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What is Family Preservation and Why Does it Matter?

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What Is Family Preservation and Why Does It Matter?

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This paper describes competing ideas about family preservation, defined both as a defined program of social services and a philosophical approach to helping troubled families. A straightforward definition has become almost impossible because the phrase has taken on so many different meanings, provoking controversy about its "real" meaning and value. Indeed, "family preservation" has become the proverbial elephant whose splendors and horrors are described with great certainty by those impressed by only one of its aspects. While skirmishes between "child savers" and "family preservers" have been part of the child welfare field since its beginning at the turn of the last century, recent debates over family preservation have been especially heated, generating more confusion and animosity than might be expected from the ranks of the small and usually mild-mannered social work profession. The debate is so heated that the director of one of the nation's largest child welfare agencies said recently that he is afraid to "even use the two words on the same page." <1>

While the debate about the value of family preservation is unresolved, experimentation with different approaches to service delivery over the last two decades has helped to lay the groundwork for a resurgence of interest in family and community-centered reforms. Better understanding of the family preservation "debates" may be helpful if these reforms are to be successful over the long term. The paper discusses the competing ideas, values, and perceptions that have led observers to their different understandings of family preservation. It briefly chronicles the history of child welfare and examines key theories that have helped lay the groundwork for the resurgence of interest in family-centered services. It concludes with observations about how the competing values at stake in family preservation may affect the next generation of reforms.

Competing Ideas, Values, and Perceptions

How Do Family Preservation Services Fit into Child Welfare?

Responsibility for providing social services for troubled children and families rests with the 50 states, some of which have devolved operational responsibility to counties. Thus, although commentators sometimes refer to "the child welfare system," there are actually many more than 50 different child welfare systems in this country, each of which has its

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own history and context from which have evolved different cultures and rationales for implementing child welfare functions.

The basic functions of child welfare are protective services, foster care, and adoption, the services that focus on protecting children from "bad" families and finding them new homes with "good" (or at least better) families. Most localities offer at least some "family-centered" services for the families of the vulnerable children they serve, although few can provide these services to all of the families who might benefit from them. Although family-centered services have taken center stage in many recent discussions about child welfare, they are still ancillary to these core child welfare functions as described by Kamerman (1998/99:3):

> The services that fall under the rubric of child welfare services today include protective services (reports, investigations, and assessments), foster care (including foster family and home care, institutional care, and residential treatment), adoption services, and, more recently, family preservation and family support services. Family preservation services are services that are variously described as either "back-end services" (intensive, time-limited crisis services designed to prevent placement at the point that the child is to be placed) or "front-end" services, designed to intervene early and prevent more serious problems from occurring. Family support services are described as a package of services… to enhance parenting and prevent subsequent problems…. By far, the dominant components of the child welfare system, however, are protective services, foster care, and adoption services.

Each locality has a great deal of discretion about the types of family-centered services it offers, and because such services are still relatively new, unproven, and poorly funded, local services vary greatly. Some state legislatures invested in statewide family-centered services in the 70s and 80s, and some local agencies have partnered with foundations and non-profit agencies to develop family- and community-centered services. Other local child welfare agencies have only recently begun providing family-centered services, using federal funding which became available with passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997 (Public Law 105-89).

Although a number of authors have asserted the importance of family-centered services in the child welfare "continuum" (McCroskey and Meezan, 1998; Pecora, et al., 1995; Pecora, Whittaker, & Maluccio, 1992), this vision has not been fully realized in most communities. A group in Los Angeles has taken the idea of a continuum even further, suggesting that the continuum should be structured around family needs, rather than fitting family-centered services into a continuum of child-oriented services. Advocates in Los Angeles developed a continuum of Family Support Services. <2> In this continuum, family preservation is defined broadly, including services to prevent families from becoming

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known to the public child welfare agency, as well as services aimed at reunification. In other communities, such a broad definition of "family preservation" services might be at odds with prevailing views, but most would agree that a range of services designed to do more than protect children from serious abuse and neglect is needed regardless of terminology.

In brief, the answer to how family preservation fits into the continuum of child welfare services is "it depends." In some places, family preservation is integral, in others, it is marginal. In some places, family preservation is used to prevent placement, in others to prevent the need for child protection, and in still others to reunify families whose children have been removed. In some places, family preservation is solely a function of the public child welfare agency, in others it is also used by other systems for other target populations (i.e., juvenile justice, mental health). Such differences in service design, implementation, and utilization have led to different perceptions about the meaning of the term and to different judgments about its worth.

Is Family Preservation a Service Delivery Model or a Philosophy?

A related question is whether "family preservation" refers to a particular model of service delivery, especially the Homebuilders model, which provides brief crisis-oriented services in response to "imminent risk" of out-of-home placement. Does the term refer to a specific kind of service or to a general philosophy, part of a developing set of ideas designed to improve the whole child and family services system? Gardner (1999:1) defines systems change as

> a set of linked reforms that introduce stronger accountability for results; a greater emphasis on services that require the involvement of two or more agencies to be effective; new standing for stakeholders who are not now major decision-makers (especially parents and line workers); and greater redirection of resources now in the system toward programs that demonstrate their effectiveness.

In some places, people think of "family preservation" as including these elements (or at least some of these elements). For example, in Los Angeles, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has partnered with the Departments of Mental Health and Probation to contract with networks of community-based agencies serving high-need communities throughout the county. These family preservation networks include family members in multidisciplinary case review meetings, providing services up to a year or sometimes longer. Some of the 27 networks have used their experiences working together on behalf of maltreating families to develop new community-based family support services for all families (including job training, transportation, and summer activities for youth). The networks offer services for families referred by DCFS, but they also offer supports and resources to families <u>after</u> their cases have been closed by the public agency and to other

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families in the community who were never known to the agency. One of the key goals of the plan was to increase the capacity of community-based agencies in the poorest areas of the county to provide a broad range of family-centered services. <3>

Some believe that family preservation is the leading edge of a family-centered strategy that can help to reform a dysfunctional system, while others see it as but one program in an increasingly long list of specific family- or community-oriented services. The first group focuses on the philosophy, while the second focuses on results achieved by specific models of service delivery. Approaching it from these different perspectives clearly leads to very different perceptions of its relevance and worth.

What Are the Goals of Family Preservation?

Such differences have also led to another source of confusion—what are the desired results of family preservation?

When used at the "front-end," the goals of family preservation services may be to strengthen parenting, improve family functioning, and enhance child well-being. "Back-end" services focus on improving family functioning to prevent placement or to reunify families. So the answer to the question about the goals of family preservation is, once again, "it depends." In some places, the goal is to strengthen families in order to prevent trouble. Others focus largely on preventing placement. Still others are concerned about renewing family ties when a child returns home from placement. Or there may be a mix of related goals designed to fit specific local needs. These differences have also fueled different perceptions about the desirability and value of family preservation services.

Who Benefits from Family Preservation?

Family preservation programs usually work directly with one or more parents or caregivers (i.e., relatives, guardians) of children who are known to be at risk of becoming known to protective services. This direct work with parents may also provide indirect benefits for children and other adult family members. As illustrated in Figure 1, family preservation programs may target somewhat different groups of families—*families facing serious challenges* (including those who have not yet been referred to protective services); *families putting children at high risk* (those who face such overwhelming problems that their children may need immediate out-of-home placement); and *families who could be reunified quickly* or *where reunification is a long-term goal.*

Because family circumstances can change quickly, there are no hard and fast lines between groups, but some of the differences between these possible target populations should be underscored. Alarms about risks to children who remain at home while their parents participate in family preservation services have focused primarily on one of these groups—families whose children are at immediate or "imminent" risk of placement. Media

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reports in some communities linking family preservation services with child deaths and injuries have fueled justifiable indignation.

Many of those who are most negative about family preservation services, however, appear to believe that such services are offered to all parents, even those who have most grievously injured their children. But that isn't the case. The first job of the protective services worker is to decide whether a child can safely remain at home. These decisions are based on judgment calls in difficult circumstances and may not always turn out to have been justified, but no child welfare worker or agency wants to leave children in danger, even when they believe that there may be some possibility of eventually bringing the family together again.

Families are selected for family preservation services based on different kinds of criteria. In some places, parents who have no connection with the child welfare system can "volunteer" for family preservation services offered by community-based service agencies. In others, parents who have been referred to child protective services may be offered "voluntary" services when an allegation of abuse or neglect has not been substantiated. Families already entangled with protective services, because their cases were substantiated or their children are under court jurisdiction, are often referred to as "involuntary" cases. But there are considerable differences in family dynamics among such "involuntary" cases—and the degree of risk to children from remaining at home while parents "get it together" can vary substantially.

There may also be some benefits for public agencies, for service systems, and for communities from family preservation services. The primary point used to convince state legislatures about family preservation programs was that they would save public dollars by preventing out-of-home placement. Although there has been a good deal of controversy about the accuracy of such assertions, there may, indeed, be benefits in terms of savings or at least reallocation of costs in some jurisdictions.

Family preservation programs in some localities have been designed to expand the capacity of community-based service systems by developing new service sites, enhancing the skills of local agency staff, and increasing access to neighborhood-based, family-centered services. Such programs can also help parents find and use more preventive services, (i.e., immunization programs, Women Infant and Children feeding programs, food banks, etc.) benefiting the families, as well as the society that ends up having to treat fewer serious problems.

Thus, the answer to the question of who benefits from family preservation programs is not perfectly clear either. Benefits depend on how programs are designed and implemented, who the target populations are, what range of supports and services are offered, and what kinds of agencies and organizations are involved.

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What Works Best?

There are also different interpretations of the research to date on specific models of family preservation. Does the research demonstrate that family preservation doesn't work because it doesn't prevent placement? Do some services improve family functioning and enhance child well-being? Or is the jury still out on appropriate ways to measure the outcomes of family preservation services (Pecora, et al., 1995; McCroskey & Meezan, 1997; McCroskey & Meezan, 1998)?

While some think of family preservation as a specific model of service (usually the Homebuilders model), others think of its potential as a community-based intervention for families with a much broader range of issues and problems. This approach suggests that family and child outcomes should be seen in a community context, reaffirming the beliefs of early social workers in the importance of community-based service delivery (Waldfogel, 1998). It is not surprising that those who think the question of "what works?" is about documenting the impact of a specific service model come to different conclusions than those who want to enhance community-based services or to expand the profession's focus on families in the context of their communities.

How Important Are Families Anyway?

The last question in this section highlights the values dilemmas that have confounded the child welfare field throughout its history. When should social workers "save" poor children from families who aren't "good" enough? Who is to blame if we save them from "bad" families, but don't offer them anything better? What if they never find "good" families, and it turns out that even inadequate families could have helped children find identities and places in the world that they could not find on their own? How do we balance the "rights" of families who want to be preserved with those of children who need to be "saved"?

Unfortunately, the key underlying causes of family dysfunction—race, class, violence and substance abuse—are seldom addressed directly by service programs or by the social workers and court officers who make critical decisions about the lives of children and families. These professionals tend to make practical decisions—doing the best they can do with what they have to go on at the moment—while the big social questions of the day are debated elsewhere.

Some people believe that family preservation offers a way to expand the limited focus of child welfare decision-makers, balancing the impulse to "save" poor children of color from their "inadequate" families with a reform strategy that considers the social and economic barriers faced by poor parents, the color lines that still limit their possibilities, the violence and drugs that permeate their communities. Others believe that no service can, or should, address social inequality—and that setting up family preservation to do so is sheer folly.

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Such differences in values and beliefs make it difficult even to have a serious discussion about family preservation. Nor is it surprising that the term "family preservation" has become a kind of touchstone—signifying the failures of the past to some and hope for the future to others. The next section describes some key milestones in the early development of the social work profession that created the context for these competing views.

Child Welfare and the Development of Social Work

Some discussions of family preservation have assumed that it originated in the 1970s and 80s, and that analysis should therefore focus on recent history. The Homebuilders model, one of the most widely known models of family preservation services, was developed in the 70s based on work by Kinney, Haapala, and others in Tacoma, Washington (Kinney, Masden, Fleming, & Haapala, 1977). Other models for intensive family preservation services can be "traced to programs developed in the mid-1950s" (Reed & Kirk, 1998: 42). Key mid-century demonstrations of family-centered social work include the St. Paul Project (Geismar &Ayres, 1959), the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Project (Powers & Witmer, 1951), and the New York City Youth Board and Department of Welfare joint project (Overton, 1953) among others. Identification of the "battered child syndrome" and systematic implementation of protective service practices in the 1960s and 70s brought new demonstration projects designed to provide alternatives to letting children "drift" in foster care (Sherman, Phillips, Haring, & Shyne, 1973; Jones, 1985). But the roots of the controversy over family preservation services go back much farther—to the turn of the century beginnings of the profession.

Two Approaches to Social Services

In his history of supportive services for families, Robert Halpern (1999: 3) describes the emergence of two kinds of institutions designed to provide social services for the poor immigrant families who poured into urban America at the turn of the last century:

> The new institutions and approaches were of two sorts. One, embodied in the settlement movement, was community-focused. ... The other, found in the emerging discipline of social casework, focused on individual and family adjustment. Both approaches seemed to proponents more powerful and constructive than charity and moral exhortation. Their mission—to strengthen the domestic practices of poor immigrant families and generally help them adjust to American society; to identify and address community and social conditions that undermined family well-being; to organize and build a sense of mutual support within poor neighborhoods; to reconcile cultural and class conflict; to address the consequences of, and when possible reign in, the worst excesses of industrial capitalism – was both ambitious

and diffuse. It also set the stage for internal disagreement over purpose, emphases, and methods that would plague the service provision community throughout the century.

Both approaches were rooted in the charities and corrections movements, which emerged in the U. S. first in 1865 (based on the English model) with the creation of the American Board of Public Charities in Massachusetts (Specht & Courtney, 1994: 72).

> The charities and corrections people were ruled by a fierce Victorian morality, and they were determined to uplift every fallen sparrow they came upon. ... They believed that human fortunes are determined largely by physical and biological forces, which a benevolent and enlightened upper class can control through social engineering and use of new intellectual tools from the developing sciences of eugenics, sociology, anthropology and psychology.

This Victorian world view, which could readily envision a productive combination of morality and science, still confounds much of the work of the social work profession. Are we about "science" or are we about what is "right"? When science supports what we believe, the path is clear. But when it doesn't, do we doubt science or doubt our beliefs? In an era that sometimes doubts both, it can be difficult to know what to do. Many of the most passionate arguments about family preservation are about what to do when the twin poles of science (research) and morality (belief) are not in alignment.

The first American branch of the Charity Organization Societies or COS (also an English import) was established in Buffalo in 1877, and by the turn of the century there were branches in a number of American cities. The COS philosophy, based in "scientific charity," provided a systematic method for assessing the needs of the poor. "Friendly visitors" who completed a "social investigation" in the family home advised the poor to help themselves. Help was based on the advice and counsel of this "friend" rather than on financial contributions or relief. Their work established the foundations of the social casework approach.

COS principles were simple: to create an "independent" poor with "backbone," no material aid was to be given to them except in emergencies, and then only on a temporary basis; volunteers, usually women, were to counsel the poor as "friendly visitors"; and philanthropy was to be placed on a businesslike footing. The COS would investigate, collate data, and proffer advice, although its coercive, moralistic tone was not lost on the poor (Walkowitz, 1999: 33).

The early work of Mary Richmond and other COS leaders who developed the practice framework for social casework, pioneered what were to become key professional skills—client engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation (Richmond 1917, 1922). But latter day social workers changed the emphasis of casework by putting their faith in

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psychoanalytic rather than social explanations of need. As Specht and Courtney (1994: 75) note, these skills had taken on very different meanings by the middle of the century:

> Over the next fifty years, the scientific investigation evolved into the clinical interview; the faithful friend turned into, first, the social caseworker and, later, the psychotherapist; and the personal influence came to be exercised through a therapeutic relationship.

The other strand of social invention at the beginning of the century was the settlement house. The best known American settlement house, Hull House, was established by Jane Addams and her colleagues in Chicago at roughly the same time that Richmond was developing methods of social investigation and diagnosis. Proponents of the settlement house movement focused their attention on large-scale social and economic conditions in urban areas. They also moved into settlement houses located in the hearts of poor urban areas, creating community-based havens where immigrant families could find a broad range of supports for their families, including kindergartens, English classes, health care and social activities.

Development of local Societies for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (often affiliated with Societies for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) also marked an important turning point, laying the groundwork for child protection as a specific field of social work practice. Many of the early SPCC agents did not model themselves, however, on either social caseworkers or settlement house workers. Instead, they saw themselves as law enforcement agents, and the agents of some societies even had police powers (Folks, 1902: 174). In 1902, Homer Folks described the attitudes of "the Cruelty" (pp. 176-77):

> The influence of "cruelty" societies as a whole has been in favor of the care of children in institutions, rather than by placing them in families. So far as known, none of the societies have undertaken the continued care of children rescued by them, but all have turned them over to the care of institutions or societies incorporated for the care of children. … Usually they have not cooperated to any extent with placing-out societies, perhaps because of being continually engaged in breaking up families of bad character, but have rather become the feeders of institutions, both reformatory and charitable.

Without detracting from the great credit due to such societies for the rescue of children from cruel parents or immoral surroundings, it must be said that their influence in the upbuilding of very large institutions, and their very general failure to urge the benefits of adoption for young children, have been unfortunate. Probably their greatest beneficence has been, not to the children who have come under their care, but to the vastly larger number

whose parents have restrained angry tempers and vicious impulses through fear of "the Cruelty."

Education for Social Work

During the first few decades of the century, some social activists worked to bring the new social science disciplines of sociology, economics, and political science to universities, linking university-based disciplines and activist reformers. By the 1920s, however, these fledgling disciplines were proving their worth in the university by asserting their specialized knowledge and rigorous standards of science—a development that put more distance between academic "scientists" and their former colleagues, community-based activists from the settlement houses and other reform movements.

Several universities created professional schools of social work at about this time, moving their reform-oriented courses out of sociology and the other social science disciplines and into departments of social work in order to differentiate the "scientific" standards of the social science disciplines from the "applied" concerns of a practical profession (Reuben, 1996). The partnership between "science" and "morality" that had been envisioned in the early days of the social sciences frayed quickly, reserving the brain work of the social sciences for proper academicians and leaving implementation to professional social workers. This separation not only diminished the status of social work within the university, but reinforced the gender roles that classified social activism as women's work.

> This institutional change sharpened gender divisions within academia; moral concerns were related to the "feminine" profession of social work, while science was associated with "masculine" virtues of detachment and impartiality (Reuben, 1996: 207).

Dynamic Tensions in Child Welfare Practice

Clearly many of the dynamic tensions inherent in child welfare throughout the century can be traced back to its double roots in the social reform tradition of the settlement houses and the individual treatment tradition of the COS (Haynes, 1998; Abramovitz, 1998). Many of the troubling aspects of today's child welfare practice are also rooted in these early experiences, including

- focus on punishing bad parents rather than assuring that children have better alternatives
- placing children who have been "saved" from bad families into protective institutions rather than seeking adoptive families
- reliance on fear and sanctions rather than education and information for parents

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- the social worker's role as enforcer of middle-class standards of child rearing rather than as family "friend" who can translate across linguistic and cultural lines
- "saving" children from their immigrant families rather than helping families to understand American child caring customs
- prevention of maltreatment by scaring parents into "better" behavior
- focus on the behavior of individual families rather than community-based reform

Perhaps one of the reasons that family preservation has been such a touchstone of controversy is that it highlights many of these unresolved issues, generating discussion about basic differences in professional beliefs and values that are seldom taken head on.

The Complications of Culture, Race, and Class

Another set of complications that has distorted child welfare practice since its beginnings is caused by the difficulty of talking sensibly about the welfare of children across the gulfs of culture, race, and class. Victorian era charity and corrections movements were based largely on notions of *noblesse oblige*, the duty of the better off to provide role models for their less fortunate neighbors. Most of those who founded both the COS and settlement houses were upper-class women who wanted to fulfill their responsibilities to the less fortunate, while also finding work for themselves in a society that radically limited possibilities for women. Thus, the attitudes of the profession were largely formed by upper-class white women who, as they became professionals, took their responsibility to uphold society's moral standards very seriously. Many functioned as guardians of those standards, trying to persuade immigrant families from all over the world to behave more like "sensible" Americans.

In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Jane Addams (1910: 84) tells a story about a teacher's attempts to impart temperance principles to an Italian mother whose five-year-old daughter came to kindergarten having breakfasted on wine-soaked bread:

> The mother, with the gentle courtesy of a South Italian, listened politely to her graphic portrayal of the untimely end awaiting so immature a wine bibber; but long before the lecture was finished, quite unconscious of the incongruity, she hospitably set forth her best wines, and when her baffled guest refused one after the other, she disappeared, only to quickly return with a small dark glass of whisky, saying reassuringly, "See, I have brought you the true American drink." The recital ended in seriocomic despair with the rueful statement that "the impression I probably made upon her darkened mind was that it is the American custom to breakfast children on bread soaked in whisky instead of a light Italian wine."

Social workers still struggle with how to communicate across such deep differences in understanding and experience. How do we develop cultural competence—the ability to work competently across cultures—when even trying to talk honestly about race and class can feel like walking in a minefield? And when these same social workers have the power to take away your children, the stakes are very high indeed. No matter how culturally competent and responsive the individual social worker, it is well to keep in mind that part of our professional heritage is from the "friendly visitor" who felt that it was her duty to judge the moral worth of poor parents.

Walkowitz (1999) examines a key aspect of this role in his book, *Working with Class, Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity.* Noting that most Americans today identify themselves and their families as middle class (including those who earn $20,000 as well as those who earn $200,000 a year), he examines confusion about class identity by focusing on social workers (Walkowitz, 1999: xi):

> The history of social workers involves salient features of modern identity formation in America. First, since social workers were a predominantly, but not exclusively, female labor force that by mid-century serviced a predominantly African American and Hispanic client population, gender and race were always central to how they thought of themselves and their work… More important, though, as paid workers occupying a liminal social space between wealthy volunteers and board members who claim agency authority on the one hand and the poor who are dependent on them for aid on the other, social workers play a central role in twentieth-century class formation in America. Indeed, in their daily work of determining eligibility for private philanthropy or public relief, social workers patrol the borders of class.

Recent Evolution of Family Preservation

The 1950s and 60s were a period of rapid development for the social services, but by the 1970s it was clear that there were serious holes in the social "safety net." People questioned the large-scale institutions caring for the retarded and mentally ill. Exposés about the treatment of inmates in hospitals, prisons, and correctional facilities underscored doubts about institutional care for many vulnerable groups. Community-based care in smaller settings looked like a more sensible alternative, especially when deinstitutionalization also offered the promise of cost savings. Unfortunately, the promises of community-based alternatives for status offenders and the mentally ill who were released from institutions were never realized.

The child welfare system was dealing with related problems at about the same time—increasing numbers of child abuse reports and increasing numbers of children removed from family homes only to "drift" in foster care. By 1980, the beginning of the Reagan "revolution," it seemed that we were caught in a nightmare—out-of-home

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placements were going up while federal resources for a broad range of child and family services program were decreasing—and the protective services system seemed like it would soon become the only possible source of help for needy families.

The need for prevention and early intervention services that could help families before problems escalated to the point of abuse was clear, but where would the money come from? Experimentation with family-centered services programs had been on-going in a low key way, until one of these programs was brought forward with a good deal of fanfare. The Homebuilders program was a crisis-oriented, short-term, home-based, intensive treatment program for families intended to prevent out-of-home placement (Kinney, Madsen, Fleming, & Haapala, 1977).

> In the early 80s, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation undertook to showcase the Homebuilders model nationally… [The foundation] invested over $30 million to market the Homebuilders model to agencies and legislatures around the country. These efforts were complimented with additional support and funding leveraged by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. By any measure the effort was a success, capturing the interest of child welfare agencies everywhere (Lindsay & Doh, 1996:41).

In brief, the model suggested that the answer to the question of where to find money for preventive services was to invest some "back end" child welfare placement money in "front end" prevention services. This solution appealed to state legislators.

> Supported by programs of research in state and local agencies and at the Children's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, by the requirement of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P. L. 96-272) that states undertake "reasonable efforts" to prevent placement, by widespread belief that a continuum of child welfare services should include options for families besides placement, by advocacy of the Edna McConnell Clark and other foundations, and by modifications of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, P.L. 103-66), family-centered services grew rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s (Fraser, Nelson & Rivard 1997: 139).

Some authors expressed their reservations about the impact of family preservation on children (Wald, 1988), the need for structural reorganization of the system (Pelton, 1992), and whether services alone could combat the effects of poverty (Lindsay & Doh, 1996). Some from outside the field raised questions about "family values"—did social workers support the rights of families against those of children? Some deplored the "ideology" of family preservation:

It stands for the proposition that nearly all families, no matter how dysfunctional or abusive, can be put right with the proper mix of therapy and social services (Mac Donald, 1994: 45)

By and large, however, social workers celebrated the advent of family preservation services. Latter-day family preservation programs have borrowed from their predecessors, building on their strengths and trying to resolve their problems. And they have struggled with the paradoxes inherited from a century of professional experience intervening in the lives of families and children. The latest generation of efforts to preserve families also builds on the theoretical insights described in the following section.

The Theoretical Context of Family Preservation

Halpern (1999:24) suggests several reasons for the "puzzlingly repetitive quality" of reform:

> Reform can be seen as repeated responses to chronic concerns that are periodically reactivated: about dependency among the poor, out-of-wedlock childbearing, the adequacy of childrearing practices in poor families, the social threat posed by the behavior of poor youth. ...
> A second reason for the repetitive quality of reform may be the reconceptualization of old strategies through the use of new theories and knowledge. Social casework has been repeatedly renewed, through psychoanalytic theory, behavior theory, and various systems theories. The old goal of family preservation was reinvigorated using family systems and crisis theory.

Social learning theory and the ecological perspective have also been called upon to support different models of family preservation. These theoretical underpinnings of family preservation are described briefly below:

Crisis Theory

Often cited as the explicit theory base behind the Homebuilders model and other intensive, short-term family preservation program models, crisis theory holds that a "crisis" that cannot be resolved easily produces a state of disequilibrium during which people can be helped to achieve new insights and to change their behavior (Caplan 1964). The window of opportunity for change is brief, only a few weeks before people adapt and regain equilibrium.

> Crisis theory assumes that services offered during that disequilibrium are better able to help families find adaptive resolutions. Conversely, the helping messages of crisis services may be obstructed by family members' reduced ability to function

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as individuals and as a family at a time of confusion and discontinuity. Crises represent opportunities, but they are also stressors, which draw on resources needed to change (Barth, 1988:93).

Some question whether families who have been involved with the child welfare system for long periods of time, families who are used to disruption, experience a report of child abuse or neglect as the kind of "crisis" posited by the theory. Many families known to the child welfare system seem to live in a constant state of chaos, surviving from one crisis to the next on their wits and with a little bit of help from friends and family.

Family Systems Theory

Rather than a single theory about how family systems work, there are several variants developed by a number of theorists. Perhaps the most widely known by social workers are Satir's conjoint family therapy (1982), Minuchin, et al's structural family therapy (1967), and Haley's strategic family therapy (1963). The contributions of this school of thought to practice in family preservation have been central to the development of many family preservation service models:

> First, the family unit is the focus of assessment and treatment. An individual's problems are assessed, but the problems are viewed within the context of the family; specifically, how the problems affect family relationships and interactions. Treatment is then directed toward the individual, other family members, and the family group. Second, family members influence one another in an attempt to achieve a balance within the family. To treat an individual family member means altering the current balance in the family, and this alteration must be assessed and addressed. Third, families have inherent strengths (Reed & Kirk, 1998: 49).

Social Learning, Behavioral and Cognitive Theories

Many who believe in brief, strengths-based models of intervention also rely on cognitive or behavioral interventions to reinforce positive parenting behavior and discourage negative behavior. Social learning theory suggests that the traditional psychodynamic approaches of clarifying thinking and "getting in touch" with feelings may not result in changed behavior without reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theories also suggest that family members can learn from each other, and from others in their extended social networks, as well as from practitioners. Some have suggested that such approaches promise more than they can reasonably deliver from a brief intervention, given the confusion and chaos that often surround families known to the child welfare system. Others believe that social constructionist approaches, which assume that perceptions are constructed based on people's

understanding and experiences, can be very effective with even the most overwhelmed parent if the worker focuses on demonstrable behaviors that can be learned and reinforced.

I recently heard from a social worker who wanted to help a young single parent, mildly retarded mother to relax when around her new born—the social worker taught her how to breathe deeply and sing "this little piggy went to market…" when feeding her baby. Her task was to breathe deeply and sign this song for the next day, and when accomplished they celebrated it!

…I think it carries the hallmark of good behavioral and constructionist practice—it is concrete and strength building, solution oriented, as focused on [the client's} self-concept as it is on good parenting skills. … Effective programs are seeing that this type of intervention goes beyond clinical technique. It goes to the core of meaning for overwhelmed parents and children—it empowers and builds on strength. But self talk, cognition, and self-esteem are not enough—these internal concepts of theory do not address the larger dimensions of the outside world (Friedman 1996: 12).

Ecological Perspective

The ecological paradigm defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and others, and developed as a social work perspective by Germain (1979), addresses some of the limitations of specific clinical theories by asserting that transactions between individuals, families and their surroundings are constant and ongoing. The perspective provides a metaphor (a set of nested circles like the layers of an onion) that portrays complex patterns of relationships—a child within a family that is itself within a community and a society. These notions have been readily adopted by social workers, in part because they resonate with the profession's dual roots in individual practice and social reform.

… ecologically-based interventions have the highest level of concern with addressing environmental impingements on a family or child's functioning. The need for interventive efforts to span home, school, and community is explicit in the theory… The emphasis of the ecological model is to determine ways to achieve family goals rather than to modify family structure or provide new skills for family interaction (Barth, 1988: 107).

The implications of these theories for practice can be quite different. When drawing primarily from crisis theory, family preservation is a short-term clinical approach to treating family dysfunction during a period of crisis. If drawing primarily from social learning or cognitive theories, family preservation provides an opportunity to model and reinforce

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improved parenting behaviors for parents who are motivated to learn (if only because they fear removal of their children). If drawing primarily from family systems theory, family preservation is an opportunity to engage the entire family in understanding and reorganizing its negative interactions. If drawing primarily from the ecological perspective, family preservation is a way to address the family's social and economic needs, improving relationships with those who can offer support and understanding.

These theoretical underpinnings of practice are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Over time, each practitioner develops his or her own approach, often based on a combination of theories and practical methods that have worked. Each program also develops its own theoretical gestalt, a combination of concepts and ideas that provide direction for that program in its own context. One of the key variables is differences in the target population served. For example, Dore (1991: 127) suggests that there are some differences in the theory bases that support intensive family preservation programs designed to serve child welfare, mental health and juvenile justice populations. While child welfare programs rely primarily on crisis intervention, social learning and ecological perspectives, mental health programs rely on systems theory, theories of stress and coping and psychodynamic theories, and juvenile justice programs rely on systems and social learning theories.

These theories focus primarily on the adult members of the family, suggesting why and how intervention in dysfunctional family situations might be effective. Rather surprisingly, very little has been written about the theory base for treating maltreated children. Child development theories that could offer conceptual direction for intervention with children include the transactional approach to child development, attachment theory and resiliency theory.

Transactional Models of Child Development

Much of the current research on child development is based on a transactional model developed by Sameroff and others that "explains behavioral outcomes as the mutual effects of context on child and child on context" (Sameroff & Fiese, 1990: 119). The model suggests that developmental outcomes are not linear; rather, they are transactional, the result of dynamic and continuing interactions between the child and his or her environment. One of the practice implications is that, just as children develop over time, changes in interactions between parents and children will be incremental and mutually reinforcing over time.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory has long held that secure emotional bonds between parents and their children are essential if children are to grow and develop normally. Early research by Bowlby (1969) showed dire results for institutionalized children. In response to the

argument that child care would diminish attachment between parents and children, a number of studies were designed to assess the impact of child care on mother-child attachment. These studies have revealed a good deal about how children with insecure emotional attachments behave (Ainsworth, et al., 1978). Most of that literature shows that childcare does not disrupt the emotional bonds between parents and children, except possibly in the cases of very young children (Belsky & Cassidy 1994). Few, if any, such studies have been carried out in the child welfare arena, however, where it might be supposed that risks to the emotional development of children from disrupted attachments are even more severe. Focused efforts to assure emotional attachment between parents and children could improve the well-being of children and improve the outcomes of family preservation services.

Resiliency Theory

Resiliency theory suggests that protective factors may offset the negative effects of risk and stress for child development (Garmezy, 1994). Some children appear to have the capacity to overcome adversity while others appear to be especially vulnerable to its negative effects. The sources of protection found in the Kauai study (Werner & Smith, 1992) and in other research include: personal characteristics of the child (including infant behaviors that evoke a positive response from adults, optimism and self-direction); strong connections with a caring adult during the first few years of life; social supports available to the caregivers; and mentoring relationships with adults throughout childhood and youth. While these factors can protect children from negative developmental consequences, some may pay a price for their resilience later in adulthood (i.e., difficulty in relationships or compromised health).

Using these theories about child development to enrich the theoretical and conceptual bases of family preservation programs would enhance the power of intervention both in the short and long term. Some of the research to date has included assessment of the impact of family preservation programs on family functioning; future work should also include more analysis of the impact of changes in family functioning on the development and well-being of children.

The Family Preservation Debates

Even if my mom was to come up to me and tell me, like "I love you," I wouldn't feel the feeling like an ordinary kid because I wasn't raised to be loved or something (former foster youth, age 19, in Smith, 1996: A12).

Everyone agrees that "graduating" from the child welfare system feeling like you weren't raised to be loved is a bad thing, but, after more than a century of experimentation, we can't seem to figure out how the state can be a better parent to the children it tries to save. The underlying dilemma is that referral to child protection is sometimes the only service

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available for families beginning to face problems, as well as the last resort for other families who have been in and out of the system for years. The families who are referred to family preservation programs by child protection workers can include both those with deep intransigent problems with little hope of solution, as well as those who might, with help, find lasting answers. They include families that have failed in or been failed by other systems—parents who abuse alcohol and other drugs, those with developmental disabilities, serious emotional problems, health crises, poor education, and little earning potential—as well as those who only need temporary help to improve their situations.

In order to respond effectively to such a broad range of family difficulties, we need to expand the continuum to include more, rather than fewer, kinds of family-and community-centered services. Child welfare needs to overcome habits of isolation formed during the leanest years, and learn to look outward (beyond the profession to community members, faith-based groups, and others who care about children) for partnerships rather than inward for reinforcement. We need to challenge ourselves to rise above insider debates, to discuss options in terms that the public can understand, and to develop new ways to improve outcomes for both children and families. In that context, the debate about whether or not family preservation is "the panacea" for child welfare does not make a lot of sense.

Family preservation services cannot take the place of out-of-home care or adoption for children whose safety and well-being are at risk. They cannot take the place of substance abuse treatment, mental health or health services, or any other services that parents need in order to offer their children a safe and nurturing home. Nor will the family support and preventive services needed in almost every community offset all need for child welfare services. One kind of service does not fit all needs.

We need to look beyond narrow definitions of family preservation service models to the philosophical issues at stake. We need focus on the policy changes and technical advances that must be made in order to develop a broad range of effective family-and community-centered services. Deeper levels of discussion about what we have learned from the past twenty years of experimentation are long overdue. Such discussions might help to resolve some of the most difficult and troubling questions in the field:

* what do we mean by and how do we measure child well-being?
* what are the connections between family functioning and child well-being?
* how does community context affect family functioning and child well-being?
* how do we track connections between family functioning, child well-being, and utilization of child welfare services?
* how do we improve data collection systems to link assessment, intervention, and outcomes for both children and families?
* how do we increase emphasis on child well-being without losing sight of safety and permanence?

- how do we participate in development of practical indicators of child and family well-being that could be shared across service systems and that make sense?
- how do we use the opportunities inherent in multiple parallel reform efforts to test measures, programs, and theories?

These are the kinds of questions that require attention because they can help to guide the next generation of reforms.

Above all, we need to use what we have learned to formulate policies that focus not just on protecting children but on supporting families and improving community development. In the final analysis, the debates over family preservation will matter not because they showed who was right and who was wrong about specific service delivery models, but because they informed the development of more effective approaches to supporting families and children. They will matter if we can rise above the rhetoric and apply all that we have learned so that we don't make the same mistakes in the future.

Notes:

1. Jess McDonald, Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. (1999). Children's Institute International, Second National Forum, Solutions for Children in Crisis, Los Angeles, CA.

2. The continuum was developed in 1991 by members of the Family Preservation Policy Committee, a committee of the Los Angeles County Commission on Children and Families (of which the author was a member), as part of their planning for the Los Angeles County approach to family preservation. This version has been adapted to reflect changes since that time.

3. For example, the family preservation approach in Los Angeles County is based on community family networks, "a service delivery system for protective services children, probation youth and their families comprising 243 funded and 423 linkage community agencies working in concert within 27 networks and 20 communities." (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, 1998). For further information, write: Department of Children and Family Services. 425 Shatto Place, Los Angeles, CA 90020.

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