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Editorial

The Demands of Protection, Preservation, and Permanency: Where Has Family Preservation Gone?

With the Elian Gonzales story prominent in the news now for almost six months, the plight of children and their relationship to families has been thrust into the public view on a daily basis. Rescued at sea after his mother drowned escaping Cuba, Elian resided for 5 months with distant relatives whom he had never met before being “retrieved” by armed law enforcement officials and returned to his father. Evident is the political and value upheaval exhibited by very strong emotions regarding this topic. Aside from the political undercurrent of this case between the Cuban-American and Cuban-Communist perspectives, emotions and opinions still run high throughout the country.

As human service providers and academicians, we are all well aware that children are removed from similar situations every day by law enforcement personnel. While these cases are not as intensely watched by millions of people, the underlying principles remain the same. Those in political and elected office who often wave the flag of family values oppose the removal of Elian from his distant relative’s home. These are many of the same people who have trounced upon children’s rights, removed funding from children’s programs, and proclaim that government has no place in private matters.

There is no subject which people believe they are more expert on than family issues. Herein lies the challenge to those who support and understand Family Preservation principles and values. Since the excitement and anticipation of the passage of the Family Preservation and Support Act of 1993, even the term Family Preservation has practically dropped from sight.

Within the past year, we have observed and noted a common theme emanating from a number of sources. The Editorial Board of this Journal (composed of national experts in the field) and the grass roots Conference Committee of the Family Preservation Institute have observed what is described as a wave of neglect and misinformation with respect to the promise and potential of Family Preservation. Since 1993, there has been almost a total turnover of top state child welfare agencies administrators, many of whom have little or no experience in child and family services. Thus, there has been a generational change from the excitement of the potential regarding the Family Preservation Act of 1993 to little knowledge of it.

The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (PL 105-89) in fact provides even more federal dollars for Family Preservation services, yet, in light of legislative mandates and competing state priorities, it has been difficult for many states to maintain a focus on the advantages afforded family and states through the Safe and Stable Families funding and

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programs. This accentuates the need for family-centered advocates to more clearly articulate the benefits to children and families found in the goals of the Family Preservation and Support Act. Given the direction of the Department of Health and Human Services and the political undertones found in ASFA, Family Preservation dollars are in fact going into adoption programs and meeting the new timelines.

There is an emphasis by the Federal Government and many states on measuring successful outcomes in a field where the research methodology has perhaps not matured as quickly as practice wisdom. Several state administrators do not realize the potential impact that keeping children in their own home has in regard to ASFA. If nothing else, Family Preservation keeps the clock from starting on these children. The maintenance of the children in their own home is cost effective, not only in terms of out-of-home placement costs, but also the large number of persons who must work with those children as soon as they are removed from their homes. These include CASAs, attorneys, guardian ad litem, placement workers, treatment workers, supervisors, Citizen Review Board members, and Federal Court monitors.

While the state faces these barriers, at the same time practice wisdom points to the reality that humane excellence in social service practice is only achievable through skilled professional balancing of protection, preservation, and permanency. We are faced with critical questions.

First, what is the role of Family Preservation practice in achieving the balance between protection and preservation? Secondly, what are the necessary components of the service system capable of accomplishing this balance and how are they funded?

To help answer these questions, we must provide the following information to agency administrators and program designers: (1) Options to reinvigorate and refine the implementation of the Safe and Stable Families Programs in light of current political and legislative mandates. (2) Family Preservation system designs that employ the values and principles of family-centered practice to protect, preserve, and provide permanency for children. (3) A critical and forthright review of the Family Preservation research (facts and myths) and their implications for Family Preservation practice. Which values and principles remain relevant and what does the research really suggest? And, (4) Which human service system designs are successfully combating drift, assuring safety, and moving families through the various systems to case closure?

To achieve quality family-centered practice, we must go beyond the techniques and specific skills of Family Preservation and address collaboration and cross-systems training. One

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cross-systems training project in Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah encourages joint training, program design, and service delivery through numerous agencies, including law enforcement, schools, mental health, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, domestic violence, child welfare, and welfare (Briar-Lawson, K., H. Lawson, N. Peterson, N. Harris, D. Derezotes, A. Sallee, and T. Hoffman, 1999). In these four states, there are the beginning success stories and perhaps more importantly, the identification of major barriers to collaboration.

The structural barriers created by conflicting and separate policies that have grown out of individual cases, such as Elian Gonzales', must also be addressed through political advocacy. Political advocacy is not just working directly with legislators and administrators, but also helping to inform the general public of the strength of families and, in most cases, the fact that children, just as Elian Gonzales, grow and prosper best in families.

This Journal issue provides three important articles that will aid us in explaining what we do in service to families. We are very pleased to have the opportunity to print a major address delivered by William Meezan on "Translating Rhetoric to Reality: The Future of Family and Children's Services." The challenges of serving families under an evolution of models in Kansas is presented in "Family Preservation Services Under Managed Care: Current Practices and Future Directions" by Melanie Pheatt, Becky Douglas, Lori Wilson, Jody Brook, and Marianne Berry. What people doing the work think is addressed by the piece titled, "Perceptions of Family Preservation Practitioners: A Preliminary Study" by Judith Hilbert, Alvin L. Sallee, and James K. Ott. Finally, this issue presents a number of very interesting reviews of new resources.

Alvin L. Sallee

Briar-Lawson, K., Lawson, H., Peterson, N., Harris, N., Derezotes, D., Sallee, A., and Hoffman T. (1999). "Addressing the co-occurring needs of public sector families challenged by domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, child abuse, and poverty." Paper presented at Society for Social Work Research, Austin, Texas.