

**Juvenists Blog for 27 June 2013**

**Do you believe that children are well protected by the State?**

So, what do you think about the Government’s role and performance in protecting children? ‘From what?’ you may well ask? Bullying? Safety in public places? Infectious disease? Well, all of the above, but perhaps the most pernicious risk to children comes from within their own families, from their parents’ inability or unwillingness to protect them from their own dysfunction and unhappiness, visited on the children in the form of abuse and neglect. In other words, Child Protection, as practised by Child Youth and Family and the Police under the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989[[1]](#footnote-1).

As we all know, CYF is inundated with reports of abuse and neglect and hard pressed to deal with it all. They do so by triage related to severity and risk levels, age and immediacy. They are obliged to select what they deem the bona fide and most dire cases, referring others to community agencies and leaving the rest to either resolve themselves or be re-referred. They then further investigate and decide which of those they’ve kept need intervention to make the children safe (i.e. further triage). Those children that can’t be made safe with their original caregivers are placed ‘in care’, either by agreement or legal action.

In truth, we don’t see Government research showing how effective, or otherwise, its methods are, whether children really are made safe and stay safe, whether ‘care’ is better than home, whether intervention is stabilising or destabilising for vulnerable families, i.e. research on the outcomes. And while the focus is on making children safe, is enough attention paid to helping them recover from their trauma and loss? And what about the children who either don’t get reported or don’t get selected for intervention? Some will get help from community agencies, if their parents choose to accept help. Many will be left to cope alone, hoping that a kind teacher, neighbour or family member will reach out to them. Some of them will believe they’re not worthy of such attention.

Meanwhile, the cycle of abuse and neglect grinds on. Our high levels of substance abuse, mental health disorders and incarceration are perhaps all the research findings we need to show that we are not protecting our children. As I read on Facebook just last night:

“Let’s raise children that won’t have to recover from their childhood” (Pam Leo).

I believe the State could be doing a great deal more to help children, young adults and parents recover from their childhood and raise children who won’t need protection from them. So no, I don’t believe that children are sufficiently protected – not by their families and, by default, not by the State. Another quote that totally expresses my long-held views:

One generation of deeply loving parents would change the brain of the next generation, and with that, the world (Charles Raison).

CYF are the stop gap, the end of the line and we all like to point the finger at them for not getting it right. But the State isn’t a few thousand beleaguered CYF employees picking up the pieces at the bottom of a high cliff. The State is made up of you and me. We create the culture that is New Zealand, we elect the politicians and we contribute financially. So, if the State isn’t protecting its children, isn’t it up to us to change that? And if you’re a social services, education or health professional, doesn’t that increase your obligation to lobby to improve the situation?

At the moment we’re poised between a highly selective and rather arbitrary way of protecting children and a whole new and brave approach, put forward in the White Paper for Vulnerable Children as a result of the Green Paper. Whether you voted for this Government and support the current Minister or not, this is a hard-won document that deserves your attention and ongoing input. I have to admit to being positively impressed by its thorough research and far-reaching plans but feel there are gaps that need attention. I encourage you to read any of the versions online – from the Children’s Action Plan to Volume I or the most detailed and interesting Volume II, all of which can be found on <http://www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz/>.

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1. ‘Abuse’ includes emotional abuse, which exposing a child to family violence is considered to be. This is actually by far the largest abuse type that Child Youth and Family, the statutory body for child protection, currently deals with. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)