

Book Review

Berrick, J. D., (2018). *The impossible imperative: Navigating the competing principles of child protection*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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Jill Duerr Berrick, Ph.D., MSW, is a Zellerbach Family Foundation Professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. She focuses her research on the relationship between vulnerable families and the state. She is joined by 15 former MSW students at Berkeley as co-authors, all of whom have served as child welfare professionals in California and write of their experiences to bring Berrick's ideas to life.

The book begins with an explanation of the eight principles upon which child protection is based in our society. Each of the eight principles is discussed in a separate chapter, and each chapter also illustrates the tensions that arise when the principles are in opposition to one another when working with families. The eight principles are:

- Parents who care for their children safely should be free from government intrusion in their family.
- Children should be safe.
- Children should be raised by their family of origin.
- When children cannot live with their family, they should live with extended relatives.
- Children should be raised in families.
- Children should have a sense of permanence—that the caregivers they live with will care for them permanently.
- Families' cultural heritage should be respected.
- Parents and children (of a certain age and maturity) should have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The principles are brought to life through stories of real cases written by child protective services (CPS) case workers, and each chapter is used to illustrate a principle and the competing values we have in relation to those principles. For example, is it more important for children to be safe or to live with their families of origin? As the chapters progress and the stories develop, it becomes apparent that not "favoring" one principle over another is a delicate balance and one that makes the caseworker walk a very fine line.

The standard layout of the text is that first there is a discussion of the principle, some history behind it, and then the story or stories from the case workers' perspective. Following the story, there is a brief summary, and statements are made about how the conflicting principles in the case were resolved. The book gives small glimpses into the lives of the CPS workers and the dilemmas they face when trying to do what is in the best interest of the children with whom they work. It shows how complex decisions become and how often the worker has to make them without all the information at hand. Sometimes the stories show cases that end very positively. Sometimes they don't. But each case beautifully illustrates the decision-making process for the worker and gives insight into the thinking that brought about a certain action.

Berrick's text is rich with "practice wisdom." But it is more than that. It is a history of the child welfare system and how we got to where we are today. It explains how policies were developed and then changed by looking at some of the past attitudes

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about children and comparing those beliefs to ours currently. It shows how policies have to be followed in the field and how difficult that can be when working with the complexity of people.

This is a book that every aspiring child welfare professional should read. It makes real the idea of “keeping children safe” and “helping families.” It could easily work for a child welfare course in social work or in any profession where students work with vulnerable families and children.