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Review of Current Resources

Family Centered Services: A Handbook for Practitioners. Bonnie K. Williams (Ed.). The National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice, School of Social Work, The University of Iowa. Iowa City, Iowa. 1995

Reviewed by

Lois Wright, MSW, Ed.D.
Assistant Dean
College of Social Work
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208

The introduction to this edited handbook describes its intent -- to serve as a "resource for administrators and practitioners in public and private human service agencies who are in the process of developing, maintaining, or enhancing services to families" (ix). Its twenty-two chapters describe family centered services (Chapters 1-3); discuss contact, assessment, and intervention roles (Chapters 4-11); demonstrate a variety of applications of family centered services (Chapters 12-20); and discuss burnout and termination (Chapters 21-22).

This work is well organized for introducing the reader to the concept and application of family centered services, and the references and recommended reading lists are comprehensive. However, the chapters are uneven. At best, they combine rich content with clear application guidelines. In some instances, however, the well-intended attempts to make material accessible result in oversimplification, dilution of content, and a disjointed style.

The first chapter, describing family centered services, states that they were designed for multi-problem families with children in placement, ignoring the history of this mode of intervention. The owning and elaboration of family centered services as a family preservation intervention is a more recent development. The chapter uses many lists and quotes from other sources without always providing the text to integrate them well, and the discussion of systems theory is mechanical and disconnected.

The second chapter, which provides a brief look at application of family centered services to a variety of situations, suffers from many of the same difficulties as the first, often too sketchy to read well or to provide much guidance for practitioners or policy makers. Chapter 3 discusses Cross's six levels of cultural competence and offers principles for cross-cultural assessment and intervention and a plan for increasing cultural competence.

The next two chapters on contact and assessment describe many of the elements of good family practice (e.g., building a relationship, respecting resistance, assessing strengths) and offer some

special techniques for family assessment (e.g., genograms, ecomaps, interviewing for solutions). Each of the next six chapters--covering goal setting and roles of enabler, teacher, advocate, inter-agency coordinator, and intra-agency coordinator--provide valuable information on family intervention skills.

Chapters 12-20 report on the application of family centered services to work with child maltreatment, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, depression, chemical dependency in adolescents and adults, and refugee families. All chapters follow a similar format: definition of the problem area, significance, assessment, and intervention. Again, the chapters are uneven in terms of style and depth. Chapters 21 and 22, while containing solid information on burnout and termination, read like brief after-thoughts.

The handbook shows the editor's and contributors' struggle with a difficult task: translating the theoretical and empirical child and family literature into readily usable practice and policy tools and guidelines for readers who may not have a social work or similar background. The challenge is to simplify without impoverishing.

Building Skills in High-Risk Families: Strategies for the Home-Based Practitioner. Jane Peterson, Paula E. Kohrt, Linda M. Shadoin, Karen J. Authier. Boys Town, Nebraska. Boys Town Press.

Reviewed by:

Sharon Alpert, LMSW-ACP
Harris County Children's Protective Services
Supervisor Intensive Family Services
5100 Southwest Freeway
Houston, Texas 77056

High Risk Families is a video series and workbook designed to assist caseworkers in orienting themselves to the practice of family preservation demonstrating practical and effective skills in working with this population. Most noteworthy in both the video series and workbook are the true to life examples of families in crisis and the reactions of workers internally and externally to the demands of these experiences.

Respectful of both family norms and values, while remaining clear about the need to reduce risk of harm to children, this package guides the worker in identifying personal biases and expectations that may interfere with the objectives of the work if not honestly examined and managed. Additionally emphasized is the value of listening without judgment or answers. It is pointed out that all too often in the role of helper, we become paralyzed by our own definitions of help and are subsequently unable to hear the families' definition. We are reminded of the value of being heard and the reality that most families already have the answers but are mired in the "how to's".

The videos provide situational settings and challenges commonly facing family preservation workers, and through role play demonstrate effective ways to respond to the most formidable of challenges. These examples would be an excellent introduction to the work for new staff who are anxious to know what to do when faced with difficult situations. The family preservation workers and clients are believable and provide an opportunity to observe the dynamics and scope of the work in a manner that may alleviate some concerns new staff have about how to respond.

Clear and measurable goals are established and monitored through case examples and a number of interventions are employed in this effort. Skills and interventions are highlighted and discussed in detail between case scenarios. One worker's efforts with a developmentally disabled parent around the need to maintain structure and consistency with her children is particularly well done. Demonstrating the unique challenges of this population and the

extraordinary patience and sensitivity of the worker, this scenario would be helpful to both new and tenured staff who struggle with both the limitations of the client as well as their own.

Scenes occur in the clients' homes and family preservation workers are often seen assisting in family chores while talking with parents about the problems they are facing. The workers are obviously there to meet the needs of their families and willing to extend themselves in this effort. Also emphasized is the practice of inviting the family to use more of what is working. Using a strengths approach allows the family to see areas of success and define their objective as expanding what they are already doing. This makes change seem within reach and prevents the family preservation worker from becoming entangled in the family system's energy around problem areas.

The workbook complements the video elaborating on skills and interventions utilizing a cognitive behavioral approach to problem solving. Chapters represent stages and components of effective intervention and use case examples to expand on material presented. Particular attention is given to the foundation of this practice in its absolute respect and reverence for the family itself despite difficulties presented.

Issues addressed include family culture, building relationships, detecting abuse/neglect and intervention techniques. A variety of interventions are detailed with examples of when they would be most effective in addition to exercises allowing the reader to practice new skills.

This program is a model for family preservation practice. Staff new to this work would greatly benefit from the practical tools and knowledge presented. For this reviewer it served as a reminder of why we are in this work and the riches afforded to us in this practice.



Department of Social Work
New Mexico State University