Child Protection and Adult Mental Health. Conflict of Interest?
Douglas & A. Weir (Eds.)

The potential conflict of interest between adults with mental health problems and their dependent children has received little formal attention in the past. The size of the problem for children was thought to be relatively small and to be mainly in relation to violence.

The editors of this book, and their contributors from many disciplines, show that the protection of children is not just about managing the risk of violence. They provide a much wider definition of the dilemmas for both children and their parents and the difficulties for both professionals and families in managing these. The result is a book that makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of child factors, the diagnosis of parenting capacity, innovative service provision and service failures, user perspectives and anti-discriminatory practice and the requirements of inter-disciplinary co-operation.

The impact of mental health problems on parenting is discussed by Anne Bird. For example, ‘The symptom profile of depression has been shown to have an impact on dependent children. At the simplest level, the helplessness and hostility that are associated with acute depression interfere with the ability to be a warm and consistent mother. Insecure attachment, developmental delay, educational and social difficulties, as well as the development of specific psychopathological syndromes have all been identified in the children of depressed mothers. The prevalence of depression is highest amongst lone mothers.’

The risks to children of parents with mental illness include physical and sexual harm, but emotional abuse and neglect may produce lasting difficulties. In the view of Carole Kaplan, it is likely that where protection concerns are raised, the children may have forms of distress and behaviour difficulty, which may not meet the diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder but the children may be failing to achieve their developmental tasks. ‘Failure to reach competency’ can have far reaching consequences for a child’s life long growth and development.

Concern about development is in keeping with the provisions of the Children Act 1989 where both child protection and services to families of children in need are related to the impairment, or likely impairment, of the child’s health and development. This enables professionals to consider whether children can be best helped by providing services to the family or by using the court process. This means that the child’s development needs ongoing monitoring and consideration within the context of the parent’s health, social conditions and extended family support. It is clear from the book that this may require a much more extensive and long-term commitment from professional services than providing a foster home whenever the parent’s health deteriorates.

Sadly, as many of the contributors emphasise, the services and the inter-disciplinary co-operation required to help parents, and to protect children and promote their healthy development, are often lacking. Agencies and institutions have become too specialised and are driven by financial imperatives that deter the necessary crossing of boundaries.

The wealth of interesting material in this book demonstrates that ‘no one can practice safely or sensitively alone in this area because the whole picture has to be put together and because no one has, in a world of increasing specialisation, all the knowledge and skills required.’ These messages are very much in line with recent Government Circulars. It is a pity, therefore, that the editors, who are both senior managers in Social Services, did not conclude with a forceful overview of the radical system and professional changes required to deal with the problems.

Margaret Adcock
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Effective Ways of Working with Children and their Families
Malcolm Hill (Ed.)

Given the common complaint that children’s services provide only simple case management rather than effective case interventions, this book gets to the heart of the matter. It begins and concludes with knowledgeable and considered chapters by the editor that make for a well-constructed book successfully pulling together the individual contributions. The first chapter addresses the ‘effective ways’ concept of the title and covers evaluative research across various forms of intervention. Although promoting an evidence based approach, the chapter acknowledges the challenges in conducting sound evaluative research and discusses what kinds of answer research can and cannot give to guide practice.

The dozen individual chapters, written by academics in child welfare, social work and education, continue in a similar vein. The authors write with authority and familiarity with the theoretical, empirical and practical aspects of their subjects.

Although concerned a good deal with individual and family based intervention, the choice of topic benefits from embracing social network, community work and institutional approaches. Several authors are modest enough to think that the services themselves may need to adapt and not just the clients, especially in relation to those who find it hard to approach services in their existing settings. I particularly like the idea of combined approaches that tackle both the roots of problems as well as clients’ problematic responses.

It is frustrating that supportive evidence for many approaches is not available simply because the research has yet to be done, or fails to meet the essential design and measurement criteria. Nevertheless, the book conveys a sense of progress, while acknowledging realistically that some recipients do not improve with intervention.

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Our Future Parents
B. Inko-Tariah

Health and Children’s Education
B. Inko-Tariah

These books were published by Education Associates, a group of specialists in medicine, education, psychology, and other disciplines in the field of learning disabilities in Nigeria. Our future parents is a collection of papers presented at a conference organised by Education Associates in 1995. Health and children’s education is an edited collection of papers written by a group of professionals from the Rivers State College of Education and the University of Port Harcourt. These books are important in that they present issues relating to the education and health of children and young people within the context of contemporary Nigerian society. Some of the topics presented are similar to those that would be of concern in Western societies, for example, drug and alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy, whilst others such as examination malpractice and secret cults are clearly more particular to the Nigerian situation. The range of recommended solutions varies enormously and includes those that appear to be reproducing approaches outlined in Western research and clinical literature (for example, family therapy, behavioural parent training) to those that address the role of prevailing social, political and economic issues. Both books could have been enhanced by the inclusion of examples of approaches to these issues, which have been validated and evaluated within the Nigerian context. These books are important reading for health and mental health professionals working in Nigeria, or for those who are interested in cross-cultural issues. It is essential that health professionals in Nigeria continue to describe the social and psychological issues within their societies, but also that they identify solutions that are contextually appropriate to those issues.

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Saying No. Why It is Important for You and Your Child
A. Phillips.

This is a well written, albeit slightly repetitive book, which is full of sensible advice primarily for parents and carers. The title is self-explanatory and covers the whole age range of children and adolescents, as well as including an afterword about couple relationships. I found that it says little that is new for professionals but kept thinking whilst reading it that I would be able to give it to several parents that I knew personally and professionally. It would be easily accessible for parents as, although it is based on soundly explained and well thought out psychoanalytic concepts like splitting, containment and projective identification, it is entirely jargon free. It is written in a style that enables one to dip into it using the comprehensive Contents pages and Index. In scope it ranges from the ordinary difficulties of limit-setting and the necessity for this to give a child a sense of boundary and safety to foster development, to more special circumstances, e.g., fostering, learning or physical disabilities, illness in the family or step-children. The themes include giving a child a chance to learn how to deal with frustration and to flex their emotional muscles as well as to learn how to deal with emotions or feelings through contact with them in an atmosphere of adequate containment of anxiety. The author deals well with the issue of parental guilt and potential entanglement between the parents’ feelings in the situation and the child’s, especially taking into account the parents’ own upbringing and unconscious motivations. Saying ‘No’ helps to define what belongs to whom and facilitates a healthy separation or letting go. She stresses that a parent has to be able to tolerate saying no to themselves and being unpopular. The child needs to learn that having conflict does not imply a lack of closeness and needs to be able to internalise a capacity to say no to himself and still feel that he will be loved. The insights are derived from a rich practice of child and parent-child psychotherapy as well as from the author’s own experience as a parent. As such she is very aware of the distinction between the internal world of fantasy and the external reality that is so crucial in all parenting issues.

As a clinician, I welcomed this book, which is well illustrated with examples from infant observation, clinical practice and everyday life. It is written in an easily accessible style so that it can be recommended to parents struggling with essential parenting issues that are so prominent in our culture.

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Figures of Lightness: Anorexia, Bulimia and Psychoanalysis
G. Ripa Di Meana

A feature of patients suffering from anorexia nervosa is often a refusal to engage in treatment. An understanding of this refusal is therefore crucial to any effective treatment. This book is an attempt to further elucidate, from the psychological perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the deeper meaning that lies behind that refusal.

In the introduction the author immediately draws attention to the danger that this book will be misunderstood because of the move from ‘linguistic and semantic territory different from the original’. She states in the preface that she has intended to ‘unnerve, provoke and disarm…’ with, I think, some success. And herein lies much of the value of this difficult but worthwhile book. There will be little comfort for those wanting the certainty of numbers and statistics, but there are valuable ideas that help in thinking about the experience of anorexic patients and their relation to themselves and others.

The highly abstract formulations of the Lacanian style are likely to make it difficult for novices to struggle through the opening chapters, but when the author speaks directly from her clinical experience, the material comes to life and will strike many chords with those familiar with anorexic patients.

Anyone who spends a lot of time listening to anorexic patients cannot fail to be impressed by the inevitable emergence of a preoccupation with the very primitive aspects of existence; the essentially narcissistic preoccupations with greed, selfishness, envy and sexual rivalry. Di Meana rightly highlights the ‘chain of signifiers’ related to the ideas of fullness and excess-fat-everyone-always-everything—and the refusal that results from the dread of these. She illustrates this with some literary examples. For example, in Diderot’s novel La religieuse, Susanna Simonin is forced by her parents to enter a convent. When the priest asks her ‘do you vow poverty,
chastity and obedience to God?’ she answers ‘No’. This rejection of the masochistic ‘virtues’ of anorexia is envied and admired by the author’s patient, Beatrice, who feels just as trapped by her own self-imposed abstinence. The novel is used to explore some issues of the ‘vexed question of identity’. Susanna has known for a long time that there is a secret connected with her birth, that she is different to her sister (again a familiar story) but, as the author says, the self inflicted suffering is not a consequence of her illegitimate birth but is the ‘symptomatic product of an oral system of relationships intent on de-legitimitizing every minimum sign of sexual difference, that is to say no sexual individualisation’.

I was less convinced by the attempt to subdivide four different variants of anorexia based on the four different Freudian modes of refusal: foreclosure (melancholic anorexia), repression (hysterical anorexia), denial (fetishistic anorexia), and negation (obsessive-compulsive anorexia). Although the point is made that these styles are not mutually exclusive and that they can coexist, they do not seem to me to warrant the status of diagnostic types.

Although the book will not be of interest to those whose minds are closed to psychoanalytic ideas, I would recommend it to anyone wanting to deepen their understanding of the meaning of anorexic thoughts and feelings, and who will not mind a difficult read. As many patients state, anorexia ‘is not really about food’; what it is about is far more difficult to understand and is to do with deep and primitive aspects of the relationship of self to others within a particular culture. Although not providing the last word, there is much food for thought within its pages.

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Bad Boys, Bad Men.
Confronting Antisocial Personality Disorder

D. W. Black & C. L. Larson

Professor Black states in his introduction that this book was inspired by the rejection of an article he had submitted about antisocial men on the basis that it was ‘too chatty’. It was suggested to Professor Black that he write a book instead. The aim seems to have been to provide a comprehensive background to antisocial personality disorder not only for those professionals who come into contact with people with this diagnosis but also for the patients and their families. The book is written in an informal and accessible style and is liberally peppered with case studies (the reason given for the earlier rejection of Black’s article).

The early chapters cover various aspects of antisocial personality disorder, including aetiology, symptomatology, diagnosis, and natural history of the disorder. Each of these chapters is illustrated by case studies. Later chapters deal with the thornier issues of various treatment options and the ‘hidden anti-socials’ – those able to attain success despite their disorder (or because of family wealth). It ends with three rather different chapters. The first is concerned with several well-known murderers (primarily John Wayne Gacy but also Dahmer and Lucas) and takes the form of case histories. The second is basically advice for those affected by anti-social personality disorder – both those diagnosed with this condition and their partners and parents. The final chapter is entitled ‘Dispelling the Myths’ – which it certainly makes a real effort to do.

The book ends with a pleasingly informative reference section that not only lists the publications cited in the text but often gives a précis of the relevant research. A list of recommended texts completes this interesting and accessible book, which asks many questions and offers possible explanations without being dogmatic. I would recommend it to those working in the relevant fields.

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Children, Feelings and Divorce. Finding the Best Outcome

H. Smith

There is an increasing number of clinical accounts of the experience of family transitions on individual family members’ lives. Smith provides a further example, drawing on clinical experiences from many years. This account is very readable and, to the author’s credit, covers substantial ground in the range of issues involved with family transitions. The book reads like a gentle, common sense portrayal of a stressful event. However, there are a number of important limitations that detract considerably from the appeal of the book. Most important among these is the book’s disconnection from previous key books and research on family transitions. There are several adverse side-effects of this outstanding oversight, the most obvious is that the book re-tells in narrative what many years of research and other accessible books have already told us. The central problem is not just that the book provides little new information, but that it does not go far enough in highlighting the issues and offering clues and leads where they are available. This is a disappointment to the researcher, clinician and interested layperson.

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Books by Members

K. Ollier & A. Hobday
Creative Therapy 2: Working with Parents

J. Coleman & L. B. Hendry
The Nature of Adolescence (3rd Edn.)

D. Messer & S. Millar (Eds.)
Exploring Developmental Psychopathology from Infancy to Adolescence

D. Howe, M. Brandon, D. Hinings & G. Schofield
Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment and Family Support

R. Jordan
Autistic Spectrum Disorders. An Introductory Handbook for Practitioners

M. Lanyado & A. Horne (Eds.)
The Handbook of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy. Psychoanalytic Approaches