

# Rights, Outcomes and Love: What is the purpose of children's services and how might we do the work well?



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# Overview

- Explore the gap between rhetoric and reality in children's services
- Introduce concept of rights as something that helps explain this
- Explore rights to connection, love and respect – particularly a “love ethic”
- Argue that we need loving/caring, wise and authoritative professionals to support these rights and that doing so is essential for a respectful, humane and kind society

# National Framework: Outcomes

1. Children, young people and families stay together and get the help they need
2. Children and young people are supported by their family network
3. Children and young people are safe in and outside of their homes
4. Children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes

# Which is why families LOVE children's services involvement



# The Gap

## Rhetoric

- Strengths based
- Anti-Oppressive
- Collaborative
- Partnership
- Child centred
- Empowerment
- Social Justice
- etc



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## Reality

- Reinforces inequality
- Intrusive and policing
- Unhelpful or making worse
- etc



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# The problems with our rhetoric

Why is children's social care:  
SO difficult and full of  
tensions?  
What does great work look  
like?  
Often borrowing from  
therapy – but it ain't therapy!



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Children's services is not primarily there to improve outcomes

**Its primary purpose is to protect rights – particularly when they are in conflict**

It is therefore complicated and full of tension and uncertainty... that sense of conflict is built in

but dealing with it well is essential for a good society



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# On human rights

Established around time of the Enlightenment - a protection for individuals from oppression

- Individuals should be able to do what they wish so long as they do not harm others
  - But founded on idea of the rational agent
  - what about those who do not have capacity?

Was assumed parents want best for children – but recognition of limits of this creates need for

...Children's services

# On human rights

Broadly 3 *generations* of rights – map onto ideals of French Revolution:

1. Liberty
2. Equality (resources) and
3. Fraternity (connection/solidarity)



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Tensions and conflicts are baked into the work of children's services – it is why we exist



# On human rights: key tensions we work with

## 1. Liberty

- Whose freedom? Freedom to parent and limits
- Child's wishes and capacity and best interests

## 2. Equality/Resources

- What services do a family need?
- What do we provide eg s.17 payments

And

## 3. Fraternity (connection/solidarity)

# Third Generation Rights: Connection

**21<sup>st</sup> Century critique: Rights are too individualistic – rely on idea of independent, rational individual**

Critiques from Feminists and non-Western perspectives

- Arguments for rights to connection, for collective rights and for eco-rights and animal rights
- Generally felt that there are few examples in practice ... or are there...?

Two ways rights to connection and community are crucial in safeguarding

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# 1. Third Generation Rights: Connection

## People need connection and relationship

Therefore social workers and others are constantly working to support this... e.g.

- Keeping children with parents
- Child in care seeing parents
- Family Group Conferences
- Supporting positive relationships for child – because humans are only human in relationship

## 2. Third Generation Rights: Relationships

A rights focused perspective means that the **WAY** we do our work is important – not just what the “outcomes”

- Procedural justice eg courts or police
- What would we expect if we were subject to safeguarding processes?
- **The process is the purpose**

## 2. Third Generation Rights: Community

The way we work with people does not merely achieve “outcomes”... it also creates the sort of society we live in

We create respect, community, care and connection by the way we work with people – particularly about difficult issues



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We therefore need to be the workers we would want to have



# How might we think about doing rights focused practice well?

Rather than thinking about it as if it was counselling eg MI, SoS, systemic etc  
Counselling is justified as *a means to an end*

A focus on rights emphasises *intrinsic worth*  
How we should work not justified by outcomes



# Ethics and bell hooks

Ethics provides us with a way of thinking about what is intrinsically right and wrong

- how should I work with parents and children – not as a means to an end (ie to produce an outcome) but as an end in its own right

bell hooks was a leading black feminist theorist and developed a “love ethics” which I find helpful

# Ethics, love and bell hooks

In a key trilogy of books hooks argues that the idea of a “love ethic” can bring together the personal and political

First we need to realise that love is not just a “feeling” – something that happens to us



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# Ethics, love and bell hooks

hooks characterises love as involving certain *behaviours*:

“When we are loving we openly and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust.”

We are responsible for our behaviour – and behaviour therefore requires ethical principles. Hooks argues that love should guide our behaviour



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Personal is political and vice versa

Treat people as end in own right – as we want to be treated

Agape  
Want best for people



Integrity and honest mean we DO challenge

- How we do it important

Guide for action even when we do not like someone

# The love ethic and social work

Hooks developed the love ethic as a guide for personal and political action

Can it help us in professional action?

What might that look like?



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# A note on my own research

What is good direct practice – what does it look like?

How would you describe it?

What difference does it make?

# A note on my own research

Adapted and developed a coding scheme for practice:

1. Empathy
2. Collaboration
3. Supporting autonomy
4. Eliciting intrinsic motivation
5. Clarity about concerns
6. Focus on child
7. Purposefulness

Grouped into:

- 1. Care and engagement**
- 2. Help people achieve their goals**
- 3. Good authority**



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# Care, Help, Good Authority and the Love Ethic

Positive care, help and good authority skills were associated with positive outcomes for families in my research

And I think they are also a good description of a love ethic:

- Genuinely wanting the best for someone
- “openly and honestly express[ing] care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust.”
- Honesty and integrity also means challenge may be needed



# Challenges for a love ethic

1. In English love is so fraught with baggage that it may be better to use a different word eg compassion (but I mean love)
2. What about people we do not feel any love/compassion for?

# Contribution of a love ethic

1. Hooks work links the personal AND the political – and using it for the professional helps us move beyond an individualised approach to think about how we can create a loving society and loving relationships for those we work with
2. It helps moves us away from a focus on ends and outcomes to think about the intrinsic worth of the work we do

# Why we need rights focused children's service based on a love ethic

For those we work  
with...

It provides the  
service WE would  
want

It is most likely to  
help



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For society...

We protect  
individual rights  
and liberty

And create the  
sort of society we  
can be proud of

For workers...

We can understand  
the conflict and  
challenge in our  
work

And be proud of  
the difference we  
make

# More about rights focused practice

