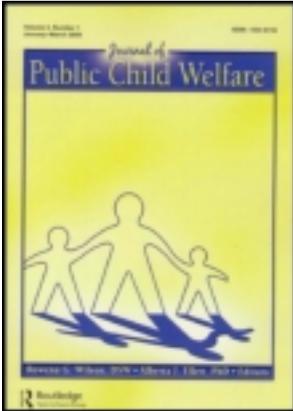


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The Challenges to Promoting Collaboration Between Child Protection Services Workers and Court Professionals

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The Challenges to Promoting Collaboration Between Child Protection Services Workers and Court Professionals: An Exploratory Study of Case Records

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Michael J. Austin

ABSTRACT. In juvenile dependency proceedings, the protection of children depends upon the collaboration between professionals in the child welfare and court systems. Since there is little empirical research on such collaborations, this exploratory study sought to identify factors associated with the difficulties encountered in these professional relationships through an analysis of case records. The data were extracted from 111 cases in seven Northern California counties. Using a logistic regression it was found that the short tenure of court professionals is significantly associated with the difficulties of fostering inter-professional

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collaboration. The implications for future practice and research are identified. doi:10.1300/J479v01n03_07 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Perceived difficulty, child welfare worker, juvenile dependency proceedings, court professional, inter-professional collaboration

While much has been written about the importance of inter-professional collaboration in child welfare services, less attention has been given to the factors that contribute to the collaboration. In juvenile dependency proceedings, the protection of children depends upon the collaboration of social welfare services and the courts. While this interaction calls for these systems to work together effectively, social work practitioners report a high degree of conflict and tension between social workers and legal professionals in this context (Katz, Spoonmoore, & Robinson, 1994). Despite such conflicts, there has been virtually no empirical study of this relationship or the factors contributing to these difficulties.

The demand for inter-professional collaboration in the child welfare system takes on increased significance when the system is over-burdened and under-funded that can cause ineffective oversight of the cases, lack of timely responses to families, and delayed permanent placement planning. Since these factors may cause more tension between child welfare and court professionals, it is important to look more closely at inter-professional collaboration.

While the child welfare and court systems share the goal of achieving positive outcomes for children and families, there is remarkably little case-based research that might further our understanding of how this goal is reached. Schwartz, Weinsner and Enoch (1999) noted that “academic, practitioner, and policy debates have mainly focused on the relationship between juvenile delinquency and the juvenile court rather than the relationship between child welfare and the juvenile court” (p. 130). This study seeks to address this neglected area of child welfare research by investigating the factors associated with the professional relationships between child protective services (CPS) workers, attorneys, judicial officers, and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) in the juvenile dependency process and to identify some of the barriers to the inter-professional collaboration based primarily on the perceptions of CPS workers. The following literature frames the major issues for the study: (1) the context of the professional relationship in the juvenile dependency

system, (2) the need for inter-professional collaboration, and (3) factors contributing to difficulty in inter-professional relationship.

The Context of Professional Relationships in the Juvenile Dependency System

Interaction between child welfare and legal professionals occur within a legal framework that defines roles and responsibilities, and creates immense pressure to meet established timelines. Federal juvenile dependency legislation, providing for judicial oversight and establishing accelerated timelines, has increased the demands upon both child welfare and legal professionals. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) provides the original legislative foundation for federal child welfare policy. A key goal is the provision of a permanent placement plan for children in foster care, through reunification with their own parents or placement with another family. AACWA required agencies to make reasonable efforts to reunify families, and assigns judges an oversight role in the juvenile dependency system. Through this act, juvenile courts became more adversarial as parental rights and best interest issues emerged in all states (Kopels & Rycraft, 1993). This fundamental change altered the very nature of the roles of parties within the court including CPS workers, attorneys, and judges. Like the AACWA, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) emphasizes the timely placement of foster children in permanent homes. Under the ASFA, the juvenile court and child welfare agencies maintain the same responsibilities as under the AACWA. However, the ASFA established shorter timelines for courts and child welfare agencies to accomplish permanency planning and the termination of parental rights. These legislative reforms increased pressures for professionals to meet timelines and heighten the potential for creating tensions between child welfare and court professionals to comply with judicial orders regarding reasonable efforts to maintain or reunify families.

The Need for Inter-Professional Collaboration

It has been well-known that legal and child welfare professionals share different organizational cultures; the child welfare professional utilizes interventions based on a collaborative systems perspective while the legal professionals stress the protection of the rights of individuals based on an adversarial system (Bailie, 1998; Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2000; Weinstein, 1997). Given these two cultures, the collaborative process

becomes critical when addressing the needs of our nation's most vulnerable and troubled families (e.g., abused and neglected children, children with special needs, or in some cases, delinquent children).

Collaboration is both a process and an outcome when promoting effective child protection among the several governmental agencies that are responsible for identifying, assessing and responding to child abuse and neglect (Corrigan, 2000). No single agency has overall responsibility or the ability to make final, unilateral, and enforceable decisions in these matters. Therefore the collaborative process needs to empower all parties by creating opportunities for people to understand and appreciate their talents and contribution. The empowerment stems from a sense of belonging, being valued, feeling of making a contribution, and being seen as an equal partner with skills, strengths, and abilities where the authority or responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect is shared. Since public child welfare agencies cannot do the job alone, the protection of children depends on inter-professional collaboration between social services and legal systems.

Factors Contributing to Difficulties in Fostering Inter-Professional Relationships

Some of the most commonly cited barriers to collaboration are poor information flow due to lack of communication, lack of respect and trust, and different professional mandates and orientations (Reese & Sontag, 2001). Among these, communication is critical in order to facilitate ongoing collaboration and to achieve effective outcome (Department of Health, 1994; Lowe & O'Hara, 2000; London Borough of Greenwich, 1987; Price, 1991; Witherspoon, 1997; von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000; Zungolo, 1994). With regard to the dependency system, Carnochan et al. (2002) found that communication between CPS workers and the court professionals is critical to fostering understanding and cooperation.

Studies have shown that due, in part, to low professional status and pay, many child welfare professionals, judicial officers, and lawyers are inexperienced and not adequately trained for collaborative work in the child welfare court system (Edwards, 1992; Herring, 1993; Weinstein, 1997). Although both the child welfare system and the child welfare agencies are over-burdened, under-funded, and overwhelmed by rising caseloads, a recent study with 10 Bay Area county social service agencies (Carnochan et al., 2002) found that CPS workers reported experiencing difficult relationships much more frequently when compared to judges, attorneys, and CASA volunteers. The study also reported that

CPS workers viewed themselves as located at the bottom of the hierarchy and were uniquely responsible for interacting with court professionals as well as with multiple individuals in a family. The study further identified that the difficulty perceived by the CPS worker due to low status and high responsibility is compounded by short tenure for judges and attorneys, who are quickly rotated into higher status assignments. These barriers reinforce the importance of searching for factors to encourage inter-professional communication.

The child welfare system serves some of our nation's most vulnerable and troubled families in crisis—children who have been abused and neglected, children who have special medical or mental health needs, or in some cases, children who are delinquent. The emotionally challenging nature of juvenile dependency work may strain professional relationships. This can be more challenging when the case is complicated due to client's needs and noncompliance. Edwards (1992) and Ross (1998) observe that professionals who work with child dependency cases may be at risk of burnout. Empirical research has examined factors contributing to job satisfaction and job burnout among child welfare workers (Horejsi, 1994; Landsman, 2001; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1994). Landsman (2001) concludes that there is a need for further research to examine job stressors among child welfare professionals; this should include the consequences of job stressors on the relationship between child welfare and legal professionals.

Given the limited amount of research on inter-professional collaboration in the area of child welfare and the courts, this exploratory study focused on the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between inter-professional collaboration and case complexity that is related to inter-personal collaboration based on the CPS worker's perception? Specifically, how do the complex client needs (e.g., psychiatric and substance abuse) impact the CPS worker's perceptions of inter-professional collaboration?
2. After accounting for case characteristics, are there other factors that contribute to the inter-professional collaboration based on the CPS worker's perception? Specifically, what is the impact of the short tenure of court professionals on the collaborative process?

The CPS worker's perception of inter-professional relationship was the focus since it is personal interpretation that determines the meaning of collaboration, not objective reality (Wertz, 1983).

METHODS

Definition of “Easy” versus “Difficult” Case

Collaboration can mean many things to many people. In this study, the conceptual definition of collaboration based on existing literature was defined as an active and ongoing inter-personal relationship in developing case plans for child protection and providing services for children and their families in the dependency system. In the working definition of collaboration proposed in this study, there are two criteria to evaluate inter-personal collaboration between the court professionals and the CPS workers: (1) lack of collaboration due to insufficient communication between CPS workers and court professionals, and (2) lack of collaboration due to an insufficient understanding of case complexity by the court professionals. Based on this definition, cases were classified as “difficult” (any conflicts or lack of collaboration between the CPS worker and the court professionals) or “easy” (conflict-free collaboration between the CPS worker and the court professionals).

County liaisons in each agency identified the CPS workers engaged in court work and asked them to select samples of both difficult and easy cases from their caseloads. In order to establish validity of a sample, we used an additional metric instead of relying solely on the CPS worker’s sampling selection. In order to validate the sample selection, the participating CPS workers were requested to provide the reasons for why they perceived the case to be difficult or easy with respect to fostering inter-professional collaboration. Examples of the reasons for labeling a case as difficult and easy are provided in Table 1.

Sampling

This study seeks to address some of the issues affecting professional relationships in the collaboration between child welfare agencies and the courts. It was conducted by the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) located in Northern California, in collaboration with the child welfare departments of seven Northern California counties. These seven counties are Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Solano. These sites represent seven different child welfare systems, in counties with different client populations and caseloads. The directors of each county social service agency are members of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium which conducted the study.

TABLE 1. Examples of the CPS Workers' Perceptions of Difficult and Easy Cases

Difficult Cases	Easy Cases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor communication between minor's attorney, city attorney and CPS workers is complicated by Mom's significant mental health issues as keeps pushing her attorney to make unrealistic requests. • The Court has refused to dismiss this minor's case even through minor is not interested in participating and his whereabouts are often unknown. • The parents' attorneys do not acknowledge parents' lack of cooperation in allowing visits with children. • Mom's attorney constantly requests services for Mom who is incapable of using them (her 9th child came into care) and has filed numerous continuances. • Our attorneys are rotated as soon as they figure out how to do the job. • Many court rulings that were far from minor's best interest and there was disagreement between the CPS workers and minor's attorney. • Extraordinary amount of court time and CPS worker time taken on side-issues . . . CPS worker believes that counsels are not adequate for handling the case. • Family court case with escalating allegations between parties. • This is a matter of the two parents being substance abusing parents. The judicial officer was unable to get past a bias against the CPS worker to see the validity of concerns regarding the emotionally disturbed minor in the care of the substance abusing father. The minor's attorney has not worked for the minor's best interests in that he has minimized the affects of the father's impairments as they relate to his son's care. <i>This is a case where the judicial officer can not understand the power of cumulative risk</i> • History court is not taking it into account long-term drug offender and gave birth to this child who was drug exposed. Court allowed older siblings to live with mother while mother was using drugs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This case which includes several other children is easier because of the children's attorney really knows the children and the details of the case. • Everyone on this case is in agreement on the recommended next steps. • This case is easy because the court commissioner and the attorneys agree with the recommendations of the child welfare worker. • The case seemed "easy" because the court typically agrees with the recommendations and nothing unusual comes up. • This case of two children in two different program has been uncontested because the attorneys have been cooperative with the child welfare department. • This case has been easy because the court commissioner has gone along with the CPS worker's recommendation. • Although the mother insisted that she does not need to comply with the CPS worker's recommendations, the court maintain firm support for the CPS worker's recommendations. • This case of two children in two different programs has been uncontested because the attorneys have been cooperative with the child welfare department.

TABLE 1 (continued)

Difficult Cases	Easy Cases
<p><i>Example of Disqualified Difficult Cases</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in working with Juvenile Court (minor was arrested for sexual assault). • Minor has a criminal history and very difficult to locate an appropriate placement. • Child is defiant and has a lot of emotional problems. 	<p><i>Example of Disqualified Easy Cases</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The case is easy because it is stable with no crises (16 year old minor has been consistently participating in the Independent Living Skills Program). • This case is easy because the caretaker is responsive, cooperative, and complies with needed services for this family.

This study utilized an exploratory design that examines a subject that is relatively unexplored (Robin & Babbie, 1997). In this exploratory study, representative samples of cases in each county were difficult to determine; instead, each county agency was asked to provide a sample of 30 cases selected on the basis of judgments made by the CPS workers with regard to inter-personal collaboration. The sample was originally designed for 20 difficult cases and 10 easy cases from all seven BASSC affiliated counties. The reason for double the sample size of difficult cases was to maximize the array of case characteristics and the judicial processes contribute that can contribute to the determination of cases identified as difficult. By the time data collection was completed, however, we obtained a total of 182 cases: 113 difficult cases, 69 easy cases, 20 unidentified cases, and 8 duplicated cases (sibling groups—sharing same court professionals). Among these cases, only 60 difficult cases and 62 easy cases fit the sampling criteria in which the case is either difficult or easy based on the working definition of inter-personal collaboration between the CPS worker and court professionals. Since all cases should have reached the dispositional hearing stage in order to ensure that all cases in this study were dependency cases, 11 of the 122 cases were disqualified. As a result, the data analysis focused on a total of 111 cases that comprised 55 difficult cases and 56 easy cases. Table 2 illustrates the process of constructing the sample for this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively from case files. The CPS workers provided the case numbers along with the classification as either a “difficult” case and an “easy” case. Upon selecting the sample cases for this

TABLE 2. Sampling Procedure

	Original Plan	Initial Data Collection	Satisfying Sampling Criteria	Data for the Analysis
Easy Cases	70	69	62	56
Difficult Cases	140	113	60	55
<i>Total</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>182</i>	<i>122</i>	<i>111</i>

study, the data for the 111 cases were extracted from the CPS case files corresponding to the case numbers that CPS workers provided (it is important to note that the number of cases is equal to the number of children). A case extraction form was developed in consultation with the county child welfare directors, and was designed to track characteristics of the child(ren) and parent(s) involved in the case and a series of variables relating to the judicial process. A review of the children's characteristics revealed that all children in our final dataset of 111 cases were abused and neglected by their caretakers and placed in either a foster home or a relative's home (excluding cases related to delinquency, homelessness, runaway and institutional placements like group homes). Graduate social work student research assistants were trained to extract information using a structured case extraction form by reviewing the records for each case selected. In order to increase inter-rater reliability, regularly scheduled meeting with the research assistants were scheduled, however, inter-rater reliability was not numerically assessed.

Sample Characteristics

Of the total of 111 children, 40.8% were White, 20.7% were African American, 17.1% were Hispanic, and 13.5% were multiracial. The sample included 57.3% females and 42.7% males. The mean age of the children was 8.75 years ($SD = 5.73$) and their mean duration in care was 1.86 years ($SD = 1.93$). With regard to the Child Abuse and Neglect Petition made by court, the majority of cases were neglected (88.3%), followed by physical abuse (13.5%), emotional abuse (12.6%) and sexual abuse (10.8%). The majority of cases reflected parental substance abuse (76.4%) and nearly half of the cases reflected parental psychiatric problems. The key variables used in the analyses are noted in Table 3. There were negligible amounts of missing data (less than 5%) in this study. To preserve sample size, we calculated variable means for missing cases.

TABLE 3. Case Characteristics and Judicial Process Variables

Variable Type	Variable Description
<i>Case characteristics</i>	
Child Characteristics	Ethnicity—White, black, and Hispanic Age Gender Psychiatric evaluation—yes or no Type of placement—kinship care vs. foster care Reason for the detention—type of abuse (physical, neglect, sexual or emotional abuse) Number of other siblings in case of the CPS Length in care (measured by mean number of months up to the Dispositional hearing)
Parent Characteristics	Needs for Psychiatric treatment—yes or no Needs substance abuse treatment—yes or no Father's involvement—the number of court appearances during the judicial hearing process/the number of hearings Mother's involvement—the number of court appearances during the judicial hearing process/the number of hearings
<i>Judicial process</i>	Tenure: Measured by the total number of a court professional presiding over case up to the time of the Dispositional hearing. Ideally, there should be only one judicial officer but there can be many. Number of review hearings (including continued review hearings) from the detention hearing through dispositional hearing on case

The demographic data from California's Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS)¹ on the child welfare population in the state were used to assess the representativeness of the sample. The sample is generally representative of the state's child welfare population with regard to race and gender; however, the average age of the children in this study is one year younger than children in Child Welfare system in California (mean age = 8.4, $t = -1.89$, $p < .05$).

The data were analyzed in two stages, beginning with a descriptive analysis and followed by logistic regression. First, the bivariate analyses were computed to examine the distribution of observations in this sample for the characteristics of the child and the parent as well as the judicial procedure based on the classification of cases as "difficult" or "easy." Second, logistic regression was used to identify factors that contribute to Court-CPS professional collaboration after controlling for the child and parent characteristics. All variables were entered in a single block.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Children and Parents: The analysis of the children's characteristics, including psychiatric evaluation, ethnicity, and gender, indicates that there was no statistically significant difference between easy and difficult cases, with the exception of the type of abuse and age (see Table 4). With regard to the ages of the children, younger children tended to be more predominant in difficult cases ($t = 2.41, p = .018$). Similarly, for the child's time in care, the average number of months for difficult cases is 30 months while it is 18 months for easy cases ($p < .005$). None of the characteristics of parents and other family members (e.g., psychiatric and substance histories of the parents, the number of other children in CPS care and the parent's court appearance during the judicial process after controlling for duration in care) turned out to be statistically significant. Hence, based on the result of bivariate analysis, insignificant variables were dropped in further analysis.

Judicial Process: Significant associations were found between the classification of difficult or easy cases and the tenure of the court professionals (see Table 4). For example, between the Detention hearing and the Dispositional hearing, "easy" cases had an average number of 2.5 judicial officers over the entire life of the case while "difficult" cases had an average number of 3.1 judicial officers over the entire case, however, the difference was only marginally significant ($p = .08$). The difference between the "easy" and "difficult" cases is most striking with respect to the mother's attorney and county counsel. For example, in "difficult" cases there were an average number of 2.4 mother's attorneys participating in the case in comparison to average number of 1.7 mother's attorneys in "easy" cases ($t = -3.104, p = .002$). Even more striking are the differences for the county counsel ($t = -5.041, p < .001$), where difficult cases had a much higher average number of professionals engaged in the difficult cases than in easy cases. Although the number of other court professionals, such as father's attorney and child's attorney, were insignificant, these variables were still included in the multivariate analysis due to their importance in this study.

In examining other aspects of the judicial process, it was found that only 16.1% of the "easy" cases had contested hearings, while 42.6% of the "difficult" cases had a contested hearing ($\chi^2 = 9.37, p = .002$, data not shown). However, the data did not include the reason for the contested hearing nor the party for the contest. Thus, this variable was not included for further analysis. With respect to the number of review hearings that occur between detention and dispositional hearings, the average

TABLE 4. The Association of the Characteristics of Children and Parents and the Number of Court Professionals Presiding Over the Case up to the Dispositional Hearing and the Inter-Professional Collaboration Based on the Perceptions of the CPS Workers

Variable	Easy (n = 56)	Difficult (n = 55)	P-Value
<i>Children's characteristics</i>			
Evidence of psychiatric evaluation	24(43.6%)	25(46.3%)	.518
Type of placement			
Foster home	42(76.4%)	33(62.3%)	.205
Kinship	13(23.6%)	19(35.8%)	
Type of abuse			
Physical abuse	6(10.9%)	6(12.0%)	.861
Neglect	46(83.6%)	47(96.0%)	.096
Emotional abuse	8(14.5%)	4(8.0%)	.292
Sexual abuse	4(7.3%)	6(12.0%)	.41
Age	10.02 (6.14)	7.45 (5.00)	.018 (t = 2.41)
Race			
White	20(35.7%)	25(45.5%)	
Black	12(26.1%)	11(21.1%)	.101
Hispanic	14(30.4%)	5(12.2%)	
Sex			
Female	36(64.3%)	27(50.0%)	.130
Male	20(35.7%)	27(50.0%)	.001(t = -3.56)
Length in care (mean number of months as open case between Detention and Dispositional)	17.78(1.96)	30.22(2.97)	
<i>Parents' characteristics</i>			
Evidence of psychiatric evaluation	23(44.2%)	28(53.8%)	.53
Evidence of substance abuse	41(73.2%)	43(79.6%)	.704
Parents' involvement			
Father's involvement	1.78(1.46)	2.38(1.55)	.48 (t = -.73)
Mother's involvement	1.47(1.51)	1.17(1.4)	.69 (t = .41)
<i>The number of court professionals</i>			
Judicial officer	2.45(2.09)	3.09(1.75)	.087 (t = -1.73)
Child's attorney	1.82(1.43)	1.73(1.08)	.868 (t = .167)
Mother's attorney	1.69(1.21)	2.43(1.56)	.002 (t = -3.104)
Father's attorney	1.62(3.25)	1.81(1.40)	.691 (t = -.399)
County counsel	1.82(1.71)	3.52(1.81)	<.001 (t = -5.041)

number for "difficult" cases was 5.08 while the average number for "easy" cases was 2.18 ($p < .001$). It appears that "difficult" cases had both more review hearings and longer episodes of children in care. However, the number of case review hearings was dropped in the multivariate analysis due to its significant correlation with the long history of a case

(correlation coefficient = .72, $p < .001$). This indicates that the longer the child remains in the care, the larger the number of review hearing. Thus, only length in care was included in the final analysis.

Multivariate Analysis: In the multivariate analysis, two different classes of variables were considered: case characteristics (parents and children) variables and judicial process variables. As Table 5 shows, the results suggested that the CPS workers perceive the case to be “difficult” when the child in care is younger. For each unit increase in age, the odds of being in the difficult case decreased by 41% ($.59 - 1.0 = -.41$, $p < .05$) after controlling for judicial process. With regard to judicial process, the court professional’s short-tenure appeared to be a strong predictor of inter-professional collaboration after controlling for case characteristics (e.g., child’s length of time in care): for each unit increase in the number of court professionals, the odds of being a difficult case is increased. For the juvenile officer, it is increased by 10% ($1.10 - 1.0 = .10$, $p < .05$), for mother’s attorney, the odds of being a difficult case is increased by 81% ($1.81 - 1.0 = .81$, $p < .05$), and for county counsel, the odds of being a difficult case is increased by 59% ($1.59 - 1.0 = .59$, $p < .01$).

TABLE 5. The Effect of Case Characteristics and Judicial Process on the Inter-Professional Collaboration Based on the Perceptions of the CPS Workers

Variable	Odds Ratio	SE	P-Value
<i>Case characteristics</i>			
Parent psychiatric evaluation	1.11	.29	.694
Parent substance abuse	1.14	.34	.726
Child age	.590	.152	.041
Child psychiatric evaluation	.73	.22	.308
Length in care	1.003	.044	.952
<i>Judicial process</i>			
Judicial officer presiding over case	1.10	.17	.039
Mother’s attorney presiding over case	1.81	.27	.003
Father’s attorney presiding over case	1.06	.09	.489
Child’s attorney presiding over case	1.05	.15	.740
County council presiding over case	1.59	.19	.010

Note: Model summary: $N = 111$, $-2 \log \text{likelihood} = 110.20$, Cox and Snell R Square = .31, and Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test Chi-square = 1.793 with P-value of .811.

CONCLUSION

As Landsman (2001) suggested, there is a need for empirical research to examine the relationship between child welfare workers and legal professionals. This exploratory study of child welfare case records sought to identify the factors that relate to inter-professional collaboration based on the perceptions of the CPS workers. The study involved two areas of inquiry. First, we examined a relationship between the characteristics of parents and children and the CPS worker's perceived difficulty of the cases. We found no clear relationship, except for the age of the child. When the child is younger, the case was more "difficult" with respect to fostering inter-professional collaboration. This indicates that when the child is younger, the case could be more complicated in terms of the decision-making process related to permanency planning. Other case characteristics, such as parent's mental health and substance abuse, had no apparent effect on the difficulty of the case. The length of the case, as measured by the mean number of months that the case was open, was significantly associated with the perception of the difficulty of the case; the longer the case was open, the more complex it became and the more difficult to foster inter-professional collaboration. However, when other variables such as the short tenures of the court professionals were controlled for, it was no longer significant.

The second area of inquiry explored the impact of the short tenure of multiple court professionals on the perception of case difficulty, after controlling for the length of the case and other case characteristics. The results suggest that the short tenure can lead to the perception of case difficulty, especially the disruption of communications that can lead to increased complexity. As described above, rotation of prosecuting attorneys within different divisions of their office is common (Weinstein, 1997). While this study did not explore the tenure of judges and attorneys *per se*, rather the number of the court professionals presiding on a case between the Detention and the Dispositional hearing, it seems logical that the rotation system could have a negative impact on the inter-professional collaboration based on the perceptions of the CPS workers.

The interpretation of the results of this exploratory study needs to take into consideration at least four limitations. First, the sampling strategy and measurement methods were exploratory and future studies need to be done with a random sample of the population from different county jurisdictions. Second, the likelihood of demonstrating statistically significant relationships was greatly reduced due to the small sample size, and therefore a larger sample of cases is needed to assess the relationships

between the perception of case difficulty and other factors (e.g., the case characteristics, staff turnover, and the adjudication process). Third, this study had limited demographic information about the CPS workers, court officers and attorneys as well as the nature of their inter-professional interactions. Future study is needed to assess the relationship between the characteristics of the professionals, the nature of case complexity, and the nature of inter-professional interactions. Finally, the involvement of parents did not appear to be a significant factor in defining case difficulty; in essence, the case did not appear more difficult to the CPS workers when the family actively worked within the court system to keep their child. However, since parents, like court professionals, were not involved in this study, further research is needed regarding the role of the family in the court decision-making process.

Recognizing the importance of the partnership between the CPS worker and the prosecuting attorney and judge, this study sought to identify the barriers to an effective CPS worker/court professional collaboration that had the shared goal of protecting children who are at risk of abuse, neglect, and dependency. Each county child welfare agency has different systems for legal representation and for facilitating communications between the CPS workers and the court professionals. In some counties, representation is provided by the county prosecutor's office, other counties utilize in-house attorneys, and still others use a combination of agency attorneys and their county prosecutor's office. In spite of these major differences, the study found that it is in the best interest of a child to be served by the court professionals who have as much experience as possible in the child welfare system. Continuity of the legal staffs such as the judicial officer, mother's attorney, county counsel is critical for providing skill-building opportunities and consistency in child welfare cases. Consequently, attention to retaining committed professionals in child welfare agencies, legal organizations that serve children and families, and juvenile dependency courts may be an important step toward improving professional relationships. Eliminating or reducing the rotation process is needed so that attorneys have an opportunity to develop the specialized skills needed in juvenile law. Further study of the impact of the short tenure of court professionals in the juvenile dependency system is needed. Inter-professional collaboration continues to be an essential element of the child welfare and court systems. More research needs to focus on the factors that encourage or discourage inter-professional collaboration. Also, further study of the reasons for staff turnovers in the juvenile dependency system needs to be pursued in order to assess the importance

of case continuity and how it facilitates positive, cooperative relationships among professionals in the juvenile dependency system.

As stated earlier, this exploratory study was implemented to increase our understanding of the factors contributing to the inter-professional collaboration between the CPS workers and legal professionals based on the perceptions of the CPS workers. Inter-professional collaboration should be the backbone of child protection systems. The effective management of the child welfare and legal systems requires effective collaboration in order to achieve the goal of positive outcomes for children and families.

NOTE

1. Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS), available at the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) at the University of California, Berkeley. CSSR receives quarterly extracts from the CWS/CMS under an Interagency Agreement with the California Department of Social Services, and presents data about children who are involved in the California Child Welfare System.

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