POLICY PAPER 4

A degree fit for the job: rethinking child and family social work training

A public health approach needs a properly trained, recognisably professional workforce. The people who write the reports on which children are removed should be trained as rigorously as doctors.

Dr Charlotte Ritchie October 2026 England Reading time 12 minutes

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Based on chapter 6 of *Child Protection – A Public Health Approach: Reducing the Numbers in Care* (2021), updated with the 2026 training framework.

In brief

- Social workers write the assessments on which courts decide whether children are removed from their families for life. They need to be academically strong, and to understand the law, the benefits system, child development and parental mental health.
- The main route into social work is still a general degree covering adults and children. A student can qualify without ever having a placement in child and family social work.
- New early career standards for child and family social workers will apply from April 2027. They are a welcome step, but they come after qualification.
- We propose a separate, four-year Child and Family Social Work degree, with a high entry standard, examinations, two long statutory placements, and a structured career to consultant level, as in medicine.

1 Why training matters

For the vast majority of looked-after children, care is not the answer. We have to accept that we cannot prevent every random or inexplicable act of violence against a child, but we can try to stop families reaching the tipping point. We know a great deal about who is likely to harm a child, and about how parenting can be improved.

We also know that some parents are “hard to reach”, and that this reluctance is easy to understand: social workers are often seen almost as the enemy. Parents who are known to social services, or who have to ask for help, come under scrutiny; the middle classes can buy help and know that asking can be a double-edged sword. Helping parents to talk about their darkest feelings without the threat of proceedings, and to get the support they need, requires a properly trained workforce.

Social workers who write reports for child protection conferences, for Cafcass, for the Family Court or for adoption panels need to leave no stone unturned in pursuing the wellbeing of families. They need to be able to analyse a situation clearly and without defensiveness, and to write it up succinctly, accurately and with a sound grasp of the research. A judge can only decide safely on the evidence in front of them.

> There are excellent social workers out there now, but it is more the result of chance than of rigorous professional training.

2 How social workers qualify now

The main route into social work remains a three-year undergraduate degree or a two-year master’s degree, approved by the regulator, Social Work England. These are general social work qualifications: the same degree prepares students to work with older people, adults with disabilities, people with mental illness, and children and families.

Social Work England requires students to spend at least 200 days learning in practice, including up to 30 skills days, with placements in at least two settings providing contrasting experiences, and at least one placement in a statutory setting involving high-risk decision-making and legal interventions.[1] That statutory placement can be in adult services. A student can still qualify, and go straight into child protection work, without ever having been placed with children and families.

There are specialist routes. Step Up to Social Work is a 14-month, full-time programme focused on child and family social work, with around 170 placement days with vulnerable children and families in a local authority.[2] Approach Social Work, formerly the Frontline programme, trains graduates in child protection while they practise.[3] These routes recognise that child and family social work is a specialism. But most child and family social workers still qualify through a general degree.

Once qualified, new child and family social workers currently complete an assessed and supported year in employment. In August 2026 the Government published early career standards for child and family social workers, setting out what they should be able to show in their first two years in practice. They apply from 1 April 2027 and will form the basis of an early career development programme replacing the assessed and supported year from September 2027.[4]

3 What is missing

After the death of Peter Connelly and Lord Laming's second report, the Social Work Task Force was set up, followed by the Social Work Reform Board and the College of Social Work. The College has since closed. Sir Martin Narey's independent review for the Department for Education, *Making the education of social workers consistently effective* (2014), called for a radical overhaul of how child and family social workers are taught, and stressed the importance of the calibre of students.[5] The Munro review and Laming's report focused mainly on the context in which social work is practised and on the structures of local authorities. To an outsider, the training of the main route into the profession has barely changed.

A general degree cannot give a child and family social worker everything they need. Too often there is no requirement to understand:

- the benefits system, debt and housing, which shape so many families' lives;
- how to listen to and talk with parents and children, especially when emotions are high;
- research methods, so that a social worker can judge whether what they are reading has any basis in fact;
- the complex aspects of child development and parenting;
- parental mental illness, addiction and dual diagnosis;
- the law and the court process in which their reports will be tested.

There is a place for everyone in social work, but not necessarily a place for everyone to be a qualified social worker. Much of what we all do every day is social work: helping people, volunteering, enabling. A professional social worker needs to be more than this.

4 A Child and Family Social Work degree

There is a case for developing separate social work training strands, with a new degree in child and family support. It would demand a high calibre of student, last four years, and be devoted entirely to children and families. A suggested curriculum, with room for debate:

Year	Modules	Placement
Year 1 Understanding the context	Social policy · Understanding the benefits system · Child and family legal framework · Introduction to research methods: what makes “good” research · Child development (1) · Parental mental health (1) · Listening and talking to families (1)	8 weeks
Year 2	What is good parenting? · Child development (2) · Disabled parenting · Childhood disabilities and support · Parental mental health (2) · Substance misuse and parenting · Active listening to children and families (2)	8 weeks
Year 3	Domestic violence: facts, policy and law · Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties: support and dilemmas · Youth offending: causes and solutions · Legal framework, benefits and family support in action · The nuts and bolts of child protection	3 months in a statutory local authority child and family setting
Year 4	Supporting parents and children through domestic violence · How does child protection work? · Law and casework in child protection · Working with psychiatrically ill parents · Working with parents with a dual diagnosis to enable family support · Working with families to reunite children in care with their families	3 months in a statutory local authority setting

At least half of the modules would be examined, with the rest assessed through at least three written essays each. The degree would be awarded on satisfactory exams and coursework at the end of each year, a placement portfolio and a dissertation.

As now, newly qualified child and family social workers would then work under supervision for a two-year probationary period. The new early career standards, covering a social worker’s first two years in practice, could provide the framework for this.

5 A career like medicine

It is surely time to offer social work training that is more akin to that of medicine. Doctors train for five or six years before working full time on the wards. There is a clear pathway after qualifying, with examinations marking each step until consultant status is reached. In general, the public has confidence in its doctors and consultants. The same cannot be said for social workers.

Continuing professional development for child and family social workers could include a requirement to stay up to date with the benefits system and the law as it affects children and families, with set examinations in further specialisms until the equivalent of a Consultant Child and Family Social Worker is reached.

Better training is only part of a much wider jigsaw. Turnover among social workers is high, and many councils struggle to recruit and keep staff. A properly trained, professional workforce could be better paid, more stable, and offered clearer career pathways. Child and family social workers also need to take ownership of their profession, to challenge procedures, guidance and law where necessary, and to make sure their voice is heard. It is not good enough that inquiries and task forces are led by retired judges and academics when the people who do the job know how it is, but lack the standing to be heard.

6 Proposals

1. **A separate Child and Family Social Work degree**
   A four-year degree devoted to children and families, with the curriculum above as a starting point for debate.

2. **A higher entry standard**
   Admission set at a level that reflects the responsibility of the role, applied consistently rather than relaxed to fill places.

3. **Examinations, not only coursework**
   At least half of modules examined, with a dissertation and placement portfolio.

4. **Placements where the work is done**
   At least two substantial placements in statutory local authority child and family settings, properly supported and monitored.

5 **A structured career to consultant level**

Build on the early career standards with examined progression, specialisms and a consultant grade, as in medicine.

6 **A voice for the profession**

Child and family social workers should be at the table when inquiries, reviews and task forces shape their work.

This is about placing families first. To work alongside them, we need rigorously trained and professional Child and Family Social Workers who can command respect at the highest level of government. It is what our families deserve.

Questions for discussion

Q1 What form should a new degree in Child and Family Social Work take?

Q2 Should the degree include tutorials and seminars, as well as examinations?

Q3 Given that many student placements fall short of the experience needed, how could placements be better provided and monitored?

Sources

1. Social Work England, *Education and training standards*, standard 2.1.
2. Department for Education, *Step up to social work* (guidance, updated July 2025).
3. Frontline, *Approach Social Work* (formerly the Frontline programme), thefrontline.org.uk.
4. Department for Education (2026) *Child and family social worker early career standards*, published August 2026, for use from 1 April 2027.
5. Narey, M. (2014) *Making the education of social workers consistently effective*. Department for Education, February 2014.

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*.