

The Impossible Imperative: Navigating the Competing Principles of Child Protection Policy

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California policymakers have shown a longstanding interest in child welfare policy reform. But policymaking in this field is challenging. Common principles that center on protecting children from harm often unify partisan differences, yet competing principles are typically at play in child welfare policy debates, none of which fall into usual partisan camps. These difficulties, coupled with the intricacy of establishing common rules to serve families who are uncommon in complexity and vulnerability, suggest a fraught policy landscape. Efforts to bring order to this policy tumult too often result in law-makers' over-reliance on simplistic notions about children, families, and government's fundamental responsibilities. Professor Berrick's longstanding research in the area of child welfare reveals 8 fundamental principles that shape California policymaking. Based on her new book, *The Impossible Imperative*, Berrick examines these principles against the intricacies of real-world child protection to reveal the competing tensions at play in devising rational, responsive policy.

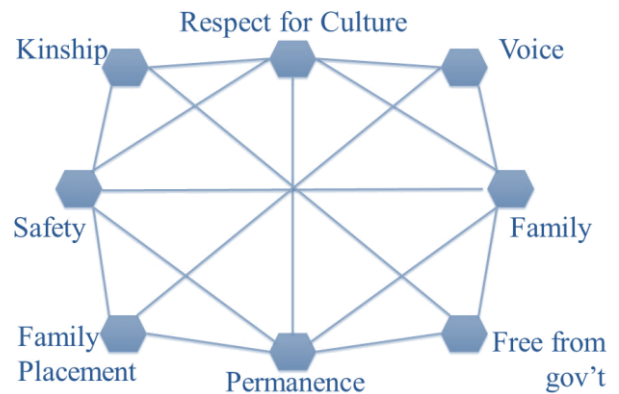
Each year, almost half-a-million children are reported to child welfare agencies in California with allegations of child abuse or neglect. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the average lifetime cost associated with child maltreatment for all affected children exceeds \$125 billion. Policymakers in California have led the nation on a number of issues relating to child welfare including: recognizing the importance of children's educational stability; privileging relatives when selecting a child's care provider; extending foster care eligibility beyond age 18; and incentivizing the use of family-care over congregate care for children. Policymaking in child welfare is often guided by shared ideas about how children should be raised and how government should respond to vulnerable families. These values transcend politics and partisanship. *The Impossible Imperative*, a new book based upon 25 years of research on child welfare and an examination of typical child welfare cases in California, reveals a series of principles that underlie most child welfare policies.

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Key Findings

- Eight fundamental principles guide child welfare policymaking and practice.
- Child welfare policies typically enforce a preference for one principle over another.
- The 8 principles usually conflict with one another and should not be characterized as a guide to uniform decision making.

Eight guiding principles for child welfare policy-making and practice



Implications for Policy

Policymakers know that every policy response entails unintended consequences. In child welfare, however, these trade-offs go beyond the familiar terrain of financial, administrative, or political feasibility. Just as practitioners should be principled in their work with families, policymakers, too, should recognize the complexity of principled child welfare. Their efforts to use policy as a tool for championing one principle in child welfare will ultimately result in conflict with other deeply held beliefs about children, parents, and government's responsibility to families. Policymakers' honest engagement with the competing considerations at stake in child welfare will help the public, the press, and the field to reject simplistic, unrealistic antidotes and grapple with the reality of a field that is messy, complicated, and enormously difficult.