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# Dangerous children and children in danger

## Some empirical and ethical aspects of primary prevention of juvenile delinquency and child abuse

### Summary

*The present debate on the prevention of juvenile delinquency pays much attention to the relation between parental rights and society's interests. However, a very important third element in this balance is the rights of children. Early support to families at risk can prevent juvenile delinquency as well as child abuse. There are indications that by early, comprehensive and intensive support to young parents at-risk the quality of child rearing can be ameliorated. This type of unsolicited intervention needs an ethic legitimisation which has to be based on the rights of children.*

### Introduction

In various Western European countries, including the Netherlands, juvenile delinquency is high on the political agenda. The Dutch Ministry of Justice has commissioned two reports about the prevention of juvenile delinquency (Junger-Tas 1996; Junger-Tas 1997). One of the topics discussed in them is the risk factors with regard to juvenile delinquency and at knowledge about it offers possibilities for primary prevention. The family is seen as the pretext for prevention, which is why the first report is titled: 'Youth and family; prevention from a judicial perspective'. Amongst other things, early preventive intervention in young families at risk is argued for, if necessary under some form of pressure. In October 1996 the Minister of Justice held a speech about the prevention of juvenile delinquency in which she said: 'A general offer [of support, h.b.] to groups at risk makes the prediction question subordinate to a wider interest, both of the child and the parents and of the community. Such an offer can be geared on a voluntary basis to the individual needs of those involved.... From the perspective of crime prevention this concerns the selection of the target group, the methods used and the possibility of using some pressure to get people to accept support (p. 3).

It is interesting to compare this statement of the Minister of Justice with the view of the Secretaries of Justice and of Welfare, Public Health and Culture, as formulated in a government report about the prevention of child abuse from 1990.

'We reject a public approach possibly geared to groups at risk. There is insufficient support, the recommendations show, for the assumption of the existence of demonstrable categories at risk. Such an approach is therefore not effective and in addition will lead to stigmatising side-effects' (Beleidsbrief, 1990, p.12-13).

If we look at the prevention of juvenile delinquency, the government is less in doubt about the existence of families at risk than in the case of the prevention of child abuse. And the fear of possible stigmatising side-effects in the case of preventive intervention in families at risk with an eye to the prevention of juvenile delinquency seems less than in case of similar prevention of child abuse.

However, this difference in positions cannot be defended on the basis of a difference in knowledge of the risk factors of juvenile delinquency and child abuse. For both phenomena it can be said on the one hand that during the last few years a lot of insight has been gained in the nature of the risk factors in question (Agathonos-Georgopoulou & Browne, 1997; Baartman, 1996; Browne & Saqi, 1985; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1988) and on the other that the predictive significance of these factors, certainly in the long term, leaves something to be desired (Browne & Saqi, 1985; Starr, 1982). In short, this implies a high chance of false positives in both cases, and therefore, albeit depending on the nature of the interventions, of the inefficient use of financial means and of stigmatising side-effects. Furthermore, both groups at risk have a great deal in common. The families in which there is evidence of (an increased risk of) child abuse and those in which there is evidence of (an increased risk of) juvenile delinquency have a clear area of overlap. In 1992, the US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect wrote: 'adult violence against children leads to childhood terror; childhood terror leads to teenage anger; and teenage anger too often leads to adult rage, both destructive towards others and self-destructive' (Davidson, 1995, p.285). Junger-Tas (1998) wrote the following about this connection: 'Most delinquent behavior occurs in families - complete or incomplete - where parents have little affection for their children, where there are constantly conflicts and where violence is used' (p.32). An overview given by Lewis, Mallouh and Webb (1989) of studies into the connection between crime and child abuse shows that remarkably high percentages of juvenile delinquents were abused or neglected as children (which does not imply that most abused children later show criminal behavior). In view of the large overlap between the two groups of families at risk, it is strange that the desirability of preventive interventions is judged so differently politically. Presumably, it is above all political rather than scientific arguments which cause this difference. Perhaps society is more prepared to tolerate intrusion into the privacy of the family in order to prevent juvenile delinquency than to prevent child abuse, because juvenile delinquency means a greater threat for the privacy of the individual citizen than child abuse.

In this document, child abuse means physical abuse and neglect. Backgrounds of sexual abuse, also in the form of child abuse, vary so greatly in many ways from those of physical abuse and neglect, that, when dealing with prevention, these types of child abuse should be kept separate. By prevention in this case I mean primary prevention in the sense of the definition given to it by Caplan (1964): 'lowering the rate of new cases of mental disorder in a population over a certain period by counteracting harmful circumstances before they have had a chance to produce illness' (p.26). More particularly this article deals with primary prevention aimed at groups at risk. Others (for example Browne, 1988; Dubowitz, 1989; Heller, 1982) consider primary prevention aimed at groups at risk as secondary prevention, whilst Caplan described secondary prevention as: 'programs which reduce the disability rate due to disorder by lowering the prevalence of the disorder in the community' (p.89).

The topics that I would like to discuss are the following. The first concerns the legitimisation of the unsolicited interference in families, because it is felt that there is a higher risk, either of child abuse, or of juvenile delinquency. I will discuss this topic by making a comparison between the current debate on prevention of juvenile delinquency and the debate 100 years ago about child protection. I will show, that at that time in the debate about child protection and about juvenile criminal law, the notion that the interest of society had to be protected against criminal children or 'candidate criminal' children played a central role. In the current discussion about the prevention of juvenile delinquency revolves more around the society's interest than the rights of children. To legitimise offering unsolicited aid, the importance allocated to the rights of the child is, however, crucial.

In addition I question risk factors and their predictive value. This above all concerns the relationship between the importance of proximal factors (in this case characteristics of the individual of the parents and child) and distal factors (characteristics of the circumstances). The nature of this relationship has consequences for the type of prevention. Within the context of the ecological models of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Belsky (1980), factors which influence the action of educators and the development of the child can be arranged at micro, meso and macro level. In connection with this, preventive interventions can be divided into *community-based services* (above located at meso level), *home-based services* (above located at micro level) and - at macro level - in measures of a more general societal nature.

A last question concerns the effectiveness of preventive interventions in young families at risk. I will round off with a number of conclusions.

### Interests of parents, children and society

A good upbringing serves both the interest of the child and that of society. So the government has, as the Minister of Justice wrote in a foreword to the said Junger-Tas report, an interest in good policy for upbringing and family.

The debate about the prevention of juvenile delinquency among other things deals with the tension between the interest of society in maintaining moral order and the right of parents to remain spared in principle, of unsolicited interference in giving shape to their parenthood.

However, a discussion about the relationship between the rights of parents and the interests of society is not useful, as long as the rights of the child are not involved. I will return to this later. First I would like to draw a historical parallel with a similar discussion 100 years ago, which was also about the prevention of crime and the interest of society.

### *The interest of society*

In 1898, a report was published which played an important role in the development of child protection in the Netherlands. Its title was: 'The issue of the care of neglected children'. Something had to be done about this issue 'in the interest of the unhappy children themselves', according to the authors of the report, and that of society (Levy et al, 1898, p.8), 'not only because we are all morally obliged (...) to help the unhappy and support them as much as possible, but also due to well-understood self-interest (ibidem, p.9). This self-interest was under threat, because neglected children 'form the cradle of criminals which our prisons are full of' (ibidem).

The child in danger and the dangerous child could, as Van Nijnatten (1986, p. 35) put it, be placed under one common denominator. In other words, the fact that children were being threatened - with physical and above all moral fall - was also a social problem because these children formed a threat.

One hundred years ago, combating neglect and protecting and caring for neglected children were seen as the means par excellence for preventing crime. A few years before the said report was published, Coenen's dissertation about 'The French law for protecting abused and neglected children' was published. In the last chapter, discussing child protection and crime, he wrote: 'Here and there the idea is beginning to dawn that (...) this crime could at least be limited by very close borders, if work started at the beginning rather than at the end, by trying to remove the causes from the youth instead of suppressing the consequences in older people' (Coenen, 1892, p.155). So Coenen here emphasises the importance of preventive measures over repression. He, among other things, referred to the articles of the *International Society for Criminal Law* which was founded in 1888, which say that punishment is an important means but certainly not the only one for combating crime: 'Elle [la peine] ne doit donc pas être isolée des autres remèdes sociaux et notamment *ne pas faire oublier les mesures préventives*' (Coenen, 1892, p. 150). When combating a phenomenon, he wrote, the causes must also be taken into account. 'The idea was to deal with crime differently and criminals differently, all right! But then start with the young.... Try to turn them into usable people by educating them: that was the handle that could be used to deal with this matter with the most hope of success. And the very wisest was perhaps to not even wait until they commit a crime, but to apply the method when only the *danger* exists, that they will become criminal. This appears to be real wisdom' (ibidem, p. 151). Or as Levy et al. wrote in the said report about neglected children: 'it is

good to render criminals harmless, but better, wiser and more humane to act preventively and protect the young people, even from their parents, if they are in danger of growing up for nothing but begging, poaching, smuggling, prostitution, stealing and thieving (Levy et al, 1898, p.11).

In conclusion, it can be said that the movement for the protection of children which was active throughout Europe and outside it at the end of the last century, was about protecting society against children who threatened to come to no good (Baartman, 1993; 1998; Van Montfoort, 1993; 1994; Van Nijnatten, 1986). That is why the legal possibility to intervene in parental authority had to be created, which just as in the rest of Europe led to child protection laws. These concern parents who default and therefore form a threat for their children and society. They made it possible to take rights away from parents if they misbehaved at the expense of their child and society. This is traditionally where the emphasis lies, both in the legitimisation of the child protection measures themselves and in the argumentation for their execution, for unsolicited intervention in the family.

### *The right of the child*

In contrast to this traditional approach in which the legitimisation for unsolicited intervention lies in the failing of parents, nowadays it is argued that, by calling on among other things the *Convention of Children's Rights*, this legitimisation can be sought in the fundamental *right of the child to care for a healthy and balanced development and growth* (Beaufort-Caspers & Veldkamp, 1991). This implies that encroachment on the right of parents to non-intervention does not have its primary justification in the default of the parent, but in a threat to or violation of said right of the child. This opinion can also be found in article 3 of the *Convention of Children's Rights*: 'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'.

We may wonder whether it makes a difference whether an intervention is based on the failing of the parent or the shortcoming of the child. After all, one usually implies the other and so in both cases intervention occurs with an eye to the interest of the child. In addition to this relationship between the failing parent and the shortcoming child, matters which usually imply each other, there is also evidence here of another important relationship, namely that between the right of parents to autonomy, which is the right to give shape to parenthood in good conscience and with their own honour and insight, and the right of a child to adequate care. In view of the need and the right of a child with regard to adequate care, we assume that this care can best be given by the parents. As therefore the primate of responsibility for a child lies primarily with the parents and secondarily with society, we grant the parents the right to autonomy when giving shape to that responsibility. To a certain degree, this right to autonomy implies the right to non-intervention. Unsolicited intervention in the way in which parents raise their child only occurs if they deprive the child or if the child is deprived. That does not detract from the fact, that in

view of the child's need for and right to adequate care, society retains its obligation to where necessary and possible give parents the opportunity to give shape to their responsibility as well as possible. If it is felt, that a child is deprived of care due to its parents' actions, then to begin with their right to non-intervention is cancelled in view of the right of a child. After all, this right to non-intervention is derived from the right to autonomy which in turn is based on the right of the child to adequate care. In addition it is possible that by means of a child protection measure the authority and therefore the autonomy of the parents is restricted.

As we in this society attach such importance to the right to non-intervention, unsolicited interference in raising children is soon labelled as interference or as meddling restriction of the autonomy of the parents. However, it is then forgotten that society has the obligation to protect the rights of those who cannot or cannot sufficiently do so themselves.

Child protection in the first instance makes us think of an infringement of the right to autonomy and (usually) trained help. This concerns situations in which parents deprive children and children are deprived. However, children's rights can be protected in other ways than through intervening in the parents' authority. In case of unsolicited aid to parents at risk to prevent child abuse there is no evidence (yet) of depriving and being deprived. If it is assumed that the right to non-intervention should be respected as long as parents do not misbehave, it is difficult to find a legitimisation for this unsolicited offer of aid. However, if the rights of the child form the basis, then it is easier to legitimise this intervention, assuming that a child not only has the right to protection when its rights are violated, but also if there is an increased risk of this. In view of the function of the right to non-intervention - which is to honour the primary responsibility of parents - it would be completely dysfunctional to honour this right if this means that parents are withheld the possibility of fulfil their responsibility. Making an unsolicited offer of preventive aid to parents at risk is a kind of interference, which does to a certain degree affect the right to non-intervention, but not the right to autonomy, at least not if parents are left free to accept or reject this offer. In view of the obligations which they have to their children, parents, and certainly parents in more vulnerable positions, have a right to society giving them opportunities to fulfil their obligations with an eye to the rights of children. In fact this occurs abundantly, consider, for example, the existing systems of ante, peri and post natal care which is available for all parents. Practically nobody experiences this system as intrusive. The reason for this is that the offer is made to everyone without distinction and is therefore not perceived to be disqualifying. An offer of preventive aid to parents at risk is, however, per se selective and will therefore be experienced as disqualification more quickly. The latter would not be the case or at least far less so if there was a general, active and varied offer of early upbringing support which had just as self-evident a place in society as the system of youth health care.

### *Voluntariness and pressure*

The above dealt with the question of how offering unsolicited preventive aid to parents at risk can be legitimised.

The next question is: 'To what degree are we justified in enforcing participation [of parents, h.b.] in this kind of program?' (Junger-Tas, 1998). 'This kind of program' means types of aid to or support for parents to prevent juvenile delinquency. However, this question not only concerns the legitimisation of pressure in primary prevention of juvenile delinquency, but also in primary prevention of child abuse.

In case of the primary prevention of juvenile delinquency there are two possibilities: a) parents have already failed seriously, in the shape of abuse or neglect, or b) parents have not demonstrably failed. In case of a) the parents' failing can justify imposing aid under pressure, and this aid can also have the aim of preventing a disorder in the development of the child which among other things can be expressed as criminal behavior. In the case of b) failing cannot legitimise imposing aid compulsorily.

The difference with the primary prevention of child abuse is that the primary prevention of juvenile delinquency relates to the actions of the child (the child shows criminal behavior), whilst the primary prevention of child abuse relates to the actions of the parents (the parent maltreats). That is why a) can never be the case here, and the parents' failing can in principle never legitimise the primary prevention of child abuse, but it can legitimise secondary prevention in the definition which Caplan (1964) gives to it.

In the discussion about the legitimacy of compulsory primary prevention, this difference between failing and not failing is important. Two elements play a central role in this discussion: the right of parents to independent execution of their parental duty and the accompanying parental authority on the one hand, and the right of children to optimum chances of a healthy and balanced development and growth towards independence on the other. Using pressure by means of an intervention in the authority and autonomy of parents can be legitimised from a legal perspective if parents, through their actions and omissions, are responsible for damage to their child. As the object of remedial education is the problematic parent - child relationship, pressure can be justified from a remedial education perspective if there is a problematic parent - child relationship (De Ruyter, 1993). In other words, *failing of the parents to the detriment of the child is a necessary condition for imposing pedagogic aid*. However, in the case of the primary prevention of child abuse this condition cannot be met, because prevention here is aimed at preventing the failing of parents and damage to the child and on preventing a problematic parent - child relationship. (To make things clear I would like to comment that a difference has to be made between restricting parental power as such and imposing aid under pressure. Restriction of the parental power can also occur without parents being responsible for damage to the child and without there being a problematic parent - child relationship, for example if a parent refuses a blood transfusion of the child on the grounds of his own religious convictions).

However, in addition to the autonomy of the parents, the fundamental right of the child to care for a healthy and balanced development and growth is an important element in the discussion. This right can be threatened without the necessary condition for compulsory aid being met, so without parents' failing and damage to the child. On the other hand, if anyone, in this case a

child, has a right then there is also an obligation to (help) honour that right, a duty which lies with the parents in the first place. If there are empirical reasons to assume that the honouring of that right is threatened, as there is a slight chance that the parents will not sufficiently fulfil their duty, then the fulfilment of the duty will have to be guaranteed in a different way. In other words, *a threat to the well-being of the child is sufficient reason to offer unsolicited aid of any kind to support parents*, if it seems reasonable to assume that this kind of support is in the interest of the child. But if the necessary condition for pressure has not been met, this aid cannot be imposed. In this connection I refer once again to the *Convention of Children's Rights*, namely to art. 18 par. 2. This article reads as follows: 'For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in this Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children'. If the duty to guarantee a right means that action is not only taken with an eye to redress (which means curative aid) but also to prevent a right being violated, then providing preventive aid to parents is a duty that the government, which is a party to this Convention, has taken upon itself.

## Types and effects of primary prevention

The above dealt with a number of matters of principle. Below, I would like to discuss some more practical and empirical matters. The first concerns the predictive value of risk factors. Following that, the question is raised as to what degree prevention should be related more directly to the functioning of the individuals than to the context. And finally the question of what is known about the effects of primary prevention. As this document discusses both the prevention of juvenile delinquency and child abuse, I will have to make a choice when discussing these matters. The discussion about the prevention of juvenile delinquency is focussed on interventions to improve the upbringing, which naturally does not detract from the fact that the origin of juvenile delinquency lies in more than just the quality of the upbringing. It is more or less self-evident that the discussion about the prevention of child abuse (in the shape of physical abuse and neglect) focuses even more strongly on the functioning of the educators; after all, child abuse is something which parents do, juvenile crime is something that young people do. I will concentrate on the similarity, which is early primary prevention aimed at the functioning of the educators. I will not discuss specific (differences in) risk indicators with regard to both phenomena, but I will restrict myself to outlines. For overviews concerning child abuse, please see Baartman (1996) and Guterman (1997) and concerning juvenile delinquency please see Junger-Tas (1996).

### *The predictive value of risk indicators*

An important question is what shape preventive upbringing aid should take. Decisive for this is, among other things, the difference in the predictive value which should be allocated to various risk indicators and also the degree to which these indicators can be influenced. For this it should be clear that indicators which cannot be influenced, such as the age of teenage mothers,

can still be important because they can give an indication of the target group to be approached. Primary prevention focuses on eliminating and strengthening factors which increase or reduce the chance of a problem occurring respectively. With an eye to the efficiency and effectiveness of primary prevention it is important to know what the predictive value of these factors is.

The risk indicators for child abuse and juvenile delinquency can roughly be divided into proximal factors (characteristics of the educator and the child) and distal factors (characteristics of the context) and the question is what the predictive value is of proximal factors in relation to those of distal factors. If distal factors are more important, then prevention should above all be focused on changing circumstances, if not interventions should be more directed at the functioning of individuals. Naturally these factors differ in nature and possibly also in importance for child abuse (the actions of a parent) and for juvenile delinquency (the actions of a child). I will restrict myself to the importance of proximal and distal factors with regard to child abuse.

In his process model for determinants of upbringing, Belsky (1984) distinguishes characteristics of the parent, the child and the context (the latter subdivided into characteristics of the partner relationship, the work situation and the social network of the family). On the basis of logical and empirical arguments he states that characteristics of the educator are the most decisive for the quality of the upbringing. 'Logically' because these characteristics also influenced the nature of the context and there is no cluster of factors which has influences so many other clusters of factors as the cluster of characteristics of educators. I will give a number of examples for the empirical argument. Research by Letourneau (1981) showed that a lack of empathy by the parents was a better predictor for child abuse than stress. Child abuse occurred more often in case of little empathy and low stress than in case of high stress and high empathy. Longitudinal research was carried out to check to what degree child abuse occurred in families at risk in time compared to other families, matched to a number of socio-demographic factors. Analysis of this kind of research leads to the provisional conclusion that child abuse occurs more in families at risk, the more importance is attached to characteristics of the personality of the parent as an educator when compiling the group (Baartman, 1996). This does not mean that contextual factors are irrelevant. On the contrary. The potential negative effect of proximal factors on the actions of the educator are greater, the worse the situation is and vice versa, the potentially positive effects of proximal factors are given more chance, the more favorable the circumstances the situation is (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In short: in wretched circumstances, personal shortcomings and their effects are greatly magnified.

### *Community and home-based services*

The question which then rises is whether prevention should primarily focus on improving conditions, on the assumption that as an indirect result there is a positive influence on the functioning of the parent, or whether it should primarily focus on the functioning of the educator, on the assumption that as an indirect result there is a positive effect on the environment. The first case is sometimes called *neighborhood or community-based services* (Pecora, Whittaker &

Maluccio, 1992). This among other things involves strengthening social cohesion and making facilities accessible and/or available. This approach is aimed at the group, surroundings, facilities, in short, more on the social structures than on the functioning of the individuals. 'These community-based centres make a lot of sense, particularly since they provide help to families in their own natural surroundings and in non-stigmatising or less stigmatising ways' (ibidem, p.49). In the second case, prevention is directly aimed at the functioning of individuals and the quality of their living conditions and we are in principle talking about 'home-based services'. In her second report, Junger-Tas (1997) argued in favor of a multi-course policy which has a combination of community and home-based services.

Identification of the groups at risk which qualify requires false negatives and false positives to be avoided as far as possible. Put differently, the method which is used has to be as sensitive (select those families which really need it) and as specific (not select those families which do not need it) as possible. The more sensitive the method, the smaller the risk of false negatives, the more specific the method, the smaller the risk of false positives. Thus a high degree of specificity will benefit the efficiency. After all, the efforts are not made on the families who do not need it. But there is no prior guarantee that a high degree of sensitivity will benefit the effectiveness. After all, effectiveness not only means that the group who needs it is reached, but also that the intended goal is achieved with the intervention. Negatively put, this is the prevention of child abuse and juvenile delinquency, positively formulated the goal is to improve the quality of the upbringing and the circumstances which influence it. A requirement for this is that there is insight into the nature and origin of the phenomenon to be prevented.

Elsewhere (Baartman, 1996) I have shown on the basis of an analysis of the results of empirical research that child abuse largely finds on a conflict in the parent about who should contribute to the other's good life: the parent to that of the child or the other way around. This conflict partly has its roots in the case history of these parents and is in addition usually strengthened because characteristics of the living conditions and sometimes also characteristics of the child place such an additional burden on the parents that even less of their good life remains. This conflict can largely be relationally determined, with the accompanying way in which the own parenthood and child are perceived and the actions of the child are interpreted. In that case it would appear that more good can be expected from *home-based services* than from *community-based services*. According to Pecora e.a. (1992) an advantage of community-based services is that they are less stigmatising, after all they are group-oriented rather than individual-oriented. However, it should be clear that if aid is to be effective, this can never be the only argument for giving preference to this kind of aid over more individual-oriented aid.

Stigmatisation can be the result of the fact that the person who receives an offer of preventive aid perceives this offer as a certificate of inability. The chance of stigmatisation will be even greater if the aid is offered to prevent child abuse or juvenile delinquency. It would also be wrong to propagate and offer this aid under that/those denominator(s). We are not able to predict sufficiently reliably whether the problem to be prevented will occur without the inter-

vention offered. Thus in groups of young families at risk, the percentage of families in which child abuse occurs in time varies from 6% to 53% (Baartman, 1996). Juvenile delinquency cannot be reliably predicted either, especially the longer the period between the prediction and the predicted (Junger-Tas, 1998). The legitimisation for offering aid should therefore not consist of a problem which might occur at some point, but should relate to the wish of the parents to raise their child as well as possible and to the obstacles which (could) occur now.

*Home-based services* are only effective and efficient if they are geared to the specific wishes and circumstances of the family and for that reason they cannot be offered solely on the grounds of the socio-demographic characteristics of a family. So it is wrong to make such an offer to families because they are part of a group which has nothing in common other than socio-demographic characteristics. Naturally it is conceivable that the chance of certain problems is higher in certain groups than in others because sources of support are not widely available or accessible in that *community*. In that case, it is obvious that the primary focus should be on *community-based services* - it is also called universal primary prevention - and where necessary to supplement this individually with home-based services. This is in fact also argued by Junger-Tas (1997) who is in favor of a preventive multi-course policy, in which attention is paid to both the living conditions and life in disadvantaged areas and to families where there are serious problems or likely to occur.

### *Effects of primary prevention*

The experiences with primary prevention of child abuse in the shape of aid which is offered at home to the parents from families at risk vary (Baartman, 1996; Guterman, 1997). We should take into account that it primarily concerns research which was carried out in the United States of America where disadvantaged situations and poverty take more serious forms than in the Netherlands for example and facilities for young families are not as widely available. The impression is that the effects of these projects in terms of quality of the parent - child relationship are more favorable, the earlier the intervention occurs (preferably starting just before the birth of the first child), lasts longer (at least two years), is of a more frequent nature (initially approximately once a week) and has a broader scope (aimed at both the individual functioning of the parents and their living conditions) (Baartman, 1996). This with regard to the formal characteristics of programs. Fairly little is known about the effect of characteristics with regard to content, because practically no research has been done into this.

This is also related to the fact, that usually an ecological vision of the problem to be prevented is compulsorily based on the reason why the program is allegedly *comprehensive*. At its best this means that a little of everything is done, at its worst that a vision is lacking of the relationship between the various factors which contribute to the origin of the problem. In many programs, the main emphasis is put on training skills. But the question is how much good can be expected from a program in situations where the parents are not above all lacking in knowledge and ability, but where there is evidence of a permanent conflict of interests. 'Parents need to meet

their own needs effectively before they can meet those of their children', according to Kaplan (1986, p.40). What is characteristic of abusive parents is that they expect that 'the child should and can be sensitive to the parent's needs instead of the reverse' (Rosenstein, 1995, p.1358). According to Milner (1993) training skills will not simply result in useful changes in behavior if no attention is paid to the perceptions and expectations of parents with regard to their child.

Earlier I indicated that for an unsolicited offer of aid it must reasonably be assumed that the aid is in the interest of the child and more generally that the aid is effective in view of the intended goal. Naturally this was an important point in the debate about the prevention of juvenile delinquency. However, a better distinction must be made between types of prevention and the accompanying objectives than has been the case until now. Above, I have mainly focussed on prevention in the form of support to parents as educators. And in view of the experiences gained with this until now the conclusion can be drawn that early support to young families at risk can help to prevent problems in the development of the child and the relationship between the parent and child, as long as the aid is sufficiently intensive (Baartman, 1996; Guterman, 1997; Olds e.a. 1986; Olds & Kitzman, 1990). Nevertheless, little is known about which elements with regard to content of this aid are more or less effective in relation to certain characteristics of the family. It should be noted, however, that we do not know this about a lot of types of curative aid for upbringing problems and that we still continue to offer that aid. There is no reason for waiting to offer additional support to young families where a start is made on raising children under aggravated circumstances until the necessary condition for imposing aid is met.

## Conclusions

1. Traditionally, in the debate about the prevention of juvenile delinquency great emphasis is placed on the interest of society. Wrongly, considerably less attention is paid to the interests and rights of children when this intervention is legitimised. Of course the prevention of crime is in society's interest. That does not detract from the fact that in view of the fundamental right of a child to a healthy and balanced education and growth, it would be wrong to only take up arms for this right if the child forms a threat to society. In a time like ours, in which violence and crime worries society to such a degree it is understandable that the politicians feel obliged to do something about that worry with an eye to society's (and their own) interests. However, we also have to observe that the scope and seriousness of child abuse is at least as big a threat to the moral, social and economic interests of society. But at the same time we have to observe that the politicians usually undertake more activity if children form a threat than when they are threatened. In the run-up to elections, political parties do pay attention to street violence of which adults are the victims but not a word is said about the violence indoors that affects children.
2. Offering support to families at risk to prevent juvenile delinquency or child abuse is based on a probability, and that this probability that problems will occur in these families is higher than in other families. In view of the worry which both these phenomena cause in

- society - either due to the fate of the children or that of society - there is a desire to combat this evil. But even if this worry is the reason for preventive efforts, it would be wrong to present them as the primary prevention of juvenile delinquency or neglect. In the first place, because we are not able to make a reliable prediction as to how, given the presence or absence of sets of risk indicators, the parent and child will develop. We do roughly know which accumulation of factors increase the risk of the educators dysfunctioning or disruptions in the psycho-social development of the child, but which form the possible dysfunctioning and disruptions will assume is difficult to predict. That is why it is more correct to not offer support with a plea of what may go wrong later, but with a plea of the rights of a child and connecting with the wish of the parents to honor it now. This does not detract from the fact that politicians' motivation for providing early support to families at risk can be related to reducing child abuse and juvenile delinquency. A second reason that support to young families at risk should not be offered under the flag of the prevention of juvenile delinquency or child abuse is the risk of stigmatisation which it creates.
3. We roughly know what the risk indicators are for juvenile delinquency and child abuse. To a large degree, this knowledge is based on the results of retrospective and cross-sectional research. Longitudinal research in these fields has only been carried out sparsely. However, if we want to be able to give shape to preventive support for young parents at risk in an effective and efficient way, then more longitudinal research will have to be done to gain insight into the transactions between clusters of risk indicators and protective factors. With an eye to the efficiency of the preventive efforts it is easier to identify (combinations of) risk indicators with a higher predictive value than now on the basis of such research and then better gear the content of the support to them with an eye to effectiveness.

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