

Are Child Welfare Professionals Finally Pushing Back Against Criticisms?

Last month a Senior Fellow from the Child Welfare League of America, Paul DiLorenzo, wrote [this response](#) to a Farrah Mina [article in The Imprint](#) about interviewing children in front of their alleged abusers.

For the first time that we know of, a child welfare opinion piece has challenged the decades-old Progressive oversimplification that child protection workers are typically racist and that child removals from their families are often unnecessary.

Why respond after all this time?

It's likely in part because child protection workers are trained to not take personal abuse personally. But the author also hints that some child welfare leaders are losing patience with attacks that lack grace, nuance, or an empirical foundation – and are also voicing a growing recognition that, in our desire to treat parents equitably, we have too often forgotten our duty to protect children.

Narrative for podcast

Today's blog and podcast are about an opinion piece written by Paul DiLorenzo in The Imprint, which is you may know is a daily online news publication that is focused on child welfare, juvenile justice and related fields, and which I believe is the only source of its kind.

DiLorenzo's essay is in response to an article by Farrah Mina, with who is The Imprint's reporter in Minnesota. Farrah's article covers the recent passage of Maya's law, which instituted some minimal requirements for interviewing children separately from their alleged abusers in child protection cases.

The writer starts his column with the observation that “The arc of best intentions in child welfare appears to be bending away from child safety.” To be honest I was tempted to respond to this with a sarcastic “no kidding”. The trend to leave children with or return them to parents despite grave risks started nearly 30 years ago when Casey Family Programs began to aggressively fund and promote its Alternative Response practices. This has grown to the point where we are willing to leave children in settings that are clearly far too dangerous for their safety let alone to protect them from trauma and ensure their normal child development. DiLorenzo writes as if he just now recognized this long-standing trend.

I'm a little skeptical here. This doesn't seem likely given that he is an opinion writer in the child welfare field. What seems more likely is that he and other mainstream child welfare professionals are just now deciding to push back against what I think is an over-the-top, personalized and hurtful trope that somehow all child protection caseworkers and professionals are racist, don't understand cultures other than their own, and are removing children from Black and Indigenous families that are really safe and nurturing environments.

Of course there is enough truth to these allegations to demand our attention. But it is both an exaggeration and an oversimplification of the systemic problems. As we have discussed in other podcasts, data particularly from the National Incidence Study indicates that the poverty is by far the most important driver of child maltreatment rather than caseworker racism.

This doesn't mean that racial bias in decision-making doesn't exist or that we shouldn't deal with it. However, can you think of any profession where people are more concerned about rooting out racial bias in their own thinking than social workers? Virtually all of us have attitudes about people from other backgrounds that we may not recognize readily and which need to be surfaced and taken care of. But the current response in child welfare to this problem is primarily training. And for reasons that we have discussed in other podcasts, training alone is not likely to have much of an impact on biased decision-making because to be effective training needs to be followed up on immediately by knowledgeable supervisors who help workers to integrate the learnings from their workshops into their everyday decision-making, and this doesn't typically happen. And also this needs to be supported by a robust Continuous Quality Improvement program designed to identify bias in decision-making and to address it in real time. In short the lesson here is that simply accusing fellow professionals of being racist is not going to make the improvements that we desire.

DiLorenzo addresses this near the end of his essay when he says "Now, a fresh assault on our competence and intentions is coming from our own colleagues and advocates. This home-grown disparagement of child welfare is unfair. It has an air of misguided self-loathing about what we do and why we do it." Well, it's certainly not a fresh assault, and I don't know what he's getting at with the self-loathing part, it sounds a bit Freudian to me, but what I think is going on here is that people at the Child Welfare League of America are hurt by and just fed up with the rhetoric coming out of Progressive organizations that they have been close to probably since child welfare became a profession, particularly the Center for the Study of Social Policy which is taking helping take the lead in the upEND movement, which proposes to abolish child protection.

DiLorenzo makes a number of other interesting observations in his article. Understanding them however is not straightforward given his writing style. Here is an example beginning with a phrase we quoted earlier:

“The arc of best intentions in child welfare appears to be bending away from child safety. Our fresh obsessions include rebalancing the scales of social justice and assuring we do no harm to parents. Many of us had been operating under the impression these were already part of the child welfare equation. Others think we’ve ignored our responsibilities, doing more harm than good.”

To the best of my knowledge this writing style, which tries to get to the point as indirectly as possible, hasn’t been taught since the 1960s. I fortunately had this beaten out of me in business school, where we were required to read a complex case study and produce a written analysis of it with a 24-hour deadline in no more than 1500 words. But I can still translate from those who write in this way. To unpack the preceding paragraph, I believe what DiLorenzo is trying to say is that we are all making an effort to address systemic racism, or as he puts it rebalance the scales of social justice, by doing everything possible to ensure that we treat parents fairly. He goes on to say that he believes people in the field had already been doing a decent job of balancing the rights and interests of parents with those of children though others disagree. This is simply pushing back against the narrative that the child welfare system doesn’t respect parents or take their needs into account.

DiLorenzo also raises questions about the quality of interviewing, claiming that most social workers are poorly trained and supervised. I’m not sure if that is universally true. I know that Victor Vieth and his Zero Abuse Project have been training over 30,000 workers a year for some time, so perhaps the state of preparation social workers has improved over time.

DiLorenzo goes on to say that if we really want to ensure good practice every child should be interviewed at a Child Advocacy Center, which is a site where people are specifically equipped to do forensic interviewing. I believe there are currently eight of them around the state of Minnesota and many others across the country. Or he suggests that if that is not available children at least be interviewed by someone who is trained in forensic interviewing. He must be aware but he doesn’t specifically acknowledge that this is very far from the position taken by most child welfare managers who subscribe to the Alternative Response philosophy, and who don’t want children interviewed at all prior to and separately from the adults who are allegedly

harming them. I wonder if, if this is picked up on, he would be subjected to some strong criticism.

DiLorenzo covers a number of other interesting topics in this article, but in sum they revolve around three points:

- the current attacks against child welfare professionals are unfair
- the situations that child protection workers deal with are much more complicated than Progressives and political activists are acknowledging,
- and, in our effort to be fair to parents we have lost track of our duty to protect children

As readers of our blog and listeners to this podcast are aware, these are points we have been making for a number of years. But, while it takes a little effort to unpack DiLorenzo's complicated prose, the important thing to note about his essay is that someone in a position to write opinion articles for national trade newspaper and who is affiliated with a respected institution like the Child Welfare League of America is finally making these points as well and standing up to the dominant narrative. You know, it's nice to have allies in important positions. And so we hope this is not a one-off article but that The Imprint, the Child Welfare League of America and DiLorenzo will continue to promote this point of view.

Rich Gehrman

Executive Director, Safe Passage for Children of Minnesota

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