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Anthony N. Maluccio

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Failed Child Policy—An Essay Review

Anthony N. Maluccio

Hutchinson, J.R. (with C.E. Sudia) (2002). *Failed Child Welfare Policy—Family Preservation and the Orphaning of Child Welfare*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

This essay reviews Failed Child Welfare Policy (Hutchinson, 2002), in which the author argues that the public child welfare system has failed to meet the needs of children and families coming to its attention. She recommends using the available—and limited—resources to reorganize and reconstruct the service delivery system with emphasis on family-centered services.

Introduction

The public child welfare system in the United States has long been under attack for failing to provide adequately for the needs of children and families coming to its attention. In *Failed Child Welfare Policy—Family Preservation and the Orphaning of Child Welfare*, Janet R. Hutchinson (2002) presents the latest critique, in collaboration with Cecelia Sudia. Hutchinson writes from her extensive experience in the field of family preservation as project director for many years at the University of Iowa's National Resource Center on Family-Based Services, while Sudia contributes in two chapters her perspective as a senior member of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, until her recent retirement.

Hutchinson introduces the key points in her argument early on in the book (x-xii and Chapter Seven):

- the family preservation movement has largely “failed” in its efforts to serve families with children at risk;
- the public child welfare system has been abandoned and essentially “orphaned” by the social work profession;
- the fields of social work, family therapy, and public administration must work together to “reclaim” child welfare; and
- the role of federal and state governments in family and child services should be “reconstructed.”

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Summary of Contents

In developing the above arguments, Hutchinson begins by describing in Chapter One the child welfare system's inability to meet the "overwhelming" federal and state mandates "to guarantee the safety of abused and neglected children" (p. 27). Building on a typical child maltreatment case in a protective service agency, she highlights such common factors as inadequate resources, poor preparation of—and support for—child welfare staff, and diminishing support from traditional advocates among professional social workers, schools of social work, and professional organizations.

In Chapter Two, Hutchinson collaborates with Sudia in describing a range of potential alternatives to foster care, including family therapy and family-based services. She concludes, however, that such alternatives have not been incorporated into service delivery in child welfare, due in part to the continuing influence of bureaucratic and administrative structures adopted in the 1930s by federal and state governments and the resulting emphasis on removal of children from their birth families. In Chapter Three, she argues that agencies "need both will and imagination" to introduce innovations and challenges to "bureaucratic constraints and risk-averse cultures" that currently characterize the service delivery system (p. 64).

In Chapter Four, authored by Sudia, there is a comprehensive presentation of the history and functions of the Children's Bureau. The key point is that historically there has been "very little interest in the family unit." (p. 92). Moreover, the opportunity to establish a *family focus* was lost due to fragmentation of the Bureau's mission and structure. As a result, the staff of the Children's Bureau has increasingly been laboring under severe constraints, particularly since the Reagan administration:

Hostile Administration appointees, the failure to fund sound research and evaluation studies that would provide empirical guidance to policymakers in Congress and the states, and the constant reorganizations and consequent undermining of child welfare expertise among the agency's few remaining specialists have rendered the Bureau largely ineffective (p. 92).

As the Children's Bureau's role in the field of child welfare was subsequently reduced, various national organizations and private foundations became more active in efforts to shape the delivery of child and family services and to advocate on behalf of children and families at risk. In Chapter Five, Hutchinson describes in particular the activities of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation of New York, which during the 1980s and early 1990s pursued a national strategy of funding family preservation services along the lines of the Homebuilders model that had been introduced in the 1980s in the state of

Washington by the Behavioral Sciences Institute (Kinney, Haapala, and Booth, 1991). The Homebuilders approach focused exclusively on the use of behavior modification and social learning theory, in contrast to the family systems or ecological approach promoted by the previously mentioned National Resource Center on Family-Based Services.

In Chapter Six, Hutchinson moves into another area, as she describes a range of studies of child welfare and family-based practice. She also reviews methodological issues encountered by researchers in evaluative studies of child welfare services as well as family-based practice evaluations. She notes that the results of such evaluations are inconclusive, and adds that:

. . . underfunding, endemic to virtually every element of child welfare, plagues efforts to understand the truth of outcome claims by program developers, as well (p. 118).

In conclusion, in Chapter Seven, Hutchinson offers suggestions for restructuring the child welfare system through a variety of changes in social work, family therapy, and public administration. Additionally, she advocates the “reconstruction” of the roles of federal and state governments, through such means as establishment of a “regional human services authority with a goal of eliminating redundancy and filling service gaps” (p. 147). Above all, she argues for replacing “the inadequacies of the child welfare discourse with a family-centered discourse” (p. 150) involving the three previously mentioned professional disciplines of social work, family therapy, and public administration.

CRITIQUE

As reflected in the above summary, *Failed Child Welfare Policy—Family Preservation and the Orphaning of Child Welfare* represents a comprehensive—if somewhat rambling—review of a timely topic. Hutchinson and Sudia describe in depth not only the recent development and main features of family preservation but also the rise and fall of the child welfare service delivery system in the United States, notably at the federal and state levels. They also offer pertinent suggestions for improving services, such as organizing programs around the family rather than children or parents as individuals, and also promoting better integration with other community helping systems. It would have been useful, however, if they had provided further details regarding their recommendations. For example, given the obstinacy of the service delivery system as they describe it, how could child welfare and family services be better organized and delivered? How could the recurrent issues and rigidities that they so clearly point out be

confronted? How could interdisciplinary leadership and collaboration be promoted? How could federal and state policies be improved?

Finally, while emphasizing the failures in the child welfare and family preservation arenas, Hutchinson has overlooked or neglected to consider some of their positive features. These include, among other examples, programs in various states and communities to reunite children in out-of-home care with their families; preparation of adolescents for independent living; open adoption and adoption of children with special needs; foster family care services for young unmarried mothers and their children; services to prevent out-of-home placement of young children; and selective use, at least in some agencies, of group and residential care for adolescents. In particular, as described by Roberts and Early (2002) among others,¹ emerging in various settings are good examples of family-centered, neighborhood-based programs such as those supported in recent years by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These programs are proving to be effective, as they offer focused services with adequate and varied supports to vulnerable families and children and, consequently, good potential to prevent out-of-home placement.²

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¹ See, for example, Adams & Nelson (1995); Maluccio, Ainsworth, & Thoburn (2000); Wells and Tracy (1996); and Yoo and Meezan (2001).

² These and other programs have been described in such journals as *Child Welfare*, *Children and Youth Services Review*, and *Family Preservation Journal*.



School of Social Work
New Mexico State University