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Relationship-based Practice with Families Where Child Neglect is an Issue: Putting Relationship Development under the Microscope.

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Abstract

Child neglect is a persistent social issue in Australia, with factors that hinder efforts to intervene. Of particular concern are difficulties that have been raised regarding building working relationships with parents where child neglect is a concern. This article draws on findings of an Australian qualitative study that explored in depth multiple perspectives on the development of relationships between family workers and parents where neglect is a concern. It was found that the process of building trust, which was central to the establishment of the working relationship and increased parent willingness to engage in child-welfare related interventions, was something the parents in the study engaged in actively. They did this through testing workers’ trustworthiness and by attempting to reduce perceived power inequities between workers and themselves. It is argued that resistance to workers’ attempts to build relationships are a healthy protective response by parents to challenge the professional expectation they submissively build relationships with strangers who wield great influence over their lives, and the lives of others in their family. Implications for professionals include developing greater understanding of why parents might resist attempts to build working relationships, and using this knowledge to accommodate parents’ resistance where it arises.
Child neglect (neglect) is a concerning social issue in Australia and elsewhere, with factors that hinder efforts to intervene. It is a persistent problem and is usually recurrent (Berry, Charlson, & Dawson, 2003; Daro, 1988; Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenwieser, & Williams, 1981; Tanner & Turney, 2003). Theorists and researchers have distinguished neglect as a distinct type of child maltreatment, which justifies responding to it in ways that vary from other forms of child maltreatment (Gershater-Molko, Lutzker, & Sherman, 2002).

While neglect is not a new phenomenon, the way in which it is understood is still relatively undeveloped (McSherry, 2007; Wilson & Horner, 2005). There is considerably more research that focuses on child physical and sexual abuse (or child abuse and neglect in combination), than on neglect exclusively (Berry, et al., 2003; Tanner & Turney, 2003). Furthermore, despite many years of research, no clear, uniform, comparable, reliable, and unambiguous conceptualisation of neglect exists (Dubowitz, Newton, et al., 2005; Zuravin, 2001). While multiple definitions of neglect have been suggested (Zuravin, 2001), it is generally understood that neglect is the result of omissions (rather than commissions) in care by the child’s primary caregivers, usually their parents (Dubowitz, Pitts, et al., 2005). This situation restricts efforts to understand the distinct nature and consequences of neglect. It also inhibits making fiscally sensible decisions with respect to research and policy, and the development of interventions that successfully reduce both its prevalence and impact (Dubowitz, Newton, et al., 2005; Zuravin, 2001).

Of particular concern are difficulties that have been raised regarding the working relationship (the relationship) with neglecting parents. Neglecting families have been found to be more difficult to engage and retain in child welfare services than families experiencing other types of child maltreatment (Berry, et al., 2003; Stone, 1998). Furthermore, Daro (1988) showed that 40% of neglecting families prematurely disengage from services at a rate
that is substantially higher than for other types of child maltreatment. In addition, practitioners who work with neglecting families report higher feelings of apathy, hopelessness, helplessness, and experience higher rates of burnout compared with practitioners who do not work with such families (North Eastern Health Board & Horwath, 2005).

There is some evidence of the important role of working relationships to support engagement of neglecting families in services (Berry, et al., 2007; DePanfilis, 1999). However, the issues and processes relating to building working relationships with these families remain largely unexplored (Girvin, DePanfilis, & Daining, 2007). This is partly due to simplified ways of thinking about engagement in services (Littell & Tajima, 2000), which could be ameliorated by more explicit and thoughtful focus on theories regarding relationship-based practice when working with neglecting families (Turney & Tanner, 2001).

**Literature Review**

The development of a relationship has been regarded as one of the core features of work in the human and social services (Clemence, Hilsenroth, Ackerman, Strassel, & Handler, 2005). This relationship has intrigued social workers, clinicians, researchers, and theorists for over 100 years, dating back to the early social casework literature of Mary Richmond (1899), and the relationship is the most empirically researched concept in psychotherapy (Castonguay, Constantino, & Grosse Holtforth, 2006) and in social work (Priebe & McCabe, 2006).

Despite this, there are very few publications that utilise rigorous empirical evidence to explore and make inferences about issues relating to working relationships with neglecting families. Furthermore, there is very little literature that provides detailed examination of the interplay between these client and worker characteristics, and their influence on the evolution of relationships in neglect-related interventions.
The Relationship in Neglect-related Interventions

A number of researchers have found the development of a relationship that is collaborative and authentic to be important when working with families where neglect is an issue (DePanfilis, 1999; Zeira, 2007). Also, some have argued that it is important for the client to see the worker as a “confidant”, because this helps reduce client resistance and hopelessness (Gaudin, 1993a), along with linking clients to a range of community and social supports (Berry, et al., 2003; DePanfilis, 1996).

Such relationships are considered important in order to improve retention and treatment success, reduce family stress, and to improve the worker’s perception of the client (Berry, et al., 2003; Girvin, et al., 2007). The relationship is a useful tool to model relationship and conflict resolution skills (DePanfilis, 1999; DePanfilis, Lane, Girvin, & Strieder, 2004).

In relation specifically to the beginning phase of the relationship, it has been noted that an important dimension includes building trust (Fernandez & Healy, 2007; Zeira, 2007), as this supports parents to be open and cooperative with workers (Zeira, 2007). It has also been noted that during this time, it is important to be empathic, although not excessively so. According to Kenemore (1993), it is important to balance empathy with objective distance, an idea Reimer (in press) has developed by exploring how family workers use friendship-like characteristics to build highly personalized professional relationships.

Building a relationship is assisted when workers calm clients’ anxiety by being clear about worker and client roles, boundaries, and expectations. This includes ethical boundaries, agency policy, and legal requirements that might affect them (Kenemore, 1993), and to what extent workers may intrude into clients’ lives (Fernandez & Healy, 2007).

Furthermore it is important to be perceived to accept the family, which involves an attentive and nonjudgmental way of working (Zeira, 2007), approaching families more tentatively than usual (Fernandez & Healy, 2007). This includes approaching family
members from a position of respect, equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. This assists clients to develop a sense of agency over the situation (Beeman, 1997; Fernandez & Healy, 2007; Zeira, 2007).

A number of researchers have noted that providing for immediate emotional and concrete needs, such as using brokerage money to pay outstanding utilities bills or to purchase white goods, is important when building the relationship (Berry, et al., 2003; Fernandez & Healy, 2007; Gaudin, 1993a; Zeira, 2007). However, this must be done in a way that is relevant to clients (Kenemore, 1993). Furthermore, relationship building is supported as workers and clients develop mutual understanding of clients’ needs and intervention approaches (Kenemore, 1993), and as workers become prepared to alter preliminary treatment plans in light of changed understandings of the families’ needs (Zeira, 2007).

Clients may come to the relationship with barriers to developing effective relationships. Such barriers include difficulties regarding, and resistance to, developing and sustaining professional relationships generally (Kenemore, 1993). Common family relationships that have been found to affect relationship building are marked by negative issues such as a sense of hopelessness (Polansky, et al., 1981), maternal depression (Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick, & Shilton, 1993; Wilson, Kuebli, & Hughes, 2005), and a history of negative relationships and communications, such as conflict, and lack of warmth and empathy (Beeman, 1997; Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick, & Shilton, 1996). These issues, which some identify as involving a reduction in, or absence of, a care relationship generally (Turney & Tanner, 2001), lead to lack of responsiveness within relationships (Beeman, 1997; Wilson, et al., 2005). In line with this, some note that it is common for neglectful families to offend potential sources of informal support, such as neighbours (Crittenden, 1985).

Others have explored the way in which power inequities between participants can hinder relationship building in such families (Turney & Tanner, 2001). This includes viewing
professionals who are offering help with suspicion (DiLeonardi, 1993), especially when families fear statutory intervention in their lives (Fernandez & Healy, 2007; Petras, Massat, & Essex, 2002).

Finally, some have noted that clients need space and time to put the effort into developing the relationship because of their often chaotic, overwhelming, and complex circumstances and needs, and because of the many other services with which they are frequently involved (DePanfilis, et al., 2004). In the case of chronic neglect, workers need to be persistent and should expect and be prepared to work consistently with families over the long term (Daro, 1988; Gaudin, 1993a; Stone, 1998; Thoburn, Wilding, & Watson, 2000).

**Rationale**

This paper draws on research findings of a qualitative empirical study which took place in a regional area of New South Wales, Australia. The study was designed to explore how parents, family workers, and supervisors in family services, who are working with families experiencing neglect issues, understand the nature of the working relationship: its purpose, value, and meaning (Reimer, 2010). The research involved exploring reported perceptions of their experience of the relationship, the meanings they ascribed to these experiences, and factors perceived to affect the development of the relationship.

Greater awareness and understanding of the nature of professional relationships with families where neglect is an issue, and in particular of the types of issues that arise, which facilitate effective engagement and limit premature intervention closure, will assist in a number of ways. Such research can identify elements of best practice for the development and maintenance of relationships during neglect-related interventions. This may ameliorate responses that label neglecting families as “untreatable”, and so reduce “the need to move quickly to terminate parental rights on behalf of their young children in out-of-home-care” (Wilson & Horner, 2005, p. 476). It is also expected that greater knowledge will decrease
levels of worker apathy and sense of helplessness and hopelessness, and so help reduce rates of worker burnout and staff turnover.

Method

Methodology

The study utilised qualitative methods to explore, in depth, and in a holistic fashion, the complex multiple and layered dimensions of eight relationship dyads (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw, & Firrek, 1994; Stark & Torrance, 2004). Case study methods (Yin & Campbell, 2003) provided a way to organise the data, while thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabled rigorous analysis and confidential presentation of the findings. Confidentiality was required as the participants live and work in small rural communities, and could be easily identified. It is also for this reason the specific location where the study took place remains undisclosed. Such organisation and analysis enabled the author to analyse and describe patterns between different peoples’ lived experiences of like relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethics

The author secured ethics approval from the University of South Australia. Ethical issues related to potential perceived power differences between the participants and author, and the participants and services (Macdonald & Macdonald, 1995), as well as to the matter of providing payment to parent participants for their involvement in the study (UnitingCare Burnside, 2002). To ameliorate issues of power, the research was conducted retrospectively, and participants were repeatedly informed that their involvement was voluntary. Participants were also informed that the study was independent of the service, and so would not affect their involvement with the service. Regarding the A$40.00 payment, which only parents received, participants were informed that it was to go towards costs incurred related to their participation.
Context

The participants involved in this study are part of the 30-year long tradition of family work in NSW, Australia. The services were originally developed to fill a support gap for families who cannot access normal informal support (Wolcott, 1989; Zigler & Black, 1989), or who find that previously established formal social welfare services cannot adequately meet their needs (Wolcott, 1989; Zigler & Black, 1989). The workers deliver multiple programs such as home visiting, information and referral, playgroups, parenting groups, centre based support, and counselling services (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). The workers operate within a framework of voluntary, strengths based, community embedded, and empowerment practice that includes building connections to the broader community through universal support mechanisms such as playgroups (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). Despite this, many parents who attend family services have been referred due to their involvement with the statutory child protection system. While the family workers are clear that parents are not mandated to attend, that the service is not explicitly an agent of the statutory child protection system, and that the workers do not have statutory child removal powers, parents usually feel, at least initially, that the threat of child removal is real.

Sample Selection and Recruitment

Eligibility depended on the relationship having been established around a neglect-related focus and having ceased within the last three months. Parents who recruited to the study had to have been a client of the workers who were also recruited. At the time of the study, neglect was defined in NSW legislation as “the continued failure by a parent or caregiver to provide a child with the basic things needed for his or her proper growth and development, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care, and adequate supervision” (NSW Department of Community Services, 2006, p. 6).
Recruitment involved informing workers of the study and inviting them to participate. Workers who subscribed were asked to provide eligible parents with minimal information about the study, subsequent to ceasing a family work intervention. This included an invitation to parents to inform the worker’s supervisor, or researcher directly, if they were interested in being involved, and inviting them to subscribe after a conversation where further information was provided.

**Participants**

The number of participants in the study totalled 21, made up of 9 parents (where a couple had been engaged with 1 worker in a relationship), 8 workers, and 4 supervisors. The relationships varied in duration, but all could be considered medium to long term, lasting from over 1 year in all cases to over 5 years in two cases.

With the exception of 1 parent and 2 workers, all of the participants were female. Six of the parents and all of the workers and supervisors identified as being from Anglo Celtic background. One parent had emigrated from Ireland within the past 10 years. One parent identified as being from an Aboriginal background and another parent was from a New Zealand Maori background. The ninth parent did not specify her cultural background. Consequently, there may be cultural and gender limitations, where most participants were female, and of Anglo Celtic origin.

The eight workers had from 2- to over 30-years family work experience and all were tertiary educated. Five held bachelor degrees in areas such as social science, social work, and community work. The other three held vocational diplomas in community welfare. The supervisors were all tertiary trained. One had completed a Masters degree, two others held Bachelor degrees, and one had received vocational education in community work. They had from 3- to 12-years family work experience.
Procedure

Using in depth interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995), and drawing on literature about the notion of phases in relationships, participants were asked to provide a chronological account of the relationship. While the parents were involved in the relationship due to neglect concerns, the focus of the interviews was the relationship, rather than on the child or child protection issues that may have existed.

With the exception of three of the supervisors, each participant was interviewed once only. Of those three supervisors, one supervised 3 workers, and completed 3 interviews, where the interviews were focused on a different relationship each time. Two supervised 2 workers each, and each spoke to the author on 2 separate occasions, each time about a different relationship they were involved in.

Analytic induction (Denzin, 1978) was used to examine the de identified transcribed data for key words in three relationship cases. This involved highlighting, and then grouping, the key words that concretely described parent, worker, and supervisor “actions” and “attributes”. These key words concretely described the experiences of the participants, which is what the research questions related to, and became subthemes under the themes “action” and “attribute”. A list of other key words was also developed. These recorded who was speaking, who was being spoken about, the phase of relationship, where the relationship took place, other contextual issues, and the purpose, value, and meaning of the working relationship.

These became the starting point for generating a more standardised thematic analysis across the eight relationships. Following this process, the manually analysed data were entered into NVivo qualitative analysis software (Bazeley, 2007), and the remaining transcripts were analysed using the inductively derived subthemes.

Once completed, the author developed a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organise the action and attribute subthemes by the participant voice and phase of the relationship themes.
This spreadsheet helped build a picture of how common subthemes were to the participants’ experiences of the relationship, and it was used for closer examination of patterns between the relationships. Disconfirming evidence in particular stood out clearly. The interviews, transcriptions, and analysis were conducted by the author.

**Results**

The following will summarise the findings of the parents’ and workers’ reported perceptions of the factors affecting the building phase of the relationship in which they were involved. While the aim of the paper is to explore all facets of these developing relationships, the theme of developing trust emerged as the key factor involved. In light of this, the remainder of the paper has been arranged to explore how trust developed, and discuss this theme in light of the literature and its implications.

Given that the supervisors sit outside the relationship dyads, but are part of the context, they were more limited than the parents and family workers in their ability to comment on key attributes of the building relationship. Consequently the paper explores the building relationship from the parent’s and worker’s perspectives. Direct quotes will be used throughout.

**Parents’ Desperation and Ambivalence**

The building phase was characterised by the parents feeling a high level of vulnerability, desperation, and ambivalence. In particular, parents and workers described how the associated anger or fear of poor experiences impacted negatively on the early part of the relationship.

The parents were often unwilling, commonly making it difficult for the workers to engage them. Parents used words like “desperate” and “defeated” to describe how they felt before commencing the relationship. They described how fear of child removal, distrust, guardedness, and concern about confidentiality became a barrier to trusting the family
worker. Workers reported that parents described feeling angry, hurt, and distrustful as well as
tired, burdened, and unmotivated when faced with the prospect of having to develop another
relationship with a professional.

Parent apprehension came from unfamiliarity with the family service and worker, fear of
being judged, and not knowing what to expect. It also came from feeling under some kind of
pressure to engage. Most common were feelings of extreme desperation or fears related to
statutory child protection intervention, both currently, and in the future.

All of the parents described previous positive and negative experiences with human
services workers from government and non government agencies alike, for example,

The whole counselling side of it was very daunting for me. I’ve had really bad
experiences with counsellors…. [They] were not understanding. Were very
cold...Turned me off a lot of counsellors. So coming in I was very, “Is this one gonna
work?” I was really reserved that they weren’t gonna be able to help me. Weren’t
going to understand where I was coming from. I wasn’t really up for it. But, in order
to keep my children….I had to do something. (Parent 7)

Common reflections on previous negative experiences were that they increased parent
distrust and ambivalence to build a new relationship. In contrast, some parents also
commented that previous positive experiences of relationships with workers assisted the
attitude with which they approached building the relationship. One parent, who had
experienced both positive and negative relationships previously, reported that her feeling of
vulnerability reduced when she focused on the degree to which the worker made her feel
comfortable, rather than the previous very negative experiences with child and family service
workers.

While a combination of these concerns resulted in ambivalence for the parents, this was
resolved by parents putting aside their fear and becoming sufficiently motivated, or willing,
to give their worker a chance to prove why the parent would want to engage. A common factor was recognition that they needed assistance from an outside source, as their own personal and existing professional support systems were inadequate. This was usually because they felt people were not listening or were unable to respond adequately to their needs. The parents recognised that they deserved better for their lives, and were motivated to achieve this. However, they felt overwhelmed, uncertain, and nervous about achieving the change.

Interestingly, it was also common for workers to feel apprehensive and struggle with motivation during this phase. Apprehension mostly occurred prior to meeting the parent. While none of the workers said that they felt apprehensive about their ability to build a relationship with the parent, some were anxious because of what others had said about the parent, some doubted their ability to help the parent meet their needs, while some were concerned that the parent would not be willing to engage or work on the identified issues. While apprehension reduced once workers realised the parents were willing to engage and were receptive to what the worker was saying, a powerful source of motivation was their identification and strong emotional connection, which they developed with the parent.

**Parents Assessing Worker Qualities**

Although parents felt unable to meet their own needs and be the kind of parent they wanted to be, and this motivated them to either seek or accept support, they were not yet willing enough to lose some sense of agency over the interaction. Most participants reported that parents tested workers during this phase, as explained by one worker,

I think there was some testing from her. She was testing the waters to see if I would judge her. From one session to the next, she would often repeat the same conversation. But then there’d be just a little bit extra detail. And I felt that was a test. (Family Worker 3)
This included testing the character of the worker to decide whether or not they were trustworthy, judgemental, and if the parent felt comfortable with the worker. It required getting to know the worker, but at the same time not revealing too much about themselves until they decided the worker was “right”. It also involved being guarded when discussing their issues, telling varied accounts of situations, remaining silent and avoiding contact, or making contact randomly and intermittently.

Knowing a worker was “right” was also promoted through discovering some similarity with the worker, for example a common experience of parenting, both being smokers, or having had similar interests or hobbies. Parent identification with the worker seemed to mark a turning point in the building relationship. It reportedly influenced the degree to which parents trusted, opened up, and were attentive and responsive to the worker regarding their needs and making life changes. Furthermore, while most workers and two parents also reported that doing something practical to meet a need early on was important, focusing on building an emotional connection seems to be considered more important in this study than focusing on meeting an immediate need during the first few encounters.

**Worker Actions and Attributes**

Important worker actions and attributes during this trust building phase included workers providing a first impression that they were genuine/authentic, active in their attention to the parent, willing to help, focused on capacities, empathic, non judgemental, patient, flexible, collaborative, and confident in their dealings with the parent. Underpinning all of this was a perception of worker respect for the parents. As one worker expressed it,

> You’ve got be very natural. You’ve got to be not pushy. You’ve got to be very respectful of them....Everyone is different so you’ve got to get a sense of what’s going to work with that person. How am I going to work with this person? Build that
trust building relationship. Because, it’s that first meeting with the family. It’s that important to build that trust. (Family Worker 5)

Being attentive and responsive occurred from the first meeting and remained important throughout the entire relationship. It involved providing solutions to parents’ concrete and emotional needs, but not in such a way that they felt disempowered. This required gaining parents’ perspective on needs, tailoring responses to those expressed needs, and acknowledging parents’ ideas and their roles in meeting the needs. It also involved taking time to build trust and clarify what needed to be done, instead of moving to setting goals early in the life of the relationship.

Parents and workers also reported that worker empathy was important. This was described as the idea that workers understood what the parent was experiencing to some degree. Empathy was also described in terms of workers showing care and giving the impression that they cared about the parent. These ideas were summed up by one parent who described her family worker as, “the type of family support worker who understands. She actually feels at the same time. It’s like she understands how you're feeling” (Parent 2).

Furthermore, it was considered important that workers were interested in more than just the professional issues. This meant having a wide range of topics for conversations and being prepared to follow the parent’s interests even though it might not seem related to the family work focus. Some parents described how they felt workers from other organisations were not similarly helpful as they could not be flexible and go outside the exclusive focus in those agencies.

Worker patience and flexibility, along with workers being available to the parent as needs arose, were reported to help form a strong foundation to the relationship. The relationships took different lengths of time to build, where two virtually instantly developed trust, but the others took up to six months to achieve this. The workers involved in relationships that did
not form quickly commented on the need to be patient and flexible, and to take the time to enable the parent develop trust and overcome unwillingness. They said that this needed to occur before they could begin to focus on meeting the parent’s needs and begin challenging them to focus on their needs themselves.

Collaboration as reported by the parents was characterised by open and honest communication and negotiation, particularly about the parents’ needs, what the workers could offer, and the relationship parameters. It also involved the parents feeling some sense of choice and power regarding the process. It is apparent that this was made possible by the workers’ flexible and accommodating approach regarding what they were prepared to do and how involved they were prepared to be, depending to some extent on what the parent said they wanted.

Finally, some parents noted that it was important to perceive the workers as confident or competent. They described the workers as resourceful, knowledgeable about a range of areas of professional expertise and life in general, able to respond to the parents’ changing needs, and able to connect with people from a variety of backgrounds.

**Trust**

Parents and workers described that parents progressed from unwillingness to willingness as they got to the point of connection and feeling comfortable, the lynchpin of which was trust. As one parent noted, “I think the relationship’s really important in regards to it all because if you don’t trust someone, if you don’t have the respect there, between both client and counsellor, then there’s really no point in having counselling” (Parent 7).

Trust for the workers had strong practical implications. Parents described becoming more attentive and responsive to what the worker was saying once trust was built. Willingness to engage openly and honestly about deeper issues was specifically described by all but one of the parents as linked to trusting the worker. Interestingly, the parent who did not report a link
between the relationship and trust took a long time to engage with the worker, approximately six months, and, according to both the worker and supervisor, did not make herself available to the worker until trust was built.

Prior to this point, the parents discussed more obvious or publicly known issues, such as those related to the immediate and concrete needs they wanted met, or issues they thought might shock the worker. They used disclosing these types of issues to test the worker’s trustworthiness. Most workers and a couple of supervisors reported that parents used this strategy.

For some, this process was instant and occurred during the first meeting as they got to know the worker whereas, for others it developed over a period of months. In addition, one parent who had been involved with the family service previously, described feeling willing to work with the worker from the outset because she had already established trust in the service.

Discussion

This study supported previous findings of studies focused on child neglect that found trust to be central to the establishment of working relationships (Campbell, 1997; Fernandez & Healy, 2007; Zeira, 2007). It supported others focused on families where neglect is an issue who recognise the historical context of negative relationships (Beeman, 1997; Gaudin, et al., 1996) and power laden aspects of working relationships (DePanfilis, 2002; Petras, et al., 2002; Turney & Tanner, 2001). It also supported previous findings that parents may test the level of worker trustworthiness and attempt to reduce power inequities (Beeman, 1997; Turney & Tanner, 2001; Zeira, 2007). However, this study expanded on previous studies by exploring in depth the nature of trust development with families where child neglect is an issue, which had been raised but not explored extensively (Zeira, 2007).

Importantly, this study found that the parents’ active attempts to test for workers’ trustworthiness was fundamental to reversing the parents’ unwillingness to discuss the issues
that went to the heart of the neglect concerns regarding their children. This began with the finding that a very important feature of establishing trust involved the parents discovering a personal connection, or similarity, with the worker in the context of a professional relationship. This finding further supports the notion that it is important to find a balance between objective, or professional, restraint, and empathic attention when working with clients in social welfare settings (Campbell, 1997; Kenemore, 1993), including statutory child protection (Petras, et al., 2002). However, this balance is difficult to achieve because while it is obvious that setting expectations and boundaries around the relationship is very important (Fernandez & Healy, 2007; Kenemore, 1993), the parents in this study were clear that an integral aspect of trust development involved workers themselves providing some level of personal disclosure.

In light of such findings, it could be argued that active parent resistance to developing working relationships is a reasonable and healthy protective response, rather than a perception that such families are ‘untreatable’ or deficient (e.g. Wilson & Horner, 2005; Kenemore, 1993; Stone, 1998). The basis for this idea comes from the finding that eight of the nine parents involved in the study discussed testing their worker’s trustworthiness actively. None of these eight parents had previously experienced the worker or service, and all eight of them had prior negative experiences with professionals from other services. This contrasted with the parent who reported coming to the relationship with her family worker from a position of trust from the outset because she had previously experienced positive relationships with workers from that service, so felt she had no need to test the worker. With this in mind, it is worth considering that the way these parents approached these relationships is similar to the way most people approach building relationships where there is an obvious power imbalance; that is, with ambivalence, suspicion, caution and, depending on the circumstances, desperation, but measured by motivation to try.
The implication is that the onus is on the profession to ensure that clients’ experiences of client-worker relationships are positive ones, and that they meet clients’ need for testing trustworthiness, rather than considering negative client deficiencies to be the problem. More could be done to build relationships with members of the target community prior to them being formally referred for interventions, as this would ameliorate the need for clients to test for trustworthiness later. Furthermore, it would help if workers considered client resistance to developing relationships through the client’s perspective. This would include reflecting on how they would feel if they were similarly being asked to build a relationship with someone they do not know, had no reason to trust, and where there are obvious power imbalances; particularly when previous experiences of such situations have been negative.

**Conclusion**

The findings offer useful insights and may contribute to the developing body of knowledge about the nature of relationships with families where neglect is an issue. However, this study needs to be seen as exploratory, and the findings as tentative, and requiring further research. Such research should be conducted to test the current findings, utilising research participants with varying characteristics and in a number of different practice settings.

Interestingly, since the study began, a number of studies have been published that are very salient to the relationship focus of this research (e.g., Ruch, Turney, & Ward, 2010). This places the current study within a context of growing interest in, and exploration of, the nature of relationship-based practice in child welfare work (Thoburn, et al., 2000). It sits alongside a growing body of qualitative work that explores the relationship in greater detail than has been done previously, supplementing the qualitative literature and complementing the quantitative literature.
References


