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## Advising the Press on Child Protection

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writes **Amy Taylor**

The tendency for inaccuracy can make following media coverage of social care stories a painful experience for social workers. A quick grimace is often as far as it goes, but in February last year independent child protection social worker, consultant and trainer **Joanna Nicolas** decided enough was enough.

On hearing a Radio 4 Today Programme report incorrectly claiming a baby had been taken away at birth from its 18-year-old mother by Nottingham Council without a care order or consent, Nicolas, who then worked for Gloucestershire Council, decided to ring up the show to correct them.

"I was listening to the programme and they were talking about an emergency police protection order," she recalls. "But there's no such thing, so I rang up and they asked if I could come on to explain about the different powers (of police and social services)."

She appeared on Radio 5 Live and the BBC Ten O'clock News speaking on the same issue later on in the day. Now Nicolas regularly contributes to BBC radio, TV programmes such as Women's Hour and BBC Breakfast on BBC1, and the broadsheets, either in an advisory capacity or by providing commentaries.

### Passion for social work

In journalistic terms, Nicolas is gold dust. Frontline social workers willing to speak to the press are virtually non-existent; council or charity officials routinely come forward to speak instead. Nicolas says it's a passion for social work that fuels her work.

"Quite often, the people who are called on by the media are academics - who of course have a valuable place in the whole system but when were they last near a vulnerable child? They also call on directors of children's services, who also might not have had much contact with vulnerable children and families recently."

Nicolas has worked on stories including the Baby Peter case, accountability, and the benefits system. She says she has never been misquoted and has only had one journalist ignore her advice. She puts her positive experience down to only engaging with the media she respects, and ensuring she only talks about her core area of knowledge: child protection.

### Former insurance broker

Nicolas has a varied CV. After a career in sales, she became an insurance broker at Lloyds of London in the late 1980s. She began working in social care in 1992 as an unqualified residential social worker in a children's home, a move prompted by a three-month placement in a Romanian orphanage. She went on to do a social work diploma at the University of North London. She found the university to be very left wing and was told she would find it difficult to get onto a training course due to her "untraditional" background.

"At that time, social work was radical and angry and I used to have to hide my newspaper in a brown paper bag because it wasn't the Morning Star," she says.

High caseloads and lack of supervision are all long-term issues in social work, but Nicolas sees no point in raising them with the media. "The press aren't interested in those issues and it just comes across as whinging. The only way things will improve is if the council takes responsibility for the way the systems work in their own area."

She argues that social workers need to stand up to their employers to bring about system change, and that it's this that which will ultimately lead to a better public image.

Shortly after Nicolas spoke to *Community Care*, she was due to appear on the Simon Mayo show on Radio 5 for a feature entitled "Who would be a social worker?" She is evidence that a wide variety of people can be.