

Insight into the world of child care social workers

CHILD protection workers do society's dirty work and are universally despised for it. Low status, chronic stress, low pay, fears about their own safety and witch hunts in the wake of abuse enquiries have crushed the profession. Social workers are leaving child care social services at an unprecedented rate. Yet rarely have they been needed more.

The BBC and the Open University have joined forces to provide an insight into this world through the eyes of the Bristol Social Services child care teams, who conducted their jobs while BBC cameras rolled for a year.

The end result, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, is an honest insight into the profession and a candid view of the standards of parenting that a cross-section of our society's children are being exposed to.

Someone to Watch Over Me, provides the viewer with the opportunity to step into the world of the social worker and see life through their eyes.

In Bristol, 190 child care social workers are responsible for the safety of the city's 73,000 children. Each year they receive 4,500 referrals about children at risk. It's an all but invisible emergency service, except when something goes wrong.

In February 2000 in Haringey in London something did go terribly, wrong. Eight-year-old Victoria Climbié died, having being neglected and systematically tortured by her great-aunt and her boyfriend. Social workers and other professionals missed 12 opportunities to save her. As the filming began with the Bristol teams, the Victoria Climbié inquiry published its damning report and Nigel Richardson, a member of the inquiry team, came to Bristol to pass on the lessons learnt from the case.

"When we're dealing with concerns about children you must never do nothing," Nigel pleads.

The series concentrates on half-a-dozen of Bristol's child care social workers as they go about their day to day work in the aftermath of the

Victoria Climbié Inquiry. Each day they deal with a huge range of referrals including, a baby with five suspicious rib fractures, a four-year-old boy found living in appalling conditions and a mother who worries that her 14-year-old daughter is dealing drugs and having inappropriate relationships with older men.

Contrary to popular belief, social services cannot actually remove children – only the courts and the police are empowered to do that. The popular perception is that social workers remove children from their parents at the drop of a hat. The reality is that social workers do not make such recommendations lightly – indeed they spend most of their time trying to keep families together. Sometimes though, the abuse is so severe that children are permanently removed from their parents.

"I've worked on cases" says social worker Frances, "where you've seen a mother's distress on losing her child and you want to say no. No I didn't mean it, just because you can't bear to see someone in that much pain. But you have to remember the child, the child, the child."

Someone to Watch Over Me is a documentary series which takes viewers into a hitherto closed and hidden world. Not only has Bristol Social Services given the BBC access to the day to day work of its child care teams but, for the first time, the family courts have allowed filming to continue when cases become subject to proceedings in the family courts.

- *Someone To Watch Over Me*, an Open University and BBC co-production, is scheduled for transmission on BBC One on Tuesday November 16 at 10.35pm, and for the following five Tuesdays, concluding on 21 December 2004.

- *Someone to Watch Over Me*, was produced by Sarah Johnson, who brings the same sensitivity to this project as that which made her series *Love is not Enough* an award-winner.