LONG READ 1

How we got here: 150 years of rescuing children from the poor

Our child protection system was not designed from scratch. It grew out of the Poor Law, Victorian rescue charities and a century of inquiries, and it still carries their assumptions about poor families.

Dr Charlotte Ritchie October 2026 England Reading time 20 minutes

Child Protection: A Public Health Approach · Long read 1 · October 2026
Based on chapter 1 of *Child Protection – A Public Health Approach: Reducing the Numbers in Care* (2021), shortened, with present-day figures updated to 2025.

In brief

- Our model of child protection and care is rooted in a Victorian model that focused on the poor.
- The early rescue charities put “rescue” and “protection” far ahead of prevention, and created a template that has proved impossible to remove.
- For a brief period after the Second World War, the law put prevention first. By the Children Act 1989, the duty to prevent the need for care had been replaced by investigation and protection.
- Time and again inquiries have reported abuse in care, yet little has changed.
- The focus on risk consumes money that could support children and families in need.

Timeline

1834

Poor Law Amendment Act

Relief for the able-bodied poor only in the workhouse, where life was to be “less attractive than the most unpleasant means of earning a living outside”.

1870

Education Act; Barnardo’s first home

A national system of elementary schools. Dr Barnardo opens his Home for Destitute Boys in Stepney.

1889

NSPCC formed; first cruelty Act

The Prevention of Cruelty to and Protection of Children Act sets the first legal benchmark for cruelty.

1891

Custody of Children Act

Parents must now prove they have not abandoned or neglected their children to get them back.

1908

Children Act

Penalties for negligence as well as wilful cruelty: the beginning of the concept of “risk”.

1933

Children and Young Persons Act

Courts must “have regard to the welfare of the child”.

1946
Curtis Report
After the death of Dennis O'Neill in foster care, a damning report on the care of children.

1948
Children Act
The Poor Law ends. Councils set up children's departments.

1962
"The Battered Child Syndrome"
Kempe's paper rediscovers abuse within seemingly normal families.

1963
Children and Young Persons Act
A duty on councils to help families so that children need not come into care, including with cash.

1974
The Maria Colwell inquiry
Case conferences, area review committees and registers follow.

1987
Cleveland inquiry
Social workers criticised for removing children too readily.

1989
Children Act
The child's welfare becomes "the paramount consideration". Support for families becomes a general duty, not owed to any particular child.

2026
Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act
Councils must offer a family group decision-making meeting before going to court.

1 From child labourer to child

The nineteenth century saw a growing interest in the welfare of the young. Its origins lay, perhaps, not so much in the discovery of neglect or cruelty as in a changing economy that allowed children to be taken out of the labour force, and made "childhood" a period of economic inactivity requiring education.

To understand how great that change was, consider the plight of children before it. With no social security to fall back on in illness, old age or unemployment, parents had little option but to send their children to work if they were to avoid the stigma of the workhouse. E. P. Thompson records a minister who buried a boy found standing

asleep with his arms full of wool, beaten awake after a seventeen-hour day, who woke at four the next morning asking whether his brothers could see the lights of the mill, afraid he would be late, and then died.

Babies were farmed out to minders who fed them badly and quietened them with opiates. Those children who survived the Manchester mills were, in Thompson's words, "almost universally ill-looking, small, sickly, barefoot and ill-clad".

Concern for these children was not necessarily driven by empathy. The children of the poor became the object of professional and institutional concern not because they were starving, cold and ignorant, but because the economic and political needs of the country determined that something should be done. The Boer war revealed how unfit many recruits were, and fears grew about the quality of British "stock". Compulsory schooling, from 1880, gave doctors and inspectors large groups of children to study for the first time.

By the end of the century, the working-class child who had swept chimneys and worked in the mills was to be seen as vulnerable, ignorant, dependent and innocent: in fact, a child in need of protection.

---

2 The rescuers

Before the 1880s, provision for orphans and destitute children was haphazard. The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 was an attempt to reduce pauperism by deterrence. For the poor, the workhouse loomed, and men, women and children would often rather beg than suffer it. The authorities had a duty to care for a child who was destitute, orphaned or deserted, but nobody had any responsibility for children neglected or ill-treated in their own homes.

The children's charities that arose in the late nineteenth century were different from other philanthropic movements. They were driven by a desire to "rescue" children, both from their circumstances and from their supposedly immoral and unchristian ways. The crusading zeal of Dr Barnardo, Benjamin Waugh and others quickly created a lobby whose emphasis on rescue and protection was far greater than on prevention.

By 1870 Barnardo had opened his first Home for Destitute Boys, with a sign over the door: "No Destitute Child Ever Refused Admission". But there seems to have been little understanding of why children were on the streets. Many may have seen street life as better than the workhouse, or than the poverty enforced on families whose parents were unemployed, sick or too hard at work to care.

> "If the children of the slums can be removed from their surroundings early enough, and can be kept sufficiently long under training, heredity counts for little, environment counts for everything."
>
> Dr Barnardo, as quoted in the book

The early rescuers did not believe, like the eugenicists, that the poor were of wholly degenerate stock, but they saw little virtue in the bonds of family life. In believing that children could be given a better life away from their parents, they ignored the emotional and cultural values of others and, most importantly, their poverty. They provided a template that it has proved impossible to remove.

All the rescue societies sent children abroad, to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, believing that emigration would stop them returning to their "bad" families. The practice continued into the 1950s and beyond.

With no statutory supervision, thousands of children were exposed to permanent separation and abuse. It was not until 2010 that the British Government apologised.

The Custody of Children Act 1891 allowed the charities to act first in removing a child, and forced parents to prove that they had not abandoned, neglected or ill-treated their children. It set the pathway for our modern legal framework, in which it is for parents to prove that they are capable. Thus the poor were further disempowered.

Boarding out, the forerunner of foster care, began around the same time. Foster carers were poorly selected and barely supervised, and children were often used as cheap labour, in conditions no better than those they had left. Those who opposed boarding out said its chief merit in the eyes of ratepayers was that it was cheap: an argument that still finds its proponents today.

3 The cruelty men

No account of the early years would be complete without the NSPCC. In 1889 the London society joined with others to form the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the first cruelty Act was passed. From the 1880s until 1939 the NSPCC was the leading organisation in child protection policy.

Its inspectorate was all male, drawn largely from the armed services. As the society's authorised history put it, "only married men are considered for appointment since experience has shown that an Inspector's success largely depends on the sympathetic support given him by his wife". Sailors, who saw precious little of their own children, were thought qualified to judge the parenting of others.

Benjamin Waugh's stated aim was "to remove the evil from the home, not the child". But neither evil nor abuse could easily be removed from a home; they were not independent agents but properties of adults and circumstances. Because little thought was given to working with adults, and the poor were seen as incapable of change, it was the children who had to be rescued.

Harry Ferguson's study of the NSPCC in Cleveland found that of more than 800 children taken into the Stockton shelter between 1891 and 1903, 94% were returned to their parents, most within three months. Removal that turned out to be unwarranted in 94% of cases can hardly be called good practice. It finds an echo in modern practice, where only a small share of children investigated end up in care or on a protection plan.

From the start, the NSPCC relied on publicity, appealing to people to report anything suspicious, and displaying photographs of the worst cases. The only moral response available to the viewer of such photographs was to help the NSPCC, rather than to help the child or question the circumstances that had given rise to the abuse.

In 1909 the minority report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws argued that an authority dealing with the family "merely at the crisis of destitution, having no excuse for intervening before or after this crisis, can never cope with the conditions here revealed". For anyone familiar with the limits of section 17 of the Children Act 1989, the words still ring true.

4 Between the wars

After the First World War, with so many men lost, the survival of children became a matter of national importance. Truby King's *Mothercraft Manual* told mothers that child-rearing was a national concern rather than a personal one, and professionals judged good mothering against his rules on fresh air, regularity and routine. Those who brought up their children differently were treated with suspicion. Mothers, not fathers, were held responsible for every aspect of childhood except material support.

The depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s made it hard to argue that the unemployed were feckless or degenerate. Child guidance clinics opened, to which parents could refer themselves. The Children and Young Persons Act 1933 required courts to "have regard to the welfare of the child", but left "care or protection" so loosely defined, "exposed to moral danger", "unfit to exercise care", that it strengthened the arm of those seeking to take children into care. The situation is little changed today.

5 War, Curtis and the welfare state

The Second World War was a watershed. The Government's policy of evacuating children was widely resisted. Families, in Jean Heywood's words, "refused to remain divided and gradually, in ones and threes and then in groups and crowds, they returned to their homes and family circle, preferring to stay together under danger than to be separated and safe".

Here were families putting their children at risk not of bruising or neglect but of nightly terror and death in the bombing. Yet nobody prosecuted them, and we too might have acted in the same way. Perhaps what makes a risk unacceptable is not its size but its type, and who is responsible for it.

The death of Dennis O'Neill in 1945, at the hands of his foster parents, led to the Curtis Report on the care of children. It found poor care, little understanding or affection, and a deplorable shortage of trained staff, findings that bear comparison with the Utting report of 1997 and with inspections since. Curtis also found the after-care of young people leaving the homes "a matter of deep concern". More than seventy years later the same criticisms could be made.

The Children Act 1948 ended the Poor Law and created councils' children's departments. The welfare state offered families relief from want, disease and squalor. In 1952 a Commons committee urged that more attention be paid to dealing with problems "before the actual break-up of the home occurs", and the Ingleby Committee saw removal from home as potentially destructive.

The Children and Young Persons Act 1963 marked the high point of this thinking. It placed a duty on every local authority "to make available such advice, guidance and assistance as may promote the welfare of children by diminishing the need to receive children into or keep them in care", including assistance "in exceptional circumstances, in cash".[1] Casework in the home was the priority, and removal into care a last resort.

6 The rediscovery of abuse

Just as prevention was growing, the publication of Kempe's "The Battered Child Syndrome" in 1962 raised once more the spectre of risk. Its finding that children were being battered by seemingly normal, respectable families had a huge impact. Parents and children became subjects of investigation by paediatricians and psychiatrists. Cruelty, now abuse, had been rediscovered with new force, and the following decades saw the gradual erosion of preventive strategies.

Huge variations between councils in the numbers of children in care were already apparent. In the 1960s Jean Packman concluded that "children's departments can choose whether they admit to care or not and do so on the basis of different policies in different places". The situation is little different today. In 2025, councils in the North East had 111 children in care for every 10,000 children; councils in London had 48, despite similar average levels of child poverty.[2]

Following the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell, case conferences, area review committees and child protection registers were introduced. Ingleby had wanted "some door on which they can knock". The reformulation of child abuse after Kempe led instead not to an open door of support, but to the secretive world of protection.

7 Inquiries, Cleveland and the 1989 Act

By the late 1970s the economy was in recession, and the public sector began to shrink. Resources were targeted at those most in need or, in child care, most "at risk". The inquiries into the deaths of Jasmine Beckford (1985), Tyra Henry (1987) and Kimberley Carlile (1987) found social workers too trusting of parents. Then, in 1987, the Cleveland inquiry found them too quick to remove children thought to have been sexually abused.

Now that the primary function of social workers was seen as protection, failure to protect led to blame, and each inquiry led not to a reassessment of how the system engaged with the welfare of children and families, but to a loss of public confidence in social workers. Councils, social workers, courts and doctors became increasingly risk-averse and bureaucratic in their attempts to avoid blame.

The Children Act 1989 represented an uneasy alliance between children's and parents' rights. Its guidance said that the best place for a child to be brought up is usually in their own family, with the council working in partnership with parents. But the section 1 duty of 1963 to diminish the need for care was gone. Section 17 gave councils a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need, and the very nature of a general duty is that it is not owed to any particular child or family. Through section 47 investigations, resources were targeted at child protection.[3]

The language of social work became the language of investigation, assessment, dangerousness, risk and forensic evidence: closer to the language of the police than of the caring professions. A parent who asks for help can find themselves the subject of child protection enquiries, with no way to withdraw.

8 Where this leaves us

In 1948 there were just over 48,000 children in care. On 31 March 2025 there were 81,770 in England.[4] Councils spent £9 billion on children in care in 2024–25, 55.9% of everything they spent on children's services.[5] Two thirds of the children living in children's homes are placed outside their own council area, and more than one in five children in care live over 20 miles from home.[4] In the 1870s, boarding out was only to be used where all family ties had been broken, because it was thought wrong to separate children too far from their families.

The apparatus of the state, targeted at particular children and families, is a massive cost: a drain on resources that could otherwise be used for support and prevention. It may improve life for a few, but not for the many who are also vulnerable, and not even for many of those apparently "saved".

> It is time that practitioners, academics and others dared to raise their heads above the parapet of risk, and pressed for a public health model of child and family welfare: inclusive, supportive, universal, accessible and welcomed by parents.

Questions for discussion

Q1 To what extent is the current model of child protection based on a male-dominated view of parenting and care that ignores the needs of primary carers, usually mothers, and fails to involve fathers?

Q2 To what extent do the large children's charities continue to influence policy and practice?

Q3 With reference to children's charities' marketing and use of images, to what extent are they marketing children rather than parental or family need?

Q4 To what extent does a focus on individual children and "risk" take attention away from the real killers of children, such as road traffic, obesity or lack of physical fitness?

Sources

1. Children and Young Persons Act 1963, section 1(1).
2. Our analysis of Department for Education (2025) children looked after by council, pooled by region, and MHCLG (2025) English Indices of Deprivation, IDACI (simple average of council scores).
3. Children Act 1989, sections 1(1), 17 and 47.
4. Department for Education (2025) *Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2025*.
5. Department for Education (2025) *LA and school expenditure: 2024–25 financial year*.

6. Historical sources as cited in Ritchie, C. (2021) *Child Protection – A Public Health Approach*, chapter 1, including Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class*; Heywood, J. (1965) *Children in Care*; Ferguson, H. (1992); Packman, J.; Allen, A. and Morton, A. (1961), the NSPCC's authorised history; and the Curtis (1946) and Ingleby reports.

Photo

Dr Charlotte Ritchie is a former researcher at the University of Oxford and Deputy Director of its Centre for Research into Parenting and Children. She qualified as a social worker in 1997 and was a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Oxford Brookes University. She is the author of *Child Protection – A Public Health Approach: Reducing the Numbers in Care*.

Child Protection: A Public Health Approach · Long read 1 · October 2026 · Figures are for England unless stated.