Talking Point: Child protection — spare a thought for workers

CAROLINE BROWN: There is nothing more serious than a child being abused by their family — yet there is nothing more serious than removing a child from their family

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Child protection workers face the spotlight when something goes tragically wrong, and people pass judgment without knowing the facts.

WHO would work in the child safety service system? Well I do, and while it is fraught with challenges, the rewards can be amazing.

I ask you to spare a thought for the people who are trying to keep Tasmania’s children safe, across both government and non-government services.

Child safety workers are faced daily with the ultimate “Damned if you do, Damned if you don’t” paradox.

There is nothing more serious than a child being abused by their family and yet there is nothing more serious than removing a child from their family and mandating that they live elsewhere.

These decisions are not always clear; they involve multiple shades of grey.

Weighing up the evidence, debating whether the consequences of removal outweigh the risks of staying. These are complex and often fraught decisions that are agonised over by the people involved.

No one likes removing a child from their family to place them with a stranger in foster care, but sometimes it is necessary and it is sometimes of great benefit to children.

But it also comes at a cost for children, their families and their communities.

These decisions are made every single day across Tasmania. No media is really appropriate nor is it attracted to the success stories, the reunifications that work well, the parents who make the necessary changes, the families who remain intact after a successful intervention. However, the work of the child safety system truly comes into sharp focus when something goes wrong,

Front and full page media stories are likely to result from a tragic event such as the death of a child known to the child safety system. And rightly so.

The death of any child is a heartbreaking outcome that absolutely no one wants and everyone in the child safety system tries to prevent.

Sadly babies, children and young people do occasionally die. The Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity Committee of Tasmania has reported that from 2008 to 2016 between 12 and 37 children died each year.

Each one of those deaths is a tragedy. It’s a tragedy for the child themselves, their families and their communities. We grieve their loss sometimes personally, sometimes through hearing their story via traditional or social media.

Infants and children die for a range of reasons but when that child happens to be connected to the Child Safety System there is an almost implicit assumption that the death was caused by another person causing them harm and that it could have been prevented, if only another course had been taken.

We want to blame someone for the death of a child known to have been involved in the “system”.

Perhaps that is a human trait, but in doing so, without all of the information, we risk adding to the massive burden of grief and loss that parents, siblings, extended family members, friends and neighbourhoods are already dealing with in our search for someone to blame.

We also add to the burden of grief of child safety workers who naturally seek to question their actions, regardless of the apparent cause of death: “Did I act fast enough? Should I have removed the child or not removed the child? What else could I have done?”

And we add to the grief of family support workers who question whether there is something they have missed, whether the child got to the doctor early enough, or whether they should have advocated more strongly.

It may never be publicly broadcast that the child died of pneumonia or some other acquired condition. Thankfully very few children die from direct abuse.

As well as our families, our workers need our support and kindness in the days and weeks following the death of a child that they have come to know through their work. They need support through their own grieving process and they need opportunity to process what has occurred in a non-blaming way.

We all learn from things that have gone wrong in the past. Working with vulnerable children and families, those lessons can be significant and harsh. They will ultimately make us or break us as workers in this field. System and practice reform is a critical and inevitable outcome of a child death review and that is important, but it takes time to occur and should be undertaken without conscious or unconscious bias.

This Child Protection Week, I ask you to think about what you can do to support a child in need and to keep an open mind about attributing blame next time a child known to the child safety service system dies, for it will surely happen and our families, neighbourhoods, volunteers and workers will need our support.

Building community strength and connectedness is far more likely to assist in protecting our children than creating a culture of blame which results in a community that does not want to get involved and turns away from people who need our help.

Please don’t turn away. Connect and make a difference to a child’s life today.

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