

# Irish Association of Social Work: Protecting and Connecting

By Richard Devine

Friday 24<sup>th</sup> November 2023



“The image of a vulnerable child suffering pain and fear at the hands of their carers stirs up deep feelings of horror and outrage. Equally, the idea of powerful officials invading the privacy of the family and interrogating us on the intensely personal issue of our competence as parents provokes anger and resistance. It is hard to imagine circumstances that pose a greater challenge to reasoning skills: limited knowledge, uncertainty, high emotions, time pressures and conflicting values”.

Eileen Munro. Effective Child Protection (2020, p. 2).

# Aims

How do we protect and connect?



Challenge two misconceptions

Social workers can make people change

Our relationships are the primary therapeutic vehicle to bring about change



Offer a different, more realistic and more optimistic account of our work

3 areas

Principles for conceptualising  
parental difficulties

```
graph TD; A[Principles for conceptualising parental difficulties] --> B[Working with denial: situational and psychological]; B --> C[Helping families];
```

Working with denial:  
situational and psychological

Helping families

# AREA 1: CONCEPTUALISING PARENTS DIFFICULTIES

‘If her past were your past, her pain your pain, her level of consciousness your level of consciousness, then you would think and act exactly as she does. With this realisation comes forgiveness, compassion, peace’

(Eckhart Tolle, 2003)

Can we 'enter into the internal world of others feelings and personal meanings so completely' that we lose 'all desire to evaluate and judge it?'

(Carl Rogers, 1961)

# AREA 2: DENIAL, RESISTANCE AND CONFLICT



# Denial

There are 'many strong social and interactional pressures that make denial a compelling response'

Denial disputes can 'often escalate to a point where enormous amounts of professional time, resources and energy are poured into them' (Turnell and Essex 2006: 29, 8).

# Situational denial

'Seek first to understand, then to be understood' (Covey 2004: 237).

Concerns the Local Authority might have.

Establish common goals.

Explain the process and possible outcomes

# Psychological denial

‘Psychological coping strategy designed to keep us emotionally stable in very unstable times’

Ian Thomas, Social Worker and TEDx Speaker

‘We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. **Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know**’ (Carl Rogers 1980, 116)

...being empathic is a complex, demanding, strong yet subtle and gentle way of being (Carl Rogers 1975, 143)

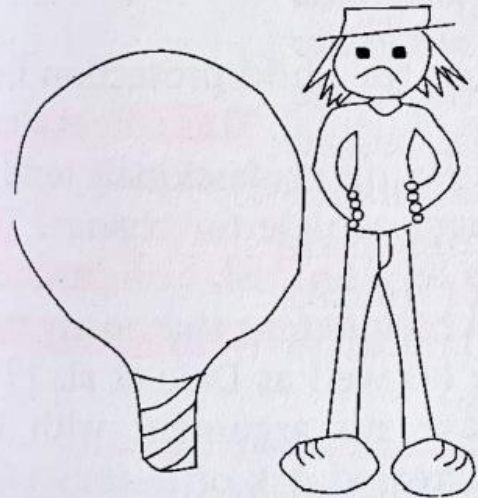


[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

# AREA 3: HELPING FAMILIES

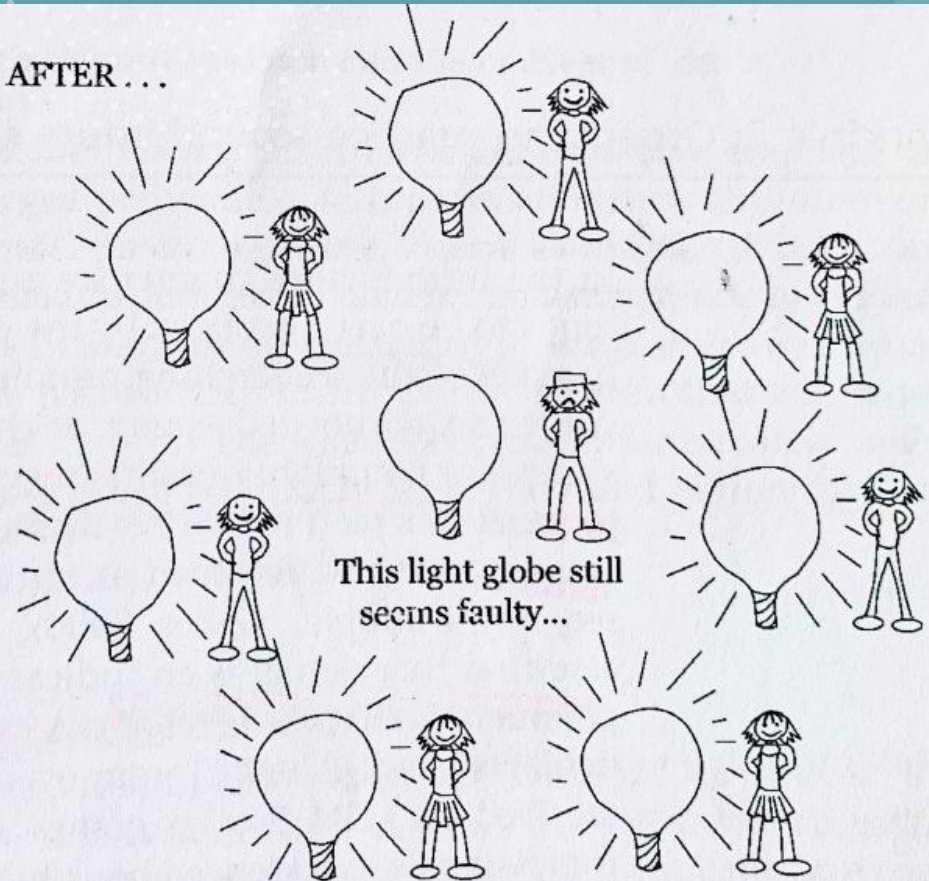
## Psychological and Social help

BEFORE...



This light globe seems faulty

AFTER...



This light globe still seems faulty...

but now we've installed a whole new lighting system!



Eradicating risk, or...

# Concluding thoughts



# 'The system said nothing' by Alex Fox

The family said, "The system will only help you when it's already too late."

The social worker said, "I came into this job to help people, but our systems get in the way."

The manager said, "We know we need to do things differently, but we have to work within the systems we have been given."

The director said, "We've got an exciting new vision for empowering people, but our systems take so long to catch up."

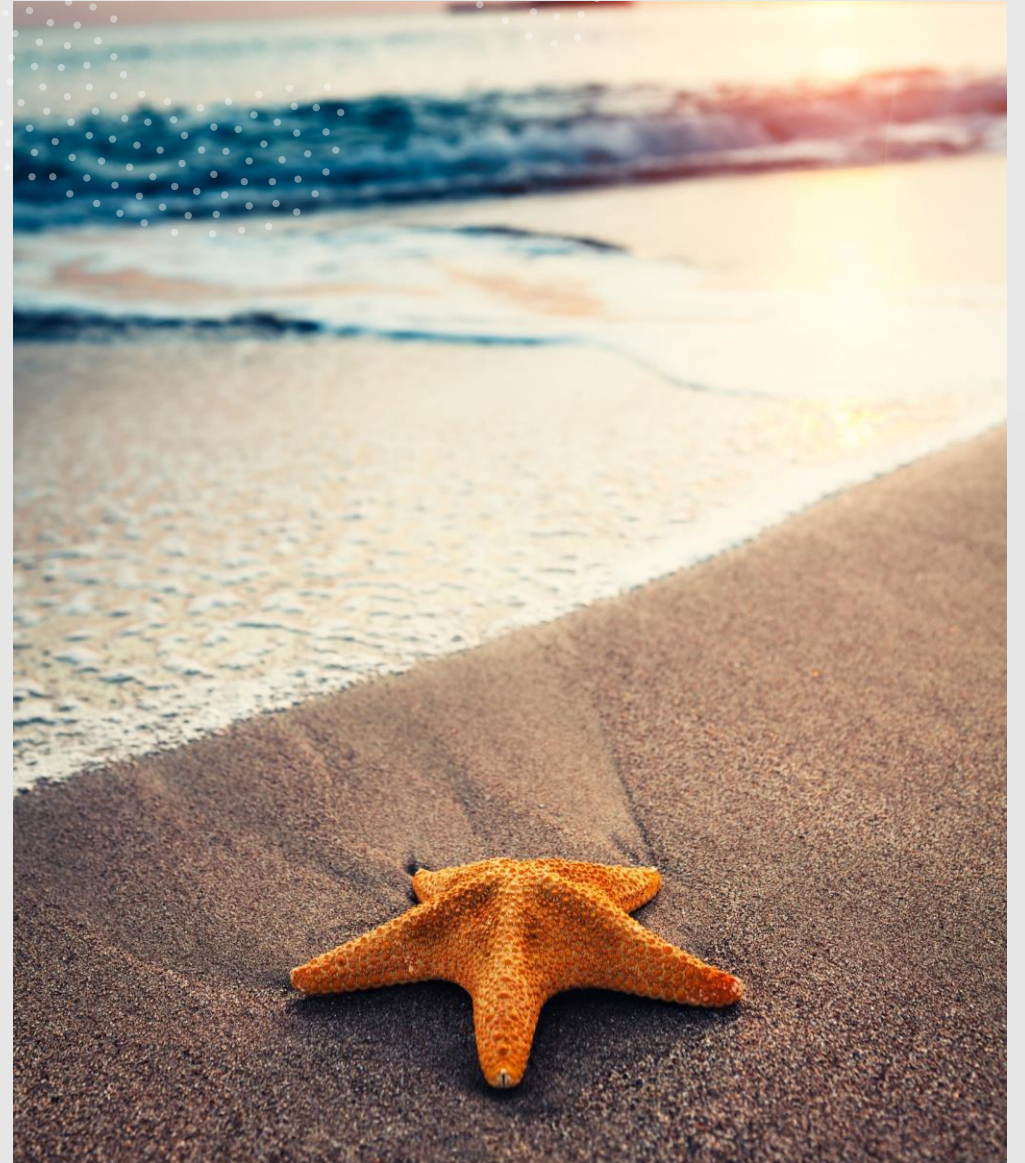
The Minister said, "The first thing you learn in this job is how hard it is to change the system."

But there was no system, so the system said nothing.

# The serenity prayer



God grant me the  
**Serenity**  
to accept the things I  
cannot change...  
**Courage** to  
change the things I can  
and **Wisdom** to  
know the difference...



# Thank you...

- **A Compassionate Enquiry into Addiction:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VljLxDLIBG4&t=824s>