



Perceptions and Practice with Domestic Violence among Child Protective Service Workers

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This paper examines social work practice in child welfare for the purpose of identifying how social workers intervene with cases containing domestic violence, and describes their attitudes and beliefs toward those cases. Two hundred service workers employed in a public child welfare agency completed a self-administered questionnaire. The instrument contained standardized scales that measured respondents' attitudes about domestic violence. The instrument also contained vignettes that described a domestic violence case. Responses on the vignettes were assumed to provide a description of the workers' practice. Social workers (MSW's and BSW's) responses were contrasted with other workers. Fifty-six percent of respondents said they would engage in safety planning. Workers were in substantial agreement that physical contact or threats of physical force constituted domestic violence. Also unambiguously defined as domestic violence was insisting a partner have unwanted sex. Workers were less likely to label situations that did not involve a physical confrontation as domestic violence. Workers favored psychological and cultural explanations for domestic violence; whereas workers discounted structural explanations for domestic violence. Respondents for the most part did not identify any situations where they thought hitting would be appropriate. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Historically the relationship between advocates for victims of domestic violence and child protective service workers (CPS) has been adversarial even though both communities are committed to stopping the violence. Explanations for these tensions include differences in perspectives, approaches, terminologies, mandates, and competition for scarce funding (Schechter & Edleson, 1994). Child welfare and domestic violence advocates are products

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of different historical epochs. Child abuse intervention developed in the 1960's as part of the child saving movement and the dual emphasis on rights of the child and later emphasis on family preservation. The domestic violence community grew out of the feminist movement and interest in using law enforcement to protect victims. The domestic violence advocates usually adopt an adult victim-centered approach, and they charge that the child-centered approach of protective services results in social workers de-emphasizing the impact of domestic violence. CPS workers are often criticized for placing the burden of protecting the children on the mother. Advocates assert battered women are blamed by CPS service workers for being passive and not protecting their children. The belief of the advocates is that CPS workers have it backwards: CPS workers should focus on protecting the mother because that will help ensure the safety of the children. (Schechter & Edleson, 1994). Some critics of CPS workers maintain that these workers often fail to identify domestic violence in their caseloads, perhaps because of inadequate training and skills (Mills and Friend, 1997). Advocates claim that social workers take a "blaming the victim" stance. They assert that battered women are not offered supportive services; instead CPS workers remove their children. After the removal children the victim is still at the mercy of the perpetrator. The threat of the removal of their child is cited as a reason why many women in abusive relationships do not report child abuse by their partners (Jones, 1993). However, little empirical data is available that describes CPS practice with domestic violence, so it is impossible to verify these charges. This paper examines social worker practice in child welfare for the purpose of identifying how social workers intervene with cases containing domestic violence, and describe their attitudes and beliefs about domestic violence. Specifically, this study examined the following questions.

- (1) What are child protective services workers (CPS) definitions of domestic violence?
- (2) What are their attitudes toward domestic violence?
- (3) What are their beliefs about the causes of domestic violence?
- (4) Do CPS workers employ contextual justifications for the use of violence?
- (5) Describe CPS workers' practice with domestic violence victims and perpetrators.

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