

## **From Suburbia to Squalor:**

### *Musings on an Internship with the NH Division of Children, Youth and Families*

In middle of this past January, a four-month-old infant was admitted to a local hospital with a broken femur, a broken arm, two broken ribs, and a cracked cranium. Some of these breaks were more recent than others, but all had occurred within the previous day or so. The teenage mother of the infant was present at the time of admission, and testified that he had been accidentally dropped by his biological father. Hospital personnel treated the infant for his wounds, but suspicions were raised regarding exactly how they had come about. The broken leg, arm, and ribs were understandable after a fall, but it was the fractured cranium which was particularly curious. Subsequent X-rays would reveal that the fracture of the child's skull was not simply a minor fissure in the bone, but rather a network of small cracks expanding from a single point like a spider's intricate web. Such a break pattern would not occur from a fall from four or five feet in the air. In fact, a fracture of such shape implied that the infant's head had been forcibly struck against a hard surface.

One of the doctors of this hospital, given the circumstances with this child, became suspicious of child abuse and, as a mandated reporter, made a phone call to the New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth and Families, or the DCYF. His call was directed to the main office in Concord, NH where an operator asked the doctor the nature of the suspected child abuse and for any supporting details. The doctor was informed that the report met the criteria for a child abuse screen-in, and the operator forwarded the report to the nearest DCYF district office relative to the infant, which happened to be in Claremont, NH. One of the supervisors in the Claremont office received the report, rated as a severe, and issued it to one of the Child Protective Services Workers (CPSWs) in the office to begin an investigation. The particular CPSW chosen for this assessment made plans to initiate contact with the child and its family that very day, and placed the report on her intern's desk so that he could familiarize himself with it. That intern was me, and nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced on my first day of my senior internship, or for the things which I would eventually experience throughout the semester. My three months as an intern was one of the most eye-opening times of my life.

During the summer between my junior and senior year of college I had begun to consider my options for potential internships which I could complete; an internship would not only provide me with valuable field experience, but as a child development major, my internship experience would contribute to large portion of my capstone project. With goals of pursuing a career in school psychology, I was looking for an internship site which would be able to provide me with clinical experience. A professor of mine suggested working with the DCYF in Claremont as many Colby-Sawyer students have before me with great success. I met with a supervisor in the fall and arranged to begin an internship during my spring semester. Going into this internship, I was aware that I would be working with situations involving child abuse, and that I would be aiding in the assessment process by accompanying CPSWs during site visits and interviews with clients. What I was not fully prepared for was the severity of some of the cases I would encounter over the course of only two hundred and twenty-one hours.

As mentioned, the first assignment which I had experienced on the job was difficult to learn about. When I came into work that day I was expecting to simply learn basic policies and procedures about the division. I met my supervisor, one of four CPSWs in the office, and she gave me a packet of information to familiarize myself with and mentioned that we would be investigating a couple assessments in the afternoon. The first assessment involved a young girl telling her paraprofessional at school that she is uncomfortable when her step father watches her dress and undress at home; this was the caliber of assessments I believed I would be involved with day in and day out. That, or assessments involving instances of physical punishment that maybe went further than it should have. The second assessment, involving the infant with multiple broken bones, completely baffled me. I could not believe that such a heinous act could have been committed against a baby, nor could I believe that I would be immersed in such serious field work right away. We were unable to make contact with the infant's parents that night; however, we did conduct an interview with the family involved with the young girl. My supervisor and a local police officer interviewed her mother and step father—the alleged perpetrator. I cannot describe the emotions I felt in that situation; there is something very surreal about diving into the

*“...it was a very surreal workday, to say the least.”*

*Excerpt from journal:  
January 27, 2010*

personal lives of strangers, as well as witnessing their own emotions when they disagree with the allegations.

My crash-course in social work on my first day of the internship never truly came to an end. From mid-January straight through April I was a sponge. I only worked two or three days per week, depending, but more often than not there were brand new assessments waiting every time I sat at my desk, and my supervisor always had something for me to do. Within the first week, I was familiar with the basics of the assessment process. By three weeks, I had learned the

*“Even though it was a relatively routine case, it was exhilarating doing my own assessment...I was able to apply my knowledge of child development to determine the safety of the environment.”*

*Excerpt from journal:  
February 23, 2010*

computer system used by the division, called NH Bridges. This system contains all of the records of DCYF involvement with families, and a proficiency with such a tool meant that I could begin working more independently. Every time a CPSW makes any form of contact with a client or other person involved in an assessment (also known as collateral), he or she is required to enter a report of such contact into the system. It became my official role to take notes

during interviews with clients and collateral and enter reports of these into NH Bridges. I also became proficient in conducting follow-up phone calls with clients and collateral. After one month of working for the division, I was tasked with conducting my first client interview and home safety evaluation by myself. By the time April rolled around, I was working solo at least a third of the time.

Over the course of this experience, the assessments I encountered never ceased to amaze me. Believe it or not, the case of the battered infant was not the strangest scenario to find its way into my workload. I once accompanied one of the CPSWs in the office on a high-risk assessment involving unsanitary living conditions. We arrived at the residence of the family to conduct client interviews and ensure the safety of the children, and found the family living in anything but hospitable conditions. When we entered the home we were not walking on the floor, but a layer of trash which covered it, and there was an odor so strong of smoke, rancid food, and pet urine that it permeated our clothes and followed us for the remainder of the day. Another time I helped investigate a case wherein parents were forcing their children to do push-ups outside in subzero temperatures as punishment. I observed an interview with a young girl

who was potentially dissociating from her own personality and forming new ones as a result of molestation. I saw children with bruises and bite marks and parents with puncture wounds running up and down their arms from intravenous drug use. I was present for many a custody battle in local courtrooms, and helped track fleeing perpetrators across whole towns.

Unfortunately, in many of the more serious assessments, children had to be removed from the home per court order. However, this is not the standard procedure of the DCYF, which I believe to be a rather ominous myth which surrounds the division and infects the opinions individuals in the general public. Hollywood portrays Child Protective Services like the boogeyman: they will come and snatch your children if you are not careful! Not surprisingly, this belief is held by many of the clients I worked with; you can see it in their eyes when they open the door and you tell them that you are with DCYF and need to talk to them about a report of concern for their children—even non-perpetrating, supportive clients are reluctant to speak with division workers for this reason. I came to find rather early on that the DCYF works in the best interest of children, and keeping families together is often so. Only in extreme cases are children removed from the home, and even then parents are given one year to correct the problem before their parental rights are permanently revoked; also, children in these situations are often placed with relatives for the time being, and supervised parental visitation is facilitated and even encouraged by the division. In less severe cases of abuse, DCYF will work with parents to make sure they are aware of appropriate parenting practices and have the support they need. The majority of the assessments involve families of low socioeconomic status, and CPSWs regularly encourage families to take advantage of community and government aid which is often available for them. There are also a number of cases which, after investigation, turn out to be false reports or simple misunderstandings or miscommunications. For this reason, it was very important for me to learn to examine every assessment objectively as to not allow any biases or preconceptions to interfere with my work.

Cases like the ones I experienced happen on a daily basis across the country, and until this point, I had been completely oblivious to their existence. It's not that I was unaware of child abuse prevalence rates across the country; as a child development major I knew that the topic is very real and can be severely detrimental to physical and mental health. But reading about child abuse and seeing the effects of it first-hand are two very different things. Growing up in the suburbs my whole life, I feel as though I may have been sheltered from certain phenomena

which tend to plague communities lower in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Many of the assessments which came in for neglect were very challenging to work with, simply due to the fact that some of the families simply did not have the financial means to correct the problems of concern. A number of reports came in regarding concerns that certain children were not being properly supervised, or that they did not have proper clothing or enough food in the house. In some cases, changes could easily be made, but with some, parents were working long and odd hours and just barely breaking even after paying for rent and other bills. It was with these families that making such changes were particularly difficult. One assessment involved a mother who was letting her best friend watch her children while she was at work during the day. The problem was, Vermont's Child Protective Services contacted the Claremont office to inform us that they had been involved with this mother's friend in the past, that she has a history of drug use and mental disabilities, and she was not fit to be taking care of young children.

*"Although I find my internship exciting, my work depends on children being mistreated, so slow days are really not so bad considering the mission of DCYF."*

*Excerpt from journal:  
February 8, 2010*

My supervisor and I conducted an interview with this mother, and she explained that she did not have a flexible work schedule, and she was new to the area so she did not have any other friends or family in the area to help her, and that this friend was her only source of support. In such a scenario where a single mother is doing the best she can to get by, it is difficult for DCYF to ask her to make changes. Her friend had stopped using drugs, and actually had children of her own who appeared to properly cared for. We put the mother in this assessment on a waiting list for a state-sponsored babysitting program, but other than that there was little DCYF could do other than conduct frequent follow-up phone calls and visits to ensure the safety of the children. I now have a much greater understanding of the plight of parents who are struggling to raise children with limited resources, especially single mothers.

Dealing with child abuse assessments, whether they are severe or minor, takes its toll on an individual. Burnout rates for CPSWs are very high, simply because this work is stressful and simply conducting investigations exposes one to very many things he or she could go without seeing. For me the severe assessments were difficult to cope with at first, but became easier to deal with over time. I believe it was because I was successful at leaving my work in Claremont,

rather than bringing it to campus with me on my shoulders. I asked my supervisor early on exactly how she copes with this line of work, and she said something similar—she leaves her work at work. She did say, however, that after working as a CPSW for six years, she did not see herself in this position much longer, it was just too stressful. Some of the biggest sources of frustration in the office were repeat offenders, and those families who resist help when they dearly need it. After only three months on site, I may not have been around long enough to experience these issues, but I certainly empathize. The mission of the division is to provide support for families, but some parents and caregivers resist that notion to the point of exhausting the CPSWs who are trying to help in any way possible; anyone in such a situation would be frustrated.

My experiences with abusive and neglectful parents over the course of my internship have completely changed my perspective in multiple ways, both positive and negative. Despite the difficulty in learning about so many children having been harmed, this internship with the DCYF has allowed me to view topics in child development through a completely different lens. Until this semester, my involvement was limited specifically to classrooms and interactions with parents were minimal. I now have the full picture, as I have witnessed in real-time just how much a child's home life can have an effect on him or her. As a future school psychologist, I will need to understand this very principle, because children do not leave issues pertaining to their home life behind when they step into a school setting. In fact, it is often the case that many behavioral and academic problems within the school setting trace their roots to a disrupted or troubled home environment. Undoubtedly, I will retain what I have learned during this internship and consider it when working with children inside the school system. Employing multiple perspectives and enriching and deepening self knowledge are some of Colby-Sawyer's most prominent learning outcomes for students. If obtaining these outcomes is any indication of a great internship experience, I can say that my internship with the New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth and Families was truly an invaluable chapter in my educational and professional career.