

# Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a major change in child welfare theory, policy and practice throughout Western Europe and North America. There has been a shift away from removing children from their families, and far greater emphasis has been placed upon helping families remain intact. There has been a decline in the provision of residential care, and what remains of this sector is increasingly being used to offer short-term, respite care with the clear purpose to helping families stay together. In the wake of this, innovative family support and family preservation initiatives have been launched in many countries to empower vulnerable children and their families. These initiatives hold much promise for the overall pattern of child welfare services in the future.

However, the rhetoric of family support is not always matched by the reality of service provision. In most countries, local authorities and service providers find it difficult to put the ideas of family support and family preservation into practice, as they have to resolve issues such as 'how to create pro-active family support services that really help vulnerable families', 'how to empower socially excluded families', 'how to achieve an appropriate balance between supporting families and protecting children', and 'what role is left for foster and residential care in family support services'. Some of these issues are discussed in this issue of the Journal.

We start with three articles that address the above issues and are related to family support and family preservation at a more theoretical and reflective level.

We open with an article by *Hatzivarnava-Kazassi*. She starts with some interesting reflections on important conceptual issues: what kind of 'families' are we referring to when we talk of those that must be supported (for example, nuclear families, one parent families, networks of family members or individual family members), and what do we have in mind when we talk about 'socially excluded families' and 'support services'? This is followed by a discussion of some major challenges faced by family support services. These challenges are placed in the wider context of government family policies and measures, and also other social and economic policies and processes that affect families. The author concludes that the real challenge is not to develop relief or support structures for families, but to prevent or avert social and economic processes that make families so vulnerable, such as unemployment, poverty and ecological threats.

The second contribution, written by *Whittaker*, presents a brief 'state of the art' overview of family-oriented prevention programs in North America, including the services for family support and intensive family preservation. Until recently, the family prevention initiatives spent a great deal of time on things that go wrong in families, on the processes by which they go wrong and on seeking ways to prevent failure. Recently, the primary question has increasingly shifted towards finding out what works in terms of the development of vulnerable families and those strategies that empower families 'at risk'. To this end, family support and family prevention programs now tend to define outcome criteria and intervention methods that closely match

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the specific needs of families 'at risk', and make use of existing resources which allow for assistance to vulnerable families instead of imposing external standards that only increase strain for families 'at risk'. The author argues that the 'ecological validity' of interventions will largely dictate the effectiveness of prevention efforts. The building blocks proposed by Whittaker to enhance this ecological validity include partnership, mutuality, social assets, resilience, social integration and the hope that things can change for the better.

Now that we have addressed the issues related to family support and family preservation at a reflective level, it is time to present some research findings.

The third article is written by *Thomlinson, Maluccio and Wright*. They raise the important question as to whether family reunification really works. Their answer is a tentative "yes", for some children and families. Reunification is more likely to succeed when supported by a comprehensive framework of policies, intervention strategies and resources, matched with the specific needs of the children and families to be reunited. For example, we need different interventions for discharges from residential, foster and adoptive care. Intensive family guidance positively affects reunification rates and we must tackle the emotional and behavioral difficulties of children and parents to prevent the risk of renewed family breakdowns. The authors recommend more empirical research in order to identify which services should be deployed in relation to the various forms of reunification.

*Janssens and Kemper* evaluate the impact of Video Home Training interventions on family preservation. The VHT technique offers short-term, home-centred, filmed video feedback of family interactions in vulnerable families. These video tapes are used to discover more about the interactional strengths that exist between children and parents, and aim to reinforce these. As such, VHT possesses the 'ecological validity' proposed by Whittaker as an inherent feature. The findings of the study are very promising. The quality of parent-child interaction in a sample of children treated on the basis of the VHT method was much higher than in a sample that did not receive VHT treatment. The level of behavioral problems among children was also much lower in the VHT sample. The authors, again, stress the importance of the issue of 'ecological validity'. The VHT technique works only when family interaction patterns are the cause of dysfunctioning; it cannot resolve family problems related to social exclusion, like poverty or unemployment.

The second article in this section addresses questions that are of interest to anyone working in the field of child and family welfare: what welfare measures actually exist for vulnerable children and their families? And what child and family measures are needed but not yet provided? To answer these questions, *Ruxton* explored and compared the child welfare services offered by various countries of the European Union in relation to vulnerable children and their families. The similarities between the various member states are highlighted, as well as the striking differences that appear to exist.

*Matthew Colton, Jan van der Ploeg & Evert Scholte*