

# Introduction

Readers of this book will be interested in working in, or planning to work in, the developing field of services for children and their families. Their concerns are likely to be the knowledge and skills required by the children's services workforce. In the book we try to address both knowledge and skills. The first involves a broad, interdisciplinary understanding of how children develop and families work in the context of their communities. The second is about learning how to do things to improve the life chances for children through good-quality professional practice.

The book draws on real-life experiences gained through the Sure Start intervention. Sure Start local programmes offered an opportunity for practitioners to learn from each other, and this happened at several levels. They were able to learn from colleagues within multi-disciplinary teams, from practitioners from other agencies and organisations, and from the families and communities with whom they were working.

Sure Start has offered a model of a learning community. It had a deeply serious moral purpose in addressing poverty and social exclusion. It was backed by a large-scale financial commitment from central government, and through the mechanism of local decision-making it provided flexibility to explore new ways of working. Although this left Sure Start open to the criticism that the intervention was loose and unstructured, it enabled communities to conduct serious experiments in the improvement of services for families.

Here we share what we have learned from the Sure Start experience where it is relevant for the development of the children's service workforce. The contribution to the knowledge base includes child development, child welfare and helping children progress. The acquisition of skills includes those of effective communication and engagement, sharing information,

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and multi-agency teamwork. Overarching themes have emerged: the ethics of social engineering and intervening in children's lives; the complexity of maintaining quality while promoting innovation; establishing respectful relationships between practitioners and users; the deployment of generic and specialist skills; and how to design services that reach everybody. The chapters of the book are grouped under headings which reflect these themes.