

Child welfare: How English speaking countries are losing their way and how parent participation and advocacy reformed New York City's child welfare system

Across the English speaking industrialised countries a common trend in child protection has emerged. In country after country increasing numbers of children are drawn into the child protection system and their situations investigated for possible abuse by parents. For example, a recent study in the USA has shown that 37% of all children experience an investigation by child protection services before the age of eighteen and this increases to 53% for African American children. This 'investigative turn' with its large increases in child protection investigation is accompanied by reductions in support for families all taking place purportedly as a response to the economic crisis of 2008-09 and to promote the safety of children. However, this covers a significant change in the understanding of the role of the state and its relationship to the family. This ideological shift to what has been called *authoritarian neoliberalism* also includes a growing trend to contract out services which has spawned a market of 'evidence-based' programmes which embed its assumptions particularly about parental responsibility and blindness to the impact of poverty and inequality.

Andy will present these international trends before providing a case study of the changes in England drawing on information from his research into child protection and welfare. He will show that growing numbers of children are taken from their parents and placed in state care, guardianship or adoption. The basis for this growing removal of children is a focus on the rescue of children from 'future harm' attributed to exposure to neglect or emotional abuse. He will give an example of how a focus on child deaths and serious harm has led to misinterpretation of research and has exaggerated the risk of harm to children and led to policies that mislead front line staff on the danger faced by children and lead to unnecessary and harmful practice. He will argue that the growing focus on safety rather than support for families has led to systems in need of significant reform.

David's presentation will tell the inspiring story of the ways parents in New York City, whose children were involved in the child welfare system, became active in child welfare decision making, advocacy and system reform. It will describe dramatic changes in the city's child welfare system that parents helped bring about including reducing the number of children in foster care from almost 50,000 in 1992 to fewer than 9,000 today.

The presentation will describe some of the problems in the New York City child welfare system when parents had no voice and present some of the major changes in the system in the past 25 years. It will describe ways in which parents have become involved in child welfare decision making in three main areas: on their own cases, as Parent Advocates working in various child welfare programs, and in helping to shape child welfare policy. The presentation will describe how parents helped bring about those changes, describing the role of Parent Advocates and the role of their allies including social workers, government administrators, agency staff, lawyers, and foundation officers. And finally, the presentation will answer the question: Why has New York City's child welfare system changed as much as it has in the past 25 years, and why has the child welfare system recently deteriorated?