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Editorial

What's Good for Families?

In the midst of the debates in Washington, D.C. over the budget, health care, welfare, and foreign affairs, a central question remains unanswered -- what is good for families? Part of the ongoing debate has included family preservation which has been both touted as the solution for society's ills and, simultaneously, as the cause. The reality, of course, is somewhere in between. Family preservation is a new and exciting approach for helping the most basic unit of our society, families, do their job. The principles which guide family preservation grow out of professional helping values and practice experience. Family preservation is a powerful approach to practice which puts the families we are trying to help at the center of the process, not as "symptom bearers" or "dysfunctional systems," but as full partners. While family preservationists enter a family with their eyes wide open to help solve problems, sometimes very serious ones, most of their energy goes to finding strengths and resources in the family in order to meet its needs. It works! And thousands of families who have been helped, along with researchers and other practitioners, sing its praises.

Family preservation is good for families but it's not enough and never can be. Both the proponents and detractors of family preservation must not forget the broader issues effecting families as we continue to search for the ideal professional helping response. Just as individuals live in a context, families survive, thrive or perish in neighborhoods, communities, states and nations. It has never been easy for families. The job of a family is complex and challenging. But these are even more perilous times as reflected in profound economic, cultural, religious, and technological changes. Major forces continue to work against families including poverty, violence, racism, sexism, and rampant consumerism.

Beginning in the early 70's some politicians chose to highlight and exploit differences in our society for personal gain. Polarization and confrontation have been exacerbated. We sue each other "at the drop of a hat" (figuratively if not literally). Negativism is a prime marketing strategy for politicians and products. Materialism sparked by an economic base which can only be maintained by ever increasing consumption may be one of the most notorious "isms" facing families. These themes are pervasive, powerful, and every present in our society. To successfully address them family preservationists must first recognize them as the powerful adversaries they are.

No one approach, method, or technology will single handedly obviate the impact of these negative forces on families. Working with families in their homes from a strengths approach will not eliminate the poverty, racism, and violence outside (or inside) their doors. It is this reality which makes ours such a "messy business": no quick fixes, no miracle cures, no magic bullets. While we must continue to strive to account for greater percentages of the variance of what ails families we must be humble, realistic and prepared to work on multiple levels.

Several of the state plans for the Family Preservation and Support Act contain missions and visions which reflect an understanding that what is good for families must address these negative themes at a community as well as personal level. Doing so entails creating a society which affords every member an adequate level of income and a fair and equal opportunity to participate. Until then no model, technique or approach will be the answer to “what is good for families”?

Family preservation principles and values must be ingrained in the fabric of society before the full potential of family preservation can be realized. The parallel process must extend beyond work with the family to all levels of the community. Politicians must develop policies which are family centered - not vote centered; administrators must develop regulations which are family centered - not agency centered, and corporate leaders must be family centered - not profit centered.

What is good for families begins with treating the families as the expert on their needs but also with recreating communities to be inclusive not divisive, nurturing not punitive, and to value diversity. To achieve these goals we must impact the negative trends which undermine communities at the same time that we help individual families. We ask a lot of family preservation and those who practice it. While family preservation is not the only answer, it is one solid approach which makes a difference for families.

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