

## Changing the Role of

# Child Welfare

By Betsy Rogers | Photo by Geoff Story

**C**HILDREN HAVE A POWERFUL PAIR OF FRIENDS in Melissa Jonson-Reid and Brett Drake. This husband-and-wife team of associate professors bring disparate skills but a shared passion for children's welfare to their research and teaching at the Brown School.

"Are we as a society," Drake wonders, "legitimately going to take responsibility for providing the level of help some people need to successfully raise their children?"

His question reflects what both see as tension in the child welfare realm: Should child welfare be approached from a criminal justice perspective that treats abuse and neglect as discrete incidents or should it be approached from a public health perspective that takes a more comprehensive view?

"A report to child protection is triggered by an event," he explains. "It starts out like a police report that is investigated to find evidence. This approach—set by the organization of the system—can contrast sharply with the goal of the child welfare worker who is trying to assess the need for services. Nationally, child welfare agencies are struggling to understand whether they are expected to operate like police responding to specific events or more like a support agency providing services as needed to help people live their lives better and to help children develop in a healthy way."

"Child welfare wants to be and strives to be the latter," Jonson-Reid says, "but they get stuck sometimes in the former for a variety of reasons." A public health approach would help move child welfare from assessing and preventing an action to thinking about how to support healthy families, she said.

One important reason that child welfare is often limited is the urgency of child protection in severe cases. Right now, more intensive intervention is largely driven by substantiation, which many mistakenly confuse with whether or not maltreatment exists. Children whose mistreatment is substantiated by investigators' reports, logically enough, require attention and services, including, for some, foster care. Depending on the state and the situation, children whose reports cannot be substantiated may or may not receive services. This is unfortunate because many unsubstantiated cases need services and without them pose serious risks in terms of child outcomes. "You can have a severe injury and be unsubstantiated because there's not enough evidence," Drake explains. "Or you may not have enough obvious harm to substantiate a neglect case, yet have conditions that have tremendous impact on child development. A family without a substantiated incident of maltreatment may still truly need services."

In fact, the pair's research shows that negative outcomes occur almost as frequently for children in the unsubstantiated category as for those whose reports are substantiated. A child who has been reported for abuse or neglect faces tough odds, whether or not the report is able to be substantiated. "Without successful intervention, the majority of cases are at similarly high risk for many things," Jonson-Reid says. "They're more likely to die accidentally. They're more likely to be in the special education system. They're more likely to contact the juvenile court system."

"So," Drake concludes, "it looks like child welfare reporting is an accurate identification system for finding a special population of high-need families. The problem is how to

better meet those needs once contact is made. We feel very strongly that as a society we must do our best to meet the needs of longer term well-being and not simply restrict response to a specific reported maltreatment event. The question is: How can we (researchers, government and community agencies, policy makers) work together to help these families?"

A public health model offers the promise of addressing these needs, whereas the criminal justice model is not designed to do this. Child neglect, for instance, often occurs below the "investigative radar" for substantiation, though recent research has illuminated its serious, long-term effects. "For a long time people thought neglect was the lesser trauma," Drake observes. "Now everybody is finding pretty uniformly that neglect is at least as serious as abuse, sometimes more."

Jonson-Reid and Drake themselves have conducted an eight-year study funded in stages by select agencies such as the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute of Justice, the Department of Education, and currently solely by the National Institute of Mental Health. The study looked at outcomes for abused, neglected, and low-income children—death rates, accidents, delinquencies, and so on. Findings are shared with partner agencies and used to help identify better timing for collaboration and needed policy change. For example, the findings raise the profile for the need to address neglect.

"Neglect," Jonson-Reid observes, "is the absence of all those things that you as a child depend on to develop. You need cognitive stimulation, basic nutrition, and health care to offset developmental delays, and a certain level of protection, particularly if you don't live in a nonviolent neighborhood. You have to have someone who's competent in advocating for you. You have to have a parent who will enroll you in school and support you. It's not surprising, when you think about it that way, that neglect could have a powerful impact on your development."

Closely related to maltreatment is poverty and the stresses it places on families. The notion that child abuse and neglect are democratically distributed across all income levels is a myth, Drake argues. "It's just harder to parent if you're poor," he asserts.

"Imagine being in a little apartment with two or three children and no livable income," Jonson-Reid suggests. "You don't have resources or easy access to services. You don't have day care. You don't have a supermarket nearby. You have to pay more for groceries. You don't have transportation."





Drake picks up the thread. "Your income tells the story, but your income isn't just how many dollars you have in your pocket. In low-income areas, you may have fewer people and organizations in the community who can help, you may have more people who can hurt (crime, etc.), and you have greater potential for bad role models as children grow up in high poverty communities. If you tell me the income of a geographic area, I can give you a pretty good estimate of how high the maltreatment reports will be compared to other areas," he says. Services must therefore address not just discrete incidences of parenting problems but ongoing family well-being.

The pair's research continues with a new three-year grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Building on their previous work, they are turning now to young adult issues. "Do these children and adolescents continue to struggle throughout their lives?" Jonson-Reid wonders. Do they continue to be victimized? Do they become perpetrators themselves? Answering such questions helps target intervention but also can help society understand the benefit of investing in earlier effective approaches to helping families that come into contact with child welfare. The new funding, the first direct CDC grant to the Brown School, runs through 2010.

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With research at the core of their shared vocation, it is not surprising that Drake and Jonson-Reid are leaders in the School's advancement in evidence-based practice. "Many people hear the term 'evidence-based practice' and falsely believe that it's simply about using practices that seem to have been proven," Drake notes. "That's not it at all. It's about evaluating that evidence" as one of three critical components, along with the client's values and the social worker's professional judgment.

The shift to EBP started in medicine in 1992, made possible by searching technologies and the access they gave individual doctors to the latest primary data. These changes meant that front-line physicians no longer needed to depend on hearsay or "the way things are done" but could instead quickly find and evaluate the best available evidence. Doctors in the trenches could now access the latest research and combine it with their professional judgment and the clients' conditions to craft the best medical advice.

The Brown School is leading a discipline-wide effort to move this model into social work. As part of a novel accreditation initiative, the school is integrating EBP throughout its curriculum, and Drake and Jonson-Reid are deeply involved. "The Brown School is updating the curriculum to reflect the EBP model," Drake says.

In a field as vast as social work, changing the fundamental model is a tall order. "It's the right thing to do, but it's a huge thing to do," Jonson-Reid acknowledges. "It demands more of the practitioner. You really have to take responsibility for finding information and figuring out what will work."

Teaching research methods and the EBP paradigm brought the pair to a new venture, just completed. In their new book, *Social Work Research Methods: From Conception to Dissemination* (Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), EBP constructs inform every chapter. "If EBP is going to work it has to be demystified," Jonson-Reid says.

The book evolved from their teaching. "He was teaching methods and I was teaching statistics," Jonson-Reid explains. But it's important to integrate the two. "You want to understand how they flow together," she says. "We couldn't find any single book we liked that would cover everything."

Theirs is a unique book that guides the reader through not just the research but an entire project. "It's meant to be like a book you buy at Home Depot about how to install paneling in your house," Drake explains with a grin. Along with discussions of values and ethics, literature searches, methods, project design, computer applications, and myriad other topics, it describes five fictional researchers tackling diverse projects and follows them through the process from start to finish. "We think people learn best from examples," Drake observes.

Because social science research is rarely tidy or linear, Jonson-Reid adds, "we talk about the messiness."

Many research methods textbooks appear to assume that a project proceeds neatly from step to step, but, Drake says, "this almost never happens. You start, you go forward, you go back. You get all the way to here and a reviewer asks, 'Have you considered this factor?' And we'll say, 'whoops,' and we'll go all the way back, include that, change the design slightly, and reanalyze the data."

Including the word "dissemination" in the title speaks to the importance—and the challenge—of moving new findings and knowledge into the hands of practitioners and policy-makers. "We're (social work researchers) getting better," Jonson-Reid asserts. Grantors are expecting researchers to share their findings more widely; agencies



are getting better about asking for data to assess their services. Both she and Drake serve on various boards and work with local and state agencies, giving them additional avenues for disseminating key research discoveries. They adapt scholarly journal articles for publications serving practitioners.

Technology also is helping, and indeed a comprehensive online search function is being explored as a key component of the Brown School's EBP initiative, Drake says.

Jonson-Reid and Drake are both California transplants. Both earned their PhDs at the University of California—she at Berkeley, he at Los Angeles. But they met and forged their personal and professional partnership in St. Louis, on the Brown School faculty, where he started to work in 1991 and she in 1997. It's a partnership that they prize.

"I can't imagine working any other way," Drake says.

"We collaborate really well," his wife notes. "We have overlapping but not identical interests."

"It's very helpful to me," Drake resumes, "because, for example, we have unique programming skills. I do things she can't do and vice versa. She's very good at understanding and establishing patterns and seeing how things fit together and doing mathematical models that look at complex systems. I'm very good at making small specific things happen incrementally and being absolutely certain that something is what it is."

"I've never met anyone who could specify something as clearly as Brett," says Jonson-Reid. "He has a very ordered mind. He also has a really strong ethic about making things better and doing the best thing for people."

Daunting as child welfare issues seem, Jonson-Reid is hopeful. "These are large problems," she readily acknowledges. "I would prefer that no child be in such databases at all. But social work and social science researchers and agencies are working together more now, and this type of research helps us think about more effective approaches. For example, our state child welfare agency strives to fund and support prevention as well as intervention. Agency, researchers, and policy makers are working together to figure out ways to develop communities so there are more opportunities and less violence. We have to remind ourselves that these problems are fixable." ❧