

FAMILY PRESERVATION SERVICES

Research and Evaluation

Kathleen Wells
David E. Biegel
editors

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Foreword

This volume will prove fascinating for those interested in child welfare policy issues as well as researchers who seek to hone their skills in evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of social programs. The highly significant federal legislation that made it national policy to seek the prevention of unnecessary out-of-home placements of children, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, P.L. 96-272, had as one of its key thrusts the development of preventive and reunification services. These were to be strengthened in a context of an overall national policy umbrella of "permanency planning" related to children at risk of loss of their family ties. Thus the federal government has stood ready over the past decade to increase funds to the states for this purpose while it has strictly limited further contributions to the placement services required for children who wind up in substitute care arrangements.

It is not surprising that considerable research interest has emerged in determining whether the marked growth in child welfare prevention programs in all of the states has been of benefit to children and parents in families at risk of dismemberment. This volume provides the results of important first efforts in this area. The summation presented here is very timely and can strongly influence the disposition of the Congress and state legislatures as they seek to reduce social investments, presumably through

the identification of "programs that don't work," in an economically stringent period.

An unusual aspect of the interventive program strategy that receives special attention in this volume, the Homebuilder's model of intensive family preservation services developed in Tacoma, Washington in 1974, is that its use has been very actively promoted by a single philanthropic foundation. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has invested considerable funding in the promotion of the model from its very beginnings at various sites in the country. It also has supported training and research efforts to test and strengthen the way intensive family preservation services are delivered to families and children.

The initiative of the Clark foundation has given preventive child welfare services, as envisioned in federal legislation, a much needed thrust and a strong sense of coherence. The efforts of the foundation are responsible for a sense of excitement that now attends this serious effort to make an impact upon a social problem with a service model that is quite well specified.

Ten years after the enactment of P.L. 96-272, a basic question arises: Given its central position among child welfare prevention service, will evaluative research show the intensive family preservation model to be as effective as its supporters have maintained? Is the heavy investment in this area producing some pay-off? There are some who fear that a valid appraisal of programs such as Homebuilders is at risk of being unduly influenced by those who have promoted its use with considerable zeal. The evaluation has to be as rigorous as possible to allay such fears.

An examination of the contributions of the researchers whose chapters are included reveals that the task of introducing evaluative research in agency settings where the Homebuilder's model is being employed can be daunting. A mine field of research methodological problems are identified, and this fact requires surefooted approaches on the part of the investigators. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon and there is a rich literature on the pitfalls that can be encountered in evaluating social programs that followed the anti-poverty social action investments of the Kennedy-Johnson years.¹

The problems in evaluating the best known survivor of the war on poverty, the Head Start Program, have become almost legendary for researchers in this field.² The group of studies reported here builds on the experiences of the 1960s and 1970s and charts a research agenda to be executed in the 1990s.

The investigations shared with the reader are in three main service systems dealing with children in out-of-home placements: child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice. All have used an intensive family preserva-

tion services model with some adhering closely to the Homebuilder's models while others have somewhat altered the basic format. Taken together, these studies represent a first generation effort to answer difficult evaluative questions. Impressively, there are reports of several efforts in the use of experimental and quasi-experimental designs as well as several efforts in the use of descriptive and exploratory investigations. The investigators are painstakingly conscious of the soft features of their research and candid in their cautionary notes.

Given the possible confounding of results introduced by problems of design and measurement specified by each of the researchers whose chapters appear in this volume, the reader might wonder whether the glass is half full or half empty. Despite the if's and's and but's that surround all the discussions of outcomes, enough positive findings have emerged to warrant a sense of optimism, expressed in several chapters, that the general thrust of intensive family preservation services has validity even if the specific elements of the Homebuilder's model remain to be tested.

It is a piece of practice wisdom in child welfare that once a family has been dismembered, it may be very difficult to bring the members together again. An approach, which offers family court judges and others with decision-making responsibilities in protective service cases, an option in which placement can be postponed to permit a thoughtful effort to alter a family's dysfunctional mode of operations, has appeal on the face of it.

The authors have identified many research issues that need to be resolved as part of the future research agenda for those seeking to add to the knowledge base underlying practice in this area. The collaboration between the Bellefaire/Jewish Children's Bureau and the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University in the persons of Kathleen Wells and David Biegel has provided a very fine contribution to the professional literature. We are in their debt.

David Fanshel
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Notes

1. See, for example: Rossi, P. H., & Williams, W. (1972). *Evaluating social action programs: Theory, practice, and politics*. New York: Seminar Press.
2. McKey et al. (1985, June). *The impact of Head Start on children, families and communities*★Final report of Head Start Synthesis Project (DHHS Publication No. [OHDS] 85-31193).

Acknowledgments

The idea for this volume grew out of a two-day invitational National Intensive Family Preservation Services Research Conference sponsored by the Bellefaire/Jewish Children's Bureau, the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University, and the Treu-Mart Fund. The conference, which was held in fall 1989, was attended by 28 leading researchers, policy makers, and practitioners from around the country. It was designed to assess the state of intensive family preservation services research and to develop a research agenda for the next generation of empirical investigations in this field. This volume was influenced heavily by the presentations and discussions at that conference. Most of the contributors to the volume presented papers at the meeting.

The success of the conference and the development of this volume would not have been possible without the combined support and assistance we received from a number of organizations and individuals. Samuel Kelman, Executive Director, Bellefaire/Jewish Children's Bureau, and Richard L. Edwards, Dean, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, provided financial support and encouragement. Michael Cole and Ellen Ticktin at the Cleveland Jewish Community Federation helped us to secure funding. Funding for the conference and support for this volume were provided by the Bellefaire/Jewish Children's Bureau, the Commonwealth Fund, and the Treu-Mart Fund.

At the Bellefaire/Jewish Children's Bureau, the Board of Trustees and the Board Research Committee provided support for the conference. Staff members from the Division of Research and the agency's family preservation program, Parents and Children Together (PACT), worked closely with us to identify unanswered research questions that were addressed at the conference and in this volume. We are particularly grateful to the assistance received in this regard from Mario Tonti, former Director of Community Services, Selma Gwatin, Director of PACT, and Dale Whittington, former Research Associate at Bellefaire. Dale Whittington also assisted in the editorial review of draft chapters for this volume; we are indebted to her for her aid. Shirley Ross, Research Department Secretary, assisted with the arrangements for the conference and the preparation of the manuscripts for this volume; we are also indebted to her for her help.

Finally, we are extremely grateful to the conference participants and to all the contributors to this volume. The contributors worked tirelessly with us in conceptualizing both the conference and this volume. Their willingness to help us critically examine knowledge building in the human services, to analyze the state of intensive family preservation research, and to develop and present an agenda for future research were central to this work. Therefore, this book is truly a collaborative effort between the editors and the contributors. The editors, of course, accept responsibility for any errors of omission or commission.

Kathleen Wells
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Introduction

DAVID E. BIEGEL
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The 1980s were a time of considerable strain for America's families. Increases in poverty, homelessness, child abuse, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse combined to place many families at risk of having their children removed from their homes and placed in foster care, group homes, residential treatment centers, psychiatric hospitals, or correctional facilities. In fact, today growing numbers of children are experiencing out-of-home placements in each of the three major American child-serving systems—child welfare, child mental health, and juvenile justice. The U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families estimates that 500,000 children are currently in out-of-home placements in the United States. The Committee projects that by 1995, if no major changes in governmental policies take place, the number of children in out-of-home placements will rise by more than 73% to 850,000 (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1990).

These trends, together with increasing concerns that the current child-serving systems are not working adequately or consuming resources efficiently (see Kamerman & Kahn, 1990), has led to a search for new models of service delivery. One such approach is family preservation services, whose aim is to prevent the out-of-home placement of children.

The number of family preservation service programs has increased significantly over the last decade. Although the current number is unknown, the National Resource Center on Family-Based Services listed 20 such programs in their 1982 directory and 269 in their 1988 directory (National Resource Center on Family-Based Services, 1988). During this time the

federal government and many state governments (National Conference of State Legislatures, 1989) passed legislation to allow public funds to pay for such services. Private foundations, most notably the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, have made family preservation services a priority.

Family preservation services enjoy considerable public and professional support because they emphasize keeping families together and because they are believed to be a cost-effective alternative to the institutionalization of many young people. In addition, these services are compatible with the public policy mandates to preserve families (e.g., the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980), to treat children in the least restrictive environment possible (e.g., the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act), and to keep youths who are status offenders out of institutions in the juvenile justice system (e.g., the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act).

In view of the potential significance of such services, it is important to determine how and to what extent these policy goals are being achieved. In fact, research has been conducted in this area and has documented a number of positive effects. Current knowledge about family preservation services is due largely to the commitment of developers of family preservation service programs, especially developers of the Homebuilders' program (Kinney, Madsen, Fleming, & Haapala, 1977), to examine their practice. Yet, many questions regarding the implementation, effectiveness, and role of these services remain unanswered. The answers are important if public and private resources are to be spent wisely.

The purpose of this book is to assess the current state of research and practice knowledge pertaining to family preservation services. To focus and clarify the discussion of the scientific literature, we restricted our attention to intensive family preservation services. These services are short-term (4 to 12 weeks), family-focused, and intensive (8 to 10 hours of service provided per week per family) (Child Welfare League, 1989). We present critical issues and newly emerging research findings on these services and evaluate their potential in the child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice systems. The volume also includes a research agenda for the next generation of empirical investigations.

The idea for this volume grew out of a National Intensive Family Preservation Services Research Conference sponsored by the Bellefaire/Jewish Children's Bureau, the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University, and the Treu-Mart Fund. The conference, held in fall 1989, was attended by 28 leading researchers, policy makers, and practitioners from around the country. (A list of participants and an agenda

are included in Appendix A.) The conference was designed to assess the state of research on intensive family preservation services and to develop a research agenda for the field (Wells & Biegel, 1990). The agenda presented in the conclusion to this volume was informed by discussions at the conference.

To place family preservation services in context, we will review broad trends with respect to out-of-home placement of children. Then we will describe intensive family preservation services, review the status of research conducted before the work presented here, delineate the organization of the volume, and summarize briefly each of the chapters.

Service-Use Trends in the Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Child Mental Health Systems

The data given below suggest both the extent of the problems of American families and the numbers of children entering placement.

Child Welfare System

In the child welfare system, the number of children in out-of-home placements fell during the 1970s and then began to rise dramatically in the mid-1980s. The number of children in facilities for dependent and neglected children decreased from 60,459 in 1966 to 24,533 in 1981 (Young, Dore, & Pappenfort, 1989). Foster care cases declined by 9% from 1980 to 1985, but increased by 23% from 1985 to 1988. During this three-year period, the number of children in foster care grew from an estimated 276,300 to an estimated 340,300. It is estimated that this number will reach 553,600 by 1995 (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1990). The House Ways and Means Committee estimates that 360,000 children were in foster care in 1989, a 29% increase since 1986 (Ways and Means Committee, 1990).

Child Mental Health System

In the child mental health system, the number of children served over the past 25 years has increased consistently. In 1966 there were 13,876 children in institutions for the emotionally disturbed; this figure rose to 20,397 in 1981. Similarly, in 1966 there were 8,028 children in psychiatric facilities; this figure increased to 12,683 in 1981 (Young, Dore, & Pappenfort, 1989).¹ Burns, Taube, and Taube (1990) report that inpatient hospital admissions for

children and adolescents (under age 18) increased by 24% from 1975 to 1986. In a narrower time span, the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (1990) reports a 60% increase between 1983 and 1986 in the numbers of children under age 18 who were in psychiatric hospitals, residential treatment centers, or other residential care settings. The Committee estimates that at the end of 1986 there were 54,716 children in care; by 1995 this figure is projected to grow more than twofold to 123,000 children with emotional problems in out-of-home placement (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1990).

Even so, the large increase in children being served in this sector does not mean that currently designed services are meeting their needs adequately. The Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress estimates that from 70% to 80% of the 7.5 to 9.5 million children and adolescents with mental and emotional problems are not receiving appropriate care (Office of Technology Assessment, 1986).

Juvenile Justice System

In the juvenile justice system, admission rates to public detention centers and public training schools had been declining, but now have increased.² Steketee, Willis, and Schwartz (1989) report that admissions to public juvenile detention centers decreased from about 490,000 in 1977 to less than 405,000 in 1984. In 1986, however, admissions increased by more than 60,000. Admission rates decreased from 1977 to 1982, and then increased to 1,799 admissions per 100,000 eligible youths in 1986. Similarly, admissions to public training schools decreased between 1977 and 1982, and then began to increase. The admission rates for both public detention centers and training schools in 1986 were the highest of the decade (Steketee et al., 1989).

The House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families reports that the number of youths in public and private juvenile facilities in 1987 increased by 27% from 1979, with a 10% increase between 1985 and 1987. The Committee calculates that by 1995 there will be 119,700 to 130,000 children in custody in the juvenile justice system (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1990).

Increasing rates of drug abuse, alcohol abuse, child abuse, child neglect, and homelessness in the American population are major factors in the increasing placement rates of children in all three systems (Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 1990).

Description of Intensive Family Preservation Services³

Intensive family preservation services are described most clearly by reference to the Homebuilders' program, one of the best-known of its kind (Kinney, Haapala, Booth, & Leavitt, 1990). Nearly all of the investigations reported in this volume were of programs that used the Homebuilders' approach. In the Homebuilders' program, families must meet two criteria in order to be referred for services: first, at least one family member must express the desire to keep the family together; and second, no key family member can refuse the option that the family stay together (D. Haapala, personal communication, January 1990). The goals of treatment are to resolve the crises that led to the decision to place a child outside the home and to teach a family the basic skills they need to stay together.

To achieve these ends, families are seen by a program worker within 24 hours of their referral. After that visit, they are seen as often as needed. Their worker is on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to deal with emergent family problems. Workers deal with no more than two families at a time; services generally are provided for 4 weeks; and meetings usually take place in their families' own homes. Interventions are both concrete (e.g., helping families to obtain food or jobs) and therapeutic. Therapeutic interventions include cognitive, environmental, and interpersonal strategies. These interventions are based on social learning theory, crisis intervention theory, and ecological perspectives on child development.

Kinney and her colleagues observe:

All these aspects of the model—the rapid response to referrals, the accessibility of workers at home during evenings and weekends, the time available for families, the location of the services, the staffing pattern, the low caseloads, and the brief duration of services—produce a much more powerful intervention than one that utilizes only one or two of these components. (Kinney et al., 1990, p. 53)

Status of Existing Research

Not surprisingly, initial investigations of Homebuilders-type programs were modest in scope. Typically they focused on one or two outcome variables, depended on small samples, and employed nonexperimental designs (Hinckley & Ellis, 1985; Kinney et al., 1977). These studies focused on the proportion of children served who remained at home. As Pecora and his colleagues note in chapter 1, early investigations showed that between

40% and 90% of these children remained at home at termination of service or at follow-up.

The existing investigations, however, when considered together, have a number of significant limitations (Frankel, 1988; Magura, 1981; Rosenthal & Glass, 1986; Stein, 1985). These limitations also characterize research pertaining to some other types of children's services. We note them here not to hold intensive family preservation services accountable to a higher research standard than we apply to other services but to identify issues to which the next generation of studies must attend.

These limitations include the following: (a) Few studies employ comparison or control groups, so it is difficult to attribute outcomes obtained to involvement in a program; (b) the flow of clients through programs and of subjects through studies is described poorly; (c) data-collection procedures are not articulated, and the reliability of measures, particularly those relying on clinical judgment, is not addressed; (d) assessments of change rely on single-variable analyses; and (e) problems posed by statistical regression effects are not taken into account.

Organization of the Volume

The material presented here represents an effort to overcome the limitations of the extant literature and to advance our knowledge. This volume has two parts: the first contains previously unpublished empirical investigations in this area; the second is concerned with conceptual and policy issues.

Part I: Empirical Studies

Part I includes five chapters, each of which presents original research findings from recent studies of intensive family preservation service programs. The first three chapters, by Pecora and colleagues, Schwartz and colleagues, and Feldman, use the strongest research designs to date to evaluate the effectiveness of these services. Chapters 4 and 5, by K. Nelson and by Yuan and Struckman-Johnson, focus on important unresolved questions in the literature: Are the families in intensive family preservation service programs less troubled than those in the child welfare system as a whole? What factors are associated with placement?

Chapter 1. Pecora, Fraser, and Haapala report findings from a study of six intensive family preservation service programs. Pre- and post-treatment data were collected from families that received these services. Follow-up

data were collected from a subsample of these families. Few children were in placement at the end of treatment; 12 months after the start of treatment, this number increased to about one third of the sample. The authors also obtained a small comparison group of families that were referred to intensive family preservation services but received traditional services instead. They matched comparison with treatment families and compared the placement rates for the two groups. The placement rate was higher for the comparison group than for the treatment group: 12 months after beginning treatment, 85% of the comparison-group children were placed, as opposed to 44% of the matched treatment cases.

Chapter 2. Schwartz, AuClaire, and Harris report on a study of the degree to which an intensive family preservation service program served as a placement alternative for youths who were identified as being at risk of imminent out-of-home placement. The study used a two-group experimental design. The comparison group was randomly selected from a group of cases not served by the intensive family preservation program. The use of all placements by subjects was tracked over a 12- to 16-month period. Youths in the treatment group experienced fewer placements than youths in the comparison group: 56% of the treatment-group children were placed during the study period, as compared to 91% of the comparison-group children. Comparison-group children who were placed also experienced more total days in placement than did all of the treatment-group children. The two groups did not differ, however, in the average number of placements made.

Chapter 3. Feldman uses an experimental design to evaluate the effectiveness of five intensive family preservation service programs. Families who had a child less than 18 years old and who met several other intake criteria were assigned randomly to either the intensive family preservation services program or to traditional community services. Data were collected for up to one year after termination of service. In significantly fewer treatment-group families than control-group families, a child entered placement from one to nine months after termination; the differences between the groups dissipated by the 12th month. The author uses a wide variety of measures to assess family functioning. Results showed improvements on some measures for the treatment group over time, but few differences were found between the treatment and the control groups.

Chapter 4. K. Nelson examines two issues: first, the differences between families receiving intensive family preservation services and families in the child welfare system in general; and second, among families that receive intensive family preservation services, the factors that distinguish those with children who are placed from those with children who remain at home. To

address the first issue, the author compared families who received intensive family preservation services with a sample of families in the child welfare system studied previously by Magura and Moses. Children in intensive family preservation services consistently had more problems than the comparison-group sample on all comparable measures. To address the second issue, the author reviewed the case records of families who had received family preservation services to identify a subset of cases in which placement did or did not occur. Predictors of placement for families referred for child abuse or neglect differed from those for families referred for problems pertaining to status offenses and delinquencies of their adolescent children.

Chapter 5. Yuan and Struckman-Johnson further explore variables associated with placement of children served by intensive family preservation service programs. They examine the predictors of placement, with a focus on the degree to which prior placement combines with reason for risk of out-of-home placement to predict placement. Subjects were families in eight intensive family preservation service demonstration projects. The authors found complex interactions between prior placement and reason for risk; the placement rate differed as a function of both the number of prior placements and neglect (i.e., one of the reasons for risk of out-of-home placement). Subsequent discriminant analyses using a large number of both child and family variables confirm the importance of the above variables in contributing to placement, but show that a variety of other variables are important as well.

Part II: Conceptual and Policy Issues

Part II includes six chapters. The first three, by Dore, Tracy, and Jones, address significant gaps in the intensive family preservation research literature. They pertain to the context of family preservation programs, the identification of client populations, and the measurement of outcomes. As a group they are designed to raise issues and to provoke debate that will inform future studies in this area. The next chapter, by Schuerman, Rzepnicki, and Littell, is a window through which one can see the practical dilemmas inherent in conducting research in family preservation services. The final two chapters, by D. Nelson and by Yelton and Friedman, address policy issues pertaining to family preservation services within the child welfare and child mental health systems.

Chapter 6. Dore argues that the character of family preservation programs is determined strongly by the service system context in which programs are developed. Although similarities exist among programs in each of

these systems, there are also divergences. Dore believes that these divergences have not been explored fully, and that this lack has prevented a full understanding of the role of contextual variables in research on family preservation services.

Chapter 7. Tracy examines current definitions of the target population for intensive family preservation service programs in the child welfare system and discusses major factors that influence this definition. She discusses a number of conceptual, definitional, and programmatic issues pertaining to assessment of the need for placement, establishment of criteria for program selection, and implementation of referral procedures. Tracy's discussion highlights the difficulties involved in defining "at risk of imminent placement"; these difficulties, in turn, complicate research in intensive family preservation services.

Chapter 8. Jones presents a comprehensive analysis of the nature and measurement of change at the case and program level, and then applies this analysis to intensive family preservation services research. This discussion underscores the complexity of conceptualizing and measuring outcomes. Topics discussed include the dimensions of change (occurrence, direction, magnitude, rate, duration, and sequence), the locus and the level of change goals, and the content of change goals (both child and parent outcomes), as well as types of measures and sources of data.

Chapter 9. Schuerman, Rzepnicki, and Littell provide practical lessons for researchers of intensive family preservation service programs. On the basis of their experiences in designing and implementing an evaluative study of such programs in one state, the authors examine issues pertaining to target populations and outcomes from the perspective of researchers in the process of implementing a study. The chapter includes a discussion of the problems inherent in implementing a program evaluation, particularly an experimental design.

Chapter 10. D. Nelson's chapter is predicated on the belief that we already know a great deal about intensive family preservation services; therefore this knowledge should be applied aggressively to human service policy and practice issues. Nelson believes that such knowledge can be applied in a way that would allow states to initiate and expand cost-effective services. He argues that family preservation services offer a reasonable alternative to placement, which can be used to counter the recent trend to more out-of-home placements. In Nelson's view, lessons learned from family preservation services have wide applicability to human services in general; in particular, they suggest that we need to reexamine the categorical nature of our service delivery systems.