

What One State's Interview Debate Suggests About the Bigger Child Welfare Discussion

BY [PAUL S. DILORENZO](#)

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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.

I was reminded of this as I reviewed the current debate [in Minnesota](#) on whether children should be interviewed alone or in the presence of parents following the allegation of serious physical or sexual abuse. The arguments being presented failed to say that a skilled interview with a child will frequently elicit information beyond an initial allegation. When we go past an incident-based response to understanding a child's full set of circumstances, we have a better chance of helping a family.



Paul DiLorenzo

But that's not why some people want to eliminate individual interviews, or why there is a concern about unannounced home visits or mandatory reporting laws. There is a belief that these child welfare activities are part of a broader, systemic assault on parents — and communities — that has persisted for years. I believe that each of these is an example of how the journey and the destination can have an equal value.

Think about the interview question. Too often, we send our least prepared and supported workers to perform the most difficult tasks. If we were serious about the quality of interviews, we would assure that every child had access to a child advocacy center, or at least a trained forensic interviewer. That would address the quality of the process. But are the critics' questions related to the why and what of our purpose, rather than how we do our work? Should our desire for balancing the scales of justice trump good practice for child safety?

Since most of my career has been spent developing and implementing community- and neighborhood-based family support and prevention programs, I'm not asking for more surveillance. It's clear to me that we create upstream partnerships for the purpose of strengthening families and communities, resulting in safer, healthier kids. For most of us, that reflects our personal calling and our social justice beliefs.

Within that equation we should measure child safety and stability first — no apologies or excuses needed. Professionally and ethically, we are required, not invited, to do this work in the best way possible.

I wonder how much of our thinking is being influenced by denial or grandiosity? In our shared desire to see parents in the best light possible, are we willing to look past the reality of what is right in front of us? The data and the accompanying narratives from respected child welfare professionals and parents in recovery are clear. The drivers of our system are the epidemic numbers of caregivers with substance use disorders and untreated or unregulated mental health issues. Of course, most are also poor, and they are disproportionately families of color.

But our acknowledgment of what needs to be done to make the system more just cannot come at the price of compromising best practices around child safety, including the ability to [interview children alone](#) when that is necessary. In our frequently muddled conversations about roles, responsibilities, and the entire structure of child welfare, I worry that we are abandoning our North Star value.

I'd like to think we can manage ambiguity, respecting the intrinsic value of family and community in the life of a child, while acknowledging that there are times when that youngster's exposure to threat or harm puts them on the top of the pyramid. Sometimes, that is going to require interviewing them alone. Our responsibility is to assure the highest quality of interview.

If you work in the child welfare arena long enough, you come to a few conclusions. First, there are too many assaults on American family life for one system or caseworker to address. Our approach is a ridiculous attempt to remediate the toxic combination of social problems and poor parental behavior that send families into a downward spiral. Second, despite our best efforts to train new staff, we are not adequately preparing people to assess short- and long-term harm and trauma to a child, how to engage parents and collaborate with traditional and non-traditional partners.

Third, there is rarely a single incident or set of facts in CPS cases. They are mostly situations that have a trajectory of circumstances both social and generational. The incidents are not isolated or singular. The cases talk, you listen. It's rarely the other way around. Our response can't be one dimensional.

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Finally, child protection cases are a messy business that require the skill of determining truth — something that wise humans since Aristotle have failed to do. My early experience taught me that families, agencies and courts are all uniquely truth challenged. I suspect that is still the case.

After four decades of service in child welfare, I thought I had read and heard just about every disparaging thing possible from the external critics of our work. Mostly, we've sucked it up, quietly tolerating everyone's fair and unfair observations. We've paid dearly for not doing our

jobs well. In that whole time however, we have remained the arbiters of child safety, even as others tried to demean us, treating our profession like a thrift store clearance bin. It would never be wise for us to let go of our grip.

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. We are in a soup of intractable social and family problems and shouldn't allow this criticism to stand without question.

It's not as if we are asking our agencies to serve two gods. Keeping kids safe has always been dependent on family engagement and a foundational belief in a level playing field. Just because we haven't realized our promise doesn't mean we abandon our values.