

CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON EMERGING TRENDS IN CHILD/YOUTH AND FAMILY CARE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses recent trends in child/family welfare. A more collaborative relationship between institutional caregivers and the natural families is needed in order to foster mature identity development in the children and youth. Societal change warrants flexibility and openness to an expanded range of care arrangements. Interventions need to focus on socio-economic, health, and ecological inadequacies in contemporary society.

The Issues at Hand.

Recent changes in the alignments and practices in child/family welfare, including foster care and mental health services, require more effective inclusion of the parents (Gerring, 1996). Truly here is a timely call for a paradigm shift. Child and family welfare services are to become collaborative efforts of the intervening service agents, the family, and the community at hand.

In line with this shift serious consideration has to be attended to the actual practice between persons served and the professional intervention program. Some stress that the inclusion of the parents can provide valuable information about their child's earlier experiences and the family's values and ambitions. I question, however, the illusion of some advocates that the children's institutional caregivers should also find themselves in the role of trainers of parents and supervisors of this collaborative effort (Ainsworth, 1994; Peterson & Brown, 1982). Let me strongly reiterate that the parents and community representatives involved are in the scene as *partners* but not as clients.

Let me suggest that an effort to foster close ties between children in institutional or foster care and their natural parents requires more than the chance to meet. Foremost, both parent and child need preparation and practice in facing each other and having a fruitful time together. Furthermore, private meeting places have to be assured and, above all, opportunities provided for ease of being together. Such situations may call for a private picnic, such games as Frisbee, or other joint fun experiences. The difficulties which parent and child or siblings face are primarily caused by the fact that rarely are they prepared for being face-to-face leisurely together. In short, much time and thought has to go into making meetings meaningful and creating stepping stones for successful new encounters. In other words, as Eric Berne once said, "What do you say after you've said 'Hello'?" (1972).

There is a variety of highly praised and publicized contemporary trends, some merely a passing vogue, others with promise to bring about substantial innovations. Noteworthy for the following deliberation is the stress upon *family preservation* (Tracy, 1995; Whittaker, 1991) and *family unification* (Maluccio et al., 1994, 1995). Also vital is the full regard for active partnership of birth parents within the child welfare team, even for children who have been legally moved from their original family homes (Gerring, 1996).

Family preservation, family unification, and continuance of birth ties are issues fundamental to child rearing toward mature identity development. These emphases are especially needed to stem the tide of youngsters who are growing up without an awareness of their roots or clarity about their natural family ties. However, maintaining family ties might not be sufficient for handling devastating situations and subsequent crisis-hurdling. Group care service must be extended to include, enhance, and strengthen the linkages between the children, youth, and their families even if they might be ineffective, limited, or bizarre. Much of past, and still today's, child welfare practice continues as if parents were incapable of change, leading courts to deny parental rights and involvement. Tacitly that establishes that birth parents are out of their child's future life. This author maintains that this mistaken practice of social/legal decision-making requires serious re-evaluation within the terms of family preservation and reunification. Building up family connections is not merely in the interest of the youngsters involved. It is also an instrumental requirement for family members to maintain an enriched sense of personal integrity and membership within their culture and society.

We're periodically learning of the reunification of a mother with a child she once placed on adoption or in a vaguely defined institutional placement. I'm sure much could be learned through the study of the meaning of such family reunions.

Family preservation principles hold that family and community ties have to be preserved, strengthened, and acknowledged as a basic feature of a youngster's life (Noble & Gibson, 1994). Community, family, and the child's heritage are inseparable from each other. Children might no longer be viewed as the parents' property (Millen, 1994), but birth parents, as well as foster parents, are apt to continue as integral family members throughout their lives. And conversely, children, regardless whether in or out of the home, are of relevance to the parents' full life course. David Millen aptly quotes Judge Anne Russell when she refers to that growing up as "a balancing act between a safe, secure environment and a need for family contact. The process involves balancing the present with the future, the known with the unknown, the real with the intangible needs of the child." (Millen, 1994). Family preservation and unification with active partnership of birth parents are fundamental for developing a sense of family identity. Therefore, family preservation, family unification and continuous birth parent partnership are in order.

At the same time there are also a number of *puzzling* contentions in the literature and assertion of the "family preservation movement" which are of concern, or even possibly alarming. The alarm becomes particularly acute when their advocates propose bureaucratic corrections in the process of services (Tracy, 1995; Whittaker, 1991). Simultaneously much of our challenge is to be open to the changing era with a readiness for new modes of family living. These new modes are needed along with the traditional patterns of earlier generations (Elkind, 1994; Erera, 1995). Many changes, for instance, in the progression of life development, such as prolonged periods of youth and blended family living, call for openness to new ways of working with families.

New Features in Care Practice.

Societal conditions, such as the breakdown in adequate housing and other community resources may call for appropriate healthy but out-of-the-home independent living arrangements, such as foster or group homes. Above all, extraordinary intra-family stress, physical or mental health breakdown of key family members, or maladaptive community conditions may point to the out-of-the-home group care experience as possibly the most desirable alternative arrangement. In other words, for some children and families in-home life might no longer be the "natural" sanctuary.

Furthermore we learn that in almost every family change situation it's the lack of family resources (income as well as reserves) which dominates the stress situation. Consequently the crisis must be seen and handled as a financial rather than a personal dilemma. In short, for these families a revision is required so that they can have "dollars at hand."

At the same time "family preservation" is also anchored in some powerful recent findings in connection with attachment development, with the awareness that severe stress occurs in the absence of family ties (Fahlberg, 1991). Alternative family living experiences are also very much in order.

Most important, family preservation and family unification essentially deal with strategies of intervention in the work with distraught family situations. In no way do they address the fundamental issues of the breakdown of family life per se. Strengthening opportunities for inherent family functions would have to be directed at social-economic, basic health, and ecological inadequacies within our contemporary societies. In Noble and Gibson's account, a staff member observes:

I had the idea that we would be able to provide some concrete services, some education, some modeling, and we would see some fairly self-sustaining families. If I am modest I thought that they would become 'middle-class'. But I found that those families were so disorganized, so disadvantaged, and so desperate for concrete services that we spent all our time and resources simply trying to keep them afloat, let alone to help them to become self-sustaining. (1994)

The preceding reminders alert us to the fact that the basic economic changes, namely second order ones, are essential before first order (incremental) changes can assume their course. (Maier, 1985).

Simultaneously, I must admit along with others (Ainsworth & Fulcher, 1981; Anderson, 1978; Noble & Gibson, 1994) my own uneasiness lest the apparently sincere efforts of enriching and maintaining family connections become associated with or even taken over by today's conservative trends which presume that a return to "established family values" would correct our social-economic, our mental health, and other dislocations. Aside from wondering whether such bygone days ever existed (Elkind, 1994), it is important that we scrutinize whether these strategic changes in practice can actually achieve public savings in a budget which is already severely underfunded. Moreover, we also learn from ongoing empirical research that reports of favorable outcome gains cannot necessarily be duplicated. (Barth, 1994; Bath, 1995). Clarification and strengthening of family connections (of one's roots) have become urgent factors for therapeutic intervention (Gerring, 1996).

Finally, current enthusiasm for a novel array of child/family welfare and mental health approaches should not obliterate earlier though much simpler efforts (for example, Burmeister, 1949; Mayer, 1958; VanderVen, 1991). Especially it is important to guard against a tendency toward "agency bashing" in the light of the family preservationists' earlier astute warnings against "family bashing."

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