate. Eighty percent of the parents in attendance believed that the information reported in the conference was largely accurate and well presented. It is notable that this level of agreement is much higher than that described at the beginning stages. Again, this replicates the trend toward convergence identified in Cleaver and Freeman's research (1995): "*on all fronts over half the families were now in agreement with the professionals views*" (p 130). Cleaver and Freeman point out that this change of attitude on the part of the parents may be due to a

number of factors, including shifts within the family and the wish to be seen to be cooperative to achieve a desired outcome. However, previous chapters have suggested that all the participants agree that information both coming in and going out of the conference is more accurate and comprehensive because the parents have contributed to it. This finding does, therefore, underline the value of including them in the conference.

Only 22% of the parents in my study said important information had not been shared, in only one instance by themselves. Many parents felt able to add to, correct or challenge what was said. Evidence from the observation study is that they did, and were supported in doing so by the chair.

"We sat next to him. He gave us every opportunity to make our own statements and invited us to correct anything we disagreed with"

However, while some parents agreed with the facts as presented, they disagreed with the professionals' interpretation of them as abusive. Cultural factors and different parenting standards seemed influential here, as the discussion in Chapter 2 and the case studies presented in the previous chapter illustrated. There was also a lack of congruence, as was also found in Cleaver and Freeman's study (1995) between the views of the parents and the professionals about the cause, and so the solution of their problems which was disturbing for some parents. The mother from Case 2 again.

"They should try looking after three little kids on no money and in a damp house full of rats"

For similar reasons, the parents views about what information was relevant to the assessment of risk often differed from the professionals. They understood the necessity for a detailed presentation of the circumstances immediately surrounding the abuse, but questioned the ethics as well as the relevance of introducing information which related to their family background or lifestyle. A study by Fisher (1990) in Bradford describes how

'bombshells' can be presented in the conference - "*information of critical importance given without warning*" (p3), creating problems not just for the parents but for the chairpersons, in managing them. In Case 4 in my study, for example, the General Practitioner read from some transferred medical records that the mother had three children from a previous marriage, now in care in another authority. This was the first her present husband knew of their existence, and, not surprisingly, contributed to the disruption caused.

A number of parents did not see the relationship the professionals made between what had happened to one child and another:

"It's not right to let what happened to the first child be brought up again....Going to the meeting is a good idea but when they bring up your past it's not a good idea"

The picture is very similar, again, to that portrayed by Cleaver and Freeman (1995), where parents resented information being passed from one agency to another, feared information would be taken out of context, and believed that everything they said or did was viewed in the light of suspicion and given a negative interpretation. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that the family members in their study were anxious to prevent damaging information spreading beyond the family, but felt they had had no power to prevent it. They point out the similarity of this description to Goffman's (1963) description of the stigmatised persons need to control information which has bearing on personal identity.

Parents in my study also felt bemused by the fact that the conference considered other children in the family, especially when they had not been informed this would happen;

"They were right to have a conference about Mark; but not about the other two children. I thought it was just about Mark - whether they could put him in care for his own safety. But up to this day they had never suggested the other two might be registered"

There were other aspects of the meeting the parents did not like. A number wished they could have been accompanied by a friend or solicitor which, at that time, was not possible. Farmer and Owen (1995) found that most parents who attended felt exceedingly lonely, a feeling that would be exacerbated by their often socially isolated lives. Many of the parents in my, and in the other research studies cited, expressed concern about the composition of the meeting, both its size and membership. The police presence was not welcomed, especially by the small number of black families in the study, nor was that of professionals who appeared to have no direct connection with the incident, such as teachers who knew the family, but not the child in question.

" I don't think it made any difference to them whether I was there or not. Too many people there are not directly involved, health visitor, head teacher and school nurse were all new to us because N has only just gone to school...so they didnt know us. Other people had nothing to do with it at all"

At the time the research was undertaken, most of the parents were required to leave the conference at the decision making stage, and while 50% of the parents said that they understood why they were asked to leave, 58% did not like it and thought 'secrets' would then be shared which they were not a party to. Farmer and Owen (1995) thought partial exclusion had damaging effects, sometimes representing punishment. However, in this study parents' views on this issue were not sufficiently strong as to affect their attitude to the overall intervention, a finding which is similar to Thoburn et al's (1995);

"Contrary to our expectations.....there was no statistically significant difference in the rates of participation between those who attended all the conference [just over a third] and those who attended most of it" (p 205).

Although partial attendance has received a bad press and been a matter of concern for some time my study, and Thoburn et al's (1995) recent one, forwards the debate by suggesting that it is the way in which partial exclusion is handled that seems critical in determining attitude. Parents do not like being excluded, but in my study a number could see the situation from the professionals point of view and, to a degree, manage its emotional impact if they felt they were not being marginalised.

iii. Management of the meeting

There were aspects of the conference the parents liked. Half of them felt that the people sitting round the table understood them and were not prejudiced against them. Like the parents in Cleaver and Freemans's (1995) study they thought the professionals had already made up their minds about registration, but they also believed they were listened to.

"Q. Did they look like a group of people who could understand you.

A. No. When I was talking they kept giving me funny looks as though they were thinking what are you on about and I didn't think they understood what I was saying....They listened, but they didn't understand"

Being cared about "as people" was important to the families in this and in Thoburn et al's study (1995). Farmer and Owen (1995) also found an important component of effective practice was whether the worker was able to convey an attitude of respect and liking for the parents. As the quote above suggests, this disposition seemed at least as important as whether the professionals had understood what they were trying to say.

The parents in my study generally spoke very favourably about the management of the meeting which in most cases followed a clear and logical procedure which was explained before the meeting, and again at the beginning. Being in the room first with the chairperson was considered the best arrangement and concrete things like seating arrangements mattered. The way in which the chair made them welcome and handled

introductions received favourable comment from 82% of the parents. The chair's attitude was experienced as enabling, for example by his careful explanation of a point or of a procedure.

" The chairmen was really nice. He spoke to me before. I sat next to him. He tried to put me at my ease"

Farmer and Owen (1995) also report that skilled chairing was helpful in eliciting parents feelings. This worked best if the chairperson was prepared to move slowly and at the clients pace.

The crucial role of the chair has been referred to in previous chapters. Another dimension is introduced here. Evidence from the observation study is that the three different chairs operated very different styles of chairing. For example, the chair in one division operated a pairing arrangement with the female principal social worker in which he took responsibility for process, she for content. While the professionals did comment on the effect on the conference of these different styles, there was no evidence from the parents' interviews to suggest that the different styles made them more or less positive to the chairperson or the decisions of the conference. This is particularly interesting when set against the research findings on the professionals' experience, which suggest that their assessment of what is difficult in the conference bears some relationship to the style of chairing. Parents were generally very positive about the way the chair managed the meeting

Returning to the parents, respect was communicated by a polite attitude and a business-like approach. Attention to detail, such as providing paper and pencils, or a box of tissues mattered, as has also been highlighted in Thoburn's work (1993). Cleaver and Freeman (1995) also point out how attitudes are communicated by such arrangements; they form part of the operational perspective. Only 4% of these parents said the conference had been unhelpful to them, or that it had adversely affected relationships within the family. The positive feelings arose from feeling supported, involved and being

taken seriously. Parents were pleased to be a party to the reasons given for the registration decision and to respond to suggestions about the child protection plan, including whether they were prepared to cooperate with the key worker.

"They talked about things in a civilised manner...not prejudiced by what I or husband said. It was very helpful for me and father to be there...It is better they should know now because they can help"

iv. Influence on decisions

Returning to the issue of influence and the parents' impact upon the decisions, the parents were asked whether they felt they had been heard in the meeting, whether what they said made a difference, and so on. Although three-quarters of these parents felt fairly treated and that the professionals had listened to them, two-thirds did not think they had influenced the decisions about whether the abuse had taken place, whether the child should be registered or about ways of helping. These percentages are very similar to those found in Thoburn's study (1995):

"It was rare for any family member to be involved in decisions about risk and registration, but the main parents were more likely to be involved in decisions about the protection plan and the help offered" (p 186).

Thoburn et al (1995) found that only 50% of the parents in their study felt listened to, and 33% felt that their views were definitely not listened to. However, only 31% felt that their views had definitely carried weight about whether the child had been abused or neglected. Notwithstanding, the social workers in her study still worked toward full involvement in the belief that if families were excluded it was harder for the social workers to overcome. The finding in my research was that the majority of the parents felt that the professionals had already made up their minds. In the words of Cleaver and Freeman (1995), "they believed professionals held all the cards and controlled the rules of the game."

" They take notice of what the Doctors say but they didn't listen to us. I don't know if my being there made any difference".

" When I was talking they kept giving me funny looks as though they were thinking what are you on about and I didnt think they understood what I was saying...They listened, but they didnt understand "

The parents' belief that they did not affect the decisions received support from the monitoring study which demonstrated that there were no differences between the pilot and control areas in the numbers of children registered or in the categories of registration. This finding is also supported by Farmer and Owen (1995), who write

"There seemed to be an expectation not that parents would influence the conference judgment but that they would be influenced by it" (p 108).

An important finding for practitioners who are concerned about the trauma experienced by parents attending is that parents are often able to hold their anger and fear in balance with more positive feelings; parents could feel bad about what was happening to them, but still agree that the outcome was good.

" The police shouldn't have been there. It felt just like a court room.....But we are happy about the decision to register, and review after three months. They even wrote to housing for me"

The experiences of parents in the pilot areas contrasted sharply with those in the control areas, nearly all of whom wished to have been invited. Over three-quarters of the parents who were not invited had no idea what had been said about themselves or their child or whether it was accurate.

" We would like to have been able to correct information and the way it was given-wrong conclusions were drawn."

While they share with the parents who attended a sense of impotence in the decision making process, parents in the control areas differ dramatically in feeling an overwhelming sense of injustice .

"Since the conference I cant talk to my social worker. It's unfair that I wasnt allowed to be there. I wanted to put my point of view. I dont feel any of the decisions made will be helpful to me or my children"

The experiences of this group of parents is more like those in Farmer and Owen's study (1995) which took place before full involvement of parents had been initiated. They found that almost all of the parents experienced the investigation and conference as processes over which they they had no influence, and from which they felt excluded.

What, then, were the differences in my study between the parents who participated in the conferences and those who did not. One of the most striking findings is that an outstanding difference between the parents who attended and those who did not is in their sense of fair play; 47% of the parents in the pilot group felt they had been treated fairly, compared with 16% in the control group. As discussed in Chapter 2, fairness, as a concept, is linked to justice, (see Rawls, 1971). The difficulties for conferences in being fair and just, given the ambiguous nature of their task, were also discussed in the chapter reporting on the monitoring study. It is therefore particularly interesting that parents who constantly liken the experience of attendance to being in court, who clearly feel scrutinised, judged and blamed and who have no legal representation or chance of redress, feel fairly treated if they have been allowed to be a part of the process. 'Messages from the Research' confirms this crucial finding:

"a great deal of social work research shows that clients will cooperate even if it is against their obvious personal interests as long as they see the process as 'just'" (p 47).

PARENTS' EXPERIENCE AFTER THE CONFERENCE

i. Information received about the decisions and recommendations

Nearly all the parents in the pilot and control areas knew what had been decided by the conference, although in this authority it was not the practice at the time for parents to receive the minutes. Generally, a letter with the main recommendations had been received. Only 6% of the parents had no idea what had been decided, the same proportion as in Thoburn et al's (1995) study. Clearly not sending the minutes to parents increases their sense of exclusion and was received in an especially negative way by the parents who had difficulty in engaging in the process. The small group of parents who had been invited but had not attended provide a good example:

" I think it's a good idea to go, but I hadn't got the nerve because if I crossed them in any way they'd be awkward. Anyway it wouldn't have made any difference to the decisions made. I was refused a copy of the minutes. This is wrong"

Hallett (1995) draws attention to minutes as the key document in the inter-agency work. Working Together, 1991, is unambiguous in its recommendation: *"a copy of the minutes should be sent to all who attended the conference"* (p47). At the time the research was undertaken practice varied widely nationally, partly because of the difficulties involved in training minute takers, and in agreeing a format. In Thoburn et al's (1995) study, some parents received the minutes and some did not. As she points out, there are particular problems for family members living outside the main household. Receiving minutes is clearly a basic ingredient of partnership practice, conveying an important message to parents about how their participation is perceived.

Surprisingly, nearly half of the families interviewed four weeks after the conference had not been visited by the social worker. Returning to the idea of crisis intervention, this seems to be a golden opportunity missed. It calls to mind the research findings on children admitted to care, (see Rowe, 19) who are forgotten when they are 'safe'. It seems likely that in this arena a number of dynamics are operating. Thoburn et al (1995) suggest there may be an element of collusion. Her parents did not want to be visited. Even in cases where children were not registered she found parents felt obliged to accept a visit, but did not welcome one. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) also found that once the conference was over families were relieved that they still had their kids, wanted to get on with their lives and did not want to be bothered any more. Perhaps as 'Messages from the Research' suggests, "*while professionals jealously guard the point of entry, less attention is given to the point of exit*"(p 38).

Interestingly, in my study, a visit was more likely in the control areas than the pilot areas(82%/41%). This suggests, in line with the possibilities outlined above, that the purpose of the visit was seen by the workers as an opportunity to ensure that the information had been understood, rather than as one for consolidating a partnership arrangement. Seventy two percent of the parents in the control area had been given the opportunity to discuss the decisions afterwards, compared with 44% in the pilot area. Thoburn et al (1995) also found that there was a greater emphasis on explaining than on negotiating, and that although family members used the words 'agreement' and 'contract' they did not always view them positively. This point will be looked at in the interviews with social workers in the proceeding chapter.

ii. Were the decisions helpful?

After the conference only 33% of the total sample felt positive about the decision to register, although nearly one half were happy about the keyworker recommendation. Table 4 illustrates what parents did and did not find helpful. The high figure of 65% in the category 'not applicable', for allocation of resources reflects the fact both that initial conferences do not allocate resources, and suggests that the parents in this authority have some understanding of the legal status of the conference, and its limited remit. The 43%

who declared registration to be unhelpful to themselves or their child were more likely to disagree that their child had been abused. They felt registration undermined their confidence in their own parenting skills;

"I think they were quite out of order to register all three children. Its totally wrong. It makes us less sure how to treat our children "

" WHICH CONFERENCE DECISIONS DID PARENTS FIND HELPFUL?"

	HELPFUL		UNHELPFUL		NOT APPLIC		TOTAL
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Registration	15	33	20	43	11	24	46
Child protection plan	10	24	11	26	21	50	41
Allocation of resources	11	26	4	9	28	65	43
Allocation of key worker	21	47	11	24	13	29	45
Total N = 51							

Table 7.4: PARENTS' VIEWS ON CONFERENCE DECISIONS

Some felt that agreeing to continuing social work involvement was a high price to pay for the child's name remaining off the register;

" The decision not to register seemed like blackmail to me. I was pleased none of the children were registered, but angry to see the social worker in order to achieve non registration"

For other parents, registration was regarded as a welcome alternative to the removal of their child, which was often what parents thought the conference was about.

"We feared having the baby removed, so registration was fine"

One of the adolescent children interviewed expressed grave anxiety that the conference would break the family up, but then welcomed the registration decision as she felt it offered her protection;

" I felt safer. If anything happened again I could go to my social worker . The conference has improved how I get on with my Dad"

Farmer and Owen (1995) interviewed fifteen children in their study, and also found that for some of them, uncovering the abuse led to feelings of relief. However, for children who had to leave home they had the double pain of telling, and losing their place in the family as a consequence. Thoburn et al (1995) interviewed fourteen children, and found that although most were pleased their parents had gone to the conference, they did not want to go themselves.

Moving on to the child protection plan, as has been explained the prevailing practice in this authority was to formulate the detailed plan at a later strategy meeting, to which the parents are also invited. It was, therefore, not surprising that over half of the parents could not describe what the future plans were at this stage. Opportunities were taken in the conferences researched to check out with parents what they would be prepared to cooperate with, and what they would find immediately helpful. The debate about whether the conference is the appropriate place for the child protection plan to be made was discussed in the chapter reporting on the monitoring study.

Parents were asked what forms of help other than that suggested would have been welcomed. They mentioned " unifying the family", help with parenting skills, family therapy. In particular, like the families in Thoburn et al's study (1995), families wished to set their own agenda so they got the help they thought they needed, not what the social worker decided.

OUTCOMES

The important difference between parents from the two areas at the end of the conference process was not in their understanding of what was happening, but their feelings about it. As reported above there were differences between parents in the pilot and control areas with regard to their feeling fairly treated, and in their relationship with their social worker. These are illustrated in Table 5. The numbers are too small to demonstrate a statistical significance, but the consistency of the differences strongly suggests that they are real. In particular, parents in the control areas were more likely to feel unfairly treated, and to report that their relationship with their social worker had deteriorated, a finding which was almost significant in the smaller sample and significant in the larger one.

As well as analysing the parents' attitudes towards the conference itself, it was thought important to explore their attitudes towards the actions of the social services department throughout the investigative process. Previous chapters have outlined the power of the operational perspectives the participants bring to the conference with them. This chapter has followed the shifts in parents attitudes throughout the process, explored the way these were modified in the conference, and analysed the impact of that process on attitudes to the future interventions.

PARENTS VIEWS; OUTCOMES

	PILOT		CONTROL		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Thought fairly treated by SSD	12	45	3	17	15	34
Thought relationship with social worker impaired	5	20	9	53	14	33
Felt involved in decisions	12	39	4	22	16	33

**N refers to the basis on which percentages are calculated
xp = .06 after controlling for continuity**

Table 7.5: PARENTS VIEWS, OVERALL

In order to measure the parents' attitudes four scores were calculated: cooperativeness - which measured attitudes to plans (e.g. whether the child protection plan was helpful to them); attitude to the social services department before the conference (based on answers to closed questions such as "did they blame you" and "did they respect you"); attitudes after the conference (based on similar questions), and total attitude formed by summing attitudes before and after the conference.

There were no significant differences between the pilot and control groups on any of these four scores. The factors most strongly associated with attitude were whether the child had been removed from the family either before or after the conference by statutory

action, and whether the parents agreed that abuse had taken place. Table 6 gives results for attitudes towards the social services after the conference. In all cases where statutory action had been taken or was recommended, parents felt unfairly treated throughout the course of the investigation.

"They were wrong to suggest a care order. They're like a set of Gestapos. Hitlers army"

**ATTITUDE TO PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION BY PILOT AND CONTROL
STATUS AND STATUTORY ACTION
Average Attitude Scores***

	PILOT	CONTROL	TOTAL
No action	11.50 (N=18)	10.23 (N=13)	N=31
Statutory action	4.38 (N=8)	7.50 (N=4)	N=12
Total	N=26	N=17	N=43

Significant Effect Statutory Action; F= 8.27, df=1, P=.006

*** A high score denotes a positive attitude**

Statutory action is significant at .006

Table 7.6: ATTITUDES TO PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION AFTER THE CONFERENCE

The association between denial of the alleged abuse and various measures of attitude was similar. Parents who were denying the alleged abuse had a negative attitude to social services. Regression analysis suggested that denial of alleged abuse and statutory action were independently related to a negative attitude toward social services but that

participation in the pilot areas was not. As stated previously, the removal of their child is the parents' greatest fear and the context within which ideas about equality within partnership must operate. These findings, and those of Cleaver and Freeman (1995), are in keeping with that suggestion.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the interviews with the parents confirm the largely favourable findings from other studies of child protection conferences, that nearly all parents want to be at the conference and are pleased that they attended, although they find the experience emotionally difficult. The parents' positive feeling of involvement does not extend to a conviction that they have influenced the decisions of the conference, but their ongoing relationship with their social worker is less likely to be impaired where they have been invited and attended.

However, my research suggests that the parents' involvement does not, in itself, affect their feelings about registration, or make them more cooperative with the child protection plan. It seems that parents' greatest fear is not that their child will be registered, but that h/she will be removed. Where parents do not agree that abuse has taken place, and where they have experienced the heavy end of social services intervention, involving removal of the child and statutory action, their attitude to the intervention is negative, irrespective of whether they attended or not.

The numbers of parents in this study who were invited and did not attend was small; they probably needed particular help from the social worker before the conference to address their apprehensions, correct misunderstanding and provide practical support, such as child care. There was also evidence to support the findings from other parts of the research already presented regarding how the family is defined, and who gets invited. Many mothers attend alone, and the range of issues this raises were discussed. My research is the only study to compare the effects of conference participation on two groups of parents. Almost all the parents from the control groups wished to have been invited and felt a sense of injustice which affected their relationship with their social worker

adversely. The important difference between the pilot and control groups was not in their understanding of what was happening, which was sound, but their feelings about it. Parents in the control group were more likely to feel unfairly treated and to report that their relationship with their social worker was worse.

DISCUSSION AND PRACTICE POINTS

My study of the parents interviews, and the recent research undertaken by Thoburn et al (1995) and Cleaver and Freeman (1995), draw similar conclusions. The findings underline the need for parents to be carefully supported throughout the initial investigation, and throw some light on what effective partnership practice in child protection work might consist in. Providing information that is accessible to all racial and class groups, for example, attention to the detail of reception facilities, and the skills of the chairperson in managing the business and affect of the meeting are important factors in communicating respect and a sense of fairness. Access to, and contributing to the available information is a critical starting point for establishing a partnership in which the parents expertise is acknowledged and the basis laid for collaborative work. Hearing what is said in the conference allows the parent to hear how the diagnosis of abuse has been constructed, and to share their perceptions both of what they understand to be the problem, and ways of resolving or mediating it. In this way, operational perspectives begin to merge which has a positive effect on outcome. In cases where the diagnosis is not disputed, and particularly where the parents feel blameless, this information should, theoretically, enable the professionals and the parents to agree on a common goal, to protect the child, and the means of achieving it. As Cleaver and Freeman (1995) suggest, where instrumental intervention coincides with concord between parents and professionals, outcomes, such as the safety of the child, are more likely to be satisfactory.

My research has also suggested that there are situations in which the benefit of full participation and the open sharing of information is in doubt. As was found in the study of the professionals' views in the previous chapter, fundamental issues arise as to who exactly the partnership is with, and what the objectives of the work are. Leaving aside the issues for the child and the child's protection, for parents who are separated and have

secrets from one another, or for parents who disagree about the child's welfare, or for mothers within a violent relationship who fear retribution, some information could be damaging to themselves or the child. In my study over a third of the conferences were attended by the mother alone, and a number of the parents experienced the open sharing of information about their family background as oppressive, yet they had no control over what was said at the conference. It seems reasonable to assume that the child would have even less control.

Further, while the parents interviewed here were helped to and did contribute to the open sharing of information about the abuse, they did not receive information about how to deregister, how to complain, how to access the legal system, or the conference minutes - information essential to any empowering process. Neither were the parents who did not attend encouraged to put their views in writing; again an essential prerequisite of partnership practice. Thoburn et al's work (1995) established the importance of the social workers' commitment to working in partnership (in their study 60% of the workers were rated as being strongly participatory in their attitudes) My research has also demonstrated that working in partnership is achievable and constitutes good practice. However, it also points up the need for workers who wish to genuinely empower their clients to provide information in a user friendly way, and to spend time enabling the parents, key carers and children to find a way of presenting their views.

My research on the parents' experiences forges new ground by analysing the relationship between conference attendance and attitudes to intervention. The finding that the client-worker relationship is less likely to be impaired where parents have attended the conference than when they have not lends support to the view that, at least in those cases where parents and professionals agree about the abuse, a partnership approach should be encouraged. However, the research also suggests, as does Thoburn et al's (1995), that optimism about partnership practice, even in these best scenario cases, should be tempered. The parents in my study were fully aware that their expertise was the subject of close scrutiny in the conference, and, in a number of cases, was found wanting. While they valued hearing and being heard - and this contributed to a sense of fair play which

was empowering - they did not believe (and they were correct in this belief) that they influenced the registration decision. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that parents and children experienced the intervention as powerful, and yet one over which they had little control. This belief must feed into a sense of disempowerment which is further nurtured by the unequal power balance in the social work relationship, and by the parents' knowledge and fear that their child could be removed.

Marsh and Fisher (1993) suggest, as has been determined here, that forming a partnership presents fewer problems when the parents agree with the judgment of the conference as to the nature and cause of the problem. My research goes further in providing evidence that such "agreement" is not straightforward and depends upon many variables. For the professionals, partnership practice is built upon assessments and plans constructed on the basis of concepts of family and relationship dysfunction which are not necessarily shared by their clients. Parents may not agree that the situation as described is abusive and may feel that the solution to their problems is an adequate income, better housing, and employment.. 'Messages from the Research'(1995) stressed the importance of taking into account parents' perspectives on what constitutes abuse. The parents we interviewed did not share the professionals view that family history and family dynamics contributed to the abuse; while professionals did not have access to the resources that parents felt they needed. Since, collaborative discussions about what is helpful and possible begin from the professionals interpretation of events and are limited by inadequate resources, there are clear limitations to the parents negotiating powers within the relationship.

The research findings demonstrate that, however well the meeting is managed and prepared for, many of the disempowering elements identified by the parents are inherent in the potentially contradictory tasks that are being pursued within the initial conference. No favours are done to parents by ignoring this, and good partnership practice would begin by acknowledging that tensions do exist, that there may be conflicts of interest and that the dilemmas for practitioners are encapsulated within the concept of partnership practice rather than solved or made easier by it.

EIGHT

THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

" Will you, won't you, will you, wont you, will you join the dance? "

The Mock Turtle, Carroll, (1865) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

In the last chapter I reported on the experience of the parents and other family members of their involvement in the investigation of the allegation, the preparation for the conference, their attendance at the conference and the immediate aftermath. Overall, the parents were pleased to be involved, and when they had been their relationship with their social worker was less likely to be impaired than when they had not. However, their feeling of involvement did not extend to a conviction that they had influenced the decisions of the conference. Attendance at the conference per se was not a significant determinant of attitude to the overall intervention.

This chapter examines in more detail the content and process of the social work undertaken by the local authority social worker carrying out the investigation, preliminary assessment and work with family members before, during and after the conference. We have seen in previous chapters that the investigation and the conference are concerned with the assessment of risk, rather than the assessment of need. I wished to find out more about how the social workers undertook their assessment. Other writers, as described in Chapter 3, have suggested that the focus of the assessment is on the incident and that the social workers see their primary task as being to collect information about what happened. This is then pieced together and added to by the other professionals so that the conference

is presented with an accumulation of concerns, making up the jigsaw. To further my thinking about partnership I wanted to know whether the social workers saw their role as being primarily to collect information, and how they set about doing this? Additionally, was the inquisitorial stance suggested by work of this nature consistent with the principles of empowering practice?

It has been suggested that the conference, like a court of law, is more interested in what has happened than why. One consequence of this model of decision making is that short shrift is given to theoretical considerations, (see Stevenson, 1995). In consequence, social workers describe what has happened and describe factors in the family background that are material to the consideration of risk, such as a history of drug abuse; but they do not offer a theoretical explanation for the connections. Farmer and Owen (1995) suggest that in many cases background information is crucial to the assessment of risk. As well as confirming the allegation already made and providing further evidence of risk, background material is capable of providing the germ of an explanatory theory by enabling conference members to form a notion of the aetiology of the abuse. For example, if a parent has been brought up in residential care, reference to attachment theory could enhance an understanding of present parent/child relationships, and suggest therapeutic interventions. I was therefore interested in finding out what priorities the social workers accorded different elements of their assessment, particularly in relation to family background. How did they define this task, and did they believe it was achievable? Other research studies cited have suggested that the shortness of time between the allegation and the conference means a full assessment is not a realistic objective. King and Trowell (1993) have drawn attention to the impossibility of providing an instant assessment of parenting capacity for courts, and the same applies here. However, conference agendas and the participants largely operate as if a full assessment were possible. I was interested to know the social workers view on this, and how this was operationalised in their practice.

This chapter also looks in more depth at the views of the social workers on participatory practice, and whether they feel this is achieved through involving parents in the conference. In particular, I wished to explore further the social workers' views on the

nature of and opportunities for partnership practice in this early investigative stage of the child protection work, the skills they considered the task required, and the degree to which the authority's policies and investigation procedures facilitated their task. Thoburn et al (1995) have drawn attention to the relationship between social worker's attitudes to partnership and their agencies policies and procedures. I therefore wanted to collect data about what social workers knew about agency policy and procedures, whether there was congruence between the individual's principles and the agencies policies, and the impact this had on their practice. The importance of procedures to workers in child protection work in managing anxiety has been previously discussed, and here it is explored again with particular reference to the inter-agency dimension.

Finally, this chapter takes further the debate about consensus. I wished to hear what the social workers thought about this. Did they go to the conference with a preformed view about registration, and was conflict minimised? This thesis has demonstrated that disagreement between parents and professionals was a major component in parents' attitudes to their experience and their preparedness to cooperate with the ongoing work. As we have seen, the cases professionals find difficult are those where parents disagree about the abuse and the need for a conference, and where certain characteristics previously identified exist. (Bell, 1996) I wished to understand more about how social workers viewed the management of conflict. Further, how did the principles of rights and justice, held dear by social work practitioners, sit when rocked by the conflicts and difficulties we have identified?

METHOD

Data relating to the social workers' experience of the conferences with parents present was collected by interviews with social workers in the pilot area research teams who had carried responsibility for the investigation, and through the conference attendance. The interviews were conducted by means of a semi-structured questionnaire, and took place in the neighbourhood team offices. Because the aim was to ensure that the social workers were familiar with the policy of involving parents, and had experience of conferences with

parents present, the interviews were carried out in the last six months of the research project. 63% of them took place three weeks after the conference, and the remainder between one and three weeks after it.

The interviews

The three interviewers who had undertaken the interviews with the families also interviewed the social workers. Nearly a half were carried out by one of the interviewers. The questionnaire was designed to acquire quantitative and qualitative data in three main related areas;

- * **worker profile**, such as age, ethnic origin, experience of child protection work, and knowledge of agency policy and procedures on parental involvement;

- * **the nature of the investigative work**, such as which family members and professionals were seen before the conference, time allowed for the assessment, and the preparation of parents;

- * **experience of the conference itself**, addressing issues about the influence of the parents' presence on information sharing and the ongoing social work relationship, and the related partnership skills.

The intention was to pursue in greater depth, and in relation to individual cases, a number of the issues that had been raised by other parts of the research. For example, to discover whether the social workers judged that they had undertaken a full assessment before the conference some questions pursued the nature of the direct work with the family - how the family was defined, how the views of family members not present, including the child - were represented. Other questions asked what partnership skills were used. The inter-agency component of the social work practice could also be further examined, in particular how was conflict managed, and did consensus prevail? Lastly, I hoped an in-depth look at social work practice in individual cases would throw the central themes

of partnership and empowerment into a sharper focus to enable the threads to be pulled together in the concluding chapter.

The format of the semi-structured interview schedule was based on the same principles as those used with the parents. The questionnaire (see appendix 5) was divided into sections, based on the criteria laid out above, and following the chronological order of the investigation. So the beginning section asked questions about the worker and the agency; section 2 asked questions about the family, firstly in relation to the investigation, then at the conference, and lastly, responses about the worker's overall experience were canvassed. Open-ended questions were employed to encourage the social workers to respond in their own way: for example, 'did you feel that the presence of the parents had an effect on your ongoing working relationship?'. Closed questions were used to ensure particular issues were addressed, so 'did you see the child alone', or 'was there consensus when the decision was made to register the child?'

Reliability

The means for ensuring reliability were the same as those employed in the family interviews. The schedule was carefully piloted, and then the completed questionnaires were checked against each other when they arrived to see if the answers made sense and were similar. Fifteen of the families interviewed were also included in the social worker's study, again allowing for some of the facts to be verified, and all were included in the survey on the professionals' views and the monitoring study. Regular meetings were held with the interviewers to review their approach, and address problems as they arose. The interviewers deemed two thirds of the completed questionnaires to be reliable. In some cases the social workers were rushed, and occasionally called away or failed to turn up at short notice. Many appreciated the opportunity to reflect upon their practice in this area of work which they saw as being key to partnership work. As one of the principle social workers interviewed said, "*if they get it right here, its downhill all the way*"

Analysis

The interviewing data was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, and the results were informed by the qualitative material from the observation study and by data collected from the families and the other professionals. I observed nine of the conferences involving these families, and, as has been said, fifteen of the families had also been interviewed for the research. The qualitative data was, therefore, very rich and the fact that much could be cross checked with factual content from other instruments increased its validity. The findings from the social workers interviews are therefore informed by the results from the other research studies which provide valuable additional data.

RESULTS

The sample

The sample consisted of twenty two local authority social workers who had carried out a child protection investigation and attended the initial conference with parental involvement in the last six months of the research project, between January and June 1992. The social workers were based in the four neighbourhood research teams which were piloting the involvement of parents. Some of the social workers had acted in more than one case. Half of them had attended between one and three conferences with parents present, and some had attended four. These included three conferences from which a parent had been excluded, and four where the parents had not turned up.

Two thirds of the social workers were female (15), two thirds were white European, two were African-Caribbean, one African and the remaining four of mixed racial origins. Two thirds were aged between twenty five and forty, the remainder being over aged forty. All were qualified social workers, 85% of whom were trained in the last ten years. The majority (81%) had over three years experience of child protection work and carried predominantly child care workloads. Fourteen percent were principal social workers, the rest being basic grade fieldworkers.

These findings are similar to Thoburn et al's (1995). In her study the majority of social workers included were also female, white British, aged over thirty, qualified and with substantial experience of child protection work.

i. PREPARATION AND AGENCY POLICY

The relationship between good social work practice and the management of the fieldworkers by the agency is well established, (Hallett, 1995, Bingley-Miller, 1992, Mcluskey, 1995). Discussion in previous chapters has drawn attention to this relationship. The work of Lyth-Menzies, for example, was used in Chapter 4 to illustrate the way nurses use organisational structures in the hospital as a means of managing the emotional content of their work. I therefore designed the interview schedule so as to collect data about a range of different aspects of the agencies policies, practice and procedures. I also wished to test out how these were known to and experienced by the social workers.

The social workers were, therefore, asked whether they were aware of their agency's policy on participation across the continuum of meetings in which parents might be involved, as well as related issues such as open access to records and complaints procedures. As can be seen from Table 1, nearly all the respondents were aware of the agencies policies on open access to records and on planning and review meetings with parents and children. A third of the respondents were not aware of the policy on complaints procedures, a finding also established in the interviews with parents, the majority of whom were not aware of the authority's complaints procedures. As suggested previously, such knowledge is fundamental to empowerment. These findings provide a coherent picture, supporting the earlier suggestion that while the agency and the social workers are committed to participative practice in principle, in practice there is some reluctance to relinquish power when disagreements surface, such as where complaints are possible. They also draw attention to the ambiguous nature of the task facing social workers - to act as advocates for the family in the conference and as representatives of the agency investigating the complaint.

SOCIAL WORKERS' KNOWLEDGE OF AGENCY POLICY

	KNEW	
	N	%
On planning meetings, reviews and conferences	20	91
On access to files and records	20	91
On complaints	14	63

Total N = 22

Table 8.1: WHAT SOCIAL WORKERS KNEW ABOUT AGENCY POLICY

My analysis of the interviews with parents led me to suggest that different levels of communication were operating, and that these would affect the way information was received and acted upon in subtle ways. This hypothesis I also wished to explore in the interviews with the social workers. Table 1 also illustrates what documentation they had received, and what opportunities they had been given to discuss it. To get a broad picture I included Working Together 1991, as well as their agency guidelines on report writing and attendance of parents at conferences. I also wanted to know whether they had seen the letters and leaflets for the parents and what they thought of them. Table 2 shows this information.

While nearly all the respondents had seen Working Together 1991, and the letter sent to parents inviting them to the conference, fewer had seen the policy guidelines issued by the agency on report writing, or the explanatory leaflet sent to parents. This is surprising since 91% of the respondents said that they had been to team meetings where these issues were discussed, and where the opportunity to peruse them would, one would have thought,

existed. This may explain why social workers raised the opportunity to review these procedural documents in training. This supports my earlier suggestion in Chapter 5 that training is seen as an avenue for addressing matters that should also be addressed by management.

AGENCY DOCUMENTS SEEN BY SOCIAL WORKERS		
	SEEN	
	N	%
Working Together(1991)	19	86
Policy guidance on attendance		
at conferences	10	45
Policy guidance on report writing		
for conferences	15	68
Leaflet to parents about		
conferences	17	77
Letter of invitation		
to parents	20	91
Total N = 22		

Table 8.2: WHAT DOCUMENTS WERE SEEN BY SOCIAL WORKERS

The social workers' general view, where they had seen the policy guidelines, was that they were helpful and good, although they would have preferred a clear format for report writing, such as was provided to the nurses. Of those who had seen the literature sent to the parents, the majority rated it, generally, as good. Some thought the language could have been simplified, but did not suggest any concrete improvements. One did not know what languages it was available in.

Agency policy and views on partnership and parental involvement

Another theme running through this thesis has been the relationship between congruent views and positive outcomes. It seemed important to determine whether there was congruence between the views of the social workers and the approach of the agency on the participation of parents throughout the investigative process. In exploring the factors that support partnership practice, Thoburn et al (1995) identified a relationship between the agencies policies and approach to partnership issues, and the social workers inclination and ability to engage in partnership practice. Where the agencies approach was seen as supportive, she found, the social workers' practice was more likely to be participative, along the dimensions she constructed.

As in Thoburn et al's (1995) study, all the respondents in mine were aware of their agency's policy on involving family members in the conference. 68% of the social workers in my study (60% in Thoburn et al's) considered there were no differences in principle between their own attitudes and those of the agency. The differences that did exist were in relation to the policy of sending parents out at the decision making stage - the social workers disagreed with this - and many thought the parents should receive a copy of the minutes.

" We're all in agreement that the parents should be there.....I've had interpreters at the conference and the department has paid for the service - no questions asked"

Agency support

Findings from the research reported in Chapter 5 suggested that structures in the agency for managing, supervising and supporting the fieldworkers within their teams were important determinants of the workers' experience of and capacity to involve parents. Other work has been cited which emphasised the importance of agency structures to the quality of the work - especially the child protection task. I therefore asked the social workers to describe ways in which they felt the agency facilitated their task. In the first instance they mentioned support services, such as paying for interpreters, child care

arrangements, and sending out the letters. When practical arrangements fell down it was the social workers who had to pick up the pieces, or who were faced with the impact of inadequate or poor resources or facilities. A number mentioned how badly they felt about the dreadful accommodation, and they saw this as communicating contradictory messages to the parents:

"....out of date furniture, run-down, shabby - doesn't go with the importance of the issues....I felt ashamed. Also there were no creche facilities available"

The respondents clearly felt that their managers and the Area Child Protection Committee were attempting to address these practical matters, and that they were all moving in the same direction. Ideologically they were as one. The problem was that the resources to meet the needs simply did not stretch, and the social workers had no control over these.

The administrative and secretarial support provided to the workers was also seen as important, both for them and for the families. In some cases the families had not received the letter inviting them to the conference, and this made the preparatory social work more difficult. They, like the respondents in Hallett's (1995) study, also reported that the lack of administrative back up for their own work meant they had less time to spend in direct work with the families for the conference attendance, and this was a source of concern.

A number of the social workers (63%) mentioned the value of supervision in preparing themselves for the conference. Their managers, like those in Thoburn et al's (1995) study, were closely involved in decisions about who should be invited, and in the inter-agency work, especially where a joint investigation was being undertaken with the police. Discussions in team meetings were also used as forums for exchanging and acquiring information, and reinforcing policy directives. Training events also served that function. In many cases the social workers had discussed the management of the case with the chairperson. Usually the discussion was about concrete matters, such as the time and location of the conference, but more complex issues, such as how to handle confidential

information were also resolved between the social worker and the chairperson. Indeed, as reported previously, where issues had not been resolved prior to the conference, difficulties were more likely. The social workers also took the opportunity to tell the chairperson of any anticipated difficulties. In one difficult case:

"The office where we had the conference did not have any security - only a Yale lock. We had to make plans for if Dad turned up"

It was striking that what the social workers most frequently took to supervision and team discussions were, again, management and procedural matters. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) also found that social work managers were key in making decisions about how the investigation should be handled by the authorities. With regard to their direct work with the families, social workers in my study sought help with procedural matters where the police were involved, and in managing cases where they feared aggression. Hallett (1995) found that the respondents in her study (not just social workers) more commonly used procedures and guidelines in resolving inter-agency disputes and only rarely reported that the existence of procedures helped them in their direct work with families. Hallett (1995) suggests that the social workers in her research welcomed the structure and safety afforded by procedures. She finds this significant since previous studies have suggested that social workers perceived guidelines as compromising their professional autonomy. Her suggestion is that in child protection work procedures are used as a means of allaying anxiety in this stressful area of work, a point to which I will return later.

Training

Three quarters of the social workers interviewed had received training on parental participation. This included the Area Child Protection Committee inter-agency events previously described, and additional in-house training offered by the child protection coordinators to the neighbourhood teams. Two thirds of the respondents rated the training they had received as good or very good. This group of social workers valued the same elements as were valued by the respondents to the attitude survey, described in a previous

chapter. They mentioned, in particular, the opportunity to share their experience with other professionals. They wished for more help with how to prepare parents, guidance on writing reports and greater opportunities to review their practice afterwards. The respondents saw the conference as a key point in their child protection practice, and wanted more training on broader child protection issues, as well as on the handling of matters specific to the conference. Again, how to manage aggressive parents was high on the agenda.

ii. PROFILE OF WORK WITH THE FAMILY

There were a number of aspects of the work undertaken with the family which were of relevance to the theme of partnership which I wished to pursue in greater depth. If, as has been suggested in previous chapters, the thrust of the investigation and of the major focus in the conference is on the investigation of the incident triggering the referral, what priority - if any - is accorded to other elements of the assessment and the direct work? Firstly, did social workers believe they had undertaken a thorough investigation of the incident, and had they involved the family members in this? Thoburn et al (1995) for example, found that the child had frequently contributed. Secondly, did the social workers consider they had carried out a meaningful assessment of the family background, and had they made contact with the significant adults in the child's life in preparation for the conference? Thirdly, what direct work was undertaken with the family which they believed helped to build a relationship based on participative principles, and was the inquisitorial stance required for the assessment of risk compatible with this?

The assessment

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that there were a number of difficulties in undertaking assessments in these circumstances. Shortage of time is one factor, the level of anxiety is another. Other studies have suggested a difference where the social worker already knows the family. I have suggested that there is a further difficulty in that the task itself is essentially contradictory. I wished to explore the social workers' views, and to find out the extent to which the family had been involved. While Thoburn et al (1995) found

that the family was commonly consulted, Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that few relatives were involved in decisions about the investigation.

As this and the other research cited has shown, a number of the families involved in a child protection investigation are already known to the Social Services Department. This has been found to be an important variable in both process and outcome. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that the social workers' assessments of families who were already known were less complete than those conducted on new referrals. Further, the children of families already known were more likely to be registered than those newly referred. Thirteen (59%) of the families in this part of my research were new to the social workers interviewed, and there were both similarities and differences in the time taken and the nature of the assessments with these two groups of families.

Time between referral and conference

Cleaver and Freeman (1995) quote thirty four days as the mean number of days between referral and conference in their sample. In my study, in just over half of the cases contact had been made with the family either on the same day (7) or within a week of the allegation. 50% of these cases were conferenced between two and four weeks of the first contact. The rest - mainly those already known to the social worker - were held within, or sometimes even after six weeks had elapsed. There was a longer time between referral and contact where the family was already known.

Was a thorough assessment carried out?

Three different elements form the social work assessment, and the format of the conference is built around these elements. To get a picture of what priority the social workers accorded the different elements of the investigation, and whether they felt they had the time to undertake a full assessment, I separated the assessment into a) the incident, b) the family background, and c) contact with significant adults.

a) The incident

One third of the social workers replied that they had been able to undertake a full investigation of the incident, one third replied yes, reasonable; and one third replied no, but for particular reasons which I will later describe. For the new referrals, the time between the first contact and the conference was generally within four weeks - six of the nine conferences took place then. For families that were already known, half of the conferences on these families took place between one and four weeks after the first contact, and half after four weeks.

The picture that emerged of the social workers' investigation of the new referrals is fairly consistent. They reported that over three quarters of this group of families were easy to like and to engage. However, in all cases they felt they had not been able to get to know the family well. The focus of their work had been on investigating the incident provoking the allegation. This consisted primarily in getting information from other professionals, and from the family. In some cases this had involved a joint investigation and/or medical examinations. Just over a half of the social workers felt confident they had made a reasonably full assessment of the incident leading to the allegation.

Of the nine families already known to the social workers, seven had been known for between one and three years, and the remaining two for a year. The social workers judged that they knew five of these families well or very well, and one not at all. Six of the social workers reported that they liked the families, although even in those cases they had not always been easy to engage. With regard to the assessments, most (7) felt that they had been able to undertake a thorough, or reasonably thorough, investigation of the incident. Again, this was described largely in terms of gathering information, with a heavy reliance on contributions from other professionals. So, while the social workers did not express confidence about their knowledge of these families - even where they knew them already - they felt satisfied that their investigation of the incident was reasonably thorough.

b) Family background

Again, one third replied that they had been able to undertake a full investigation of the family background, but 22% judged this part of their assessment as only reasonable. The remaining 48% said they were unable to assess the family background, again giving specific reasons. The reasons given for not being able to do a fuller assessment of the family background were not shortage of time, but related to particular features of the family. In the main, this was that they were uncooperative, or that attempts to gain this information would put family members at risk.

"I could not carry out a full investigation because the father might have punished the children by putting them in the lift. They were very hostile to me, and would not let me in"

Thoburn et al (1995) found that comprehensive family assessments were undertaken on about half of the cases in her cohort, but in a number only child protection issues were addressed.

There were greater differences in my study between the social workers views on their assessments of the known families and of the new referrals. Of the new referrals, in all but two the social worker reported that they had not felt able to assess the family background in any depth. Where social workers already knew the families, seven said they had a reasonably thorough knowledge of the family background. As one social worker commented on a mother she knew well:

"Yes, I knew her already; she's a lovely person. Otherwise the time constraints make it impossible to be thorough, and it is important not to delay"

However, in most cases the assessment described already existed. Generally, the social workers relied on information on file - and did not attempt to undertake a fresh

assessment. Given what we know about shifting alliances and the reconstitution of families that have a history of involvement with social services, relying on such information might be risky. Moreover, Thoburn et al's (1995) research revealed that files were unreliable sources of information on family circumstances in the year prior to referral. Half of the parents in her study described a serious loss by death or divorce in the preceding year and a quarter told of serious illness or accidents. The researchers in her study rarely saw a full family history on file.

c) Significant adults in the child's life

Only three of the respondents thought they had seen most of the child's primary attachment figures, and twelve replied that they had not. The remainder did not know. In some cases there were particular reasons for this, such as that the father was violent, or had not lived in the household for some time. In two cases, the fathers had gone abroad; in another the mother was mentally ill, and in another had severe learning difficulties and was unable to cooperate. In others - especially in relation to grandparents - it did appear not a great deal of thought had been given, or importance attached. As one social worker said;

If the relatives had been around I might have wanted them to attend".

In another case, the social worker felt responsible for not letting damaging information seep out to the extended family;

"I think the maternal grandmother should have been involved, but she is unaware of the marital violence so this would have caused problems in the conference and after it."

Quinton and Rutter (1988) identified positive support from a partner as a key factor in preventing the inter-generational transmission of parenting problems. It is therefore alarming that family support figures were so rarely seen. Thoburn et al's (1995) research

identified more family members as having been seen. However, on her broader definition of involvement (being informed and consulted) only 42% of the main parents and 10% of the non-resident parents were rated as involved.

In summary, this analysis reveals some interesting similarities and differences. It seems that, where families are already known, more time elapses between the first contact and the conference. This is understandable in terms of the uncertainties and anxiety around a new referral. These findings also suggest that the focus of the investigation is on the incident, and that the approach is forensic - on gathering information on risk factors for the conference, not on helping the family with their welfare needs. Where families were already known to the social worker, there was a heavy reliance on what the worker already knew about the family. Where the social worker liked the family, collecting information from the family posed less problems. In the new referrals, there were also difficulties in exploring the family background and in seeing other significant adults. Here, also, the reasons given were not shortage of time, but that the difficulties that presented themselves could not be addressed at the time.

3. CONTACT WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

All of the respondents had consulted with other professionals involved as part of their investigation. In most cases at least two professionals were mentioned. Frequently as many as four or more were listed, sometimes leading to an informal gathering before the conference. The quote that follows is from a social worker engaged in an investigation of child sexual abuse that had been going on for two years:

*"Police, Paediatrician, health, school....I did the works.
We had a strategy meeting with the police, but no
information was shared which was unknown to the parents"*

This quote is highly representative of the social workers' reliance on working with other professionals. In all cases the level of inter-agency consultation was very high.

The social workers said that information shared at these meetings was also discussed with the parents in all but two cases. There was no evidence that such meetings were generally used to circumvent the open sharing of information in the conference, and in some cases meetings were cancelled when the decision was taken to hold a full conference.

4. THE CONFERENCE

a) Who should be invited, and how was the absence of family members managed?

A pattern similar to that described in other parts of the thesis emerges here. A striking finding is that all the respondents thought the mother should be invited to the conference, although only two thirds thought the father should be invited. In 68% of the conferences the mother attended, compared to 13% where the father was present. As suggested previously, it seems factors other than family composition are at work, supporting Farmer and Owen's (1995) suggestion that social workers chose the mother as the focus for their pre-conference work.

Turning to how the absence of family members was managed, the social workers did not see this as an essential part of their work. In only one of the cases where a parent had not been invited were the reasons explained to the parent. Likewise, in only one case were the views of an absent parent or family member specifically represented at the conference. Only three thought, with hindsight, that another adult, for example a grandparent, should have been invited. The views of this social worker are reasonably representative:

"Grandmother lives with the family but the question of her attendance did not occur"

In contradiction to the findings reported earlier, only 28% thought a friend should have accompanied the parent. Again, there were a number of quite specific situations where the practice presented problems and social workers, understandably, chose the safe option for them.

A similar picture emerges in relation to the attendance of children. Although in principle half thought older children should be invited, only one thought the child should have been included in the conference in question.

" You are talking about children and they have a right to participate. The fact that they actively contribute towards any decisions and recommendations that are made means they are more likely to stick to them"

Table 3 provides a profile of the work done with children in preparation for the conference.

	VIEWS OF THE CHILD					
	YES		NO		NOT APPLICABLE	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Were they obtained from the child beforehand?	6	27	6	27	9	43
Were they represented to the conference?	7	32	6	27	7	32
Total N = 22						

Table 8.3: DID SOCIAL WORKERS OBTAIN THE VIEWS OF THE CHILD?

As can be seen, the views of the child were only obtained in just over one quarter of the cases (27%), and specifically represented to the conference in under a third of the cases. Fifty three percent of the children were aged over four, an age at which communication is possible. In most cases the reasons for not seeing the child separately were not given; where they were it was usually "mother would not allow it". This social worker was investigating an allegation of child sexual abuse over two years;

"Mother would not allow me to see the child on her own. I was only able to see her with her mother or another sister"

Some differences exist between these findings and those of Thoburn et al (1995). The workers she interviewed were strongly committed to involving children, although less sure that they should attend conferences, and this commitment did translate into action in 59% of the cases in their study. The difficulty she identified was that social workers were interviewing children without asking their parents' permission, and this also raised ethical problems and difficulty in the ongoing work. In my study, a small number of the social workers (18%) experienced conflict between the interests of the child and the parents. On the whole, they chose to avoid it by not seeing the child. Overall, only three of the workers judged that the parents' presence would help their relationship with the child, and the majority believed it made no difference.

These findings suggest that the factors that we have previously identified as creating problems in practice, such as the absence from the household of key parental figures and the presence of intimidating adults do act as barriers to partnership practice, notwithstanding the ideological principles of their position. This is also true when we look at the social work engagement with the child which was not regarded as a priority by the social workers in this study.

b) The preparation of the families for the conference

The interviews with the parents conveyed the deep sense of shock and bewilderment following the allegation and in the run up to the conference. Other parts of the research have shown that social workers are, also, anxious and feel threatened; if they get it wrong they risk damage to the child as well as to their professional integrity and status. Farmer and Owen (1995) found that the social workers they interviewed handled the investigation differently. They noted that some sensitive workers were aware that the feelings of the family were raw, and that for them the families experience was not a side issue - it was actually part of the story

"What needed to happen in the time between investigation and conference, and often did not happen, was that the social workers understanding should move beyond a simple familiarity with events and circumstances - beyond the mere collection of evidence, in other words - to encompass the feelings experienced by child and family" (p91)

The findings from my research revealed that the social workers practice did go beyond the collection of evidence, but fell short of encompassing the feelings experienced by the child and family. Forty percent of the social workers said that they had worked with the family in preparation for the conference. Mainly, this consisted in an explanation of the process, and rehearsing the detail of the arrangements. Two mentioned that they had gone through their report with the parents;

" I told the parents there would be a conference, explained who attends and the procedures for using an interpreter."

"I did no other work with the parents other than the call to stress the importance of attending"

I went through the purpose of the conference, the reasons for it, and the procedure"

Where work of even this level had not been engaged in, the main reason given was that the parents were uncooperative. In two cases the preparation had been left to other professionals, such as day nursery staff. None suggested time was a factor. The level of direct work described seems limited, in the main, to giving information. Seventy one percent of the social workers in my study, nevertheless, believed that they had helped the families to engage in the child protection work, and half believed the families were more cooperative as a result of their inclusion in the conference. Their view is supported by some of the parents who, it will be remembered, reported in our interviews that they felt well prepared for the conference. In some cases, they described a broader base of work than did the social workers.

A possible explanation of this discrepancy in accounts is that the social workers placed a high value on the sharing of information, and under rated other supportive aspects of their work which parents valued. This is in line with Farmer and Owen's (1995) suggestion that social workers see the primary purpose of the conference as information sharing. In their study, and in Thoburn et al's (1995) for many of the workers the social workers rated information sharing as a crucial part of their contribution. However, from the parents' perspective, the way that information is given and the sensitivity of the workers approach seems equally important for establishing a partnership.

c) Experience of parents' presence in the conference

The findings on the views of this group of social workers consolidate those from the other parts of the research. Overall, all but one of the social workers thought that involving parents was a good thing, the reasons being generally from the rights and effectiveness arguments.

" Having parents at conferences is positively good. They are aware of how decisions are arrived at and by whom. It helps in working with the parents because they have a better understanding of the multi-disciplinary way of working."

Seventyone percent of the social workers reported that the conferences did feel different with the parents there. They judged that in 54% of the cases the conference went well or very well, the reasons given echoing those reported earlier: discussion was more focussed, careful use of language forced people to be precise, and an inter-agency perspective was fostered. The difficulties of involving parents reported here were also the same as those previously presented. The most frequently mentioned was the inhibiting effect on the professionals in the conference, particularly in the presence of intimidating parents. Picking up on the discussion of difficult cases in Chapter 6, aggression was mentioned by a number of the social workers. Additionally, just under half of the respondents were worried about the effect on parents, fearing it would be difficult for them.

The specific problems raised in relation to individual cases are similar to those described in Chapter 6. These included cases where there was a police investigation ongoing, families with mental health problems and families from an ethnic minority background - especially where language was a problem and interpreters were present. The difficulties in involving parents where the child had been sexually abused raised more concerns in this part of the study, especially where the evidence was thin and/or the abuse was denied by the parents.

More concrete detail also emerged from this focus on the social workers' experience of particular conferences about the complexity of the logistical problems created. For example, what to do when the parents are expected but do not turn up; or, how to manage situations where the conference went on longer than expected, and the parent had to leave to collect a child from school. The role of the chair in managing these situations sensitively was seen as crucial.

d) Participatory practice

One aim of these more focused interviews was to explore whether the social workers' experience in particular cases led them to believe that the positive benefits they described translated into more participatory practice. Forty one percent of the social workers said that involving the parents in the conference made for more cooperative practice. In this they included the inter-agency component of their work, as well as their direct practice with the parents. With regard to the parents, they mentioned in particular that there was less secrecy and that it promoted a greater sense of responsibility in the parents. Overall, one third of them thought that the parents' presence in the conference had a beneficial effect on their ongoing relationship, and one third that it made no difference.

Seventy two percent of the social workers believed they needed particular skills in developing participative practice in this arena. The most frequently mentioned skills that would be associated with participatory practice were communication and negotiating skills. Openness and honesty were referred to several times. Also mentioned were holding on to their own judgement, allowing disagreement and presentation skills - abilities

associated with good practice, but not necessarily key to partnership practice. In many respects, the social workers relied on the chairperson to set a style and atmosphere that would engage parents and gain their trust. For a number of the social workers, he provided a role model and did the job.

" The chair was very approachable. He was good at not patronising and at explaining things....He made the parents focus on the child, and made them feel comfortable and good about themselves....He helped them to participate"

e) Registration decision

The decision to register is the key purpose of the conference. This thesis has already explored the possible effects of parental involvement on the decisions made and the interaction of the professionals. While data from the monitoring study provided evidence that registration rates and categories were not affected, other parts of my research have suggested there is an impact on the decision making process with regard to the interaction and behaviour of the professionals. In particular, the tendency toward achieving consensus and minimising conflict has been explored. I wished to scrutinise this aspect of the social workers' practice, as well as to assess whether they believed their relationship to be affected if registration was achieved.

Firstly, we asked the respondents whether they went to the conference with a view on registration, and what they hoped it would achieve. Secondly, we asked them to rate the degree of consensus on the decision in the conference. And, thirdly, we asked them whether they thought the presence of parents had influenced the decision to register.

As can be seen from Table 4, over threequarters of the social workers believed that the child should be registered and they had formulated this view before the conference. Vernon and Fruin (1986) believe that this demonstrates that the conferences are not really decision making fora; rather their purposes are instrumental. Two thirds of the social workers in my study thought that registration would offer some protection to the child by

reinforcing the gravity of the concerns, and by highlighting the case for other professionals. Farmer and Owen (1995) also found that social workers believed registration would raise the status of the case. The respondents in my study also hoped that the family would cooperate with the ongoing work resulting from the decision.

" Yes. It moved the family forward positively. I've done what I said - all up front and clear"

VIEWS ON REGISTRATION		YES		NO		DONT KNOW	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Should the child be registered?		18	81	2	9	2	10
Would registration protect the child?		14	64	4	18	3	14
Would registration achieve family cooperation?		15	68	2	9	4	18
Would registration achieve agency cooperation?		12	54	4	18	5	23
Was there consensus?		20	91	1	4	1	4
Did the parents' presence influence the decision?		5	23	10	45	7	32
Total N =22							

Table 8.4: SOCIAL WORKERS' VIEWS ON REGISTRATION

Slightly less said inter agency cooperation would be achieved, but as we have seen, ongoing inter-agency work (apart from meetings) rarely takes place after the conference

anyway, (Hallett, 1995, Thoburn, 1995). All but one of the respondents reported that there was no disagreement over the registration decision, and that consensus prevailed. In Farmer and Owen's (1995) research, dispute about whether registration was advisable was extremely rare. In my study, there was less agreement about the influence of the parents on the decision, with half saying they had no effect, a third were not sure, and the remainder thought they had influenced the decision. It will be remembered that none of the parents thought they had influenced the decision.

Other issues discussed earlier were also pursued here. Discussion of the child protection plan was not given high priority (half thought it adequate), and only three of the respondents believed registration would result in more resources being made available to the family. This suggests that, contrary to what some writers suggest, the social workers do not see registration as the gateway to resources.

f) Contact with the family after the conference

The data on the parents' interviews revealed that parents generally knew what had been decided at the conference, but that the level of social work support after the event was low. Further, and in line with what has been discussed above, the thrust of the contact after the conference was to ensure information had been received rather than to consolidate or progress a practice aimed at modifying or changing the way the families related to their children.

Twelve of the social workers interviewed said that they had told the parents of the conference decision immediately, and nearly all of the families understood. This method of communication was preferred to visiting the families at home. Only six of the social workers reported visiting the families at home in the week after the conference. However, most (17) believed the families had received the follow up letter reporting the conference decisions. After the conference four social workers saw the child alone. The social worker mentioned earlier who had not been allowed by the mother to see the sexually abused eight year old before the conference reported at this stage that

"I have not seen the child yet, but I've arranged an appointment for the children to be seen by other professionals - psychologists and paediatrician. I am due to see them shortly."

Possible reasons for this lack of follow up after the conference have been suggested in the previous chapter. Farmer and Owen (1995) add two others; where major disagreements remained unresolved, and the harmful after effects. *"The investigation and conference had left many parents feeling disaffected and alienated"* (p.185). The picture portrayed by the research studies is consistent, and it does seem that a number of factors contribute.

CONCLUSION

The views of the social workers on involving parents in the child protection investigation and conference echoed those reported in other parts of this thesis. Ninety one percent of the social workers interviewed welcomed the inclusion of parents within the conference, reporting that it focussed discussion on the issues, enhanced a multi-disciplinary approach and promoted a sense of partnership. In some cases they reported difficulties in information sharing, particularly where the evidence for sexual abuse was thin, or where the abuse was denied by the parents. Aggressive parents, or parents whose ethnic origin was non-European, raised particular difficulties.

Over two thirds of the social workers believed their views on family participation accorded with agency policy, excepting that many believed parents should be present throughout and receive the minutes of the meeting. They felt the agency supported their practice by providing back up services, and most received supervision and welcomed team discussions and training events. Discussions here were used largely to ensure the structures and procedures for managing the investigation and conference were being followed, and for addressing particular problems. The role of the chair in facilitating the process both before and during the conference was important for the social workers.

Nearly two thirds of the investigations were of families not previously known to the social worker. Two thirds of the social workers felt able to undertake a reasonably thorough investigation of the incident. However, only one third expressed confidence that they had done a thorough assessment of the family background. The reasons given were not shortage of time - 50% of the conferences were held within four weeks, and the rest sometimes six weeks or more - but generally related to characteristics of the family which made them uncooperative. Where families were already known to social services, the social worker relied largely upon information they already had about the family background. Only a few of the social workers had seen all the relevant family members, and this was not a priority for them. Only 27% had seen the child alone both before and after the conference. The views of these absent family members were rarely presented to the conference. In comparison, a strikingly high proportion (90%), consulted other professionals before the conference.

Only 40% of the social workers reported that they had worked with the parents in preparation for the conference. Mainly this was to provide information about what would happen. Afterwards they also ensured parents knew what decisions had been made, but did not embark on an intensive social work plan in the immediate aftermath. Nevertheless, they described their work as participatory in character, for example requiring negotiation and openness. About one half said they thought involving parents in the conference would lead to more cooperative work, but only twenty three percent felt their relationship with the child directly benefited. Most thought the child should not attend, except possibly some adolescent children whose interests clearly conflicted with their parents.

The views of the social workers on the conferences were that a third benefited from the parents' presence, that in a further third it made no difference, and that there were some difficulties in the remainder. Threequarters of them went to the conference with a predetermined view about the registration, and in nearly every case they said the decision was based on consensus. The social workers were confident the families knew and understood the conference decisions, but there was no evidence that they had much direct contact with the families in the immediate aftermath.

DISCUSSION

These findings are in line with the other research studies cited, (Thoburn, 1995, Farmer and Owen, 1995, Cleaver and Freeman, 1995, Hallett, 1995), that most social workers strongly believe that parents have a right to be involved, and that improved practice and decision-making will result from their involvement in the process. Most of the social workers we interviewed were committed to the philosophy of partnership and believed their practice to be more participatory at all stages of the process. However, in practice they found these ideals could be difficult to achieve.

At the beginning of this thesis I suggested that many of the early studies on parental involvement in child protection investigations and conferences were characterised by their polemicism. Social workers are ideologically committed to human rights and civil liberties, and this commitment has received political and legislative support. What the more detailed investigations of their practice is revealing is that there are severe limitations to the extent and degree to which this commitment can be put into practice. My research has identified that these limitations result from the immensity of a whole range of practical problems, such as the fact that mothers are more often found at home than the absent fathers, that the back up services are inadequate and insufficient, and that the services to meet the massive welfare needs of these families do not exist.

In exploring the minutiae of the social workers' practice, we have come closer to understanding the nature of the gap between principle and practice. The social workers themselves generally expressed the prohibitions on participative practice with reference to the family: they were uncooperative, they were difficult to engage, they weren't there, they prevented access to the child, there was a police investigation ongoing, the mother was mentally ill, the father was violent, there was a language barrier. In many of these cases these characteristics were present. As we have seen from the interviews with the parents, for their part they are extremely unlikely to genuinely engage in a partnership arrangement if they disagree with the judgments made and did not agree there was a need for a conference in the first place. It takes two to tango, and clearly these factors must be a major determinant as to whether a partnership arrangement is feasible in terms of

achieving change and protecting the child. However, I have suggested previously that the prohibitions are, also, endemic to the ambiguous nature of the task social workers are being asked to perform. The ambiguities I have defined are as follows:

Ambiguity number one: Information gatherers versus expert assessors

Social workers are employed by the authority undertaking the investigation to assess the risk to the child, and to present a full assessment to the conference. As we have seen, in approximately half of the cases a full assessment was not possible in the time, and because, for a number of reasons, the families would or could not cooperate. It is possible, as Thoburn et al (1995) suggest, that more determined and more skillful practice might engage some of these extremely difficult families and result in better assessments which would lead to more cooperative practice. I am more sceptical. My findings lead me to believe that the task of undertaking an assessment which includes, as full assessments properly should, a detailed analysis of the aetiology of the families problems is, in many cases, very difficult under these conditions and within the present resource constraints.

Ambiguity number two: Tell- tale-tits versus advocates

To do the investigation efficiently, social workers must undertake a forensic investigation, uncovering information that, in their professional judgement, is relevant to the consideration of risk and that, in their moral judgement, constitutes acceptable or unacceptable parenting behaviour. At the same time, partnership practice requires them, in the process, to create a relationship of trust in which all family members will speak openly and honestly, and cooperate with the agencies rules and requirements. It then requires them to act as advocates for all the family members in the conference. Then, having dished the dirt, to engage them in a child protection plan and ongoing work toward changes that they have specified. Lynch (1992) has pointed out that the rules are written as if parents are reasonable and the authorities always get it right. As we have seen, there are many occasions when neither of these conditions exist; but the social worker has to operate as if they did. A difficult task.

Ambiguity number three: Adjudicators versus representatives

As we have seen, there are massive conflicts of interests and rights, but no rules as to how the social worker should adjudicate between them. How are such conflicts to be resolved? Where there is a conflict of interest, say between parent and child, good practice would entail that they had different social workers. However, were such a principle to be operationalised, where would the lines be drawn? Would everyone have their own social worker? And how would this be managed in a conference depending upon consensus judgements and endeavouring to reduce the numbers of participants? This part of my study has revealed that social workers were likely to resolve conflicts of interest between children and parents by not seeing the child. In Thoburn's (1995) study, the child was more frequently seen; in cases of bad practice this made the parents angry and had a negative impact on future relationships. If the language of rights is widely regarded as setting absolute principles, what of the rights of the parents to refuse access to the child? Equally, if parents are the experts on themselves, on what principle can their judgement be questioned? Adjudicating between conflicts of rights and interests in this arena is a difficult task.

Ambiguity number four: Managers versus therapists

Procedures exist to help social workers to provide a better service to families and to ensure the protection of the child. My research, and the other studies cited, has demonstrated that social workers and their managers pay careful attention to procedural regularity, particularly with regard to inter-agency matters. However, as the findings relating to the social workers preparation of the family for the conference suggests, working in accordance with procedures conflicts with the families needs for a service based on the principles of crisis intervention, and which addresses their feelings. The narrow focus on information sharing is not unhelpful, but does not address the families wider emotional and social needs. Is it realistic to expect social workers to face in so many directions at once, and to be all things to all men? A difficult task.

Ambiguity number five: Empowerers versus restrainers

A partnership arrangement, by definition, is based upon reciprocity and entails negotiation. This research has demonstrated that families have very limited power within the relationship for negotiating. They see the cards as being stacked against them and their cooperation is, in many cases, based on a sort of voluntary coercion. Many of the studies cited have suggested that families do not welcome ongoing social work involvement but go along with it to gain brownie points which can be cashed in later to stop it. For their part, as we have seen social workers are cautious about giving parents information about complaints procedures, how to deregister, and so on. So, social workers are themselves creating a framework in which some of their practice is empowering, while some is not. Given the apportioning of blame that has been their experience of enquiries when things have gone badly wrong, who can blame them?

Ambiguity number six: Decision makers versus instrumentalists

Child protection conferences are set up as if they are decision making. Much of the evidence from my research, including that described in this chapter, is that the decisions are already made. The social workers told us that they came with their decision preformed, and the parents - apparently quite correctly - believed this to be the case. Further, consensus prevailed. In other words, these judgments were not changed as a result of discussion in the conference. Farmer and Owen (1995) came to the conclusion that judgments in the conference were not challenged because social services is seen as possessing actual and dispositional power. My research has suggested that the presence of parents gives a further push in this direction, because the professionals thought it important to present a united front. So, it seems, the conference is not doing what it, on the face of it, set out to do because that job has been done elsewhere.

Ambiguity number seven: Spokesman for the Needy versus Social Controller

One effect of involving parents in the conference was to highlight the adversity of the social conditions in which a number of the families lived. At the same time, resources to meet the families ongoing welfare needs were found to be inadequate. We have described how these factors disempowered the social workers involved. We have also demonstrated

that, and explained why, their focus was on procedural matters. These factors combine to reinforce the control function of the social work role in child protection work, and to make it more difficult for social workers to balance this with their caring function. At the same time, their employment by the authority responsible for the conference makes it difficult for them to be critical of the authorities provision. The capacity for social workers to act as spokesmen for the needy is thus compromised by their policing functions.

In the next and concluding chapter, these issues will be further explored.

NINE

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL POLICING OR SOCIAL WELFARE?

This study has evaluated the effect of involving parents in eighty three initial child protection conferences in three main areas: on the conference process, on the decisions and recommendations made and on the views and experiences of the professionals and families involved. Generally, the findings are positive, but they also highlight the potential for conflict within the conference task, as well as for the professionals. The parents prefer to be there than not, but there are limitations to the degree to which working in partnership with them is possible, and to the extent to which the process could be described as empowering. The implications are that, wherever possible, other routes should be found for addressing the welfare needs of children and families; that, where a conference is held, the task, guidelines and procedures should be less ambiguous; and that other models for the conference should be tried. There are implications for how the conference should be run, for practice, and for the agencies involved.

In this concluding chapter, I will summarise the key findings and then discuss in detail their implications for policy and practice. The implications of this research are largely in line with those of the other studies cited throughout this thesis, although they differ in some respects, for example by identifying particular cases where the professionals believe partial exclusion should be an option. They are also more broadly based in that they address the wider network of family support because they take into account more recently published research as well as the subsequent developments in practice and in the conceptual analysis of partnership.

A limitation of the research reported here is that it evaluated only one model of parental participation, and was based on the practice of one authority. As described in the introduction, at the time the research was conducted local authorities throughout England and Wales were at different stages in their commitment to participative practice, and this was reflected in the models they devised for family involvement in the initial child protection conference. The authorities studied by Farmer and Owen, for example, only invited parents in for the end of the meeting, whereas the London boroughs studied by Thoburn and Shemmings had for some years been allowing parents to stay in for the duration of the meeting. As Atherton (1984) pointed out in her survey of a number of Social Service Departments, different areas meant different things by participation in conferences. While my research compared areas in one authority where parents were invited with an area where they were not, the findings represent the work of only that authority during the pilot stage of their implementation initiative.

Further, the pilot project evaluated in this study employed a model of partial participation where the parents were required to leave at the decision making stage. It could therefore be argued that because the participation was partial, the findings are not representative of participative practice. Thoburn, for example, found that the 'short period out' arrangement appeared to marginalise parents by making it clear they were not members of the meeting. However, both the parents and the professionals interviewed in my study did view their practice as participative. The key findings in support of this perspective are that the parents who went to the conferences felt more positive toward the authority and the social workers than those who did not. Equally, the social workers embraced the initiative and reported that their practice had changed in certain important respects which could be identified. The analysis did identify some of the components of good partnership practice, such as providing information and the preparation for the conference, as well as some of the difficulties faced, and these have been reviewed in the light of research undertaken in other authorities. The conclusions therefore to some degree reflect the broader picture.

Another limitation of the study is that it is not longitudinal and provides a snapshot of a particular stage in the development of what is a rapidly changing area of practice. Indeed, as has been described, practice was changing even during the duration of the pilot project, so that some conferences where parents were invited to stay throughout were also observed and included in the analysis. In this respect the conferences studied were themselves part of an evolving process. The study attempts to capture and explore the developments while also undertaking a time limited empirical study. The other research discussed has, also, taken forward a number of the issues raised and explored in this study, such as the concern with the focus on mothers, and the preoccupation with risk assessments. This conclusion will, therefore, attempt to draw out policy and practice issues that are specific to the initial child protection conference, as well as to review the implications for the broader area of child care social work.

KEY FINDINGS

THE CONFERENCES

Numbers, Size and Length

There was no evidence that parental involvement in itself reduced the numbers of conferences held. The involvement of parents had the effect of increasing the average number of attenders from eight to ten. Conferences with parents in attendance were therefore bigger, sometimes involving up to fourteen people. Also, they lasted, on average, twenty nine minutes longer than those without, sometimes lasting between two and three hours.

Attendance

There were no differences in the average number or the overall percentages of professionals attending in the pilot and control areas, or in the overall percentage of those invited who chose to attend. Notably, the Doctors were the least likely to attend. Parents attended 72% of the conferences to which they were invited. Mothers were more likely to be invited and to attend than fathers. In over one third of the conferences the mother attended alone. Members of the extended family were rarely invited.

The Children

There was little difference in the age, gender or family composition of the children conferenced in the pilot and control areas. There were some differences in the family characteristics of the children from the pilot teams, reflecting the inner-city area served by two of the teams. A higher proportion of the children came from families whose ethnic origin was non-European; and a slightly higher proportion of the families in the pilot area were on income support. These differences were not, however, statistically significant.

Referrals

There were no significant differences between the pilot and control groups in the sources of referral either at the initial stage when the allegation was first received, or at the later stage when a conference was formally requested. The largest group initiating the first

concern were the children and their families, whereas formal referrals to social services were most frequently made by the professionals involved.

Registration Outcomes

There was no difference between the pilot and control groups in the numbers of children registered, and little difference between the pilot and control groups as to the type of abuse identified, either at the initial stage of expressed concern or in the categories of registration. 26% of the children conferenced were not registered. Physical abuse was the category most frequently used, followed by grave concern, sexual abuse and neglect. The involvement of parents therefore did not effect registration rates or categories.

In summary the professional concerns about the impact on referral, attendance and registration were not justified but there were resource implications.

TRAINING

Amount

There were differences by agency and over time in the amount of training received relevant to parental involvement. Before implementation of the policy 41% were trained, including 81% of all health professionals. Education professionals were the least likely to be trained. By the end of the project 62% had received training, the proportion of social service department workers having increased to 69%. However, only 30% from education had received training.

Rating

Respondents valued inter-agency training and rated what they had received as good. There were differences by agency in what the professionals valued in training events. Police were preoccupied with managing information, nurses with report writing, and social workers with the feelings of the parents. Their view of what they needed changed over time, from wanting input on the legal status and procedures, and sensitivity awareness, to a preoccupation with the management of particular issues, such as the role of Local

Authority solicitors, or the particular needs of professionals, such as teachers, who attended only rarely.

Preparation

There were differences over time and by agency in the preparation of the professionals for parental involvement, suggesting that the agencies differed in their methods of dispersing information and their involvement of fieldworkers in planning and consultation. Social workers were more likely to have had the opportunity to discuss the issues in their teams, whereas more nurses had seen the relevant documentation. There were particular problems in both the preparation and support of professionals outside the 'core group', such as teachers and school nurses.

PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDES TO INVOLVING PARENTS

Attitudes over time

Overall, attitudes became more positive over time. Ninety two per cent of all respondents who had experienced conferences involving parents were, on balance, in favour after the policy was implemented, compared to 79% before. Attitudes shifted markedly with regard to believing the quality of information shared improved, and that the working relationship with parents was facilitated. By contrast, there were concerns that were maintained over time, particularly that professional discussion was inhibited, and that the interests of the child were less central when parents were present. Professionals expressing those concerns believed that some parents should be excluded from certain conferences, which they specified, or required to leave at the decision making stage.

Attitudes by agency

There were differences by agency before and after the implementation of the policy of parental involvement. Attitudes beforehand appeared to reflect a world view derived from the agencies focus on the child protection task. Workers from Social Services had a beginning optimism which is maintained over time; health occupied the middle ground; whereas workers from education and the police were initially more negative. The more negative respondents were, however, more likely to become positive as a result of their

experience. The change in the view of education in respect of working relationships with parents provides a striking example.

Differences by agency

Attitudes on some issues reflect an agency orientation. Health (32%) and police (75%) maintained their concern regarding the sharing of confidential information; but it was not shared by workers from social services (12%). Of particular note was the increase in the number of social workers who thought, by the end, that some parents should be excluded from certain conferences. This was against the trend of all other agencies. Since it is a feature of the social work respondents profile that their attitudes are less subject to change over time than those of their professional colleagues, the finding in relation to exclusion is striking.

Exclusion

Respondents specified which parents should be excluded. These were cases of sexual abuse where one or both partners were the perpetrators; where the child had made an allegation not known to the parents; where certain information had not been revealed to them, or one of them in the case of separated parents; where parents may be disruptive; and where there may be repercussions on the child.

The findings are therefore basically positive. Professionals approved of involving parents and attitudes improved over time. Nevertheless there were abiding concerns over the degree to which the interests of the child remained central and over the need to exclude some parents. Moreover there were large differences between agencies in attitude, emphasising perhaps the need for joint training.

PROFESSIONAL VIEWS ON THE CONFERENCES WITH PARENTS PRESENT

Views, overall

Over three quarters of all the professionals who responded reported that the involvement of parents was helpful to the conference in question. There was little difference between agencies, education being the least favourable (73%) and police the most (94%). Twelve

per cent of the respondents considered the assessment of risk to have been hindered, and 7% reported that participation was adversely affected.

Views In Favour

The main arguments for involving parents were that the parents had a right to attend and that their involvement meant the ongoing work would be more effective. The respondents reported that:

- * the quality of the information both going in to and coming out of the conference generally was improved. Parents corrected wrong information, added information not previously known, and clarified uncertainties.

- * parents saw an inter-agency perspective, and perceived the conference decision as reflecting a shared view.

- * the assessment and intervention plans were enhanced because the parents had contributed to them.

- * chairing skills improved

Views Against

Only 9% of the sample said they found the involvement of parents unhelpful in the conference being reported on. The respondents reported that:

- * some parents got distressed, adversely affecting the professionals' concentration by arousing unhelpful feelings of helplessness, fear or sympathy.

- * the power differential was unhelpfully reinforced.

- * difficult management issues became critical, requiring the chair to attend to process at the expense of content.

- * the professionals emphasised the parent's strengths and played down their weaknesses to make them feel better. This was regarded as potentially dangerous, especially where parents did not share the professionals' concern.

- * professionals felt inhibited from speaking openly. This was caused by the following:

- a misunderstanding of agreed procedures,

- a lack of confidence in saying harsh things in an

acceptable way,

a fear of reprisal or withdrawal of cooperation,

an inability to back up a professional opinion with

established fact,

and anxiety about making public confidences and secrets

shared in the privacy of the relationship.

* conferences became longer, bigger and more complex. This was experienced as frustrating and stressful to a number of professionals. For some, particularly Doctors with fixed clinic times, this meant they were either unable to come, or had to leave before the end when the decisions were taken.

Additionally, there were resource implications, and the question arises whether the cost is justified. Many of the respondents were reassured by the existence of a safe zone, when parents were asked to leave and there was scope for private discussion of the issues.

Difficulty by case

Three groups of cases were identified on a scale of difficulty

The positive group contained five cases (17%) where the respondents were unanimously positive. The quite positive group formed 50% of the cases (nineteen), where the overall profile was positive but there were a few negative responses. The difficult group comprised the remaining twelve cases (33%) where a number of the respondents expressed concern about the negative impact of involving parents on the consideration of risk, the professional's participation and the decision-making process.

Characteristics of the most difficult conferences

The characteristics of the twelve most difficult cases can be grouped broadly into those associated with family profile, and those associated with particular features of the conference. Unfortunately some 'difficult' families tended to come from an area where the conferences also had difficult features so that it is not possible to disentangle these effects by statistical analysis.

The features which were of significance in the most difficult cases were;

- * presence of violent man in household
- * absence of (male) partner at conference
- * unacknowledged abuse, plus disclosure by child
- * type of abuse (emotional abuse and neglect)
- * disruption of conference
- * team
- * ethnic origin of family

The degree to which the difficulties reported on in these cases were directly attributable to parental involvement is open to debate. There was evidence that these conferences highlighted the ambiguity inherent in the conference task, and that the presence of parents was a contributory factor.

PARENTS' VIEWS

Parents' preparation for the conference

There was no difference between the parents in the pilot and control areas in the information they received, or their feelings about the intervention in the time leading up to the conference. The small group of parents who had been invited but did not attend knew less about what was going on, and felt more negative. Reasons for non-attendance were mainly late or inaccurate notification, *practical difficulties and fear*.

In half of the cases the social worker had gone through the procedures with the parents. Parents were rarely invited to put their views in writing, even when not attending. Most felt they had been able to put their point of view at this stage, half felt to some effect. Only 27% of the parents reported that other sources of help, such as a solicitor, had been suggested. At this stage there was no evidence of a generally more positive attitude to the professionals in the pilot than in the control areas.

Parents' knowledge of the professionals' concerns and remit

Three-quarters of all the parents said they knew what the social service department was worried about; in most cases the parents had an accurate perception. However, only a third shared these concerns, and only 43% thought it right to call a conference. Over three-quarters knew that the child's name went on a list, that the child protection conference could recommend statutory action, and the implications for monitoring. However, less than one-third had any idea what happened to the list, how to deregister, or about the complaints procedure.

Parents' experience of the conference

Over three-quarters of the parents invited said they were pleased to be asked, and the rate of attendance was 72%. Nearly all the parents who went were glad they had gone, but found the experience difficult. Eighty per cent of these parents believed that the information reported in the conference was largely accurate, although some questioned the relevance of information which related to their family background or lifestyle, rather than the incident.

Parents thought the meetings were too big. The police presence was not welcomed, nor was that of other professionals who appeared to the parents not to have had a direct connection with the incident. The way in which the chair made them welcome, handled introductions, and managed the meeting helped. Only four per cent said that the case conference had been unhelpful to them.

Overall two-thirds of these parents felt that they had not influenced the decisions of the conference, and most did not like being asked to leave at the decision making stage. However, three-quarters of them felt they had been listened to and felt fairly treated.

Their experiences contrast with those of the parents in the control group, 91% of whom wished to have been invited. Over three-quarters of these parents said they had no idea what had been said about themselves or their child or whether it was accurate. They share

with the parents in the pilot a sense of impotence in the decision making process, but differ dramatically in feeling an overwhelming sense of injustice.

Parents' experience after the conference

Half of the parents in the total sample received the letter informing them of the decisions taken at the conference. Nearly all had a clear idea what had been decided. In cases where the child had been registered, over one-third said this would be helpful, and half welcomed social work intervention.

The important difference between the pilot and control groups was not in their understanding of what was happening, but their feelings about it. Parents in the control group were more likely to feel unfairly treated, and to report that their relationship with their social worker was worse. Parents in the pilot area were not, however, more likely to have a favourable attitude to the Social Services Department than those in the control areas, nor were they more likely to say that the plans made for them were helpful.

Other factors

Other factors which were strongly and significantly correlated with parents' negative attitudes were the removal of the child before the conference, and the recommendation to take statutory action (Sec.47). In all cases where statutory action had been taken or was recommended, parents felt unfairly treated throughout the course of the investigation. Positive attitudes were connected with cases in which the child had disclosed abuse, and the parents were not denying that it had happened. They were also associated with a sense of fair play and justice which the parents in the pilot attest to, even where they express negative views about specific aspects of the process or the outcome.

In general, these findings were again favourable to the involvement of parents. However, they raised questions about the extent to which parents had been given information that would genuinely empower them, and about the extent to which involvement in the

conference of itself could be expected to have a major impact on opportunities for working in partnership.

THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Workers' profile

Two-thirds of the twenty two social workers were female, mainly white European, aged between twenty five and forty. They were all qualified social workers, the majority of whom had over three years experience of child protection work, and they carried predominantly child care workloads.

Preparation and Agency Policy

Nearly all the social workers were aware of their agency's policies on participation in meetings, but a third of them were not aware of the policies on complaints procedures. Most had seen the literature sent to the parents, whereas less than half had seen the guidance on conference attendance. All were in agreement with the agency's policy on involving parents, although the majority thought parents should not be sent out at the decision making stage, and that they should receive a copy of the minutes.

Agency Support

The management, supervision and support of the social workers were important determinants of their experience of and capacity to work with parents. Management and procedural matters - especially relating to inter-agency issues - were most commonly taken to supervision, and discussed with the chairperson before the conference. The administrative resources were seen as important, but were not always available. Training was valued as providing the opportunity to talk to other professionals, and for help with preparing parents and dealing with aggression.

Profile of work with the family

The time between referral and conference varied from two to six weeks. The gap was longer where families were already known to the Social Services Department. The social

workers found the newly referred families easier to engage than those already known. Two thirds judged that they had not undertaken a full assessment of the incident or of the family background. Where families were already known a heavy reliance was placed on the information on file. The investigation consisted largely in collecting information from other professionals and from the family. However, in a number of cases only the mother was seen, whereas commonly up to four professionals were consulted. The social workers reported a number of difficulties in engaging with the families, including aggressive fathers, missing relatives, and uncooperative mothers.

All the respondents thought the mother should be invited to the conference, whereas only two thirds thought the fathers should be. Little attention was paid to the role of the extended family. The views of absent family members and of the children were rarely represented at the conference. Only 27% of the social workers saw the child before the conference, the main reason being that the parents did not want them to.

The focus of the social work practice during the investigation was on collecting evidence about the allegation, following procedures and providing information. Social workers rarely attempted to work with the feelings of the family members during the investigation. 71% believed they helped the family to engage in the child protection work, and 40% believed families were more cooperative as a result of their inclusion in the conference.

Partnership Practice

With regard to partnership practice, the social workers believed they had been successful in promoting a greater sense of parental responsibility. The skills they associated with partnership practice were communication and negotiating skills, and being open and honest. They placed a high value on sharing information.

Experience of the Conferences

The social workers judged that conferences with parents present went well in 54% of the cases. The role of the chairperson in managing anxiety and setting a role model was seen as key. They also believed that conferences were improved by more focussed

discussion, careful use of language and a shared inter-agency perspective. There were specific difficulties in a number of the conferences, especially where a police investigation was ongoing, where the families were from an ethnic minority background, and where the evidence to support the allegation was thin or denied by the parents. Aggressive parents also aroused anxiety and created situations which were difficult for the chair to manage.

With regard to the registration decision, most of the social workers went to the conference with a pre-formed view. There was little overt disagreement in the conferences. Consensus was maintained by the chairperson and a consensus view generally prevailed. The social workers believed that registration would reinforce the gravity of concerns to the parents and highlight the case for other professionals. However, they did not believe registration would result in more resources being made available to the family, or that the inter-agency work fostered by the conference would continue afterwards.

After the Conference

In the weeks after the conference there was not a high level of social work visiting to the families. Generally, the purpose of visits was to ensure that the families knew what had happened, not to engage in therapeutic work. The level of inter-agency work with the family fell off sharply after the conference.

In summary, social workers valued the opportunities provided for working with the parents, but in a number of cases they experienced specific problems in putting the principles of partnership which they adhered to into practice. The difficulties in operationalising their values were caused in some cases by the characteristics of certain families. However, the social workers also were required to perform sometimes contradictory tasks. The enquiry was conducted largely with the mother, and a heavy reliance was placed on gathering information from other professionals and on following procedures. There was little attempt to work with the families feelings, or to involve the child, and the focus was on giving information.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The requirement to involve parents in the conference was initially controversial: some professional groups, particularly social workers, were in favour; others, such as the police and Doctors, were concerned that the childrens' safety would be put at risk. It is now accepted that involving parents in decisions that are made about their children is an essential component of effective child protection practice and that their involvement in the conference has brought some benefits. In attempting to fulfill the conference tasks, however, new conflicts for the professionals have been created, and existing ones made more difficult to manage. The other research studies cited had identified these issues but, in my view, had concentrated their conclusions on the benefits of involving parents. My study suggests that the way forward is to openly acknowledge and address the conflicts that are endemic to the conference tasks. In this concluding chapter I will consider the implications of this analysis for the debate on partnership and empowerment, discuss the ambiguities and the conflicts as outlined above, and then suggest the main implications for policy and practice.

Partnership

Child protection conferences were originally designed to protect children by ensuring that the professionals met and communicated their concerns. The emphasis was on partnership between professionals. The response to new concerns, particularly the requirement to work in partnership with parents, led to their inclusion in the process. The research has shown how the tasks the social workers face in setting up partnerships with families who have, or may have abused their children involve conflict. In some cases, especially where there is an agreed perception between the professionals and the families on what has happened, it makes sense to talk about partnership. In others, for example, where families deny the abuse or, as in cases of neglect or emotional abuse, do not share the professionals judgement of their parenting behaviours, working in partnership seems an unrealistic goal. Attempts to define partnership arrangements by suggesting they are based on a separation of the care and control functions, such as is proposed by Marsh and Fisher (1993), seem naive on the basis of my findings. In contrast, Thoburn's (1995) conceptualisation of

partnership with parents as taking place on three levels was helpful. My findings also suggest that opportunities for working in partnership vary along these three dimensions: from providing information, through a more active involvement such as consultation, to participation in decision making.

There seems general agreement that the three levels of partnership defined can be used with different sorts of cases. In practice, working in full partnership in child protection was found to be extremely difficult to achieve. Full partnership is only likely to be appropriate in the few cases where there is certainty about the child's safety. In families where the risk factors are low, and perceptions about the abuse are shared, such as in cases of sexual abuse where the perpetrator is no longer in the household, a full partnership in which the protective adults and the child are empowered to protect themselves may be achievable. Walton (1996) provides an example of empowering practice in describing a group work initiative for mothers whose children have been sexually abused. She sees group work as allowing mothers the opportunity to deal with the traumatisation, stigmatisation, betrayal and powerlessness that are commonly described as being the mothers' response to their children's sexual abuse, (see Hooper, 1994)

Alternately, the most appropriate intervention in a family scoring high on identified 'risk factors' may be intensive and careful monitoring, a daily family aid and provision of extensive day care for the children. My findings imply a relationship between 'high risk' families, and difficult conferences. It seems likely, then, that achieving partnership in the conference with families having these characteristics is also likely to be extremely difficult. The research, in providing information about which conferences the professionals find difficult, suggests some clear criteria for determining intervention strategies, and for alerting the chairperson as to which conferences are likely to be problematic.

Whatever level of intervention is undertaken, however, one of the most important messages from my research was that it was the way the interaction was handled - the messages the parents were given about being respected as people - rather than their feeling

influential, which was empowering to them. A key implication for practice and for new policy initiatives is that it is the human qualities of the professionals, and their commitment to partnership, that are valued by the parents. They feel respected as people if they are listened to, given information, engaged in the task, and treated fairly. In that respect, in creating partnerships the process is more important than the outcome. Further, the role of the agencies in supporting and facilitating partnership practice cannot be undervalued.

Empowerment

Are parents empowered by this process? The comparative nature of the research design helped to answer this question by pointing up the differences in attitude between parents who had and had not attended the conference. Those who attended found a number of things helpful. They gathered information which they said would help them to protect their child. They liked being invited and, where they had been invited and had attended, they felt more positive toward the social worker. Most importantly, they felt fairly treated. At the same time, the parents we interviewed, like those described in a similar study by Corby et al (1996), did not feel they had influenced the decisions. In my study, in most cases the families had not received information about other sources of help, or about complaints procedures. Within the context of the power imbalance described above it is questionable whether, in any event, having access to written procedures would encourage parents to complain. A report from the National Consumer Council (1993) quotes one person as saying 'the sense that we do not have a right to services raises fears that we will lose what we have got, as a punishment for making a fuss'.

Aspects of the meeting also served to disempower the parents. A number expressed concerns about their lack of control over the membership of the conference, and about information brought into it that they considered irrelevant to the abuse. They were concerned that information about the abuse would seep into the extended family and valued social networks, thus further stigmatising them and damaging relationships. As we have seen, in some cases parents had no prior warning of the 'bombshells' that were dropped, the emotional impact of which was paralysing.

Corby suggests that the process of removing conflict from the conference, added to the parents' belief that the decisions had already been made, is more likely to alienate parents and make them apathetic than to empower them. He believes the process is inevitably disempowering. The comparative data in my research, however, demonstrated that the parents who had been to the conference had a more positive attitude to the social work intervention than those who had not. The strong sense of having been fairly treated seemed to lessen feelings of anger and allow for a more rational response to develop. These factors combined to allow for a more positive social work relationship to be maintained. So, while the parents did not feel powerful in terms of influencing the important decisions, their involvement in the process seemed to lay a firmer base from which to proceed. This is likely to be enabling, if not empowering, in terms of their negotiating power within the social work relationship. Further, it also seems reasonable to assume that in some cases the knowledge gained in the process will increase those parents' ability to protect their children from further abuse; and also that the contribution made by the parents' presence, both regarding additional information, and in reassuring the workers, makes the child protection plan more relevant to the families needs.

The above discussion suggests that, for parents, being involved in the conference is better than not, that they are helped by hearing of the risks their child has been exposed to, and that they may be more inclined to cooperate with the social worker. The way in which their involvement is handled is key to the parents' experience. I have also identified a number of ways in which parents feel disempowered, particularly within the context of inadequate support service provision. Is the term empowerment helpful in this context?

Like user involvement, empowerment is a contested concept with a range of meanings. Banks (1995) suggests there are three main approaches: the consumerist approach, within which users would be given some limited choices; the citizenship approach, which involves power sharing; and the radical approach, whereby people are encouraged to realise their own power and take action for themselves. These three approaches are strikingly similar to the three levels of partnership defined by Thoburn (1995). They do seem to carry with them aspects of empowerment, in varying degrees. Within the

consumerist approach, providing information can be empowering. For example, people should be given information about their rights, about the procedures that will be used in the investigation, and about what will be shared in the conference. This may offer them some limited choices and some limited control. The citizenship approach is more likely to embrace opportunities for consultation. Katz, (1995) for example, suggests that parents could be given more say in how the assessment is carried out. In his study, parents and children who were consulted felt more powerful as the assessment progressed. Of course, consultation will only be real when a choice is offered, and when it is possible for it to be refused without negative consequences. As we have seen, neither of these conditions may exist. In any event, choice is more likely to be offered at the treatment stage than before or during the conference, when uncertainties about risk prevail. Lastly, from the radical approach, there are few opportunities for power sharing because of the endemic conflicts. In seeking ways forward we need next to look more closely at these conflicts.

THE CONFLICTS

Generally, the conflicts can be grouped into three main areas. They arise from the muddiness surrounding the basis of the intervention, from the requirement on professionals to consult the interests of different people, and from their having to perform contradictory tasks.

THE BASIS OF THE INTERVENTION

Legalism

My findings have suggested that the conference is serving a quasi-judicial function. The present system feels, and probably is too legalistic. Parton (1991) and Stevenson (1995) have described how the recent emphasis on risk and culpability, and the closer working relationship between the police and social services has rendered the discourse soci-legal, rather than socio-medical. Concern that investigations are now dominated by the evidential requirements of criminal prosecutions have been heightened by unhappiness with the low levels of prosecution in the court system. The way the courts operate is a contributory factor. To render the intervention less legalistic would require changes in the

court system running alongside. I will return to this point in considering the implications of this analysis for policy and practice.

Three issues arise from the legalism that is endemic to the conferences, as follows: that culpability has to be addressed; that the social and legal implications of the findings of abuse take place over discussions of aetiology; and that the relationship between professionals and families is not a voluntary one.

Culpability

At the beginning of this thesis I pointed out that the guidance on the purpose of the conference fudged the issue of culpability, so presenting the conference with an ambiguous task. Working Together describes the function of the conference as being to identify abuse, while at the same time saying the meeting must not make " a formal decision that a person has abused a child." What happens is that information is presented in the conference as evidence, and then used to construe the parents' responsibility or culpability for the alleged abuse. In determining risk, the conference has to determine what acts of commission and omission by which responsible adults place the child at risk.

Culpability, therefore, has to be addressed. In the conference arena this is outwith the trappings of the legal system. The parents told us that they feel judged, and the analysis of the conference process suggested a number of ways in which the parents' capacity to speak for themselves was undermined or non-existent. Habermas' work on the way power effects communications and relationships was used to explain the dynamics of this process. Further, we have seen how the parents' position without legal representation in the conference could be said to be potentially unjust. In my view, the quality of representation and fact disputation that actually takes place in the conference does not accord with the principles of natural justice.

At the same time, my findings drew attention to the importance to parents of fairness in determining their attitude to the ongoing intervention. Issues relating to justice as fairness, and the relationship between empowerment and whether people feel they have been fairly

treated are important. My study has suggested that, while natural justice does not exist in this arena, procedural justice is a more useful concept for understanding the conference process. Although the balance of power did not change when parents were present, they nevertheless felt that, procedurally, they had been fairly dealt with. Provided that children are not removed from home it is the way the process is managed, rather than simply the outcome of, for example, whether children are registered or not, that determines the parents' experience. This has important implications for practice to which I will return.

A jigsaw of information

As we have seen, the focus of the social work intervention at this stage of the investigation was on collecting information. Against the background of the Inquiries, which have castigated professionals who have 'missed' key bits of information, the focus on information gathering can be seen as an important way of managing professional and personal anxiety. I have also suggested that the conference is instrumental in managing anxiety, for there information is shared and the responsibility for addressing it becomes a collective one. The findings demonstrated that sharing information is accorded the bulk of the time, and that its collection and presentation preoccupied the professionals. The emphasis of the investigation, and its presentation, is on what people said and did, rather than on theoretical linkages which could provide an understanding of the connections between the disparate bits of information. There was also evidence to suggest that professionals were wary about making judgements, and about owning their expertise. This is of concern if interventions and the child protection plan are to address the complexity and interconnectedness of the dynamics underlying the abuse. It is also important that in this area of uncertainty the expertise of professionals is not undermined

Voluntary or not

The interviews with the parents revealed that they did not appreciate that their cooperation after the conference was voluntary, and that the registration had no legal basis. A more recent study, comparing parents' understanding of registration decisions in England and the U.S.A. (Bell, 1997), supports this finding. A factor contributing to the parents' misconception was that few were given information about how to deregister,

how to appeal or how to complain. Any debate about the nature of partnership practice, and the opportunities for empowering parents within that, must address the power imbalance that is endemic to a relationship which is in part coercive.

At the same time, it has been suggested that social workers are also disempowered by the unsatisfactory basis of the intervention, which on the one hand requires them to exercise control, and on the other does not give them the legal authority to manage this effectively. The research of Cooper and Hetherington (1996) into seven European child protection systems is helpful here. They found that in countries other than England, the system is frequently organised so that the transition from "confidential" to compulsory intervention is made easier. In France, for example, as in Scotland, a "hearing" with a judge who is as available to children and parents as to professionals can be requested simply on the basis of concern about a child's welfare. Cooper and Hetherington found that the backing of authorities freed social workers to use their authority more confidently with uncooperative parents in the voluntary domain. All the continental social workers felt that there was an emphasis on "control" by their English colleagues, combined with lack of support from the authorities, which disabled them from confronting abusing parents and engaging them without the backing of the courts. This research adds weight to mine in highlighting the difficulty of balancing care and control within a pseudo- voluntary arrangement. It also highlights the disabling effects - both on social workers and on the families - of the way that entry and exit to the system is currently negotiated.

Power and Justice

Power has been seen to be a key feature in the relationship between different professional groups, and in relationships between professionals and family members. Power has also been seen to be instrumental to the decision making process because of the way it operates at different levels. For example, the chairperson uses power in determining whether some bits of information are confidential; the social workers have power in determining which information they will present; doctors have power because of the status invested in their knowledge and expertise. At the same time, we have seen that social workers in the conference were disempowered when the parents contextualised the abuse because they

could not do anything about it; teachers were disempowered because they did not consider their contribution to be of key importance in the context of child protection; and parents had no effective source of power.

Generally, the findings have suggested that the sharing of power between professionals and families is problematic. Parents have power which, if exercised, may prove to be detrimental to the child's welfare: power to appear to cooperate, to refuse permission to see the child, to withhold information. Professionals also have power which they exercise at all stages of the investigation. Before the conference the professionals hold the power by defining which family members will be invited, during it they maintain power by suppressing disagreement and avoiding conflict, and after it the social workers ultimately control and judge the families' parenting behaviours. The interviews with the families revealed that, for them, the ultimate threat is the removal of their child, and this hangs over them like a hawk over chickens.

CONSULTING DIFFERENT INTERESTS

In an ideal world it might be assumed that legal, professional, social and moral rights and duties would complement or coincide with those required by the agency. In complying with its statutory duties, the agency requires that social workers perform duties to society, duties to the profession, duties to users, as well as duties to itself. As we have seen these duties conflict, and yet the social workers are given no guidance as to how to manage or prioritise them. Social workers have to manage conflicting interests in the following ways:

The Family and the Agency

The findings have pointed up a number of difficulties for the professionals, particularly for social workers, in working in the close partnerships prescribed with two different systems - the professional system and the family system. Family systems theory (Satir, 1964, Minuchin, 1974) has enabled us to understand why it is difficult to work with some abusing families, where boundaries are impermeable or fragmented. The interviews with the social workers well demonstrated the difficulties they experienced in engaging with sometimes chaotic and often uncooperative family systems. A systems approach to

working with professional networks (see Vickery, 1976) also facilitates an analysis of the dynamics, such as those involving power, that operate within the inter-agency system. The interviews with the social workers and the attitude survey revealed the degree to which the workers felt bound by procedures and inter-agency collaboration during the investigation, and the effect this had on their engagement with family members and children. Working within and across the professional system and the family system engendered a number of conflicts for the professionals, as will be discussed below. Within the time constraints available it is questionable whether effective work with both systems can be achieved by one social worker.

Systems theory also provides a helpful way of exploring a related issue - that of the conflicting role demands placed upon the social workers. In conducting the investigation social workers are acting for the system that employs them. The needs of the members of the family system may well diverge, however. The interviews with the families showed that in some cases there was congruence between what they believed and wished for, and what the social worker believed and recommended. In other cases there was not. In explaining how perspectives *may come together or may diverge*, Cleaver and Freeman's term, the operational perspective, was found to be useful. Where congruence existed, the social workers roles within the family and the employer systems were complementary. However, there were a number of situations where such congruence was absent, and the roles conflicted. The nature of that conflict was evident in 'the most difficult cases' group, and was graphically described by the mother in Case 3 presented in chapter 6.

Different family members

Social workers also experienced role conflict in acting for different family members. The monitoring study revealed that the identification of key family members, or adults the child was attached to, was not straightforward. Additionally, some key attachment figures - such as separated fathers - were difficult to access, or their views on the child's welfare differed from the mothers. Difficulties of definition and access were further compounded by the hostile response of some parents to the intervention, as well as by differences in language, culture and class.

The involvement of extended family members was also problematic. The interviews with the social workers vividly demonstrated the difficulties they faced in engaging with all family members, and that they managed this, generally, by working with the mother. For many, this was only a partial and temporary solution and they were left feeling concerned about the limitation of their focus, but without the power to change it.

The child

The social work role in relation to the child was a further area of conflict. While the attendance of children at the conference is advocated in *Working Together*, this authority was not including them at the time of the study. Social workers therefore had a particular responsibility to act as advocates for the child in the conference, and therefore to find out beforehand their needs and wishes. It became clear in the interviews that the social workers did not engage with the children, and that to do so would have (in their view) engendered conflict in their role with other family members. In my study, workers responded to this role conflict by not seeing the children. It will be remembered that, in Thoburn's study the social workers did engage with the children, but in cases where this had not been discussed with the parents, their relationship was adversely affected.

Direct work with children is skilled and specialised. In child protection work, there are additional complexities, for example where a criminal prosecution is also on-going, (see Lynch, 1992). The social workers we interviewed did not seem confident in engaging with the children either before or after the conference, or in undertaking such work within the family environment. Their difficulties in doing this were exacerbated by the need they felt to maintain the mother's cooperation. The implications for practice of this analysis will be suggested later.

PERFORMING CONTRADICTIONARY TASKS

An early hypothesis was that social workers are required to perform a number of contradictory tasks. The chapter reporting on the interviews with the social workers described these in detail. I have suggested that these contradictions are a product of its history. The primary task for professionals at the conference is to classify children as being

at risk, and to implement the means for controlling future risk. This function is a policing one. In evaluating the impact of involving parents in initial conferences, the monitoring study demonstrated that this primary purpose - to assess risk to the child, and to decide whether or not the child's name should be placed on the 'at risk' register - was probably not affected. There were no differences in the proportions of children registered as between the conferences where parents were present and where they were not. (It is interesting, within the context of discussions about empowerment, to note that this finding allayed professional anxiety !)

The analysis of the history of the initiative to involve parents explained how the conference had acquired a secondary purpose - to involve parents in the decision making process by working in partnership with them. The primary task, here, is for the professionals to be helpful to the parents by setting up a relationship which would, firstly, engage the parents in the conference, and, secondly, enable the ongoing work to be cooperative. This function is a welfare one. Findings from all parts of the research have demonstrated that this enabling and helping task conflicts with the primary objective - to classify risk. The conflicts were apparent in the process of making and presenting assessments, in balancing the care and control functions of the work, and in the way the decision making is managed. I will address these in turn.

Making an assessment: classifying risk and assessing need

There are a number of problems for social workers, in particular, in undertaking a full assessment of the family for the conference. Clearly, within the time available and with the difficulties revealed, a full social work assessment is rarely possible. Yet the guidance is written as if, and the nature of the decisions made by the conference are such, as to suggest that there is a presumption that a full assessment of the family can be presented to the conference. As we have seen, even in cases where the families have been known to Social Services Departments for some years, the up to date information necessary for a full assessment is often absent. The interviews with the social workers also demonstrated the difficulties they had in accessing key family members, and gaining the cooperation necessary to do the work. The requirement to undertake a full assessment is, in many

cases, an unrealistic goal within the time available. Doing this according to inter-agency procedures, while at the same time, setting up a partnership with families who are traumatised and frightened, is conflict ridden and may be experienced as de-skilling. A full social work assessment is, as we have seen, unlikely to be achieved.

Presenting the assessment in the conference

The research has suggested that, when parents are present, the professionals are more rigorous in presenting accurate information. At the same time, they are less confident about interpreting, formulating and expressing judgements in front of parents. Various factors seemed to be operating here. As already discussed, one was the difficulty in balancing a therapeutic intervention with a forensic investigation. This was revealed by the attitude survey and the interviews with the social workers and the parents, as well as by the observations of the conferences. 'How to say nasties nicely' preoccupied a number of professionals, some of whom struggled with the imperative to be 'up front' about their concerns while fearing that this might endanger their capacity to protect the child. Their fear was that, if the parents heard 'what they really thought' they would be alienated and deny access to the child. At the same time, parents objected to information about their family background being shared in the conference, as well as to the professional interpretation of some events or behaviours as abusive.

A further difficulty for the social workers in presenting their assessment in the presence of parents was revealed in the analysis of the 'most difficult' conferences, and by the observations. These drew attention to the disempowering experience the social workers faced when hearing from the families about the severe deprivation they faced. The presence of parents in the conference seemed to exacerbate the 'mismatch' in assessing risk and in addressing need, and this undermined the professionals' expertise and made them feel helpless because they had few resources to offer. Similarly, the families - especially the mothers - felt ground down by the relentless concentration on risk factors without resources being offered which would relieve their often dire material circumstances.

Balancing Care and Control

This thesis has attempted to explore and evaluate the conflicts raised for the social workers by trying to work in partnership with families and with their professional colleagues within the context of the child protection procedures. It has identified a number of difficulties, central to which is the conflict between policing the intervention and acting as a welfare agent to the families involved. Social workers in this capacity are agents of social welfare as well as agents of social control, and we have seen that holding the balance is extremely difficult.

While the assessments made focused on risk, the decisions the conference took focused on control. Spelling out the care function of the child protection plan was, as we have seen, largely left for a further meeting held after the conference. However, if families are to experience the investigation as helpful the care element of the work has to be balanced from the outset with that of control. In my study while the social workers were aware of the families' distress at the investigation, their primary preoccupation was to 'get at the facts' by gathering information. Acquiring the relevant information is essential for the child's protection. While the way in which that information is collected affects the families experience of the investigation and makes it more or less bearable, the social work literature on therapeutic interventions suggests that the tasks involved conflict, (see Howe, 1992).

For the professionals, managing the balance between care and control was made more complicated by the requirement to work in partnership. Additionally, they were not confident how to do it. Their preoccupation with procedures, and with inter-agency communication, can be seen as strategies for managing the balance in a professionally safe way. There remained little capacity for them to, at the same time, work with the families distress. The effect of this on their sense of integrity, as well as on the lack of therapeutic help offered, has been described.

For the parents, the interviews revealed that the control element of the intervention was invasive and ultimately pervasive. As previously stated, the interviews suggested that their

abiding fear was not that their child would be registered, but they he/she would be removed - and they felt they had little control over that. The study suggested that, while the partnership dictat enabled the professionals to, at least theoretically, embrace the care aspect of their intervention, the families experience was different. Their quite understandable difficulty in understanding the legal basis of the intervention, and negotiating within that context, is related to this.

Family Support

Related to the above is the impact of the lack of service provision to support families in need. One conclusion of my study is that the separation between child protection and family support services is both false and unhelpful. In my study both the families and the professionals lacked the resources needed for effective family support, and this impacted in a variety of ways on their relationship. The families expressed the need for concrete support services, and its relationship with positive outcomes has been discussed. Additionally, family support means the families find the investigation less traumatic. In Cleaver and Feeman's research, outcomes on all aspects studied improved when material support for the families coincided with the parents and professionals holding corresponding perspectives on the events. Achieving congruent perspectives was seen to be an important component of effective partnership practice.

The professionals were also disempowered by their inability to meet the families' needs with appropriate services. As we have seen, the parents' expression of material deprivation in the conference was discomfoting for the social workers who see themselves as being there to help. One effect of the parents' presence was to bring to their attention the structural nature of deprivation and its relationship with abuse. Social work practitioners are generally are not in a position to counter structural issues, (see Banks, 1995). Adding this factor to the lack of theoretical input to the judgements made about risk, there is the risk that social workers will perceive their professional integrity and expertise as being undermined. It seems likely, therefore, that workers as well as families would be empowered by easier access to and greater provision of material resources.

Achieving Consensus

Performing contradictory tasks has other implications for the process and management of the conference. The findings have suggested that the presence of parents in the conference may progress and hardened unhelpfully the move to consensus. Professionals in my study told us that they thought it important to present a united front to the parents. In some cases disagreement was suppressed; in others the negatives were diluted, or not shared openly. For their part, we have seen how the parents were inhibited from disagreeing with assessments, and how the power dynamic in the conference mitigated against their appearing to be awkward or difficult.

Corby et al's (1996) more recent work on one hundred and ten initial conferences provides support for my findings. He also concluded that parents had little opportunity to disagree with assessments either during or after the conference. *"They felt unable to challenge professional views or put forward their own concerns and had no say in the final decision making."* Echoing my comparison with a theatrical performance, Corby goes on to describe conferences as being *"carefully stage managed to avoid conflict in the presence of parents ---- who were carefully groomed and moulded into the process"*. Corby concludes:

"The very absence of obvious conflict may itself be symptomatic.....It is not necessarily a sign of consensus, but may be an indication that the power of the conference is working to define problems and solutions for parents, precluding alternative views"

My research findings in relation to the drift toward consensus, and the role of parental participation in progressing that drift, are similar. Clearly, the chairperson has a key role in encouraging and supporting the expression of differences of view in the conference, and in managing the ensuing conflict constructively. However the research suggests that disagreement is suppressed, that the social workers rely upon the chairperson to contain anxiety and maintain consensus, and that the decisions are made before the conference is held.

Lewis' (1994) work spelled out the key role that the chairperson has in effective conference management. This was endorsed by the social workers in my study. Farmer and Owen (1995) suggest that they are "groomed" to improve their theoretical competence and in the management of conflict. While such grooming can only help, the tasks assigned to the chairperson seem to be assuming a Herculean proportion. Other means must be found. My research suggested that, at least in the more difficult cases, providing a space for the professionals to talk privately was necessary. Importantly, the parents understood this. An acknowledgement that the rights of parents must be balanced with the overriding duty to promote the best interests of the child would seem an essential beginning to being pragmatic and flexible in the management of the conference process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This analysis has a number of implications for child care policies generally, as well as for the way the investigation and initial conference is set up, organised and managed by the agencies involved. Some of the implications are practice specific, some address the legal and procedural base of the intervention, and some concern the wider context of service provision within which the conference takes place. In considering the implications for the initial conference, I also question whether other types of meeting would enhance the benefits while diminishing the difficulties.

This study has suggested that there are benefits to be gained by supporting and improving certain aspects of the present system, while radically changing others. There is evidence that initial child protection conferences fulfill an important function in the investigation and classification of children at risk, and that involving families throughout the process is an essential ingredient of participative practice. This research has identified some of the ways in which the conference and social work practice can be improved, for example by ensuring the views of the child are represented - if necessary by an advocate. It has also suggested that there are some conferences where partial exclusion may be in the best

interests of the child. The professionals were in agreement about the features of some of these cases, and the analysis of the 'most difficult' cases provides the means by which these can be identified at an early stage of the investigation. Such information could be acted on by Social Service Departments and incorporated into their existing models of running and managing the conferences.

At the same time the the studies have demonstrated conclusively that the experience of the present system is traumatising for the families. There is now general agreement that other ways of addressing the needs of a number of children who currently fall within this system should be found. A more flexible system of referrals should be developed so that, wherever possible, families can be diverted away from the present conference arrangement to a support structure which more appropriately meets their welfare needs. Directors of Social Service Departments and Area Child Protection Committees should also try new models of meeting, such as the family group conference, which emphasises the role of the family in the decision making and in the future protection of the child.

I have identified a range of difficulties for professionals in addressing the needs of children and families within the present system. My findings are also consistent with other studies in revealing the distress caused to families by the investigation, and that the difficulties are compounded by the lack of resources. One of the sad ironies arising from the recent Rikki Neave case was that it was Rikki's mother who made some of the clearest statements as to the risks at home, yet she felt unsupported. Protecting children is as much about supporting parents and carers to prevent abuse from happening in the first place as it is about erecting procedures to prevent it from happening again. Child protection is about family support, and the systems in place to enable children to live free from abuse are - or should be - on one continuum. The first implication to consider therefore relates to pathways into the child protection system. If there is some other means of classifying risk and meeting the needs of families, the research findings suggest it should be found. The second and related implication is the need for more community based child care services.

A more flexible response to referrals

In order to reduce the number of families who are subject to child protection procedures tighter criteria for child protection referrals should be developed to prevent such large numbers of children and families from being drawn into the net. Gibbons believes there are opportunities to develop more flexible responses to child abuse allegations within the existing statutory framework of The Children Act. She points out that the rigid response currently operating may not be the intention of the legislation and supporting guidance. 'Expressions of concern', she suggests, should not be treated in the same way as a definite suspicion that a child is at risk of or suffering significant harm. The opportunity to offer support under Section 17 of The Children Act could be used more widely. This would have the benefit of ensuring a more positive response from the parents and families, while at the same time more appropriately addressing their welfare needs by developing preventive services.

There are various ways forward within the existing system to develop more appropriate responses to the wide range of referrals received. While the use of risk factors as screening tools is controversial because it can lead to false positives (Corden, 1995), there is a strong argument for using them judiciously. Jones (1996), recently surveyed seven hundred and one decisions in 'child protection' and 'child care' cases within one local authority, and found that major risk factors could be identified at four different levels in the decision-making process. At the end of the process, the research found that workers were appropriately discriminating between child protection and child care cases, based on the risk factor weightings given by independent auditors. Thoburn (1995) and Farmer and Owen (1995) also identified cases which they believed could have been filtered out of the child protection system at an early stage. Thoburn, for example, mentions "some very needy families who had been crying out for help for some time, and others whose children had been harmed by an acquaintance or partner who had promptly been ejected." (p 235) It is of interest to note that the criteria identified with the difficult conferences in my study includes a number of factors which are commonly associated with the likelihood of child abuse, (see Jones et al, 1987, Moore, 1992). This implies that there are common features between high risk families and difficult conferences, and it could be helpful for

agencies to be cognisant of this in planning their intervention, and in channelling referrals appropriately.

The development of family support

I have argued that the potential for conflict between care and control that is endemic to the child protection conference in its present form would be lessened by the development of a broader based child care system. Such a system would require Government funding for resource provision, enabling preventive services to be developed on a community basis as well as providing for more effective post conference services within an inter agency framework. Within this framework a more flexible response to referrals and clearer, more workable and more effective intervention strategies could be developed.

The development of community based preventive services funded by voluntary and statutory agencies seems essential. One example is Easterhouse, Glasgow, where lead staff help local people to establish services and activities which meet the needs of disadvantaged families, such as credit unions, community shops, babysitting circles, toy libraries and after school clubs. The importance of such locally based activities in supporting families where abuse is likely was indicated in a research project I undertook in Leeds on service provision for children and young people who have witnessed domestic violence, (Bell, 1997) The incidence of domestic violence in families who abuse children is high, (Mooney, 1994). However, the violence is often hidden and its effects on children not immediately recognised as abusive. Concerned and aware of this fact, the professionals identified the need for different levels of prevention and support. Primary preventive work was most likely to be undertaken by the voluntary sector, for example by providing information and support to local community groups. Secondary prevention was seen as being provided by, for example, school nurses, teachers and home carers, well placed to identify problems at an early stage and refer on. Tertiary prevention was undertaken primarily by social services and health agencies, who react to identified need - especially where it is couched in terms of risk.

Such research helps to make explicit the link between supportive activities and child protection. It also highlights the key role that parents can play in developing and supporting services. Further, it provides a sharp focus for discussions about partnership practice. In such arrangements as those outlined above, partnership is voluntary, it is reciprocal, and it is based on negotiated agreement both with families and with other key professionals in the community. Service provision of this level is likely to mean capable and disadvantaged families mixing, and therefore offers a non-stigmatising approach to families with a social service label. Reducing the stigma associated with a social services intervention might well result in earlier referrals and greater opportunities for preventive intervention. It also requires the involvement of all the child care professionals in a community which, as was demonstrated by my and Halletts'(1995) research, is essential for effective inter agency work in child protection. Hearn's description of family support is helpful here because it includes the range of agencies involved with children.

" Family support is not solely the province of social workers and social service agencies nor simply a partnership between them and local people. It is enhanced by, and enhances the work of all primary professionals including adult and community education, community police and nursery staff. So head teachers can contribute space, parents groups and parent education programmes throughout the school; health visitors can lead health education programmes for young people and parents; youth workers can pay special attention to the 'difficult' young person'

Hearn,(p24).

Clarifying the basis of the intervention

The contradictions inherent in the secondary purposes the conference has now acquired should be acknowledged and addressed. As things stand, the conference is instrumental in managing professional anxiety and in formally progressing the registration of children at risk. Research evidence suggests the conference largely achieves this primary task. The basis on which parents are involved in the process is, however, muddy and this was seen as being unhelpful to all parties. Being more explicit about the power base of the

intervention, and developing some structures to formally validate that, seems important. The family group conference offers a model here.

Family group conferences were developed in New Zealand, following the implementation of the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989. The essence of Family Group Conferences (see Connolly, 1994) is that the family meet without the professionals, to construct a plan which the professionals feel confident will protect the child from future harm. Before their meeting, the family are told the professionals concerns, and acceptable parameters for a family constructed protection plan are laid down. A facilitator is on hand for the family. The meeting culminates with an agreement between the family and the professionals about action which the professionals consider will ensure the safety of the child.

While further research needs to be done, this model has advantages in that families are given a real opportunity to make proposals about their childrens future, based on clear reasons for professional concern. The professionals power is made explicit by the fact that they can reject the families proposals if they consider them inadequate, and can then apply to the courts to resolve the issues. Corby (1996) believes that family group conferences explicitly acknowledge the potential for conflict between the different parties and provide for a clearer negotiation process. A different model, but having similar advantages, was that researched on the continent by Cooper and Hetherington (1996), and described above. There, when control had to be kept in the hands of the professionals, the authority is provided by the court.

I have referred earlier to suggestions that the court system needs changing in order to more adequately meet the needs of the different parties, (see Hallett, 1993). One possibility is to make the basis of the registration legal. Another is to streamline court procedures to enable civil and criminal actions in child abuse hearings to be heard earlier, and in a less formal context, such as happens in Scotland. Responsibility for assessing culpability, and for determining the threshold of significant harm, might then be placed more properly within a judicial system where the interests of all parties could be properly

represented. An additional benefit would be that the child protection conference could then concentrate on assessing need, and on the construction of the child protection plan

AGENCY SUPPORT

The relationship between good practice and agency support has been spelt out by this research. There are a number of policy, management and training implications for local authority social service departments, as well as for the other key agencies. Where agency support structures existed, staff found their task more manageable. Support needs to be provided in the following areas.

Supervision

It is evident from the findings that effective child protection work depends upon good supervision. Supervision offers a means of developing reflective practice and of addressing a number of the practice dilemmas identified. Within supervision, ways of diminishing conflicts of role could be considered. Developing the role of advocacy would be helpful in enabling the interests of different parties to be represented and presented outwith the social work role. Involving more than one social worker in the family may also reduce conflict. Due care should be given to aspects of personal safety, including acknowledging the impact of working closely with people who are aggressive and violent. Supervision also has an important function in ensuring that social workers address the emotional impact of the investigation on families, as well as following procedures. The preparation of families for the conference, and their care afterwards, were important aspects of the users' experience. Supervision should ensure good practice in this regard, including maintaining accurate up to date records, and written agreements.

Management

The findings revealed a number of ways in which practitioners as well as users were disadvantaged because they had not seen key documents. Management should take the primary role in ensuring procedures are known to staff, and that they have been followed.

By owning this responsibility for providing accessible information, and by taking responsibility for streamlining procedures and ironing out some ambiguities, fieldworkers may feel less exposed and freed to address the families' fears (as well as their own).

The conference was stressful for the professionals as well as the families. Effective support structures for staff are an important aspect of good management, and these should provide a means of support, as well as sharing responsibility and providing accountability. All agencies need to ensure that debriefing is available to all staff after the conference. Team meetings, where experiences were shared, were also valued and experienced as supportive.

Administration

The need for good administrative support was mentioned by the social workers and the families. Social workers and families are dependent upon administrative and clerical backup for the arrangement of the conference, and good record keeping. Administrative staff should ensure parents are provided with accurate information about the conference, as well as the steps they can take to deregister their child, and with complaints procedures. They should also ensure accurate minutes of the conference are made and sent to the parents afterwards.

Facilities

The interviews with the parents and the social workers demonstrated that the environment in which the conference was held communicated messages about how they were viewed as people. Social Service Departments need to provide adequate facilities for the reception and accommodation of family members attending the conference, including attending to language and race. They also need to provide support services, such as child care.

Running the conference

The observation study provided insight into the importance to professionals and families of how the conference process was managed. Where people sit, how introductions are made, and the way in which parents are welcomed into the meeting makes parents feel

supported and respected as people. Parents should be encouraged to take a friend and, if necessary an advocate and/or interpreter. In structuring the meeting, the chairperson should take account of the different interests of family members, including what they know about each other, and their language needs. Agendas should contain a discrete place where the views of the child, and absent key family members, are made known. All participants should be clear about the way confidential information will be handled, and whether there is likely to be a need in the conference for the professionals to have a private discussion. The Area Child Protection Committee procedures for the conferences should address the matter of exclusion, so that clear guidance is given with regard to situations where it may be appropriate for some family members to be excluded for all or part of the conference. The situations identified here included cases of sexual abuse where one or both parents were the perpetrators, and cases where the child had made an allegation not known to the parents. The chairperson should ensure that parents have had access to all written reports before the meeting.

After the conference

In considering the ongoing intervention, the continuing involvement of agencies other than social services should be required, as appropriate. While many professionals gather for the conference the evidence suggested that the interagency support fell away afterwards. In some cases, it may be appropriate to nominate a professional other than the social worker as the key worker.

A number of parents were not visited for some weeks after the conference. Social workers wait for the planning meeting before engaging with the families in therapeutic work. They should be encouraged to, and supported in making earlier interventions.

Particular attention should be paid to the child's therapeutic needs, and services developed to ensure their availability. Social work help should be offered before and after the conference, and not left until the planning meeting.

In response to the finding that mothers are the primary target for the intervention, social workers should develop methods of working with fathers, and ensure that, wherever possible, they are encouraged to participate.

Some families direct their anger at the investigating social worker. In those cases a new worker should be considered as a positive measure, and not as a failure.

Training

The training needs of professionals from all agencies were identified by the attitude survey. Training should provide all participants with an awareness that their emotional reactions can be unhelpfully brought into play by parents' attendance at the conference, and this should be addressed in supervision. Training needs to take into account the impact of cultural factors on the assessment and definition of abuse, and on the experiences of the families concerned.

Inter-agency training was valued, and should be maintained and developed. Each agency has special needs - especially those not closely identified with the core agencies - and these should be acknowledged and addressed.

Social workers should receive training to develop their confidence in working with children, in family work, and in working with men..

The role of advocates should be developed, and appropriate training provided.

Area Child Protection Committees

In determining and writing local procedures, the Area Child Protection Committees should be cognoscente of the amount of skilled professional time that is taken up with the requirements of bureaucratic regularity, and that this can get in the way of good practice. Other models of conference meetings are being explored and the Committee could encourage some trials of these, for example on the Family Group conference model. The

Committee has a role in initiating and supporting inter-agency training, in allocating resources to support the use of the procedures and to pay for training events, and in monitoring service provision, taking into account the users perspective.

Resources

The research has demonstrated that resources need to be provided to support initial conferences, and to provide services that can help families before and after the conference. As stated above, for the conference there has to be adequate accommodation, administrative and child care facilities. Community based family support services should be developed in both voluntary and statutory agencies, in particular therapeutic services for children after the conference.

CONCLUSION

Is the conference, with parents as members, the best way of intervening in situations of possible abuse? I have suggested that the primary purpose of the conference should be reinforced. As things stand the conference achieves its primary purpose - of protecting the child from future harm - as well as any other system (Stevenson, 1995). Although more longitudinal studies of outcomes are needed, Farmer and Owen's (1995) research was positive in suggesting that most of the children registered were not reabused, and the development of 68% of the children had been enhanced during the follow up period. It seems, then, that the conference is effectively meeting its primary purpose. However, there are intrinsic dilemmas in attempting to meet the secondary purpose of working in partnership with families in the conference to empower them. Involving parents has brought some benefits -these can be enhanced; but the policy initiative raised some false expectations. One implication of my analysis is that there should be an explicit acknowledgement that there are power differentials and there are constraints on what it possible to offer or achieve. Some of these constraints are external to the conference process. Others are, I have argued, encapsulated within it.

The initial conference does not and should not be regarded as a one off event standing in isolation from other essential children's services. That this has happened is partly a product of its history, and partly due to the present government's policy on the family. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Utting, 1996) has shown how, despite political rhetoric emphasising the importance of family life, there has been a policy shift away from recognising the costs and demands of parenthood. This needs to be redressed by the recognition that parental responsibility is best supported by developing a broad based framework of children's services, within which entry to the child protection system is reserved for cases of serious abuse.

Some ways forward, both for the initial conference as it now stands, as well as for alternative models, have been identified in this concluding chapter. It is within the power of social service Departments to implement some immediately; others require changes in policy and procedure which will take time; others require a substantial input of resources.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Area Child protection Committee: A model for parental attendance, and policy guidelines

Appendix 2. Questionnaire for monitoring study

Appendix 3. Postal questionnaire for attitude survey

Appendix 4. Questionnaire for profesional opinion survey

Appendix 5. Interview schedule for keyworkers

Appendix 6. Interview schedule for parents

Appendix 8. Instrument for Observation study

Appendix 9. Brief guide for parents

APPENDIX ONE

AREA CHILD PROTECTION COMMITTEE: A MODEL FOR PARENTAL ATTENDANCE AND POLICY GUIDELINES

**AREA CHILD PROTECTION COMMITTEE: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE
SUB-COMMITTEE**

A Model for Parental Involvement in Case-Conferences

1. Introduction and Clarification of Terms

1.1 This paper has been prepared at the request of the Professional Practice Sub-Committee of the Area Child Protection Committee. It proposes a set of guidelines for the implementation of the recommendation in 'Working Together' that parents should be invited to attend and participate in case-conferences held in respect of their children.

1.2 This paper does not set out the arguments for or against the principle of greater parental involvement in case-conferences. It assumes that this principle is accepted, and that the obstacles to implementation arise from failure to agree an appropriate means of achieving the end which everyone supports.

1.3 The move to greater parental involvement should be seen as a desirable objective, rather than the single moral imperative which guides policy in this area. In some instances, parental rights will conflict with the need to act in the best interests of children and to protect staff from intimidation or violence. These guidelines are based on the belief that the need to act in the best interests of children and the need to protect professional staff from intimidation or violence are paramount. However, it should also be acknowledged that in many cases, action in the best interest of children may be facilitated by closer involvement of parents in the decision-making process, and that it is frustration on the part of parents as a result of exclusion from the decision-making process which often contributes to hostility and intimidation of professional staff.

For these reasons, the guidelines are a compromise. They also, necessarily, include areas in which responsible staff must exercise judgement and discretion (in the same way as they already do in many areas of policy).

1.4 Definitions

1.4.1 The term 'case-conference' is used to refer only to the formal meeting convened in the course of an investigation of alleged child abuse or neglect which takes decisions about the need to register a child, makes recommendations about the need for action to protect the child, and establishes a strategy group.

1.4.2 Where parents are invited to attend case-conferences, it is assumed that they will also be invited to attend subsequent strategy meetings and reviews, unless the circumstances of the case change dramatically.

1.4.3 The term 'parent' is used to refer to any adult who has had the effective daily parental responsibility of caring for a child in a period of six months leading up to the incident which resulted in a case-conference being convened. This may include grandparents, step-parents, other relatives, foster-parents, or residential care staff. Where more than one party has had effective charge and control for a significant period (as, for example, when children have recently been received into care) consideration should be given to inviting more than one party to the case-conference. Where a literal application of this definition would result in obvious injustice, it should be acceptable to adopt a broader definition.

1.5 The Area Child Protection Committee should consider whether the model should be implemented initially in two pilot areas. The need for external evaluation of the model, by comparing the experiences of case-conference participants in areas where the model is introduced with those in areas where it is not, should not be overlooked.

2. The Decision to Invite

2.1 The person with responsibility for chairing the case-conference (or their nominated deputy) should decide whether invitations should be issued to parents (and if so, to whom) when the decision is taken to convene a case-conference. This person should be vested with the power to exclude parents whenever they are convinced that their presence will prevent the case-conference from taking decisions in the best

2.2 There are certain categories of problem in which it is anticipated that the need to exclude parents must be seriously considered. These are listed below: we recommend that they are not used as reasons for exclusions in all cases where they might be applied, but as guidelines to assist the persons with responsibility for the decisions.

2.2.1 Parents with a previous history of involvement in incidents or serious threats of violence towards professional staff or carers should be excluded whenever it is thought that their presence might result in further incidents at the case-conference or subsequently.

2.2.2 Parents who are, at the time of the investigation, primary suspects or the partners of primary suspects in a criminal investigation should be excluded if the police consider that their presence might inhibit the thorough and effective investigation of the crime. This is most likely to occur in situations where a conference has been called to consider an incident of sexual abuse or serious physical abuse: it should only be applied where the suspect is likely to be alerted to information implicating him/her which will not already have been disclosed. Where the parent is in custody or on bail with certain conditions attached, an invitation should not normally be issued.

2.2.3 Parents who are suffering from a serious psychiatric disorder which is not being effectively treated at the time or where their doctor considers that their attendance could exacerbate the illness should not be invited.

2.2.4 Parents whose intellectual impairment is so severe that it would be impossible for them to understand the significance of the meeting and the decisions under discussion should not be invited unless they can be accompanied by a friend who can act on their behalf and explain the significance of the issues subsequently.

2.3 All parents should be notified of the decision to convene a case-conference. An invitation should be issued, in writing, whenever the person responsible decides that a parent should be invited. A simple leaflet should be prepared, outlining the procedures

accepting an invitation. Where a decision is taken not to invite one or more of the parents, this decision, together with the reasons for it, should be recorded and attached to the minutes of the case-conference.

2.4 It is proposed that parents would not normally be allowed to bring anyone else with them: exceptions would be made, at the discretion of the chair, in cases where the parent had serious difficulties in communicating their views, but in these cases, the normal procedure would be to engage a professional interpreter or translator. Where the parent's special needs did not fall into these categories, the chairperson would retain discretion to approve some other arrangement.

3. Venue and Timing

3.1 All case-conferences should take place in premises which are reasonably welcoming and informal. Tea and coffee should be available. A minimum of two rooms should be set aside. Consideration should be given to the establishment of premises reserved for this purpose.

4. During the Meeting

4.1 It is proposed that each meeting should normally consist of a number of stages. These are set out below:

4.1.1 The first phase will be preparatory: all agencies which have information to contribute to the case-conference should put this in writing, and make a number of copies available to the meeting. Where agencies have information which they are unable to share with parents on the grounds of confidentiality, this should be set out on a separate sheet and lodged with the chairperson. A period of 30 minutes should be set aside at the start of the meeting to enable all those attending to read the reports, including any parents who attend. Where necessary, one person should take responsibility for helping the parent(s) read the reports and to identify any points they wish to clarify or question. This person would normally be the worker with some previous knowledge of and relationship with the parent concerned.

4.1.2 In the second phase, the chair will invite the agency representatives in to the meeting room. Those present will be asked whether they have any objections to the parents being present throughout the meeting. Written information which has been lodged with the chair on the grounds that it cannot be disclosed to the parent will be shared at this stage. It is anticipated that this phase will normally be brief (not more than five minutes).

4.1.2 In the second phase, the parent(s) will be invited to join the meeting. The written reports will be formally tabled, and a brief oral resume will be given: opportunities will be given for those present to seek clarification, and for the authors to add supplementary information which may only have become relevant as a result of reading the other reports. This phase may be expected to take up to 30 minutes but may often be shorter.

4.1.3 The chairperson will then offer a formal resume of the factual position, including any areas where there is substantial disagreement on matters of fact. S/he will also outline the main issues which need to be considered.

4.1.4 There will then be an opportunity for all agencies and the parent(s) to offer their opinion on the issues identified by the chairperson. This should normally be kept fairly brief.

4.1.5 The parent(s) will then be asked to leave, while decisions are taken on the issues before the case-conference.

4.1.6 All the written reports circulated before the meeting should then be returned to the agency of origin, with one copy of each being left with the chairperson of the case-conference.

4.2 The parent(s) will be invited to remain behind to be told the decisions and recommendations being made, by the chairperson and other workers with an existing relationship with the parent(s), as soon as the case-conference is completed. They will

contest any applications made in care proceedings. One person who has a reasonable working relationship with the parent(s) should keep space to spend further time with the parent(s) to go through the decisions and recommendations and to help them share their feelings about the meeting.

4.3 The chairperson should have the power to ask parents or their 'friends' to leave the meeting at any time, if their behaviour prevents a reasonable discussion from taking place. The use of this power should normally be preceded by an informal and a formal warning that their behaviour is becoming unacceptable.

5. After the Meeting

5.1 A copy of the minutes, recording the reasons for convening the meeting and the recommendations and decisions where were agreed should be sent to all parties including those who attended. A letter should be sent to the parent(s) whether or not they were invited, informing them of the recommendations and decisions, and of their right to seek a review.

6. Timetable for Implementation

6.1 A target date for the introduction of the policy should be agreed. This should include a six-month preparation phase in which agencies can undertake training, literature can be prepared, and premises can be obtained if necessary. (October 1990, for the start of the preparation phase. April 1991 for the start of implementation of the pilot phase).

6.2 The pilot phase should run for six months initially, and a decision whether to extend the scheme to the whole city should be taken after an evaluation report on the six months pilot is submitted to and considered by the ACPC (April 1992).

7. Resource Implications

7.1 It must be acknowledged by the ACPC and by the agencies represented that there are significant resource implications to these proposals. Broadly these are as follows:

7.2 **Accommodation:** Traditional venues for case-conferences do not all meet the criteria laid down in this proposal. It may be possible to use other premises available to agencies, but in some cases these may need to be hired. The possibility of obtaining premises in each division which could be used for this purpose and as a venue for supervised access of children in care may need to be seriously considered.

7.3 **Training:** It is essential that staff who attend case-conferences regularly, and staff who are responsible for advising colleagues who only attend occasionally, are offered training in the most effective ways of communicating concerns honestly and openly. There is considerable expertise within the authority in involving parents in other meetings: in the education department, the health authority, and the social services department, many meetings already take place in which parents are present, and where they have to be confronted with painful facts and opinions. A series of multi-disciplinary one-day workshops should be organised in the areas in which the pilot scheme is organised, with an agreed level of input from appropriate staff from each of the agencies concerned, drawing on the experience already gained in other contexts.

7.4 **Staff Time:** It is anticipated that there will be an increase in the time spent by staff in preparing for and attending case-conferences to which parents are invited. It will also be necessary for staff to give up time at the training stage to develop skills and confidence in speaking openly in the presence of parents. It is difficult to estimate the extent of the increase, but it is assumed that this would be one aspect of the evaluation.

7.5 **Evaluation:** A thorough external evaluation, involving a comparison of experiences in participating and non-participating areas, would be an invaluable contribution to the small body of knowledge which exists on this topic. It might involve the employment of a full-time research fellow with administrative support for a maximum of two years. A university-based project might cost around £50,000: spread over two or possibly three financial years. This sum might be raised by each of the agencies represented on the ACPC agreeing to contribute a proportion roughly in line with their level of involvement in child protection work e.g.

Social Services	35%
Health	30% split equally between East and West
Police	15%
Education	15%
Probation	5%

A research grant could be sought from the DoH, to offset some or all of this expenditure.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN CASE CONFERENCES

Policy Guidelines: October 1991

1. Introduction and Clarification of Terms

1.1 These guidelines have been drawn up to enable those involved in convening and chairing child protection case-conferences to implement the policy of the Area Child Protection Committee to involve parents in case-conferences wherever possible.

1.2 The guidelines are intended to take into account the duties imposed on local authorities and other agencies by the Children Act 1989: and also to follow the guidelines and regulations issued by the Department of Health in 'Working Together'. Both the Act and the regulations require all agencies to ensure that the interests of the child are paramount, but they also recognise that *this is normally most likely to be achieved by establishing a working partnership with parents and other carers.*

1.3 Definitions

1.3.1 The term 'case-conference' is used in these guidelines to refer only to the formal meeting convened in the course of an investigation of alleged child abuse or neglect, in which a decision is taken about the need to register a child, and, if the child is registered, recommendations are made about any action necessary to protect the child, the appointment of a key worker, and the establishment of a multi-disciplinary core group.

1.3.2 Where parents are invited to attend case-conferences, it is assumed in these guidelines that they will also be invited to attend subsequent planning meetings and reviews, unless the circumstances of the case change dramatically.

1.3.3 The term 'parent' is used to refer to any adult who has parental responsibility for the child as defined by the Children Act 1989. Other carers who have played a major role in the care of the child may also be invited. Grandparents, step-parents and

have the power to decide how widely to extend the invitation, taking into account any difficulties which might arise in the case-conference.

2. The Decision to Issue and Invitation

2.1 The decision on whether or not parents should be invited to attend a case-conference needs to be taken at the earliest opportunity. Once the decision to call a case-conference has been taken, it is essential that close consultation takes place between the agencies directly involved in the investigation, and the chairperson of the case-conference, wherever there is any doubt as to the wisdom of inviting a parent. Otherwise the presumption will be that parents are invited to attend all case-conferences.

2.2 If after consultation the chairperson decides that a parent's presence will prevent a case-conference from taking a decision which is in the best interests of the child, a letter will be sent to the parents explaining the decision, in the name of the chairperson of the ACPC. There will be no appeal or complaint procedure against this decision.

2.3 Parents who are, at the time of the case-conference, primary suspects or the partners of primary suspects in a criminal investigation should be excluded if the police consider that their presence may inhibit the thorough and effective investigation of the crime. This is most likely to occur in situations where a conference has been called to consider an incident of sexual or serious physical abuse. The decision to exclude a parent in these circumstances should only be applied where the suspect is likely to be alerted to information implicating him/her which will not already have been disclosed. Where the parent is in custody or on bail with conditions attached, an invitation will not normally be issued.

2.4 There are certain other situations in which it is anticipated that the need to exclude parents must be seriously considered. These might include:

In situations of this kind (and other similar circumstances) a decision to exclude a parent should only be taken when there are good grounds to believe that the presence of that person would prevent those attending the case-conference from acting in the best interests of the child.

2.5 All parents will be notified of a decision to convene a case-conference. A written invitation will be issued, accompanied by a simple leaflet outlining the procedures to be followed at the case-conference. Where a decision is taken not to invite a parent, this decision, together with the reasons for it, will be recorded and attached to the minutes of the case-conference.

2.6 Parents will not normally be permitted to bring anyone else with them to the case-conference. However, particular consideration must be given to parents for whom English is not their first language, and to parents with special needs such as a sensory disability or a learning difficulty. Any exemption will be at the discretion of the chairperson.

3. Before the Meeting

3.1 Agencies holding information of a confidential nature which may need to be presented to the case-conference, but which cannot be shared with the parents, must inform the chairperson at least two working days before the meeting, and discuss with the chairperson whether and how that information can be shared at the meeting without breach of confidentiality.

3.2 The worker from the agency which has had lead responsibility for the investigation prior to the case-conference will prepare a written report, the contents of which will be shared with the parents before the case-conference takes place.

3.3 The chairperson will arrange for the parent to be invited to the case-conference 15 minutes before the time when it is scheduled to begin. The chairperson will use this time to explain to the parents the procedures involved in the case conference.

4. During the Meeting

4.1 All agencies which have information to contribute to the case-conference will put this in writing using the agreed format. A copy of their report will be handed to the chairperson immediately before the start of the meeting. Information agreed beforehand by the chairperson to be confidential will be set out on a separate sheet, and handed to the chairperson immediately before the start of the meeting.

4.2 The case-conference will proceed with each agency speaking to their written report, and providing clarification where necessary. There will also be an opportunity to provide supplementary information which may only have become relevant as a result of hearing the other reports. All participants including the parents will have an opportunity to clarify factual information and to correct any errors.

4.3 The chairperson will then provide a resume of the factual position, including any issues on which there is substantial disagreement. Discussion will then take place with the parents present as to the nature and extent of any concerns based on the factual information already presented. The parents will be given the opportunity to put their views at each stage on the matters before the case conference.

4.4 The chairperson will ask parents to leave the meeting if, at any time, their behaviour prevents a reasonable discussion from taking place. The use of this power should normally be preceded by an informal and a formal warning that their behaviour is becoming unacceptable.

4.5 The parents will have a final opportunity to express their views on the issues before the case-conference before they are asked to withdraw. Further discussion will then take place about the necessary decisions and recommendations. Information agreed beforehand by the chairperson to be confidential will be presented at this stage/

4.6 The parents will be invited to remain behind in the building to be told the decisions and recommendations of the case-conference. The chairperson of the meeting

who is already known to the parents. Normally all decisions and recommendations will be shared with the parents at this stage, but where the chairperson considers that full disclosure at this stage is not in the best interests of the child, certain recommendations may be withheld until they can be implemented. Parents will also be informed at this stage of their right to seek a review of a decision to register their child.

5. After the Meeting

5.1 Parents will be sent a letter from the chairperson of the case conference whether or not they were invited, informing them of the decisions and recommendations made by the case-conference, and informing them of their right to seek a review of a decision to register their child. They will not be sent a copy of the minutes of the meeting.

ii) situations where a parent is suffering from a serious psychiatric disorder or some other condition which prevents them from meaningful participation in the meeting.

APPENDIX TWO

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MONITORING STUDY

SECTION A

For office
use only

DETAILS OF CHILD AND FAMILY

This section, questions 1-15 to be completed for every child conferenced.

Number of Case

[]

101 - 104

In these questions 'Family' means the family with whom the child was living at the time of the incident/reported concern leading to the case conference.

PLEASE CIRCLE NUMBERS TO RIGHT OF PAGE AS APPROPRIATE

1. Name of child
(for parents who do not wish to be identified please invent a name eg. Marilyn Monroe)

2. Name of social worker

3. Age of child (in years to the nearest year)
(if unborn, specify).....

105 - 106

4. Sex of child:

- Female1
- Male2
- Unborn3

107

5. Ethnic origin of child: (please circle only one)

- Asian:
 - Indian01
 - Pakistani02
 - Bangladeshi03
 - Chinese04
 - Vietnamese05
 - Other Asian06
- Caribbean07
- African08
- UK European09
- Other European10
- Mixed race (specify)11
- Other12

108 - 109

6. At the time of the incident/reported concern who was the child living with: (please circle only one)

- Birth mother only.....1
- Birth father only.....2
- Step/father/cohabitee3
- Step-mother/cohabitee4
- Birth mother and birth father.....5
- Other parental combination (please specify)6
-6
- Foster parents/residential unit (please specify)7
-7
- Other (please specify).....8
-8

110

7. Was the child moved out of the family following the referral and before the conference:

- | | | | |
|-------|---|---|--|
| | Y | N | |
| | 1 | 2 | |

111

8. What was the main focus of concern when the request for investigation was received - child at risk of, or had suffered: (please circle only one)

- Neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse.....01
- Neglect and physical abuse02
- Neglect and sexual abuse03
- Physical abuse and sexual abuse04
- Neglect05
- Physical abuse06
- Sexual abuse07
- Emotional abuse08
- Grave concern:
- 1. Failure to thrive09
- 2. Schedule I offender in or visiting household10
- 3. Family has a history of neglect or abuse of other children11
- Other (please specify)12
-12

112 - 113

9. Did the focus of concern change by the time the request to convene a case conference was made:

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|
| | Y | N | |
| (If yes, please specify) | 1 | 2 | |

114

10. Who raised the first concern: (please circle only one)

- Self01
- Family (please specify)02
-03
- Neighbours03
- Anon04
- LA area social workers05
- Other LA staff06
- Health visitors07
- G.P.08
- Paediatrician09
- Teacher10
- EWO11
- Police12
- Voluntary agency (please specify)13
-14
- Other (please specify)14
-15
- Don't know15

115 - 116

11. Who referred the child to SSD: (please circle only one)

- Self01
- Family (please specify)02
-03
- Neighbours03
- Anon04
- LA area social workers05
- Other LA staff06
- Health visitors07
- G.P.08
- Paediatrician09
- Teacher10
- EWO11
- Police12
- Voluntary agency (please specify)13
-14
- Other (please specify)14
-15

117 - 118

12. What indicators of abuse were presented to the conference:

	Y	N	
Acknowledged abuse	1	2	119
Diagnosed but unacknowledged abuse	1	2	120
Unexplained injuries/illness	1	2	121
Signs of sexual contact	1	2	122
Disclosure/allegation by child of abuse	1	2	123
Allegations by others of abuse	1	2	124
Evidence of neglect	1	2	125
Danger to unborn child (from alcohol, drugs, 'mode of life')	1	2	126
Other evidence of abuse (<i>specify</i>)	1	2	127

.....

13. What decision did the conference make with regard to registration. (*please circle one*)

Registered as being at risk of:

Neglect, physical abuse <u>and</u> sexual abuse.....	01	128 - 129
Neglect and physical abuse	02	
Neglect and sexual abuse	03	
Physical abuse and sexual abuse	04	
Neglect	05	
Physical abuse	06	
Sexual abuse	07	
Emotional abuse	08	
Failure to thrive	09	
Grave concern	10	
Child of family	11	
Not registered	12	

14. What recommendations and decisions did the case conference make with regard to the child protection plan: (*please circle one on every line*)

	Y	N	
To call a strategy meeting	1	2	130
To recommend statutory action	1	2	131
To nominate a key worker	1	2	132
To allocate resources (<i>please specify</i>)			
.....	1	2	133
Other (<i>please specify</i>)			
.....	1	2	134
.....			

15. Were the recommendations and decisions made explicitly influenced by the availability of resources:

Y	N	DK
1	2	3

135

If yes, describe

.....

\ 136 /

.....

\ 137 /

Where there is more than one child in the family being conferenced, the following questions need only be answered for the first child.

ADDITIONAL FAMILY DETAILS

These, and all subsequent questions, to be completed only for the first child in the family to be conferenced.

16. First language spoken by parents (*please circle only one*):

- English01
- Polish02
- Greek03
- Bengali04
- Gujerati05
- Hindi06
- Punjabi07
- Mirpuri08
- Urdu09
- Creole/Patois10
- Chinese11
- Vietnamese12
- Mixed13
- Other14

138 - 139

17. Number of siblings/step-siblings living with family other than the index child

140 - 141

For office use only

18. Was there evidence presented to the case conference that the family with whom the child was living at the time of the incident/reported concern contained the following characteristics: (please circle one on each line)

	Y	N	
Adult's psychiatric illness (specify)			
.....	1	2	142
Adult's learning difficulty	1	2	143
Adult's history of violence	1	2	144
Adult's criminal record (specify)	1	2	145
.....			
a) violence (where convicted)	1	2	
.....			146
b) other (where convicted)	1	2	
.....			147
Adult abuses alcohol or drugs	1	2	148
Adults do not speak or understand English very well	1	2	149
Family on income support	1	2	150
Schedule I offender in family or h/hold	1	2	151
Signs of abuse or neglect of other children at time of case conference	1	2	152
Signs of abuse or neglect of other children on a previous occasion	1	2	153
Suspected abuser visiting the h/hold	1	2	154

19. If the answer to any of the above is yes, please elaborate describing adults relationship to child and the nature of the problem:

..... 155

.....

..... 156

For office
use only

20. Was a social services department already actively
involved with the family:

Y N

Leeds SSD

1 2

157

Other SSD

1 2

158

If yes, please describe briefly

.....

.....

SECTION B

DETAILS OF THE CASE CONFERENCE

1 Team:

Bramley1
Stanningley/Pudsey2
Roundhay/Chapel Allerton3
Chapelton4
Burley/Woodhouse5
Armley6

159

2. Date of case conference

time	day	mnth	year

160 - 169

3. Venue

4. Name of chairperson

170

5. What were the reasons for calling a case conference:
(as on notification, please attach if possible)

6. Which professional workers were invited to the conference:

	Y	N	
Social Services Department:			
Principal social worker	1	2	171
Principal case worker	1	2	172
Social worker	1	2	173
Residential/day care officer (name of establishment)	1	2	174
.....			
Nursing Services:			
Nursing officer	1	2	175
Health visitor	1	2	176
School nurse	1	2	177
Midwife	1	2	178
Police officer	1	2	179
Probation officer	1	2	180
Education Services:			
Teacher	1	2	201
EWO	1	2	202
Educational psychologist	1	2	203
Medical Services:			
Community medical officer	1	2	204
General Practitioner	1	2	205
Paediatrician	1	2	206
Voluntary agency:			
FSU	1	2	207
NSPCC	1	2	208
Other	1	2	209
LA solicitor	1	2	210
Other (specify)	1	2	211
.....			

7. Which professional workers were present at the conference:

	Y	N	
Social Services Department:			
Principal social worker	1	2	212
Principal case worker	1	2	213
Social worker	1	2	214
Residential/day care officer (name of establishment)	1	2	215
.....			
Nursing Services:			
Nursing officer	1	2	216
Health visitor	1	2	217
School nurse	1	2	218
Midwife	1	2	219
Police officer	1	2	220
Probation officer	1	2	221
Education Services:			
Teacher	1	2	222
EWO	1	2	223
Educational psychologist	1	2	224
Medical Services:			
Community medical officer	1	2	225
General Practitioner	1	2	226
Paediatrician	1	2	227
Voluntary agency:			
FSU	1	2	228
NSPCC	1	2	229
Other	1	2	230
LA solicitor	1	2	231
Other (specify)	1	2	232
.....			

8. How many people were present (including chairperson, minute taker and researcher)

..... 233 - 234

9. How long did the case conference last (from scheduled start time, to end):

| minutes 235 - 236

10. If there had been specific allegations of abuse, did the conference find them:

Proved	1	237
Likely to be true	2	
Unlikely to be true	3	
Very unlikely to be true	4	
Not applicable (no specific allegation).....	5	

PARENTAL ATTENDANCE

Only to be completed for the four teams where parents are invited:

11. Which parents were invited to the conference: (*please circle one on every line*)

	Y	N	
Birth mother	1	2	238
Birth father	1	2	239
Step-father/cohabitee	1	2	240
Step-mother/cohabitee	1	2	241
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	1	2	242

.....

12. Which parents attended the case conference: (*please circle one on every line*)

	Y	N	
Birth mother	1	2	243
Birth father	1	2	244
Step-father/cohabitee	1	2	245
Step-mother/cohabitee	1	2	246
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	1	2	247

.....

13. Where parents were invited but did not attend, why do you think that was:

.....	248
.....	249
.....	250

14. Who else was present :

	Y	N	
Friend of parent with learning difficulty	1	2	251
Interpreter to parent with language difficulty	1	2	252
Researcher	1	2	253
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	1	2	254

.....

20. Did any worker have confidential information which was lodged with the chair before, or withheld during the conference:

Y N

Yes lodged with the chair before

1 2

263

Yes withheld during

1 2

264

If yes, please describe, naming the agency represented and how this was handled.

.....
.....
.....
.....

21. Please note any other issues that came up in the conference: (*please specify*)

.....
.....
.....
.....

265

266

267

APPENDIX THREE

POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ATTITUDE SURVEY

Section A

Basic Details

PLEASE CIRCLE NUMBERS TO RIGHT OF PAGE AS APPROPRIATE

FOR OFFICE
USE ONLY

1. Your name

101-104

2. Your current position

105-106

3. Agency represented:

- Social Services
- Department.....01
- Nursing Services02
- Police Service03
- Probation Department.....04
- Education Services:
- Teacher.....05
- EWO.....06
- School Psychological Service....07
- Medical Services:
- General Practitioner.....08
- Paediatrician.....09
- Voluntary agency:
- FSU.....10
- NSPCC.....11
- Other.....12
- Other (specify).....13

107-108

4. Number of case conferences attended in last six months:

109

5. In the last case conference you attended would you describe yourself as working predominantly with:

110

PLEASE CIRCLE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- the child1
- the parents2
- both3
- in a supervisory/managerial role4
- other5

6. Have you attended strategy, review or planning meetings at which parents have been present?

111

- YES1
- NO2

SECTION B

TRAINING AND PREPARATION

1. Have you had any training to prepare you for parental attendance at case conferences? FOR OFFICE USE ONLY
112

YES1
NO2

2. If the answer to the above is yes, how would you rate the training? 113

GOOD1
BAD2
MIXED3
NOT APPLICABLE
(HAVE NOT ATTENDED).....4

3. Have you any views on what such training should include? 114-115

PLEASE DESCRIBE BRIEFLY

4. Have you been involved in the planning and preparation for parental attendance at case conferences in Leeds?

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE

	YES	NO	
Given the policy document.....	1	2	116
Given opportunity to discuss personally at a formal meeting	1	2	117
Been consulted	1	2	118
Been directly involved in planning	1	2	119

SECTION C

OPINIONS ON PARENTAL ATTENDANCE AT
CASE CONFERENCES

FOR OFFICE
USE ONLY

1. Do you have any views on the advantages of
parental attendance at these case conferences?

120-122

PLEASE DESCRIBE BRIEFLY

2. Do you have any views on the disadvantages of
parental attendance at these case conferences?

123-125

PLEASE DESCRIBE BRIEFLY

3. Do you think that the case conference procedures
and documents that are to be used for the pilot
project in Leeds could be improved?

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE

Yes1
No2
Don't know3

126

If yes, please specify:

127-128

4. Do you think parents should be excluded from some case conferences?

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE

Yes1
No2
Don't know3

129

If yes, please specify:

130-131

5. In general, do you think parents ought to be asked to leave at the decision-making stage?

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE:

Yes1
No.2
Don't know3

132

6. Please respond to the following statements:

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE

Strongly agree			Strongly disagree		
1	2	3	4	5	6

It is impractical for parents to be present because some information is confidential

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

133

Parental attendance may mean that case conferences become pseudo courts of law

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

134

Having parents present will improve the quality of the information shared

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

135

Parental attendance will inhibit workers from revealing all their information

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

136

Parental attendance will tend to improve the relationship between workers and parents

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

137

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE

Strongly Agree			Strongly Disagree		
1	2	3	4	5	6

The relationship between parents and workers will be damaged by parental attendance

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

138

The collection of evidence will be made more difficult by parental attendance

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

139

The construction of a child protection plan will be made more difficult by the attendance of parents

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

140

The interests of the child will become less central because of parental attendance

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

141

Parents are more likely to cooperate with the conference recommendations because they have been included in Case Conferences

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

142

Parents will be encouraged to maintain contact with their children if they attend case conferences

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

143

7. On balance are you strongly in favour of, or strongly against parental attendance at case conferences?

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE:

STRONGLY IN FAVOUR			STRONGLY AGAINST			144
1	2	3	4	5	6	

8. Do you think the following agencies will have particular problems in implementing the policy?

PLEASE CIRCLE AS APPROPRIATE:

	YES	NO	D/K.	
Social Services Dept....	1	2	3	145
Nursing Services	1	2	3	146
Police Service	1	2	3	147
Probation Department ...	1	2	3	148
Education Services:				
Teacher.....	1	2	3	149
EWO	1	2	3	150
School Psychological Service	1	2	3	151
Medical Services:				
General Practitioner	1	2	3	152
Paediatrician	1	2	3	153
Voluntary Agency:				
FSU	1	2	3	154
NSPCC	1	2	3	155
Other	1	2	3	156

Other (specify)

.....

PLEASE COMMENT BRIEFLY

.....

.....

Date.....

Thank you very much for your cooperation.
If you have any further comments we would welcome them.

APPENDIX FOUR

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PROFESSIONAL OPINION SURVEY

PROFESSIONALS OPINION SURVEY

These questions should be completed by all professionals present at the case conference, and returned to

Mrs Margaret Bell
Department of Social Policy and Social Work
University of York
Heslington
York YO1 5DD

in the enclosed envelope. Your replies will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

- | | | |
|----|--|-----------|
| 1. | Name of child | 101 - 104 |
| 2. | Agency represented | 105 - 107 |
| 3. | Job title | 108 - 109 |
| 4. | In your opinion, did the attendance of parents hinder or improve the consideration of risk to the child | 110 |
| | Greatly hinder | 1 |
| | Hinder | 2 |
| | Did not affect | 3 |
| | Improve | 4 |
| | Greatly improve | 5 |
| 5. | In your opinion, did the attendance of parents influence the decision as to whether to register the child: | 111 |
| | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 2 |
| | Mixed | 3 |
| | Don't know | 4 |
| | N/A | 5 |
| 6. | In your opinion, did the attendance of parents influence the recommendations of the conference: | 112 |
| | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 2 |
| | Mixed | 3 |
| | Don't know | 4 |

7. In your opinion, did the attendance of parents influence the participation of the professionals:

113

- Adversely1
- Beneficially2
- Mixed3
- Not at all4
- Don't know5

8. In your opinion, was the conference necessary for a proper consideration of risk to the child:

114

- Yes1
- No2
- Don't know3

9. In your opinion, was the registration necessary to protect the child:

115

- Yes1
- No2
- Don't know3
- N/A - not registered4

10. On balance, was parental attendance at this conference:

116

- Very helpful1
- Helpful2
- Unhelpful3
- Very unhelpful4
- Don't know5

Please add any other comments you wish to make:

117

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date

118

Thank you very much indeed for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire.

APPENDIX FIVE

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR KEYWORKERS

KEYWORKERS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

GUIDED SCHEDULE

(This page to be completed by interviewer)

Number of case

--	--	--	--

101 - 104

Name of family
.....

Date case conference held

--	--	--	--

105 - 110

Date of interview

--	--	--	--

111 - 116

Number of weeks between case conference and interview

- less than 1 week 1 117
- 1 - 3 weeks 2
- over 3 weeks 3

Interviewer 118/

Any comments on reliability of interview 119/

Section I Social Worker Profile

Name

Sex - male1
female.....2

120

Ethnic origin:

Asian (*please specify*).....1
Caribbean (*please specify*).....2
African (*please specify*).....3
UK European4
Other (*please specify*).....5

121

Current position held

122

I These questions are about whether a social worker's
experience in child protection work is related to their
attitude toward parental participation.

Q1. Age:

under 251
25 - 302
30 - 403
40+4

123

Q2. Qualifications:

CQSW/equivalent1
CSS2
Other*3

124

*please specify

.....

.....

Q3. Approximately how long have you been a qualified social
worker

125

less than 6 months1
7-12 months2
1-2 years3
3-5 years4
6-10 years5
over 10 years6

Q4. Approximately how long have you been in child care work

less than 6 months	1	126
7-12 months	2	
1-2 years	3	
3-5 years	4	
6-10 years	5	
over 10 years	6	

Q5. Approximately what proportion of your work is taken up
by child care cases?

up to 25%	1	127
25% - 50%	2	
50% - 75%	3	
75% - 100%	4	

Q6. Approximately how many child protection cases have you
been keyworker for during the last 5 years

none	1	128
5 - 10	2	
11 - 20	3	
20 - 50	4	
50+	5	

II. The Worker at Case Conferences

Q1. Have you attended any case conferences in the last 6/12 months

- none1
- 1 - 32
- 4 - 53
- 5+4

129

Q2. Since the implementation of parental attendance, how many case conferences have you attended?

- | | none | 1 | 2-4 | 5+ | |
|---|------|---|-----|----|-----|
| when parents excluded | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 130 |
| when parents invited, didn't attend | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 131 |
| when parents invited, attended | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 132 |
| other (specify number) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 133 |

Q3. In general, do you think parental attendance at case conferences is a good thing?

..... 134 /

..... 135 /

.....

Q4. So what do you think are the pros?

..... 136 /

..... 137 /

.....

Q5. And the cons?

..... 138 /

..... 139 /

.....

Q6. Do you feel there are any particular types of case, or family where the presence of parents raises difficulties for the case conference:

General 140/

..... 141/

Specific - Probe: eg Family from an ethnic minority group. Child has been sexually abused. Child has been physically abused. Police investigation ongoing - one or both parents are violent. Schedule I offender in house

..... 142/

..... 143/

III. Training

Q1. Did you receive any training to prepare you for parental attendance.

Yes No
1 2

144

If no, why was that

.....
.....

145/

Q2. How would you describe the training your received

146/

.....
.....
.....

147/

Q3. What elements did you find most helpful

148/

.....
.....
.....

149/

Q4. Have you any suggestions for improvement

150/

.....
.....

151/

Q5. Do you think you require any further training

Yes No DK NA
1 2 3 4

152

(If yes, please specify)

.....
.....

153/

IV These questions are about your own and your agencies views on parental participation

Q1. Are you aware of your agency policy on parental participation in the following:

	Aware	Not Aware	Mixed	
child care planning meetings, reviews and conferences	1	2	3	154
access to files and records	1	2	3	155
complaints	1	2	3	156

Q2. Have you received information about agency policy by way of:

	Yes	No	
memo or leaflet	1	2	157
team discussion	1	2	158
training day	1	2	160
other*.....	1	2	

*Please specify

.....

.....

Q3. Which of the following documents have you seen:

	Yes	No	
Working Together (HMSO '91)	1	2	161
Leeds ACPC a)Policy Guidelines on PA	1	2	162
b)Guidance on report writing.....	1	2	163
Leaflet to parents explaining parental attendance	1	2	164
Letter of invitation to parents	1	2	165

Q4. Have you any comments on the Leeds SSD documents ?:

..... 166/

.....

..... 167/

Q5. Have you any suggestions for improvement? :

..... 168/

.....

Q6. Would you say there are any differences between your own views and your agencies on parental attendance at case conferences? Please specify:

.....

169 /

.....

.....

170 /

Q7. Could you describe any ways in which your agency has facilitated or made more difficult your own work in involving parents in case conferences.....

.....

171 /

.....

172 /

.....

Section II

These questions relate to the
family who was case conferenced on

I. Pre-Conference

Q1. How long have you known this family 173
only in relation to this incident1
3-11 months2
1-2 years3
3-4 years4
over 4 years5

Q2. How well do you know them 174 /
.....

Q3. Are they a family who, because of the abuse or for
other reasons, are difficult to like, or to
engage: 175 /
.....
.....

Q4. Please describe briefly the circumstances that led to
the decision to conference the child/ren:
..... 176 /
.....

..... 177 /
.....

Q5. When was your first contact made with the family about
the allegation: 178
same day as allegation1
within a week of allegation2
other (specify)3
N/A - no allegation4

Q6. How long between your first contact with the family and the case conference: 201

one week1

2 - 4 weeks2

4 - 6 weeks3

over 6 weeks4

Q7. Were you able to carry out a thorough investigation (in your view): 202/

.....

.....

.....

If not, please try to say why not: (*Probe for the source of the difficulty, eg, time constraints, sense of family being on trial, sense of feeling exposed.) 203/

.....

.....

Q8. Did you feel that the parents were more or less cooperative with you because of the pending case conference: 204/

.....

.....

.....

Q9. Apart from investigating the incident, were you able to undertake an assessment of the family background: 205/

Please describe :.....

.....

.....

Q10. Did you see the child separately at this stage: 206

	Y	No	NA
	1	2	3

Please describe 207/

.....

.....

Q11. Did you see all the significant adults (family) in the child's life, eg. grandparents, separated/divorced parent at this stage, ie, before the conference:

Y N
1 2

208

.....
.....
.....

209/

Q12. Did you consult with professionals from other agencies at this stage of your investigation:

Y N
1 2

210

Please specify and describe
.....
.....

211/

Q13. Was a multi-agency meeting held before the case conference:

Yes No DK
1 2 3

212

If yes, please describe its purpose, and what was decided

.....
.....
.....

213/

Q14. If yes, would you say that information was shared at this meeting which was not intended to be shared with the parents:

.....
.....
.....

214/

and what were your views on this:

.....
.....
.....

215/

Q15. If a multi-agency meeting was held, were the parents informed about this meeting before the case conference and told of the views of the participants:

Y	N	DK
1	2	3

216

.....

217

Q16. Did you have a view at this stage as to whether the child should be:

	Yes	No	Not sure
registered (or not)	1	2	3
which category	1	2	3

218

219

Q17. What did you hope registration would achieve:

General

220

.....

Specific:	Yes	No	NS	NA
to get resources	1	2	3	4
to ensure multi-agency cooperation	1	2	3	4
protection of the child	1	2	3	4
cooperation of the family	1	2	3	4
visible agency backing	1	2	3	4

221

222

223

224

225

II. Attendance

These questions are about the preliminaries to the case conference.

Q1. Did you feel that, in this case, the 'effective' parents should be invited to the case conference:

	Yes	No	NS	NA	
mother	1	2	3	4	226
father	1	2	3	4	227
other*	1	2	3	4	228

*Specify. If the answer is no, could you explain why

..... 229/

Q2. In your view, should any other person have been invited:

	Yes	No	NS	NA	
the child	1	2	3	4	230
other relative (specify)	1	2	3	4	231
friend	1	2	3	4	232
solicitor	1	2	3	4	233
other	1	2	3	4	234

If yes, please describe

..... 235/

Q3. Do you think the child should be included in the case conference ?

..... 236/

Q4. Did you have any worries beforehand about anyone's attendance at the conference:

	Yes	No	NS	NA	
the parents	1	2	3	4	237
the professionals	1	2	3	4	238
other	1	2	3	4	239

If yes, please describe 240

Q5. Did you have any contact with the chair of the conference beforehand:

Yes	No	
1	2	241

If yes, please specify 242

Q6. If the parents were invited, did they attend:

	Yes	No	NA	
mother	1	2	3	243
father	1	2	3	244
other	1	2	3	245

If the answer is no, please say why not 246

Q7. If the parents were not invited:

	Yes	No	DK	NA	
Was it explained to them why not	1	2	3	4	247
Were their views specifically represented	1	2	3	4	248

Q8. Were the views of the child:

	Yes	No	DK	NA	
Obtained from the child beforehand	1	2	3	4	249
Specifically represented by a professional	1	2	3	4	250

III Preparation

Q9. What preparation work did you do with the parents before the case conference, and for what purpose:

General 251/
.....
.....

Specific (Probe) How many visits did you share your report with them beforehand; did you advise them to consult a solicitor: 252/
.....

..... 253/
.....

Q10. So would you say that in the course of the preparation the family were helped to engage in the child protection process or not?

..... 254/
.....
..... 255/

IV At the conference

Q1. So, thinking about the conference, how do you think it went:

256/

.....
.....
.....

257/

Q2. In your experience of case conferences, did it feel different to you with the parents there:

.....
.....
.....

258/

Q3. With regard to its impact on the attendance of parents, have you any comments on:

the venue
.....
.....

259/

the time the case conference was held.....
.....
.....

260/

the facilities available (eg. children).....
.....
.....

261/

Q4. Did you feel any of the following features of the conference were consequent upon of the attendance of parents:

	Yes	No	Mixed	NA	
Late start	1	2	3	4	262
Large attendance	1	2	3	4	263
Long conference (over 1½ hours)	1	2	3	4	264

If yes, please say whether any problems resulted

..... 265/

.....

Q5. Turning to the effects on information sharing in front of the parents, did you feel inhibited by their presence :

..... 266/

.....

.....

Q6. So could you say everything you wanted to say in front of them:

Firstly about the incident 267/

.....

.....

Secondly about the family background 268/

.....

.....

Q7. Do you think any of the other professionals were inhibited by the parents presence:

..... 269/

.....

..... 270/

Q8. To your knowledge, was certain information withheld while the parents were there:

Y N
1 2

271

If yes, specify.....

272/

.....

.....

Q9. In your view, did the presence of the parents result in less discussion of opinion or interpretation of the events by the professionals:

273/

.....

.....

.....

Q10. Do you think that the parents presence influenced the way in which the information was presented:

Firstly, speaking for yourself

274/

.....

.....

Secondly, for any other professionals

275/

.....

.....

Q11. Do you think the relationships between the professionals was affected by the parents presence:

Y N DK
1 2 3

276

If yes, specify.....

277/

.....

.....

Q12. Do you think you as a worker, need particular skills when parents are present:

Yes No Mixed NA
1 2 3 4

278

If yes, please describe

301/

Q13. Did you find the experience difficult:

.....
.....
.....

302/

Q14. Turning to the chair, do you feel this conference was well managed by the chair:

Y N Mixed
1 2 3

303

General

304/

Specific

a) From the point of view of the professionals participation

305/

b) The parents participation.....

306/

c) The assessment of risk

307/

Q15. Could you describe any ways in which the chair facilitated the decision making task of the case conference:

308 /

.....
.....
.....

or hindered the task

309 /

.....
.....

Q16. In your view, was this case conference more difficult to chair because of the parents presence:

Y	N	Mixed
1	2	3

310

.....
.....
.....

311 /

Q17. Moving on to the parents, do you think they felt positively or negatively about being at the case conference:

312 /

.....
.....

Q18. Did the parents portray themselves to advantage or disadvantage:

313 /

.....
.....
.....

Q19. Did the parents make a verbal contribution, and was it helpful or unhelpful:

314 /

.....
.....
.....

Q20. Were they helped to participate:

Please describe

315/

.....

.....

Q21. In your opinion, did their presence make it more difficult to discuss the element of risk to the child:

316/

.....

.....

.....

Q22. And do you think their presence influenced the decision to:

	Yes	No	NS	NA	
Register (or not).....	1	2	3	4	317
Which category	1	2	3	4	318

If yes, could you say in what way

319/

.....

.....

Q23. Or, did their presence affect the detail of the child protection plan and how was this:

320/

.....

.....

.....

Q24. In your opinion, ought the parents to have the opportunity to bring a friend:

Y	N	Mixed	
1	2	3	321

Please elaborate.....

322/

.....

.....

Q25. Turning to the decision-making stage of the conference, did you feel it was right for the pa rents to leave:

Yes No Mixed NA
1 2 3 4

323

Please elaborate

324/

.....

.....

Q26. Was any new information shared at this stage?

Yes No Mixed NA
1 2 3 4

325

If yes, please specify

326/

.....

Q27. Was a fuller assessment offered at this stage:

Yes No Mixed NA
1 2 3 4

327

If yes, please describe.....

328/

.....

Q28. Did the professionals seem more relaxed when the parents had left:

.....

329/

.....

Q29. Regarding the decision about registration:

- Was there consensus.....1
- Did the chair's view prevail2
- In the event that it was different, did your view prevail3
- Did anyone disagree with the decision4

330

Q30. Regarding the child protection plan, do you consider this was:

Excellent	1	331
Adequate	2	
Poor	3	
There was none	4	

Q31. In your view, did the presence of the parents influence the decisions and recommendations of the conference:

Yes, positively	1	332
Yes, negatively	2	
No affect	3	

If yes, please describe

.....

.....

333

Q32. Were the parents told of the decisions at the case conference:

Yes	No	Mixed	NA	
1	2	3	4	334

Q33. In your view, did they understand them:

Yes	No	Mixed	NA	
1	2	3	4	335

Q34. What written information did the parents receive after the conference:

	Yes	No		
Letter	1	2		336
Minutes	1	2		337
Other	1	2		338

Q35. When did you visit the family:

	Yes	No	
Same day	1	2	339
Next day	1	2	340
Within a week	1	2	341
Longer than a week	1	2	342
Didn't visit them	1	2	343

Q36. Did you then see the child:

	Yes	No	
Alone	1	2	344
With the parents	1	2	345

Q37. In your opinion, was there any conflict of interests at any stage between what the child wanted and was saying, and the parents:

.....
.....
.....

346

Q38. Could you say how you handled this:

.....
.....
.....

347

Q39. Did you feel that their presence at the case conference had an effect[^] your ongoing working relationship:

.....

348

So, looking back on the whole episode, did the presence of the parents:

	Yes	No	Mixed	DS	NA	
Improve the quality of the information shared	1	2	3	4	5	349
Make it more difficult for:						
a. you to speak openly.....	1	2	3	4	5	350
b. any other professional to speak openly	1	2	3	4	5	351
Improve the way in which the information was presented:						
a. by yourself	1	2	3	4	5	352
b. by the other professionals	1	2	3	4	5	353
Shift the focus from the child to the parents.....	1	2	3	4	5	354
Improve your working relationship with						
a) the parents.....	1	2	3	4	5	355
b) the child	1	2	3	4	5	356
Make the parents more cooperative.....	1	2	3	4	5	357
Lead to inappropriately furthering the investigation	1	2	3	4	5	358
Enable them to see you as part of a team	1	2	3	4	5	359
Improve inter-agency cooperation.....	1	2	3	4	5	360

Q40. And finally, have you been given any opportunities to share your experiences of parental attendance at case conferences:

	Yes	No	
In supervision	1	2	361
Team discussion	1	2	362
Training event	1	2	363
Other*	1	2	364

*Please specify

.....

.....

Q41. So overall, are you in favour of the policy of parental participation in case conferences as a result of your experiences:

Yes	No	Mixed	
1	2	3	
			365

Q42. Have you any comments on the way in which it is being implemented in Leeds:

Any suggestions for improvement

.....

.....

366

Thank you very much indeed for your cooperation in taking part in this interview.

Margaret Bell
February 1992

APPENDIX SIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PARENTS

PARENTS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

FOR OFFICE
 USE ONLY

GUIDED SCHEDULE

Both parents and/or any other 'effective' parent should be interviewed using separate schedules. Please answer every question. A 'don't know' or 'not applicable' is better than blank. Please complete fully, writing verbatim where possible.

Number of case

--	--	--	--

 101-104

Name of carer (specify relationship to child).....

Name of child/ren

Name of social worker

Date case conference held

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

 105-110

Whether present at case conference	Y	N	
Mother/stepmother	1	2	111
Father/stepfather	1	2	112
Other (<i>specify</i>)	1	2	113

Date of interview

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

 114-119

Number of days between case conference and interview

7 or less	1	
8 - 14	2	120
15 - 21	3	
22 - 28	4	
29 or over	5	

Who present at interview	Y	N	
Mother/stepmother	1	2	121
Father/stepfather	1	2	122
Other (<i>specify</i>)	1	2	123

Any comments on reliability of interview 124

Interviewer 125

I Introduction

- Purpose of research
- Separate from SSD investigation
- Confidentiality
- Results will be written up as a report, to be used to improve the quality of services for parents and children

II Context

Q1. I'd like to know something about the background to the conference from your point of view. Was this your first experience of social services (Probe - so could you tell me how much experience you have had of social workers, other services)?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Rate contact with SSD social workers

considerable over 4 years	1
" 1 to 4 years	2
" 3 to 11 months	3
some over 4 years	4
some 1 to 4 years	5
some 3 to 11 months	6
only in relation to this incident	7

Before this incident was client receiving and services from SSD or voluntary agency.

	Y	N	
Day nursery	1	2	127
Family centre	1	2	128
Child minder	1	2	129

Rate contact with social workers from other agencies, eg FSU, NSPCC, Health, CGC

considerable over 4 years	1	130
" 1 to 4 years	2	
" 3 to 11 months	3	
some over 4 years	4	
some 1 to 4 years	5	
some 3 to 11 months	6	
only in relation to this incident	7	
none	8	

Q2. So could we think about what led up to the conference. Did you know why they decided to call a conference? (Probe - did you know what they were worried about? Who they thought did it/was responsible? Why they thought that?) WRITE IN AND RATE

..... [131]

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

..... [132]

(Instruction: check for accuracy against information from notification)

Rate	Accuracy					
	High	Some	Low	None	N/A	
Nature of allegation	1	2	3	4	5	133
Identity of abuser	1	2	3	4	5	134
Grounds for allegation	1	2	3	4	5	135

Q3. So would you say you knew
 exactly what they were worried about1 136
 roughly what they were worried about2
 nothing about their worries3

Q4. Did you agree that they were right to call a
 conference?
 Yes1 137
 Not sure2
 No3

Q5. Did you think they were right about what they
 suspected/feared (Probe - for areas of
 agreement/disagreement). WRITE IN AND RATE [138]

 [139]

Rate	Degree of Agreement					
	High	Some	Low	None	DK	
Nature of abuse/danger	1	2	3	4	5	140
Identity of perpetrator	1	2	3	4	5	141
Interpretation of evidence	1	2	3	4	5	142

Q6. Were you able to put your point of view on these things
 to the social workers before the conference?
 Yes1
 Partially2 143
 No3

Q7. Do you think you influenced them?
 A lot1
 A bit2 144
 No3

Q8. How would you describe your meetings with them at this point? (WRITE IN)

..... [145]

 [146]

So would you say they Yes Partial DK No

Q8.1		Yes	Partial	DK	No	
	Understood how you were feeling	1	2	3	4	147
	Didn't listen to you	1	2	3	4	148
	Were willing to provide practical help	1	2	3	4	149
	Blamed you	1	2	3	4	150
	Involved you in decisions	1	2	3	4	151
	Respected you	1	2	3	4	152
	Could help you to change things	1	2	3	4	153
	Didn't tell you what they were doing	1	2	3	4	154
	Fobbed you off	1	2	3	4	155

Q9. What did you think the case conference could do? (Probe - anything else and then WRITE IN AND CIRCLE SPECIFICS).

a) General:..... [156]

 [157]

b)	Specific:	Y	N	
	1. Registration	1	2	158
	2. Recommend statutory action	1	2	159
	3. Recommend resource allocation	1	2	160
	4. Nominate a key worker	1	2	161
	5. Other?	1	2	162

Q10. What do you think registration means?

	Yes	No	Partial	DK	
Probe:					
Understand name goes on a list	1	2	3	4	163
Understand what happens to the list	1	2	3	4	164
Understand the implications regarding social work monitoring	1	2	3	4	165
Know about complaints and appeals procedures	1	2	3	4	166
Understand process for deregistration	1	2	3	4	167

Q11. Did the calling of the case conference affect your attitude to

	Better	Mixed	No affect	DK	Worse	NA	
a) Your social worker	1	2	3	4	5	6	168
b) SSD	1	2	3	4	5	6	169
c) Other professionals	1	2	3	4	5	6	170

(specify).....

..... [171]

III Preparing for the conference

Q12. Could you tell me how you learned about the case conference? (Probes - did you feel involved/consulted)

..... [172]

..... [173]

.....
.....
.....
.....

Q13. Could I first check with you what information you received?

<u>Written information</u>	Y	N	DK	
Did you receive any (check what)	1	2	3	174
Was it helpful	1	2	3	175
Did your social worker go through it with you	1	2	3	176

Q14. What did your social worker explain about what would happen?

.....
.....
.....

177

178

Did s/he talk to you about Y N DK NA

Who would be there	1	2	3	4	201
What concerns they would be discussing	1	2	3	4	202
What they might decide to do	1	2	3	4	203
What might influence their decision	1	2	3	4	204
Whether to consult a solicitor	1	2	3	4	205
How you could put your point of view	1	2	3	4	206
What they might ask you about	1	2	3	4	207
What other advice you might get	1	2	3	4	208
When you would be asked to leave	1	2	3	4	209
Who was invited and considered going	1	2	3	4	210

Q14.1 Did your social worker write down, or help you to write down, information you wanted to present?

Y	N	DK	
1	2	3	211

Q14.2 Did your social worker help in any other way?

Y	N	
1	2	212

If yes, please specify

.....

.....

213

Q15. Did you get any help in preparing for the case conference from anyone else? (WRITE IN ROLES EG MOTHER, FRIEND, SOLICITOR)

Y	N	
1	2	214

If yes, what help did they give? (WRITE IN AND RATE)

.....

.....

.....

.....

215

216

Nature of total help other than from SSD
(Note these are interviewer judgements)

	Y	N	NA	
Emotional support	1	2	3	217
General discussion of issues	1	2	3	218
Discussion of presentation	1	2	3	219

Nature of help from solicitor

	Y	N	NA	
Emotional support	1	2	3	220
General discussion of issues	1	2	3	221
Discussion of presentation	1	2	3	222

Q16. So how well did you understand what was happening?

Very well	1	223
Quite well	2	
Not well	3	
Not at all	4	

Q17. So, overall, what do you feel about the help you were given before the case conference? (Probe - who would you say was the most helpful?)

.....	224
.....	
.....	
.....	225

Interviewer rating	SSD	Other	
Very positive	1	1	226
Positive	2	2	
Negative	3	3	
Very negative	4	4	227

IV Attendance at the conference

(Sections IV and V to be completed only by parents in the 4 participating areas who received invitations)

Q18. How did you feel about receiving an invitation to attend the case conference?

..... | 228 |

.....

.....

..... | 229 |

Q19. Were you encouraged to attend? Y N DK NA

- by any of the workers involved
 (say who) 1 2 3 4 230

- by being helped with bus fares,
 transport 1 2 3 4 231

- by being helped with child care
 facilities 1 2 3 4 232

- by being helped in any other way 1 2 3 4 233

(please specify)..... | 234 |

..... | 235 |

Q20. Did you feel it would have counted against you if you hadn't attended?

 Y N DK
 1 2 3 236

Q21. Is there any other adult in the family who you feel should have been invited?

 Y N DK NA
 1 2 3 4 237

Give reasons | 238 |

.....

..... | 239 |

Q22. Would the invitation of another member of the family have caused difficulties?

 Y N DK NA

a) for you 1 2 3 4 240

b) for your child 1 2 3 4 241

Give reasons and specify family member | 242 |

.....

..... | 243 |

Q23. Is there anyone who was invited who you feel should not have been?

Y	N	DK
1	2	3

244

If yes, please specify

245

.....

.....

246

Q24. **Only for parents with adolescents being conferenced:**

Do you think your child should have been invited?

.....

247

.....

248

Q24a If yes, would this have caused difficulties for you?

.....

249

.....

.....

250

V At the conference

(Section V to be completed only by parents who attended)

Q25. How did you feel about being at the conference?

a) General (Probe: did anything particular that was done help you to feel more at home or particularly anxious?)

.....

251

.....

252

b) Specific. Could I just check in more detail with you:

Q25.1 Was the venue

Y	N	DK
---	---	----

a) convenient for you

1	2	3
---	---	---

253

b) pleasant

1	2	3
---	---	---

254

c) was meeting the chairperson before helpful

1	2	3
---	---	---

255

Q25.2 Were you offered any	Y	N	DK	NA	
a) refreshments	1	2	3	4	256
b) child care facilities	1	2	3	4	257

Q26. Did you feel welcome?	Y	N	DK	
	1	2	3	258

Can you say a bit more about this eg. did the chairman help? Were the seating arrangements helpful? Were you in the room first?

..... [259]

.....

.....

.....

..... [260]

.....

Q27. Did they look like a group of people who could understand you? (Probe - if not, why not)	
.....	[261]

.....

.....

..... [262]

Q27a Only for parents who are black or consider themselves from an ethnic minority (include Irish and Scots) and specify:

.....

.....

.....

Do you think the fact that you are black/from an ethnic minority

	Y	N	DK	N/A	
made it more difficult for you to be understood	1	2	3	4	263
was taken into account in a positive way	1	2	3	4	264
in a negative way	1	2	3	4	265

Q46. Has your attendance at the case conference made a difference to how you get on with your child or anyone else in your family?

	Improved	Mixed	No effect	Made worse	NA	
Child	1	2	3	4	5	332
Other person	1	2	3	4	5	333

Q47. So, on balance, did you think it was helpful to you and to your child for you to attend?

	Very helpful	Helpful	Mixed	Unhelpful	
To your child	1	2	3	4	334
To you	1	2	3	4	335

Q48. So, on balance, are you glad that you went?

Very glad	1	336
Glad	2	
Mixed	3	
Not pleased	4	

VI For all parents who did not attend:

- a) in the participating areas who were invited and did not attend, (Q49A) and
- b) in the participating areas who were not invited (Q49B)
- c) in the control group (Q49C)

A. Invited but did not attend

Q49A(i) If you were invited to the case conference but did not attend, could you say why not?

..... [337]

.....

..... [338]

Q49A(ii) Do you think your being there would have made any difference to the decisions that were made?				
A lot	1			
Some	2			339
None	3			
Q49A(iii) Do you think your not being there counted against you?	Y	N	DK	
	1	2	3	340
Q49A(iv) What steps were taken to represent your views to the conference?				
A lot			1	341
Some			2	
None			3	
Q49A(v) Do you think your views were fairly represented?				
	Y	N	DK	
	1	2	3	342
Q49A(vi) With hindsight, do you wish you had attended?	Y	N	DK	
	1	2	3	343
 B. <u>Not invited</u>				
Q49B(i) Why do you think you were not invited to the case conference?				
.....				[344]
.....				[345]
 <u>Rate for accuracy</u>				
Correct			1	346
Incorrect			2	
Mixed			3	
Don't know			4	
Q49B(ii) How did you feel about not being invited?				
.....				[347]
.....				[348]
Q49B(iii) Do you think your being there would have made any difference to the decisions that were made?				
A lot			1	349
Some			2	
None			3	

Q49C(v) Do you think your views were fairly represented?
Y N DK
1 2 3 360

Q49C(vi) Were you given any idea about what was to be said
about you and the children?

Yes, a good idea1 361
Some idea2
Mixed3
No idea4

Q49C(vii) Were there things you would have liked to have
said? (Probe - information, interpretation,
presentation of self)

Y N DK
1 2 3 362

If yes, please describe [363]

.....
.....
.....
..... [364]

Q49C(viii) Do you think the case conference was given
full and accurate information about what has happened
to your child?

Y N DK
1 2 3 365

Q49C(ix) Do you think the conference was fair?

Y N Mixed DK
1 2 3 4 366

Q49C(x). Do you think your being there would have made any
difference to the decisions that were made?

Y N DK
1 2 3 367

If yes, please describe [368]

.....
..... [369]

Q49C(xi) So, overall, do you wish you could have attended
the case conference?

..... [370]

..... [371]

Q61. Do you think any of the following factors made a difference to the way you were treated

	A lot	A little	Not at all	NA	
That you live in this area	1	2	3	4	422
That you were black	1	2	3	4	423
That you were from a different culture	1	2	3	4	424
That you don't speak English at home	1	2	3	4	425
That you are not well off	1	2	3	4	426
That you are young	1	2	3	4	427
That you are single	1	2	3	4	428
That you are a woman	1	2	3	4	429
That you are a man	1	2	3	4	430

Q62. So, looking back on the whole conference, do you feel that the professionals

	Yes	Partial	DK	No	
Understood how you were feeling	1	2	3	4	431
Didn't listen to you	1	2	3	4	432
Were willing to provide practical help	1	2	3	4	433
Blamed you	1	2	3	4	434
Involved you in decisions	1	2	3	4	435
Respected you	1	2	3	4	436
Could help you to change things	1	2	3	4	437
Didn't tell you what they were doing	1	2	3	4	438
Fobbed you off	1	2	3	4	439

APPENDIX SEVEN

INSTRUMENT FOR OBSERVATION STUDY

CASE CONFERENCE OBSERVATION

1. Number of case

--	--	--	--

101-104

2. Name of child

3. Date of case conference

--	--	--	--	--	--

105-110

4. Observer

1. Description of case conference and issues raised

111

112

113

114

115

2. SPECIAL FEATURES

(Note any special features that, in the observer's judgement, have raised difficulties for the case conference as a result of parental attendance.)

	N/A	Major Diff	Some Diff	No Diff	Posit Helpful	
1. Late start	1	2	3	4	5	116
.....						
.....						
2. Size of conference (15 and over)	1	2	3	4	5	117
.....						
.....						
3. Length of conference (over 1 hour)	1	2	3	4	5	118
.....						
.....						
4. Absent worker	1	2	3	4	5	119
.....						
.....						
5. Absent parent	1	2	3	4	5	120
.....						
.....						
6. More than one 'effective parent' present	1	2	3	4	5	121
.....						
.....						
7. Investigation pursued with parents in conference	1	2	3	4	5	122
.....						
.....						

	N/A	Major Diff	Some Diff	No Diff	Posit Helpful	
8. Parents become upset, angry, distressed	1	2	3	4	5	123
.....						
.....						
9. Police investigation ongoing	1	2	3	4	5	124
.....						
.....						
10. Sexual abuse	1	2	3	4	5	125
.....						
.....						
11. Race	1	2	3	4	5	126
.....						
.....						
12. Workers seem inhibited	1	2	3	4	5	127
.....						
.....						
13. Focus not on child	1	2	3	4	5	128
.....						
.....						
14. Information not shared with parents	1	2	3	4	5	129
.....						
.....						
15. Parents stay for decision- making stage	1	2	3	4	5	130
.....						
.....						
16. Other	1	2	3	4	5	131

3. Sharing Information

(only circle if agency represented and specify)

	No contribution	Cont good	Cont adeq	Cont poor	
1. <u>Investigation</u>					
Social Services	1	2	3	4	132
Health	1	2	3	4	133
Doctors	1	2	3	4	134
Teachers	1	2	3	4	135
Police	1	2	3	4	136
Parent	1	2	3	4	137
Other	1	2	3	4	138

Special note..... 139

.....

2. Family Background

Social Services	1	2	3	4	140
Health	1	2	3	4	141
Doctors	1	2	3	4	142
Teachers	1	2	3	4	143
Police	1	2	3	4	144
Parent	1	2	3	4	145
Other	1	2	3	4	146

Special note..... 147

.....

3. Assessment

	Not made	Made good	Made adeq	Made poor	
Social Work	1	2	3	4	148
Health	1	2	3	4	149
Medical	1	2	3	4	150
Education	1	2	3	4	151
Other	1	2	3	4	152

Special note..... 153

.....

4. Were views of absent family members represented:

	N/A	Not presented	Adequately presented	
Child	1	2	3	154
Other parent	1	2	3	155
Other (eg grandparent)	1	2	3	156
Special note				157
.....				

4. Decision making

1. Were factors relevant to registration:

	Yes fully	Yes partly	Not at all	
discussed	1	2	3	158
substantiated	1	2	3	159

Special note 160

2. Were factors relevant to child protection plan:

discussed	1	2	3	161
substantiated	1	2	3	162
made explicit	1	2	3	163

Special note 164

3. verall, was the quality of the decision making:

	Good	Average	Poor	
on registration	1	2	3	165
on the CPP	1	2	3	166

Special note 167

4.	Yes	Mixed	No	Not relevant	
Do the chairs views' dominate...1	2	3	4		168
Does the chair direct as to what is and is not relevant to registration.....1	2	3	4		169
Is there discussion as to the purposes of registration.....1	2	3	4		170
Is there agreement on the registration.....1	2	3	4		171
Is there agreement on the child protection plan.....1	2	3	4		172
Is there discussion of which category to use.....1	2	3	4		173
Is space given for exploring hypotheses.....1	2	3	4		174
Is the child protection plan clear.....1	2	3	4		175

Special note:

176

.....

5. Skills of Chair

<u>Facilitates communication by:</u>	Very well	Well	Not well	N/A	
Gives clear instructions.....1	2	3	4		177
Is clear about remit.....1	2	3	4		178
Provides a structure for turn taking.....1	2	3	4		201
Invites contributions from workers.....1	2	3	4		202
Invites contributions from parents.....1	2	3	4		203
Gives non-verbal encouragement....1	2	3	4		204

Improves quality of information by:

Encourages accuracy.....1	2	3	4		205
Disc urages speculation.....1	2	3	4		206
Sifts quality f evidence.....1	2	3	4		207
Probes quality f evidence.....1	2	3	4		208
Checks out understanding.....1	2	3	4		209
Attends to group dynamics.....1	2	3	4		210
Maintains focus on child.....1	2	3	4		211
Invites an assessment.....1	2	3	4		212
Affirms parents' contributions....1	2	3	4		213

	Very well	Well	Not well	N/A	
<u>Improves quality of decision making</u>					
By thorough summing up.....1	2		3	4	214
By outlining available options.....1	2		3	4	215
By discussing purpose of registration1	2		3	4	216
By making a clear recommendation...1	2		3	4	217
By attending to outcome issues.....1	2		3	4	218
By attention to cultural issues.....1	2		3	4	219

Improves quality of inter-professional transitions

Specify					
.....1	2		3	4	220
.....1	2		3	4	221
.....1	2		3	4	222
Other					
.....					

APPENDIX EIGHT

BRIEF GUIDE FOR PARENTS

HOW WILL I BE INVOLVED IN THE CASE CONFERENCE?

Everyone who attends the case conference is asked to make written notes of their involvement with your family. You may also find it helpful to write down your thoughts before the meeting. The Social Worker can help you with this, or you could get help from an advice centre or solicitor.

Generally the conference first hears details of the events leading-up to the meeting, then goes on to hear more general information about your family before reaching any decisions. You will be given the chance to talk about what has happened, and to question or correct anything said by other people, as well as give your opinion about what should happen now. You will not, however, be able to take part in making the final decisions and will be asked to leave the meeting before this point.

WHAT DECISIONS CAN THEY MAKE?

The meeting can decide that there is no real reason to be concerned for the well being of your child and that nothing more needs to be done. It sometimes happens that the people at the meeting find they do not have enough information to make a proper decision. In those cases they may well decide to hold another meeting at a later date when more information will be available.

If the people at the case conference think that there are grounds for serious concern they can decide to put the name of your child on the Child Protection Register. They can also suggest other steps, such as court action, when that seems necessary. Whenever a case conference decides to put a child's name on the Child Protection Register a Social Worker will be named as the

person responsible to bring together all the information about that child. They will also be expected to keep in touch with the other people who may be involved with the family and let them know about any changes or developments.

WHAT IS THE CHILD PROTECTION REGISTER?

It is a list of children who have been or are thought to be at serious risk of being abused or neglected. The list is kept secure by the Social Services Department and is not open to the public. It can only be checked by professional people who are responsible for working with children and families. The main point of having such a register is to make sure that any professional person, worried about the safety of any child, has a quick way of checking if anyone else is involved with the child and their family or has had similar worries in the past.

AFTER THE CASE CONFERENCE

Immediately after the conference you will be invited to meet with the person who has chaired the meeting, together with the Social Worker and perhaps other workers that you know. They will tell you the decisions and recommendations of the conference and what happens next. You will also get a letter that confirms the decisions later.

HOW LONG WILL MY CHILD'S NAME BE ON THE REGISTER?

If your child's name is placed on the Child Protection Register this means that all the agencies involved have agreed on a plan to protect your child and offer you help. This plan will be reviewed every three months. Part of this review will be concerned with checking that it is right for your child's name to stay on the regist-

er. As soon as it becomes clear to all the agencies involved that the reasons for the original concerns are no longer there, your child's name will be taken off the register.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I THINK THAT THE DECISION IS WRONG?

If you feel that the wrong decision has been made in putting your child's name on the Child Protection Register, you can ask for the decision to be reviewed by writing to Director of Social Services, Selectapost 9, Sweet Street, Leeds, LS11 9DQ, within 28 days of getting the written details of the case conference decisions. A review will then be arranged, unless court proceedings are underway, in which case the review will not start until all those proceedings have finished. Reviews will usually be completed within three months of receiving your request.

AREA CHILD PROTECTION COMMITTEE A BRIEF GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS ATTENDING CASE CONFERENCES

WHAT IS A CASE CONFERENCE?

A case conference is a special meeting organised by the Social Services Department. It is only called when there are genuine reasons to think that a child has been, or might be, abused or neglected. It brings together people who know the child and their family, as well as people who are experienced in working with children and families in general.

WHAT IS THE POINT?

The point of this meeting is to make sure that all the people working with a child and family know what has happened so far. They will also consider what the broad plan for any future work might be as well as deciding who will do that work.

WHO ELSE WILL BE INVITED TO THIS MEETING?

The main services; social worker, health, police, education, probation and the NSPCC are all invited to each case conference. They will usually send along the person most directly involved with you and your child. Often more than one person from each service will attend. For example, invitations to the Health Services would normally go to your family doctor, your health visitor (if you have one) as well as any doctor who might have examined your child at the time when the concerns first came to light.

Social Worker:
Tel:
Principal Social Worker.....

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