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Book Review

Messy Social Work

By Richard Devine

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Messy Social Work, written by the practicing social worker and academic Richard Devine, provides an accessible insight into the realities of practice with children and families, emphasising throughout the importance of reflection and learning. Beginning with a candid examination of the author's own childhood and early experiences which led him to join the social work profession, the book skilfully blends real-life practice stories with the theories and tools which Devine has used to support his learning and development as a social worker. The book is short yet densely packed with summaries of key texts and theories which have shaped Devine's practice, chapters which tackle direct work, assessment and providing support, as well as an important section on the process of decision making about whether a child should live away from their family. A chapter on 'myth busting' is particularly enlightening in its willingness to grapple with what social work both is and is not, all underpinned by an understanding that rights and ethics should form the foundation of good practice, whatever the context.

A practical and useful guide

Amongst the most impactful moments in the book are those where Devine describes how dialogue and reflection have been crucial to helping him challenge his own assumptions and grow as a practitioner. In one example, Devine recounts how an interaction with his manager helped him shift his perspective about the impact of domestic abuse on children:



I had written that their young age protected them from the effects of domestic abuse, my manager asked me, 'What did you mean by this?'

This feedback from my manager was a formative moment for me. I assumed that children were not affected by domestic abuse because they were too young. When my manager questioned me on this, I went on a journey to learn about the impact of early experiences on brain development. (pp.32-33)

Devine also writes lucidly about the value of tools such as chronologies and assessment processes in meaning-making and professional development. Whilst rooted in a child protection context, these messages will resonate across a range of professional experiences. In seeking to illuminate the transformative potential in what can be caricatured as bureaucratic processes, Devine encourages us to think critically about our practice and the role of relationships and dialogue in every aspect of social work:

If I had not written down what I had thought, or if that assessment had not been read by my manager who subsequently provided excellent feedback, then my knowledge and analysis of risk would have been left unchecked [...] After 13 years of writing dozens, if not hundreds, of assessments, I still consider it the most effective way to improve my knowledge and skills as a social worker. (p.101)

Ultimately, *Messy Social Work* is a useful book which demands to be taken seriously both as a guide to the profession for outsiders or newcomers and a prompt for reflection by those deep within it; in its honesty about human frailty and its frank examination of the author's own mistakes and learning along the way, it will be valuable regardless of experience or status. Devine's inclination to value and understand other people's points of view, even in the most challenging contexts, and his alertness to power dynamics within personal and professional relations, make this a rich and rewarding book for anyone in social work or with an interest in child protection.



About the review author

Euan Currie is a protecting children consultant at CELCIS, the Centre of Excellence for Children's Care and Protection. He previously worked in local authorities in both frontline practice and strategic roles.

The publisher, Jessica Kingsley, supplied a copy of this book for review.

