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Current Resources

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Current Resources

Kaplan, L., & Girard, J. L. (1994). Strengthening high-risk families: A handbook for practitioners. New York, NY: Lexington Books

Reviewed by

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Lisa Kaplan & Judith Girard capture the essence of family preservation practice in this practical handbook. It is carefully authentic and buoyantly positive about families yet unabashedly direct in describing what must happen and what to avoid in serving them.

Its publication is timely, dealing directly with many issues raised by the federal Family Preservation and Support Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-66). As individual states respond to the planning mandates of the act, they would do well to become familiar with this solid base of information on the spirit and methods of family-centered practice.

True to the principles of family preservation, the authors approach the characteristics of high-risk families by describing five categories of their strengths, including resilience, wanting to keep their families together and to improve their lot, a healthy distrust of social service workers, and being natural experts on their own realities and needs.

The authors also describe how successful programs view and approach families. In "A Framework for Beginning Family Work," they establish the essential "differentness" of family

preservation practice -- full family focus, partnership with the family, a strengths perspective, and doable goals -- asserting that traditional social work training actually contradicts the philosophy of family preservation in some ways.

The section on "Treatment Strategies" is an exceptionally well-crafted and useful primer, isolating and succinctly describing the core of family preservation practice. In addition, they include important strategies and techniques which are often underestimated or overlooked, such as the potential of support groups as a significant component of family work.

The author's style may be carried too far, however, in regard to social learning theory and behavioral technologies. Together they are described in a single paragraph, while a systemic family counseling emphasis is threaded throughout the text. In consideration of the importance of skill-building to family empowerment and the number of therapists who come to family preservation untrained in basic skill-building, an increased emphasis seems justified.

Included as special topics are families with sexually abused children, HIV/AIDS, families who are homeless and families in transition to reunification. Child neglect, however, seems conspicuously absent from the list. The authors become most directive in their prescriptions for work with domestic violence and sexual abuse. Their treatment of both of these topics demonstrates professional depth in planning safety for highly vulnerable families. It is also encouraging to note that information and practice techniques relevant to cultural diversity merit an entire chapter as well as being woven throughout the text.

This book deals as forthrightly with the major issues in evaluation as in practice. It concludes that no other child welfare programs are held to standards of success as rigid as placement prevention in family preservation and asserts that success must be redefined, and evaluated within an ecological context.

For program designers the authors list obstacles and challenges to creating a service continuum based on the principles of family preservation. With sterling logic, they point out the irony that programs created to offer genuine flexibility to families may rigidly maintain arbitrary caseload and time limits. "... as we note throughout this book, zealously holding to preconceived models nullifies the philosophical underpinnings of family preservation." Though many would concur with this observation, competition for resources, without safeguards, inevitably threatens the intensity of service which is necessary to address the needs of families at risk of placement.

The authors accurately presage the threats to the values and techniques of family preservation introduced by moving it into the mainstream "... the more mainstream a movement becomes, the more bureaucratic, compartmentalized, and professionalized it gets." They contrast it to the relatively new field of family therapy by noting that the family preservation movement "... still has no national leaders to champion its causes... there is an obvious paucity of books on family preservation... and (it) ... has not received much attention from academia."

At the same time, Kaplan and Girard join many in human services and government who have a grand vision for introducing the family preservation paradigm across disciplines. They mention juvenile justice, mental health, mental retardation, education and public health. Combining this vision with observations as to the need for leadership and resources suggests a dramatic role for education and training. However, the challenges of educating other professionals and meeting training needs are mentioned only briefly.

One could argue that the authors have attempted too much: historical retrospective, a design framework, treatment, evaluation and planning. This reviewer would argue that they have not. *Strengthening High Risk Families* is unmatched as a compilation of basic family preservation practice. It is useful, as well, in revealing how the rhetoric of infusion and integration sometimes moves beyond the realities of practice.

*Schuerman, J. R., Rzepnicki, T. L. & Littell, J. H. (1994).
Putting families first: An experiment in family
 preservation. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.*

Editor's Note: Given the level of discussion around this book, we've asked two colleagues to independently review it. Their response is as follows.

Reviewed by

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The early optimism regarding family preservation services is increasingly being challenged by evaluative research that raises serious questions about their effectiveness in preventing out-of-home placement of "at risk" children. *Putting Families First* is the latest such study, conducted by a team of distinguished researchers from the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. It consisted of an extensive and multi-faceted evaluation of the Illinois Family First initiative, a placement prevention program focusing on families officially reported for child abuse and neglect. The program was administered by the Illinois Department of

Children and Family Services, with services provided on a contractual basis by some 60 private agencies throughout the state.

The study design involved the following three phases: (1) collection of descriptive data on all Family First cases and programs; (2) an experiment testing program effectiveness, with cases randomly assigned to a Family First group or a control group receiving "regular" agency services; and (3) a longitudinal survey of parents in a representative sample of cases and programs, assessing the impact on child and family functioning. The findings indicated that family preservation services did not produce a significant effect on the risk of placement, subsequent maltreatment, child and family functioning, or case closings. In short, although the authors conclude that their message "is one of caution but not despair" (p. 229), the Family First program did not achieve its objectives, notably prevention of placement in out-of-home care.

What is one to make of these disappointing findings? To begin with, it is tempting to criticize the study on methodological grounds. Although the authors anticipate and reject such criticism, the study is flawed in a number of respects, as is typical of most program evaluations in the human services. For instance, the experimental variable (the nature of services) is inadequately defined and operationalized: within broad parameters, each agency defined what constitutes family preservation services. Also, the use of an experimental research design in the untidy world of practice may be questioned, as with previous experiments in such areas as juvenile delinquency, welfare dependency, and multi-problem families.

Despite these and other methodological limitations, Schuerman, Rzepnicki, and Littell make a substantial contribution by adding to the discourse on family preservation services and stimulating further debate regarding their nature, role, and effectiveness. They do so by providing an excellent critique of prior research; clearly delineating issues in the implementation and evaluation of family preservation programs; creatively adapting a variety of measures of child and family functioning; and thoughtfully considering directions for reform in child welfare, such as the importance of integrating the continuum of in-home and out-of-home services and merging placement prevention with family reunification (p. 247).

While direct service practitioners are likely to find the study of limited use in their work, administrators, policy-makers and researchers will find much of value. Above all, they will be challenged to reexamine their assumptions, clarify their ideas and expectations, and redirect their research and program development efforts toward more realistic goals. As an example, they will find an excellent discussion of the problem of targeting in family preservation --- that is, the often-used but largely inexact criterion of serving families with children "at imminent risk of placement".

In conclusion, Putting Families First provokes crucial questions: Should family preservation services be abandoned? Should evaluation of family preservation be abandoned? Should some other approach be adopted in the ever present quest for reforms (or panaceas) in the field of child and family welfare? In my view, proponents of family preservation services should

continue to hang in there --- but temper their enthusiasm about program effectiveness, while focusing on applying lessons learned from studies such as this one. Researchers too should hang in there --- but also temper their critique of family preservation services by displaying more tolerance for the complexities of the phenomenon under study and greater recognition of the limits of research methodology. Rigorous evaluation of "social experiments" --- or even more modest innovations in the human services --- remains a worthy but elusive goal.

Reviewed by

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Putting Families First describes the largest and most ambitious study of "family preservation" services to date, one which has been widely accepted as definitive. It not only outlines the research strategy and findings from this four year study of 6,522 families in 60 Families First programs in Illinois, but chronicles the political currents that swirl around the implementation and evaluation of family preservation programs.

The first part of the book lays out the context and concepts in recent child welfare history that have shaped family preservation and the development of the Illinois Families First program. After reviewing and critiquing the experimental research on placement prevention programs, the authors lay out their elaborate three tiered approach to the evaluation.

The second part of the book reports the descriptive data collected on all the families who received services with comparisons to the families participating in the second tier of the evaluation, a randomized experiment that included 1,564 families in 18 of the programs. Family problems and services were described by both the workers and a subsample of 278 families interviewed 7 to 13 months after referral (p. 78).

The detailed descriptions of the services provided demonstrate the range and variety of the programs in the study, as well as problems in implementing the design; for example, 60% of the families were served for longer than the intended 90 days (pp. 121, 138).

The remainder of the book describes and discusses complex analyses of outcomes, primarily comparing the 995 families randomly assigned to receive family preservation services to the 569 families who received regular services from the Illinois Department of Children and Family

Services (DCFS). The families are compared in terms of placement, subsequent maltreatment, case closing, and parents' views of changes in family problems and family functioning. Overall, the study detected few lasting effects in any of these areas that the researchers attribute to Families First.

Putting Families First is worth reading for its rich description of the process of implementing and evaluating family preservation programs in a politically volatile environment. There is much for both novice and veteran evaluators to glean from this study. The research design is multifaceted with careful explanations of the reasons behind the many choices involved in an evaluation of this scale. Research students will find a good model in this study and will appreciate the appendices that explain the sophisticated multivariate techniques employed.

For those seeking guidance in planning or evaluating family preservation services, the findings reported in this book have less to offer. As the authors themselves thoroughly discuss, the inability to target services to families at risk of imminent placement resulted in low placement rates in both experimental and control groups (pp. 150, 188). Since this means that placement was never at issue for 80% of the families in the experiment, it is not possible to learn what services or program characteristics might have been helpful in preventing placement.

Furthermore, the large and interrelated differences among sites, programs, and families create problems in assessing service effectiveness for subpopulations. For example, although the risk of placement in chronic neglect cases was much lower in the family preservation group than in the control group, since there were only 102 chronic neglect cases spread over the two groups in 18 programs they do not generate significant findings.

Indeed, the very scope of the study makes the results hard to interpret. Although the experiment was rigorously conducted, it is unclear what was being tested. It can be questioned whether "family preservation" was really being evaluated here, since the Illinois program was atypical in several important respects. For example, most of the workers did not see the value of brief intervention, so one of the hallmark characteristics of family preservation, time limited services, was not observed (p. 137). Neither was another hallmark, family participation in setting goals and defining service needs. Both tended to be defined by workers, only 40% of the families fully participated in the development of their service plan, and less than half of the families even agreed it (p. 117).

It is also unclear what "family preservation" was being compared to. In most sites, Families First clients clearly received more services, but in two sites the control group received services that were nearly as intensive (p. 110, 210). Since the data on the control group were collected in an entirely different way than in the experimental group, differences in data collection methods could also have distorted differences in the services.

Perhaps since only 20% of the families were candidates for preservation, what has really been tested in this study is the effectiveness of purchasing services from private providers with ill-

defined criteria and haphazard monitoring. In this case we might conclude that the extra money spent did not produce better outcomes for families than the usual assortment of services provided to families by DCFS. Given the lack of convincing evidence that any coherent version of family preservation services was tested, we cannot reasonably conclude from this study, as many have done, that they are ineffective.

Behavioral Sciences Institute, HOMEBUILDERS Training Division. (1992). Skills for Family and Community Living. Federal Way, WA: Author.

Reviewed by

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Skills For Family and Community Living is a 43 minute videotape that focuses on demonstrations of skills that assist families in potentially difficult situations. The video is designed as a teaching tool for professionals who work with families. A series of eight (8) vignettes of live action situations are presented and behavioral-cognitive skills are demonstrated. New skills are then introduced and supported in a reenactment of the same vignette. The tape allows for discussion and provides teaching strategies to further enhance the learning opportunity. The skills covered in the videotape include communication skills including "I" statements and listening, accepting "no" for an answer, attention and praise, impulse management, resisting peer pressure, anger management and teaching skills to children.

The strength of this video is the opportunity for professionals and family members to actually view difficult and realistic situations that families face. New skills are modeled and the tape is broken into segments that allow for discussion. The professional can select specific skills that the family seems to need or use the whole tape.

The only weakness is pointed out in the teaching guide that accompanies the tape, that not all clients might relate to these specific client groups. Suggestions for discussion with clients about this issue is, however, covered. For a professional audience, this tape may be too basic but, as a teaching tool to use with families it is excellent.

Using this tape as a teaching aide in family preservation courses, has proved worthwhile in integrating theory and practice. Discussing the underlying assumptions made in each vignette assists the student in developing a better understanding of a Behavioral-Cognitive approach to family preservation practice. Although educators may face the same issue as professionals regarding the basic level of the film, it does offer opportunities for them to relate pertinent and important skills to families and cultural groups with whom they are currently working.