

# Family Preservation Services : A cautionary note

Frank Ainsworth

*The present interest in US style family preservation services is the focus of this article. The article sounds a cautionary note in relation to the development of these services in Australia. It does this by drawing attention to a recent influential evaluation of these services and to the differences between social work and child welfare practices in America and Australia.*

**D**uring 1991, and again in 1992, a form of services to families commonly known by the US title 'family preservation services' received much attention in Australian child and community services circles. In Victoria, the 'Families First' program was inaugurated following a consultation with personnel from the Behavioural Sciences Institute (BSI). This organisation, based in Seattle, originated the family preservation form of service under the title 'Homebuilders' in the late 1970's. The First Australian Family Preservation Conference was held in Ballarat, and other events took place in New South Wales and elsewhere, again involving personnel from the BSI and other US organisations that have an interest in these types of service.

## Family preservation services

Family preservation services in the US reflect three distinct service models. These are the crisis intervention model, the home based service model and the family treatment model (Nelson, Landsman and Deutelbaum

---

*Frank Ainsworth is well known internationally for his writings on child and youth care issues especially residential practice. He has held senior academic positions in Schools of Social Work in Britain and Australia. Currently he teaches at Edith Cowan University, Perth in both Bachelor of Social Studies, Children's Studies course and a Human Services degree program and acts as the co-ordinator of the latter.*

*Address: Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus, Perth, Western Australia 6027.*

1990). The crisis intervention model is best represented by the Homebuilders program (Whittaker, Kinney, Tracy and Booth 1990). The Families First program in Victoria follows the Homebuilders model although there is reason to think that the duration, intensity and types of service offered by this program differ from those offered in programs which more precisely replicate the Homebuilders' approach.

BSI is a non-government organisation which contracts on a fee for service basis with Washington State to provide family preservation services, using the Homebuilders model, where the out-of-home placement of a child (ren) is imminent. The organisation also has training contracts with other states through which the Homebuilders service model is promoted. The principle, and some would say only, goal of the Homebuilders service is the prevention of out-of-home placement of children, and the service is always time limited. The program evaluation data has been produced mainly by the Homebuilders organisation themselves, although there are a few independent studies. This data shows impressive achievements of their goal with a high level of cost effectiveness.

## Cultural differences

When considering US style family preservation programs, it is important to understand the different starting points for professional social work and child welfare practice in the two countries. Professional practice in the

US, even within state child welfare services, is more clinically focused, and, as a consequence, there is greater emphasis on psychologically based therapeutic or clinical interventions. Less consideration is given than in Australia to the way in which societal arrangements, employment possibilities, housing options or income levels influence individual or family functioning and child rearing practices. Accordingly there is an emphasis on office-based services and few concrete services have been offered to parents in their own home.

In contrast, Australian social workers in both government and non-government agencies concerned with child welfare, have always provided some concrete in-home services to parents. Traditionally, social work practice in Australia has placed an emphasis on the way social conditions, such as employment, housing and income, influence the ability of families to care for their children. Thus Australian social work practice is less dominated, although not uninfluenced, by psychologically-based clinical modes of intervention.

## What do independent evaluators say?

Caution is needed on several grounds in regard to the impressive data generated by the BSI-Homebuilders organisation. The most recent independent review of the Homebuilders results and other evaluations of family preservation services, is that conducted for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation by Professor Peter Rossi from

the University of Massachusetts (Rossi, 1991). This foundation has provided considerable amounts of money to enable information about the Homebuilders service model to be widely disseminated.

Rossi highlights a range of concerns about family preservation services including the following, which are direct quotations from the report.

- Because judgements about 'imminent placement' are not made with any precision, typical family preservation programs serve many clients who would not have had children placed in any event.

- Although preventing out-of-home placement is advanced as a major argument for family preservation programs, we find this emphasis misplaced. We believe that placement avoidance is a means to the end of improving the conditions of children and families and that placement, in some instances, advances the welfare of children. Hence we suggest that the goals of family preservation services be re-stated emphasising children and family improvements, of which, in many cases, placement avoidance is but one means of achieving.

- A review of evaluation of family preservation programs found them to provide an insufficient base for judging the worth of the program. All evaluations heavily emphasise placement avoidance effectiveness of the programs evaluated, a partial criterion of success, as argued above. In addition, the evaluations were conducted on too small a scale and were over simply analysed.

In addition Rossi draws attention to the exclusion of certain kinds of cases from eligibility for family preservation services. One universal exclusion denies program eligibility to cases in which there is high probability of physical danger to the child. Other programs exclude families who reject family preservation services. Still others exclude serious cases with substance abusing families or families likely to become homeless. It can, of course, be argued that these exclusions are reasonable. However, as these are situations in which children are especially likely to be in danger of

out-of-home placement, the exclusion policies divert some families, who demonstrably need intensive family preservation services, away from such schemes. In turn this diversion must have an impact on the evaluation of family preservation type services and make the results more positive than would otherwise be the case.



Rossi also comments critically on the short term nature of many of the published evaluations of the family preservation services. In doing so, he draws attention to a five year follow-up study of families in New York who received intensive family casework services (Jones 1985). This study indicates that the effects of intensive family casework services can last for a significant period of time. The study also indicates that in a significant number of situations, such services only delay rather than prevent the out-of-home placement of children. Such delay can be viewed as a successful outcome, although there is an issue of the possible detrimental effect of the delay on the children involved.

It is also worth noting that there was a BSI-Homebuilders demonstration project in the Bronx, which was funded by the City of New York, where the intention was to show how the Homebuilders approach was relevant for violent and substance abusing families. It no longer exists although Homebuilders are still

providing advice and training to the State of New York.

## Other relevant research

The family preservation research which focuses on the sole criteria of placement prevention runs the risk of being isolated from other knowledge, generated by scholars with different interests, which can nevertheless throw light on the placement or placement prevention debate. Knowledge from seminal research into foster and group care (Fanshell, Finch & Grundy 1990) must now be factored into the placement prevention debate. This study maps the life course of foster children who were placed with the Casey Family Program and empirically demonstrates that out-of-home placement, when well conceived and supported, need not be an end of line alternative. This research also shows the negative relationship between the number of changes in living arrangements prior to placement, the condition of a child at entry to out-of-home care and the long term life course outcome for the child.

Thus this research addresses the issue of placement delay rather than actual prevention as identified by Jones in her New York study. In doing so, the Fanshell study shows the negative long term consequences of this delay for the child(ren). As frequent changes in living arrangements are invariably part of the history of families referred to preservation services, these findings are important. Therefore they warrant consideration when placement prevention programs are being discussed. Family preservation programs, especially those which replicate the Homebuilders model, are not always aware of these challenging findings.

## Final comment

Family based preservation services in the US have served to demonstrate that intensive in-home family based services are vital in order to prevent the unnecessary out-of-home placement of children. They have also demonstrated that concrete services which focus on the hard issues of employment and work skills, housing

and general living conditions, family income, parent education and family life skills and other similar programs, need to be intertwined with various forms of individual counselling and family treatment interventions rather than being offered to families as a range of discrete service options.

The message for Australia seems to be that intensive in-home family based services are necessary and need to be adequately funded. However given the different starting points for current social work and child welfare practice in the US, Australians need to treat with scepticism the idea that family preservation type practice is a new idea that we need to emulate. Rather it may be that what we need to do is return to and refurbish those basic crisis-oriented family and child casework practices which have been eroded across time by budget cuts and critics who castigated such practices as conservative.

We must also question the need to emulate family preservation services like Homebuilders, given comments made earlier about who is excluded from such programs. Indeed it seems reasonable to suggest that family preservation programs in the US may have demonstrated their effectiveness with the type of families where Australian social workers would not consider children at imminent risk of placement. In this respect, it is worth asking if the group of families and children who might be referred to any Australian-based equivalents to the US family preservation services are more likely to be those families covered by the exclusion policies mentioned earlier. If this is the case, then it is a matter of concern. Under such circumstances the research results from the US would have little or no meaning for the Australian program equivalents due to the different client group being targeted. Indeed there would be no rationale for US type family preservation services being developed at all in Australia.

Family preservation advocates have not demonstrated that preventing the out-of-home placement of children should be our most important objective. Our understanding of the implication of placement prevention for the

long term development of at risk children who remain with their natural family is far from clear. A senior law professor (Wald, 1988) has made this point.

Furthermore, the use of placement prevention as a single measure of service outcome and cost efficiency can be regarded as foolish and evidence at best of a poor understanding of program evaluation methodology. Respectable social researchers would hold that, in the context of child welfare, the long term developmental interests of the child must prevail. An event such as placement prevention in that context is not necessarily a positive influence on that process. In that respect the claim of successful and cost effective interventions in the lives of families and children through placement prevention by family preservation researchers and the BSI-Homebuilders organisation deserves particularly critical examination. ♦

*Thanks are due to Dr. Rick Small and Dr. Howard Bath for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.*

### References

- Fanshell D., Finch S.J. & Grundy J.F. (1990) *Foster children in life course perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nelson K.E., Landsman M.J. & Deutelbaum W. (1990) 'Three models of family-centered placement prevention services.' in *Child Welfare*, 69(1) pp 3-21.
- Jones M.A. (1985) *A second chance for families: five years later follow-up of a program of foster care*. New York: Child Welfare League of America.
- Rossi P.H. (1991) *Evaluating family preservation services*. New York: Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.
- Wald M.S. (1988) 'Family preservation: are we moving too fast?' *Public Welfare*, Summer.
- Whittaker J.K., Kinney J., Tracy E.M. & Booth C. (1990) *Reaching high risk families. Intensive family preservation - services in human services*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

# NATIONAL CONFERENCE FAMILIES AND VIOLENCE



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

## Call for Papers

Centacare Australia and the Australian Catholic University NSW are inviting papers for its conference to be held at Macquarie University in Sydney on 4-5 February, 1994.

Papers and workshops on any aspects of violence in relationship to families are welcome. These could include:


- ☆ family trends
- ☆ family life and relationships
- ☆ children and young people
- ☆ family policies and support programs
- ☆ family economics and family law
- ☆ the impact of organisations and institutions on family violence
- ☆ intervention strategies.

Please send a summary (abstract) of 200-300 words by 17 September 1993 to:

Christine Trimmingham  
Australian Catholic University  
Education Foundations Dept.  
179 Albert Road, Strathfield,  
NSW 2135

Phone: (02) 739 2100

Fax: (02) 739 2105

Centacare  Australia