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Current Resources

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Review of Current Resources

Family Preservation Journal (Volume 3, Issue 1, 1998)
Family Preservation Institute, New Mexico State University

Social Work Practice with Children. Nancy Boyd Webb. New York: The Guilford Press.

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This book, intended as a text for both baccalaureate and master's-level courses, focuses on the special needs of children. Its premise is that social work education has not prepared students to use intervention methods that are developmentally appropriate to children.

The fifteen chapters are organized into four sections. The first section sets the framework for the approach of the book. Chapter 1 presents the current social context of children's lives and commits to the ecological perspective. Chapter 2 discusses the social work role, ethics, knowledge base, and competencies for working with children. The second section comprises three chapters organized around the helping process—relationship, assessment, contracting, planning, intervention, and monitoring. While the process is generic, the knowledge base and suggested tools are mostly specific to children. Numerous brief case vignettes and one longer case example, which runs throughout the chapters, are included.

The four chapters of the third section are organized around methods of working with children. Chapter 6 on family intervention convincingly states that when children have problems, family and child methods must be blended. Webb warns against using a family systems approach that sees the child only as an element of the family system and ignores the child's specific and individual needs. Likewise, she cautions against excluding parents from child treatment, thus reinforcing parental feelings of incompetence. Chapter 7, focusing on individual work with children, argues that the child's idiom is nonverbal and that all social workers, including those working primarily with adults, need some familiarity with basic play techniques. While several of the chapters are sketchy, Chapter 8 on group work seems particularly thin. Webb seems to acknowledge this with the statement that it is intended to encourage social workers to consider group as a viable modality in work with children. Chapter 9 recognizes school as a primary component of children's ecology and briefly presents some of the knowledge base for working collaboratively with school, home, and community.

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The last section comprises six chapters that look at children in special circumstances: out-of-home placement, “nontraditional” (divorce, dingle parenthood) families, families experiencing illness and death, substance-disordered families, families experiencing violence, and families in a changing world.

Social Work Practice with Children has many strengths. The rich vignettes are written in similar, though not identical, formats that could serve as models for students learning to organize case material and present it coherently. Examples contain such elements as reason for referral, presenting problem, family information, biopsychosocial assessment, treatment plan, and discussion. Webb also uses many tools and aids, some borrowed from others and some her own, including the eco-map, culturagram, and developmental history outline. Tables, figures, and lists (e.g., problem syndromes, classification of disabilities, child equipment, interactive components of a tripartite assessment format), demonstrated over a range of cases, are handy references. There is liberal use of child art work, always with discussion included. Other resources (e.g., organizations, journals, forms suppliers, training programs) are strewn throughout the book or included as appendices.

Webb artistically draws upon older literature (e.g., Axline, Perlman, Vinter) and blends it with the new (e.g., Congress, Belsky, Webb). Thus, the book feels historically grounded yet very current. The greatest limitation of the book is inherent in its purpose as a text. It covers a vast amount of material, attempting to correct our errors of the past in the omission of child material from social work education. Too often, the chapters skim the surface of their topics. While this is not inappropriate for a text, anyone familiar with Webb’s previous works will long for the depth and richness found there.

The book certainly can be useful as an undergraduate or graduate text. As a beginning text on social work practice, its ecological approach, organization around the casework process, and many useful tools could effectively support teaching generic social work. As a text for teaching practice with children, its organization would reinforce and extend students’ existing generic practice base as well as adding child-specific knowledge and skills. In addition, a practicing social worker who wants help in adapting good social work practice to work with children would find this book a useful starting place from which to pursue topics in more depth.



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