



Interview with Don Hepburn Retired Child Protection Worker and Senior Manager at the Children's Aid Society

Don Hepburn retired from a career with Children's Aid in Scarborough, ON in 2007. He now is a valuable part of our Advisory Board, and works contract with Plan to Protect® as a trainer and consultant. We really appreciate his contribution to our team and hope you benefit from his expertise.

M) Your career has been spent in abuse prevention and child protection. Tell us about your journey?

D) I have 37 years experience with the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAS- Toronto) working in various capacities and positions from child protection worker to senior manager, until my retirement in May 2007. As a child protection worker I provided services to a caseload with varying types of cases including abuse, neglect and multi-problem families. I provided individual, family and group counselling. I was also designated as the Branch community protection worker, doing some community development in areas of Scarborough. I learned very quickly as a child protection worker that if I was going to be able to keep children safe that I needed to do so in partnership with others that knew the child and family: i.e. the teacher, the doctor, the neighbour etc.

As a Senior Manager, I was the Director of CAS-Toronto's community based branches in North York, Toronto and Scarborough. For many years I also managed the Society's Family Support Program. Throughout my child welfare career I worked collaboratively with other community services and agencies to provide needed services and programs to improve the well being of children and their families. In 2007 I was awarded the Making a Difference Award from the Toronto Child Abuse Centre, now known as Boost. This award recognized my contribution in Toronto in abuse prevention and treatment.

M) Over these years, what would you say impacted your life the greatest?

D) When I think about this, it was the tremendous responsibility of the positions that I held with CAS. This was serious business and not for the light of heart. I was dealing with the lives and the future of kids and their families on a daily basis.

M) What other positions have you held both in employment and as a volunteer?

D) My entire social work career was working with the Children's Aid of Toronto. I also served on the Hincks Treatment Centre Board of Directors for 5 years and participated in the merger of the Hincks Treatment Centre and Dellcrest Children's Centre to become the Hincks Dellcrest Centre (A Children's Mental Health Centre in Toronto)where I served on that Board for another year. I was also an elected Board Member of the Toronto Council for Children and Youth representing CFSA Funded Agencies in the mid nineties. I have always been active in various capacities in my church and community. In 1990 I received a Volunteer Award from The City of Scarborough.

M) What have been some of the heartbreaks that you have remembered over these years?

D) One of the great heartaches for me has been the realization that despite our best intentions and efforts we cannot always protect and ensure the safety of all children. We cannot always be there 24 / 7 for all children.

M) Is there any significant collaborative efforts that you have been involved in that have had an impact on both the family and the community?

D) As I stated early I believe strongly that it was always important to work collaboratively with other community services and agencies to provide programs and services to improve the well being of children and their families. I have done so at every position that I held at CAS of Toronto. Some that comes to mind: Chair of CASAT-Central Agency Sexual Abuse Treatment Program, Chair of Child Abuse Coordinating Committee in North York, Chair of Senior Managers Network, North York, Co-Chair North York Education Project, Member Somali Child Welfare Project, Chair Workshop Planning Committee on Emotional Abuse, and Member of Diversity in Action Scarborough-Adapting Mental Health Services for Newcomer Families etc.

M) Where do you see that there are still gaps in the system?

D) Unfortunately there will always be gaps. I think that there needs to be more effort in preventing child abuse and providing supports for children and families. In addition to the main stream agencies there needs to be funding for many ethno specific agencies to support new comer families.

M) If you were responsible to set laws and policies, what are some of the things that you would change?

D) I would change the child protection age in Ontario from 16 to 18 to be consistent with the protection age in 5 other provinces/ territories. This would allow CAS to intervene when older youth are abused or neglected. I would also extend supports to youth in the care of CAS's from age 21 to 25 to support them in completing their education.

M) What has been your greatest sense of accomplishment or delight?

D) My greatest sense of accomplishment has been: Being respected, being known as a man of integrity, a caring individual and person of faith.

M) Do you believe the efforts you and others like you, within organizations such as CAS have made a significant impact and changed situations around for the children involved? What would be a good example of that kind of change?

D) Yes, I believe that staff, volunteers and foster parents within CAS have had a significant impact on the well being and safety of children. I have heard many children and youth sharing their stories and how CAS made a difference in their life. PARC (Pape Adolescent Resource Centre) is a joint program of CAS-Toronto and Catholic CAS. Since 1985 this program has been helping youth in care prepare for independent living.

M) Don, how are most incidents of child abuse reported? Do the children tend to tell about it themselves? If not, why not?

D) My experience is that schools and child care centres are the largest referral source for CAS. Many children do not tell about their abuse. There may be many reasons for this: fear, feel guilty /ashamed or embarrassed, may believe it's their fault, love parent despite the abuse, view abuse as normal, fear no one will believe them, don't want to cause trouble etc. That is why it is so important for us to be aware of the signs of abuse and speak up for the children.

M) When children disclose that they have abused are most of these false allegations or are they true, or an element of truth within the disclosure?

D) My experience is that most allegations of abuse from children are true. Seldom are they false. Sometimes children may recant what they have disclosed but this is not necessarily an indication that it didn't happen. The child may have been pressured by family members to take back what they said.

M) What is one of the most important things that people should know about reporting abuse?

D) Anyone who suspects that a child has been abused or is at risk of abuse, has a legal responsibility and a moral responsibility to report their suspicion.

Thousands of children experience child abuse every year. Tragically in our city, province and country children still die each year because of abuse and neglect. In every one of these cases, someone knew about the abuse and failed to report it.

M) What happens after someone does report a suspected abuse?

D) When you call your local CAS, you will speak with an intake worker who is specially trained to listen to your concerns and ask questions before deciding how urgent the situation is and what type of intervention is required. If a child is in imminent danger, a social worker will respond immediately. At all times, the primary focus and responsibility is the safety and well being of the child.

M) Will the person who takes the intake call make the call?

D) CAS workers are professionals who evaluate your information using comprehensive guidelines and standards to determine the risk in each situation and kind of support and services needed. These decisions are made in consultation with a supervisor.

M) What have you been doing since your retired?

D) Now that I'm retired, I have more choice in what I am doing, and much less stress. I do not have to make some of the heavy decisions about a child /family. I have more time with my wife, children and four grandchildren. I have always had an interest in going to Africa. Since retiring, my wife and I have been to Rwanda and Kenya on three mission trips with Canadian Baptist Ministries. The first time we worked in the Eastleigh Slum of Nairobi Kenya with Somali refugees. On our second trip, my wife and I lead a team of 12 adults and youth from our church to do a build in Rwanda. Last fall we led a small team back to Eastleigh, Nairobi. During my retirement, I have also been the Camp Director for the Birchmount Baseball Camp. This is a partnership of our church and the local Baseball League.

Since April 2010, I have been an Associate with CAS-Toronto's Child Welfare Institute providing consultation , training and development services to the Society and Child Welfare field. And of course I am now a trainer and consultant on child welfare /child abuse matters with Plan to Protect®.

M) You joined the P2P staff almost three years ago. Why did you choose P2P and do you believe we are making a difference?

D) I had not heard about P2P until a friend introduced me to Melodie Bissell. I was very impressed with Plan to Protect® and what you and P2P was doing with Churches across the country to help them create safe environments for children. I believe P2P is doing some great child abuse prevention and so wanted to be a part of it. I had some time available and interest in doing some training. I believed that my child welfare experience and expertise could assist WKI and its members.

Child Welfare it is not well aware of what churches are doing to create safe environments for kids. This is a story to be shared!

I realize that P2P has now expanded well beyond the Churches to organizations like Scouts, Girl Guides, municipalities, etc. I certainly believe that P2P is making a difference. It's been encouraging to meet and hear people from churches, camps and other child and youth organizations and services talking about their plans to protect children and youth.

M) What is one of your biggest concerns as it relates to child / youth protection and abuse prevention among churches in Canada?

D) I believe we need to do more things together to help children and families affected by child abuse especially in those situations where children/families are known to each.

The church needs to partner with CAS in protecting children and preventing child abuse. Churches need to approach CAS because it is less likely that CAS will come to the church for their help.

M) A few years ago I had to report abuse. The child was put into foster care but I was able to work closely with foster care and CAS in providing care for the child and transition them through their process, until the child was reunited to their family. CAS really welcomed my participation. In your role at P2P, you recently helped a grandmother to work with CAS and obtain custody of her grandchild, who was potentially going to become a ward of the court. Can you tell us how that transpired?

D) I provided consultation and support to this grandmother when she was dealing with child welfare for the first time. It was a complex situation and she was overwhelmed in dealing with the authority of CAS. I helped her understand the CAS role and responsibility and what actions they would need to take. I brought clarity to the situation and encouraged her to work with the CAS. I helped her frame her questions and concerns in a way that CAS would respond favourably to them. I clarified her rights. I was prepared to meet with this grandmother and CAS to help resolve some differences. However in the end this never became necessary as they managed to resolve all differences. This grandmother was empowered and supported by my knowledge and experience with the system and services.

It was a successful ending with the court granting the grandmother custody of her grandchild. However there was no celebration because in the end grandmother would have preferred that the child's mother had been able to safely parent.

M) I hope Don that you will be able to help other families across Canada, and other clients of Plan to Protect® find good endings to unfortunate family situations. Do you have any final words of wisdom that you would give readers to help prevent abuse?

D) It is important to remember that we all share a responsibility to protect children from harm and help prevent child abuse. If one less child is harmed because of our efforts we have had success. Working together ... we do make a difference. Reporting does make a difference. That one report can make the difference in getting a child and the family the help they need, and the future of a child's life can change.

M) Thank you Don, for the difference you make and your role with Plan to Protect®. You have reminded us of the importance of working together. Child abuse prevention month is a good time to reflect on this and make the difference.

Don Hepburn and Melodie Bissell are available for speaking, consulting and training. To check availability and costs, email info@plantoprotect.com