The Critical Years

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The Critical Years

Early Years Development from Conception to Five

Tim Gully

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL WORK

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Meet the author

Having worked for the Probation Service, NSPCC and in Social Work for 25 years, mostly with dangerous offenders and in child protection, Tim made the move into higher education early this century. He has taught both social work and early childhood studies and currently teaches at the University of Chichester. His research interests include the making of children from conception to birth, risk society, social pedagogy and child protection in early years. Working with both victims and abusers, he believes that it is essential to see situations holistically so that we can better understand, intervene and protect children. Internationalism is at the core of his teaching and research and he has been able to teach in Denmark, Romania and Germany, bringing ideas back to include in his teaching in the UK.

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Introduction

Learning outcomes:

- To place the child in context.
- To initiate debates to follow, in particular about parenting and risk.
- To consider the role of the practitioner.
- To outline the theoretical child development framework.
- To explain the structure of the book.

Critical question

» *What are the key issues currently facing children in their early years, their parents and carers and the practitioners that work with them?*

I was born an only child to hard-working, middle-class, older parents. We lived in a small town on an island. I remember a tabby cat called Ugi and a blue budgie whose name I have forgotten. I do not remember ever being hungry, especially cold or not having my own room and bed to sleep in. I do remember wanting even more Lego. My mother went back to work when I was about six months old, but not before she had found a wonderful woman to look after me, someone who remained an important person in my life until I had my own children and she was in her nineties. My first school was directly across the road and I remember my time there with affection, even having to do ballet! Theoreticians, I am sure, might make much of the above.

I am here because my parents met, married and decided to try for a child and were successful in this endeavour. They lived in a society in which social expectations, structures and norms were comparatively simple and people could predict how life would go. The world was not unlike that inhabited by previous generations, but things were changing and the rate of change was speeding up. I inherited genes, attitudes and behaviours. I look like my father

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and have the ectomorphic build of my mother. I support the same football team as my father while my mother taught me to cook and play tennis, activities I continue to enjoy. Both my sons carry the family likeness and physique while my eldest son plays sport and supports the team in blue. My youngest son plays sport, cooks, but to my chagrin supports a different football team because he happened to be born in that city and they were doing better than the blues as he grew up. We are all a link in a chain that stretches back hundreds, if not thousands, of years and stretches forward, in my case, for at least one generation. We inherit a great deal, but also have the ability to grow and make our own choices.

Children in context

Children have always existed but have been seen in society in many different ways, from slaves to gods. Child development that occurs from birth to adulthood was largely ignored throughout much of history. Children were often viewed simply as small versions of adults and little attention was paid to the many advances in the cognitive abilities, language usage and physical growth that take place during childhood and adolescence. Interest in the field of child development finally began to emerge late in the nineteenth century and gathered momentum through the twentieth century, but in these early explorations it tended to focus on abnormal behaviour and how to control and contain the unruly child. Eventually, researchers became increasingly interested in other topics, including typical child development as well as the parental, social and environmental influences on development.

Once upon a time early years development began at birth, but science intervened and we now understand that child development begins at conception and even before. The birth of the first IVF baby, Louise Brown, in 1978 signalled the changes to come. Science is now able to explain heredity through DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the substance in the nucleus that enables cells to reproduce and transmit characteristics from generation to generation, and so pass features from parents to offspring. Amongst other things we came to understand development within the womb, but few predicted how dramatic or speedy those changes would be. Concepts of what is 'natural' are routinely challenged with each scientific development while ethical debate, legislation and policy and procedures lag behind.

Betty and Bill Gully did a reasonably good job in rearing me and we might argue that my grandparents did a good job in rearing them, because we are not only talking about genetic heredity here, but also psychological and emotional. If one has been poorly parented as a child one might in turn struggle to understand what is required to be a good parent. This does not mean that adults who have experienced dysfunctional, chaotic or even abusive childhoods cannot become good parents, but they will need luck, support and help to do so. People can change and do so.

Because of biology we can argue that all children are alike, but because of parenting and culture we can also say that no two children are the same. Children differ in physical, psychological, social and emotional growth patterns. Even identical twins, which have the same genetic makeup, are not exactly the same. Think of the children you work with or know. Each is different from the next. While some always appear to be happy, others may not seem as pleasant. Some children are active while others are quiet, even shy and sometimes withdrawn. As practitioners we may struggle to admit that some children are easier to like than

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others. To help all these children, the practitioner needs to understand the sequence of their development and how development can be influenced by events through the life course. Knowledge of the areas of child development is basic to guiding and safeguarding young children. Linked to this is the understanding of healthy brain development, as science has given us the knowledge and understanding of how the body and brain are inter-dependent, working together to create the human child. All children need the support of caring, knowledgeable and skilled adults, be they parents, carers or practitioners. It can be argued this is especially true of young children, for whom growth and development are happening so fast and who are especially vulnerable.

Parents were once reliant on family to support and advise them, but successive governments have taken an increasing role in providing services and giving advice. Due to child protection, governments have become involved in child rearing through political debate and legislation. There has been a gradual recognition that children should no longer be sent up chimneys to clean them as during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or suffer harm at the hands of parents or carers as highlighted by recent tragic child deaths. The danger is that parenting and child rearing become an obsession for policymakers. Problems that were once associated with the failures of society are increasingly blamed on parents, such as poor achievement at school, drug-taking, obesity, crime and mental health problems. Governments have seen fit to intervene more and more, to be prescriptive, and this trend has been allied to the increase in the number of media experts. On a more positive note, during the twentieth century global organisations such as the United Nations began to take an interest in child welfare and improve the circumstances of millions of children, lifting them out of poverty and providing hope where there was none.

Parenting and the risk society

Wherever on the planet we come from, in some form or another we all have parents, but science and social changes have made it more difficult to clearly define exactly what a parent is there for. Gone are the days when parents were a man and a woman in a marital relationship. We have quite rightly come to accept single parents, same-gender parents and carers in the parenting role. Even in child creation science has played with the role of parent; for instance, is an anonymous sperm donor a parent? In a society where the nature of being a parent is so varied I would argue that the role of the early years practitioner becomes even more important for the development of the child. The practitioner may become the only consistent adult in the life of a child. We need to debate the concept of 'practitioner love' and the notion that practitioners might be seen as replacing parents both physically and emotionally.

Critical question

» *In the baby rooms of nurseries I have seen practitioners kiss the babies. Do you feel this is appropriate?*

In one sense of course the practitioner does replace the parent. By the very fact a parent takes a child to a childminder or nursery means that this replacement is taking place. Indeed, separation is necessary if a child is to begin to develop independence, to experience change, to develop socially and build resilience, but there are tensions. A danger that parents will be

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scapegoated for leaving a baby in a baby room perhaps as young as two weeks old, concerns that practitioners 'know best' and that the government is setting standards against which children and parents are being judged.

The politicisation of parenting can have destructive outcomes. The constant labelling of parenting as some kind of problem undermines the confidence of mothers and fathers. Although dysfunctional parents are very much in a minority, the message that is often communicated is about the problems rather than the positives of child rearing and has a disorienting impact on everybody. Consider for instance the debates on MMR or breastfeeding. Consequently, the numerous initiatives designed to support parents do anything but reassure us – they simply encourage the public to become even more paranoid about parenting. The second outcome of the child rearing debate is that it has intensified the sense of insecurity and anxiety about children's lives and experiences. Society has become obsessed with risk.

The early years should be a time for developing, learning and exploring, but the idea that young children are too vulnerable to be allowed to take risks has become entrenched. How would a parent feel to see a patch of unguarded stinging nettles in the outside play area of a nursery? In Britain, of course, these would be chopped down immediately, poisoned and concreted over, but is that the right thing to do? During teaching trips to Denmark I have visited several kindergartens and been very pleased to see nettles and blackthorn in the gardens where children could sting and prick themselves and so learn to be careful around such things. I have seen children cooking with sharp knives close to lighted candles. How wonderful to be free of health and safety and our risk-obsessed society. We, in this country, are far too protective. While we need to reduce significant risk to an acceptable level, we also need to recognise that risks and risk-taking is beneficial. Protecting children from harm, however, should only be a small part of a parent's role. Playing, exploring and stimulating the child are far more important.

There is no doubt that some adults present a serious threat to children. Most of these adults exist within the family, with a very small number of strangers presenting any significant risk. Unfortunately, the media has promoted a sense of paranoia in relation to many aspects of children's lives and government and professional organisations have fed on this populist view. When children are overly protected from risks, they miss out on important opportunities to learn sound judgement and build their confidence and resilience, for instance when travelling to school. The promotion of suspicion towards adult behaviour seriously undermines the ability of people, especially men, to have a constructive role in the socialisation of babies, toddlers and young children in general. Early years professions have a major problem when it comes to recruiting young men to work in nurseries, primary schools and childcare social work. One reason is the comparatively poor pay, but another has to be acknowledged as the public concern about men and children. The estrangement of adults from the world of children has the perverse effect of leaving youngsters to their own devices and diminishing their security.

Role of the practitioner partnerships with parents

Practitioners working with the early years, be they nursery workers, health visitors, reception teachers or social workers, have a vital role to play in supporting, and on occasion protecting, young children. The value of the early years practitioner should not be underestimated. While

government policy and local procedures may change, and tragedy and enquiry may influence public opinion, the fundamentals of childcare remain the same. Children in their early years need love, physical care, play and stimulation if they are to develop positively as children and into adulthood.

The roles and expectations on the practitioner have increased as children have become the object of unprecedented concern. Anxiety as to whether contemporary families can provide a sufficiently stable setting for children's healthy development is matched by a fear of the risks the child may be at in the wider community. We have a child protection industry that continues to grow. Politicians, policymakers and the child protection 'experts' appear less and less inhibited about lecturing parents on their numerous failings. Practitioners are expected to fill the void that parents may or may not be failing to fill.

It is true that childcare practitioners have an active part to play in safeguarding and managing risk. Risk management is ideally about reducing hazards/threats while increasing benefits. We cannot permanently separate the hazard/threat from the vulnerable object or person. It is impossible to eliminate risk, and indeed all children have to experience risk if they are going to be able to develop resilience and learn to manage themselves with safety, and early years practitioners are in a position to challenge stereotypical views of risk. We can work with parents to challenge it by encouraging our children to develop a positive attitude towards the real, not sanitised outdoors and the adult world. Most important of all, we can challenge it by working together in partnership with parents as active collaborators committed to providing more opportunities for children to explore their world and develop as human beings.

The main aim of any practitioner should be to help the child develop fully to their potential. To do this early years professionals need to be trained and supervised. They need to have a set of essential skills. Observing the child is a first step, but we need to place the child in the context in which it is growing and developing. While practitioners will observe and talk to children when assessing them they will also need to get to know the families if they are to obtain an overall picture of a particular child. Indeed, working in partnership with parents and families is not only essential when it comes to getting to know a particular child, but also when wanting to do new things such as growing that patch of nettles in the outside play area or talking about diverse families. When children are observed, they may be very different from usual. At home, relaxed and with family members, children can be quite different. This can mean that a child who appears to be very quiet at school is talkative and active at home. These observations will feed the assessment so that the child can be given the very best support and opportunities available.

As already described, I have conscious memories of being a child, of generally happy, safe times that undoubtedly influenced my life course to this point and have influenced the content of this book. There will also be unconscious memories. Having once been a child can be both a strength and a hindrance to practitioners working with the early years. Inevitably we are influenced by our past experiences. For instance, when I observe and assess children I have no personal experience of being a sibling. I was a singleton. To enable me to observe and assess objectively I need to recognise this limitation, reflect and make use of the theory and my previous research experience as a practitioner to help provide an understanding of what I am seeing. So becoming a reflective practitioner is vitally important to anyone working

as a child-centred welfare practitioner. To do this effectively we need a theoretical framework in which to work.

Theoretical framework

It is vitally important for all practitioners working with young children that they have a developmental framework with which to work and against which to observe and assess. This does not have to be rigid, indeed it should not be. It is crucial that any framework is flexible enough to accommodate not only differing theories, but also different children. An understanding of child development is essential because it allows us to fully appreciate the cognitive, emotional, physical, social and educational growth that children go through from birth into early adulthood. Some of the major theories of child development attempt to describe every aspect of development. These may be based on developmental stages (eg Piaget), or through psychodynamic processes (eg Freud). Whatever one's feelings about either of these, every theory has its place and there is a place for every theory. Others might be seen as micro theories, focusing on a limited aspect of child development (eg Bowlby and attachment).

All practitioners need to have access to and an understanding of theory, but they also need to have a critical understanding of this theory and how it might be used. To simply read and believe slavishly is not good enough. Theory is there to help us understand how children grow from conception to adulthood and explains why and how development unfolds. It presents us with models, typologies and sets of ideas that compete for our attention. Some have been around for decades, others are more recent and it is important not to dismiss either, but rather to draw upon both to create our own personal paradigm of understanding. Once we have done this we must be willing to allow new research and knowledge to influence and change our views. Indeed we are all researchers in our own right. As we build our experience there is a sense that we develop from practitioner into a research practitioner, not only learning, but translating our learning into practice. This does not mean we carry out formal research, although I believe this should be encouraged at all levels, but rather that we build and expand our own knowledge and experience. Practitioners should be given encouragement to do this.

Theory therefore is key to our framework, it provides the scaffolding in and around which we work and there will be much of it to come in this book. Practitioners will not only use their observation and assessment skills and their theoretical knowledge to know when they should intervene to help or protect a child, but also when not to intervene. Unnecessary intervention can be as damaging as not intervening when required, but this can present the practitioner with a dilemma. Failing to intervene can lead to tragic consequences, as we have seen with Victoria Climbie, Peter Connelly, Khyra Ishaq, Daniel Pelka and Hamzah Khan. In each of these cases practitioners failed to act. On the other hand, practitioners worry about getting it wrong and reporting something that may turn out to be unfounded, and the impact this would have on the family and on them as practitioners.

In theoretical terms three of the key themes we will be examining are:

1. Continuity versus discontinuity: whether child development is fluid and gradual or whether it occurs in stages that are prescribed and predictable. How much do a

child's early experiences influence the future? Can we predict a child's future from its upbringing?

2. The active child versus the passive one: can individual children influence their own development through behaviour (active), or are they at the mercy of their environment (passive)? How much control do children have in a biological and psychological sense over their own development, or are there predictable givens?

3. Nature v nurture, or more importantly nature via nurture: exploring how development is influenced by our innate biology and genetics (nature) yet moulded by our experiences (nurture). How influential are genes? How influential is parenting? Or are they complimentary?

We will continually return to the notion of child development in relation to parenting and examine the impact it may or may not have upon the development of the child, and within this we will consider the choices that parents have.

Conclusion

In some respects it does appear that having children and child rearing have become more complicated than they once were. While it is true that innovation and social freedom more or less mean that anyone can have a child, we have removed some of the certainty from life and placed parents and practitioners under greater pressure to 'do the right thing'.

One thing I have done deliberately in this chapter and will continue to do is use the word 'practitioner' rather than 'professional'. I believe that the word 'professional' implies and creates a gap of expertise between workers and parents, when what we want to do is narrow the gap and create a partnership. The word 'practitioner' also implies what we should be doing and that is working with, getting down on the floor with, playing with children and not remaining aloof observers. 'Practitioner' is for me an action word that reflects what all of us working with children in the early years should be doing.

This has been a brief introduction to some of the themes this book will discuss and touches on some of the controversies that are currently debated. I have placed the child in context, touched upon the roles of the parent and practitioner and reminded the reader of the essential place that theory and research should take within practice.

Finally, as I have grown older I have come more and more to appreciate the job that my parents and 'Auntie' Lil did in supporting and guiding me, especially since becoming a parent myself. Working in childcare has further allowed me to reflect on how my upbringing influences me as a practitioner and how important it is to have the scaffolding of experience and developmental theory to keep me, my colleagues and the children I work with safe.

Structure of the book

The book is very much written with the child and practitioner or parent in mind. It follows a simple structure, following the child along the life course through physical growth, psychological development and social expansion. It considers how children can be impacted upon by disability and abuse. It is designed to be read from beginning to end or dipped into as needed.

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Taking it further

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