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Strengthening and Preserving Family is Essential to America's Future

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We read every day about the disintegration of family, and horror stories of neglect, abuse, violence, sexual predation, and homicide by family members. Strengthening family is essential to the fiber and soul of our civilization.

Certainly, that is the case today in America, as the deep recession pushes more families into poverty. Many are homeless, uninsured, and food insecure. Just consider some of the data from the National Center for Children in Poverty:

- 22% of America's children live in poverty; this number increases to 39.1% for black children and 35% for Hispanic children.
- 51% of Hispanic households are food insecure compared to 35% of non-Hispanic African American and 36% of non-Hispanic white households.
- Hispanic families are twice as likely as non-Hispanic families "to have no place to go for healthcare when sick."
- Black children are more likely to have been diagnosed with asthma than Hispanic and non-Hispanic white children.

Research on family is vital to addressing the social problems that often lead to educational, health, and behavioral problems. At the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD), we are proud to be affiliated with the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* and very glad to be a part of the continuation of the *Family Preservation Journal* in its new form.

This issue marks the first publication of the *Journal* in a new format (online) and under a new title: the *Journal of Family Strengths*. It is fitting that Professor Alvin Sallee, who for many years directed a center for family preservation and edited the *Family Preservation Journal*, now directs the Center for Family Strengths at UHD and has the lead editorial in this first issue. As Sallee explains in his article, the journal will be guided "by a set of principles and values which support the family units as the critical resource for ensuring the safety and development of children."

This first issue also demonstrates the breadth of family strength practice and research. Stephen Baldrige provides a critical review of the literature on family stability and childhood behavioral outcomes. The article focuses on the definitions of family stability and identifies gaps in research.

James P. Coyle examines resilience theory and how family resilience influences the resilience of children. Coyle proposes methods for identifying and enhancing family protective factors to support children's resilience. Similarly, J.D. Berrick applies family reunification theory, a central tenet of child welfare, by examining outcomes for children served

in the Parent Partner program. The study matches 236 children whose parents were served by the Parent Partner program with 55 children whose parents were served only by the public child welfare agency. The study indicates that “reunification may be more likely for children whose parents were served by Parent Partners.” While more research is needed, Berrick feels such programs “may hold promise as a child welfare intervention designed to support reunification.”

Family stressors have been found to affect social development of adolescents. Cynthia Harr studied adolescents in long-term residential care. The results of her study of 457 cases indicate that youth with more family stressors exhibited significantly greater impairment in their social development. Her research supports a family systems approach to treatment that focuses on building family strengths and actively involving family in the intervention process.

Two articles (those by Wedel and Friedman) examine practitioners’ views and the relationships view to family practice and decision-making. Kenneth Wedel, utilizing a Delphi study in Oklahoma, examines practitioners’ views of family strength. Roger Friedman focuses on the strengths and struggles of an individual teenager, his adoptive family, and his biological mother to better understand how the experiences of families can inform the child welfare system.

External influences on the family can impact the capacity of families to properly foster the recovery of sexually abused adolescents. Javonda Williams provides secondary data analysis of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Wave to argue that data supports contextually sensitive treatment planning for sexually abused adolescents and their families. Richard Wexler examines child welfare waivers and the stakes for communities and states.

Qualitative studies of parents can provide keen insights into belief systems and behaviors. Elizabeth Breshears conducted multi-session focus groups and interviews with 27 participants to better understand child discipline and punishment methods, including corporal punishment. She found that parents were thoughtful in use of discipline and parental strategies, occasionally resorting to physical punishment, “when children *needed* spanking.” Breshears found that parents were unaware of the risks associated with physical punishment and only three of the parents (as a result of foster training) had ever heard instructions not to spank. Parents themselves provided recommendations of how they could be better informed, including a national campaign to strengthen parenting.

Kinship care, particularly grandparents and other relatives raising children, is a growing phenomenon in America. It is also a tradition that is

strongly rooted in African American culture, according to Patricia Wilkerson and Gloria Davis. Kinship care is particularly helpful when biological parents are incarcerated or suffering from substance use or other illness. The authors argue that kinship care is vital to the transmission of identity and culture, and strengthens family, particularly in ethnic communities. Unfortunately, as the authors note, too often the child welfare system is neither conducive to nor supportive of such arrangements.

Fathers also face perception barriers in family placement and lack access to adequate support mechanisms. Shawna Lee, Anna Yelick, Kimberly Brisebois, and Kelvin Banks interviewed fathers to better understand their awareness of parenting services and found a need for male-focused community resources for fathers. The men themselves suggest engagement of children in concrete and constructive activities, such as mentorship programs with other men in their communities and felt such mentoring to be more beneficial than traditional parenting classes provided through Child Protective Services.

Taken together, the articles contextualize the wide range of perceptions and practices that support (and sometimes undermine) family strengths. Evidence-based practice is essential to the continued development of the field and is essential for policy research. We hope that the articles contained in this journal inspire your thought, practice, and further research. Our children deserve nothing less.

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