

International Trends in High Income Countries: An Interview with Professor Andy Bilson

Institutionalised Children Explorations
and Beyond
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Andy Bilson is Emeritus Professor at the University of Central Lancashire, where he is the Associate Director of The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation. He is also an Adjunct Professor at the University of Western Australia. He continues to work as a researcher and consultant promoting children's rights and reform of child protection systems. He is committed to developing systems that support families and reduce institutionalisation and unnecessary removal of children from their families. His research includes longitudinal studies of child protection in England and Australia. He is also a member of the board of Hope and Homes for Children. Andy is a qualified Social Worker and has worked as a Social Worker and Manager in many posts in the UK, including Assistant Director in Fife Social Work Department and Assistant Director of Action for Children in Wales. From 1997 to 2001, he was Director of the Council of Europe's and UNICEF's Observatory on European children's rights. He was Professor of Social Work at the University of Central Lancashire for over 10 years, carrying out research, advocacy and consultancy in social work in the UK and many other countries. During the 1980s, he campaigned to reform the juvenile justice system and was a Founder of the Association for Juvenile Justice and involved in research undertaken by David Thorpe and colleagues at Lancaster University. Successful campaigns and changes in social work with young people and their families saw the number of children on care orders for offending in England and Wales fall from 14,000 to under a 1000, and boys sentenced to detention centre and youth custody fall from around 7000 to 1000 a year. Internationally, he is known for his work on developing social work to combat the institutionalisation of children. He has carried out advocacy and research in a wide range of countries and writes on the concept of gatekeeping and system reform as well as research into child protection and services for children and families. He has recently set up the International Parent Advocacy Network which is campaigning to increase the influence of parents in child welfare decision.

This interview was conducted through email in November 2019.

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Tessa Boudrie (TB): How did you get involved in child protection, alternative care and social work? Was there a specific moment where you knew this area of work is what you wanted to be part of?

Andy Bilson (AB): After graduating with a degree in maths, I started a temporary job as a ‘housefather’ in a residential school for children with disabilities in the north of England. Much of the work was caring for the physical needs of the children but little was done for their emotional needs. Because of their illnesses, many of them could not expect to live beyond their 16th birthday. These children desperately wanted to be at home, but their families lacked the support they deserved to look after their children. Having seen this, I went on to become a social worker, manager and academic, always trying to keep families together.

TB: Your career spans over 40 years. What are major changes you have seen both in the UK and globally, in caring for children? Do you feel vulnerabilities have changed?

AB: I think in the last decade, we have seen a growth in inequality and a growing individualisation of problems. Children are seen in individualistic ways; as vulnerable victims requiring intervention to improve their functioning, whilst parents are viewed as irresponsible and totally to blame for the difficulties their families face. This individualisation hides the impact of growing poverty and other social trends, which increases the pressure on families, making parenting more difficult. In turn, this has led to a fundamental change in the nature of the work with children. In many high-income countries, help for families has been substantially reduced but the number of children investigated for possible ‘child abuse’ has increased significantly over the years. This has resulted in an increased removal of children from their families and contributed to the low level of child well-being. In England, there has been a staggering 52% increase of the number of children separated, if adoption and care are combined. Instead of focusing on help for the family and prevention of family separation, children are being removed and families placed under surveillance.

TB: You, and others, have been studying if there is evidence of a decrease in child maltreatment in high income countries, which have well defined policies around child protection. What is your main conclusion?

AB: We found out that there is no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions. An article in *The Lancet* summarises this issue for six countries, concluding that there was ‘no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions’ (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 770). Similarly, a study I carried out in Australia (Bilson, Cant, Harries, & Thorpe, 2017) found no reduction in harm over a twenty-year period.

TB: Through your research you have concluded that those policies have actually resulted in a significant increase of children being separated from their families. What was the main driver for that increase?

AB: The individualisation of family problems leads to a system that increasingly sees parental actions as the cause of family difficulties. The focus then turns to investigating parents. Child protection investigations have increased rapidly in Australia (42% between 2012 and 2016), Canada (74% between 1998 and 2008),

the US (17% between 2007 and 2015), and in England (122% between 2010 and 2018). A large and growing proportion of the total child population face the prospect of their family being investigated for suspected child abuse or neglect (37% of all children in the US; 22.5% in South Australia; 23.5% in New Zealand) (all rates cited in Bilson & Munro, 2019). These investigations are rarely followed by the help that families need when faced with problems that mainly stem from inequality and poverty, often combined with racism. The result is that more and more children are separated from families.

TB: Can you explain how the result of policies formulated since 2000, focusing on reduction of the numbers of children being looked after long term in state care through encouraging local authorities to place children in their care for adoption, has actually resulted in the increase of children placed in care?

AB: In his study of trends in ten high income countries, Neil Gilbert (2012) found that nine out of ten had increasing numbers in out-of-home care. In the United States and the United Kingdom, policies to reduce the number of children having long stays in care by an aggressive policy of promoting adoptions of children in care also failed, and the numbers separated and placed in adoption have grown alongside increases in the number of children in care. My study in England (Bilson, 2017) not only identified this national trend of rapidly increasing separation, but shows that over a five-year period in the areas of England, where the largest numbers of children were adopted, the number of children in care went up the most too. In these areas, the numbers separated rose substantially more than where adoption was less actively promoted. One probable reason for this is that promoting adoption led to a culture of child rescue, with more children removed long-term from their families (Bilson & Munro, 2019). This culture of rescue can also be seen in the changes in the focus of social work, from providing help to families to taking children into care. This growing trend is well summarised by England's senior judge in family courts, Sir Andrew McFarlane, the president of the family division of the high court of England and Wales, who identifies the link in these trends to increasing separation of children through care orders and reducing support for families, saying:

we have reached a stage where the threshold for obtaining a public law court order is noticeably low, whereas, no doubt as a result of the current financial climate, the threshold for a family being able to access specialist support services in the community is conversely, very high. (Butler, 2018)

TB: We do know that family separation results in poor outcomes for children. What are some of the main outcomes?

AB: Yes, there is extensive research showing that outcomes for children who have been separated are poor. There are negative effects on their education levels and their employment. Separated children also have a higher chance of becoming involved in crime and of being homeless and living on the streets. We see a self-perpetuating situation where a high proportion of children who are separated have earlier pregnancies, and their children have a higher chance to end up in care. A recent Australian study (Lima, Maclean, & O'Donnell, 2018) shows all these

trends for a large cohort of children entering care and how these children do worse than children who experienced maltreatment and didn't enter care, a finding similar to two large studies in the United States (Doyle, 2007;2008). We see lower IQ and mental illnesses, including leading to suicide. In general, these children have a higher mortality rate, and are more likely to become victims of sexual exploitation, become drug users and become sex workers. Studies from many countries have found these outcomes.

TB: What do you think should be changed going forward, to get better outcomes for children?

AB: I believe that we need to change the way we consider the difficulties families face and start thinking in terms of social development (Bilson, n.d.; Bilson & Larkins, 2013). By this I mean we should look at the problem as a whole. We need to work with families to help them to achieve a stable and sufficient income, as poverty is an important driver. This might involve providing social investments or support with employment to reduce poverty. We need to become advocacy-oriented and work with parents and communities. Instead of investigating and separating, we need to prepare communities and support them to strengthen their own support systems. We should start working from a strength-based starting point, looking at the positive aspects in a family or community, and see how we can build upon that. And we need to start to work much across disciplines, looking at health, access to education, housing etc. and addressing all those issues together. This would create stronger families more able to care for their children. This social development approach underpins social welfare legislation in South Africa; can be seen in countries using social work alongside social protection in South America (EveryChild, 2012); and represents a good alternative to the harmful individualised approach I've just discussed.

TB: You are involved in promoting parent advocacy with David Tobis who did the work in New York. Can you tell us something about that?

AB: In the high-income countries with the rapidly increasing levels of child protection investigations, this tends to focus disproportionately on people who are poor and particularly excluded groups. In the USA for example, first nation people are disproportionately investigated and taken into care, as are African Americans – the study that I mentioned earlier found that over half of all African American children had been investigated for possible maltreatment before the age of 18. The pattern is similar in other countries. The impact on families of being drawn into the child protection system is substantial. Parents feel shame and anger and lack hope for the future. They have a range of health problems (Wall-Weiller, 2017), and research even shows higher incidences of deaths amongst parents who have lost their children (Wall-Weiller, 2018). As many investigations do not lead to children being separated, this impacts negatively on children in the family and they suffer too. Parents lack any power, and the system blames but does not help them. In New York, during the 1990s, a new approach was developed in which parents started to help each other and alongside professional allies, they campaigned for change. They successfully reformed the New York child welfare system and the number of children in state care fell from 50,000 to 9,000 (Tobis,

2013). This is because parents are the experts on their own situations and needs, so involving them in planning and providing services leads to better outcomes.

New York's parent advocacy included programs that employed parents who had regained children from state care and overcome problems such as alcohol or drug use. They were employed in various areas of the child protection system to support other parents when they had difficulties that led to child protection involvement. There is now a growing body of research that shows many benefits for parents and children of having access to parent advocacy (Casey Family Programs, 2019). Parent advocacy instils hope, reduces future involvement in the child protection system and reduces the use of state care. It is increasingly being developed in other parts of the USA and other countries. David Tobis and I have now carried out the first international review of parent advocacy for the Better Care Network. This will be published early next year. It looks at how the lessons from high-income countries can be adapted to the very different contexts of middle- and low-income countries, so that parents are empowered and children saved from harm. I would like to see this approach of empowering parents to help each other, used to strengthen families and protect children across the globe.

TB: What would the lessons be for South Asia (and other parts of the world) to take into account when reforming current care policies and practices for children?

AB: The starting point is to avoid the individualisation of family difficulties seen in many high-income countries and work to directly reduce the full range of stresses that families face. This will require a focus at all levels of policy to reduce inequality, as well as developing child welfare services that respond to the specific needs of families. One of the reasons I joined the Board of Hope and Homes was because I helped to evaluate their services in Bulgaria and Moldova. This evaluation showed that, at the level of families and communities, it was possible to work in a different way and to focus on living conditions and housing, physical and mental health, education, employment and household economy, alongside behaviour, family and social conditions (Kragulj & Pop, 2012). The whole situation of families who received help in this way changed and children started to thrive. This was achieved because the government agencies providing the services accepted that the problems families faced had a range of causes and that parents were not individually to blame. This opened the door for the workers to address the real problems families faced in a warm and caring way.

Sadly, there is no 'one-size fits all' answer to family difficulties and in each country and even region, specific services will have to be developed. This is possible only if policy and practice respond to the full range of difficulties families face. Parents need to be at the centre of defining their needs, and parents who have overcome difficulties can be a major resource in finding the right, most effective solutions.

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