

Nagging doubts about the Daniel Pelka case

There are two reports of the case of Daniel Pelka which detail the excruciating barbarities of the case and the missed opportunities for intervention that hindsight has revealed for us, in the latest edition of our sister publication, *Every Child Journal*.

There are the usual features of cases like these – lack of coordination between the agencies, lack of training about the indicators of child abuse and the deviousness of the parents who always manage to get the benefit of doubt.

In the rush to criticise the agencies and the professionals concerned, nobody has bothered to mention that the government, almost as its first act in education, abolished the *Every Child Matters* policy which was attempting to force better collaborative practices on the very different cultures of health, social services and education. Parts of this grand design still survives, flapping around for breath amidst all the other priorities on services pressed by budget reductions. But along with the cash, the political imperative to make these services work better together has gone.

The second point which is never much mentioned because it seems to break some taboo promulgated by the care and protection agencies themselves, is that these cases can never be totally prevented, in the same way that crime of all sorts can never be abolished. It's a peculiar feature of child protection agencies that they insist that all non-accidental child deaths can be stopped. It's a self-serving myth. You can't legislate or systematise human frailty, or what our religious heritage might describe as 'evil,' out of existence. Attempts to do so often produce onerous, oppressive state interventions that are more damaging to the mass of children than is warranted by any benefit to child victims of extreme abuse.

Such a danger has featured strongly in the debate over how far we can accept restrictions to our freedom to battle terrorism, but is never raised in media coverage of the more emotive cases of child abuse.

Reading the detail of Daniel's case though does leave one with a very uncomfortable feeling that something has gone seriously wrong – not with particular agencies or procedures, faulty though these might have been in this case, but in the general relationship between adults and children.

For example, contrary to what the media reports suggested, the school in Coventry which Daniel attended with his sister Anna, was really quite professional in many aspects of its response to Daniel's presenting condition. When his sister's attendance slipped, they were quickly in touch with the parents. A school nurse, following a visit to the home, referred Daniel to a paediatrician after the mother complained that he was aggressive and soiling himself. She also sets up some behaviour management support for the mother. All entirely competent responses.

The school also talked to the mother about Daniel's obsession with food, which he stole from other children and took illegitimately from the fruit corner in the classroom. The deputy head further talked to her about the way Daniel took food from bins, picked up discarded food on the floor and ate beans planted in the school garden. A series of facial injuries was recorded, perhaps with inadequate detail, but recorded nevertheless. The deputy head tried to get a local GP involved on Daniel's behalf. Almost in desperation, the school wrote an open letter 'to whom it may concern' expressing concern about Daniel's eating, saying that the school had to manage this by locking food away!

One can't help feeling that the school's responses were concerned and professional, but perhaps overly professional and not human enough. Nobody took this child under their wing and offered personal protection, became a personal champion and at least made sure he had enough food to eat whilst at school.

In the deluge of laws, official procedures and fears about allegations, something fundamental seems to have been lost in the way adults respond to children in trouble. It's telling that the only people who are strongly noted to have tried to actually talk to Daniel about his injuries were teaching assistants. Some community responsibility and human bond seems to have been fatally weakened in the pursuit of professional correctness and professional distance. Maybe we have all become victims of the child abuse moral panic.

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