

Preface

Historically, the protection of children was a parental responsibility. Although the Canadian government has always made some provision for children in dire circumstances (usually orphans or the desperately poor), the emphasis in such cases was on Christian charity and the state's perceived duty to provide a minimum standard of living to children who would otherwise perish.

It was not until around the time of the Industrial Revolution, in Europe, that the notion of childhood as a vulnerable life stage began to emerge. Since that era, scientific research about childhood and the unique needs of children has influenced people's values with respect to how children ought to be treated.

Modern child development specialists can readily describe the physical, social, and learning environment that best supports healthy development. We now know that children need not only nutritious food and comfortable shelter, but also a plethora of other things: playtime, schooling, socialization, and affection, to name a few. Children need to interact not only with other children but also with adults; and the quality of these interactions can have a vital impact on their success as adults, and as parents in their own right. We know that children fare best when they are raised in a family-style rather than an institutional setting. We know that they need both close supervision and reasonable privacy, both clear limits and opportunities to learn from their own mistakes. And we know that individual children have individual needs.

We also know, as realists, that there is no such thing as a perfectly supportive environment. Canadian children are more likely than any other segment of the population to live in poverty: housing problems are a factor in 20 percent of residential placements. Children are raised by imperfect adults, many of whom are survivors of child abuse themselves, and many of whom suffer addictions, learning disabilities, mental illness, and personality disorders. Government resources available for improving the lot of children in need of protection are limited, and must be allocated according to greatest need.

This tension between the "ideal" child development environment and the challenges of the real world forms one-half of the backdrop for the work of Ontario's child protection workers. The other half is the legal framework that dictates how and when the government and its agents can (and often must) intervene to improve the lives of children whose environments have slipped too far below the standards acceptable in modern society. This book is designed to provide a thorough introduction to the legal context in which child protection workers must practice, without losing sight of the social context that makes up the other half of the picture. I hope that child protection workers will find it a useful reference as they work to support and protect our most precious social resource: children.

Nora Rock
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