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Common Error No. 57 [1]

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57. "Children should be taken into care at the slightest hint of any parental abuse."

Some child abuse campaigners broaden the definition to make it seem more prevalent than it is. 'Child abuse' used to mean physical violence or sexual abuse, but campaigners try to include parents who might smack a naughty child, or even verbally assail one in an intimidating manner. This broad definition devalues the seriousness of horrific acts by putting them on a par with verbal or mild physical chastisement. On this definition, most children are abused.

On the more serious definitions of abuse, there are obviously cases where the only way to protect a child from an abusive parent is to remove the child to a safe place. But even in cases of real abuse, there are often better ways of protecting the child than by taking it into care. The best environment for a child is reckoned to be a family home, whatever type of family. When abused children are asked what they want to happen, most do not want to be taken into care; they want the abuse to stop.

When a child is taken into care, it sets back their potential development and achievement. Children in care, particularly those in institutions, do not fare as well on average than those who remain with their families. Obviously a balance has to be struck, and if alternative remedies like supervision, counselling and therapy prove effective, they are to be preferred to care orders.

In the notorious Cleveland case, many children were taken from their parents on the evidence of a child abuse 'expert' acting on a crackpot theory of abuse. There were similar cases allegedly involving devil-worshipping cults in the Scottish islands which also turned out to be the obsessions of officials rather than real abuse. These cases illustrate the dangers of giving officials too much power, and of the need for children's courts to keep tight rein on their powers.

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