

Family-Centered, Home-Based Services: Impact of Client Characteristics on Program Outcomes

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Research Problem

Since the enactment of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) family preservation is of major significance to the child welfare field. As a result, family-centered, home-based services have proliferated as a mean of prevention of out-of-home placement and as a mean of empowering families to help themselves. Research over the past 20 years on the effectiveness of social work practice has neglected the impact of client characteristics on the success or failure of an intervention (Fischer, 1973 & 1981; Rubin, 1985; Videka-Sherman, 1988). Research on the effectiveness of family-centered, home-based services also has reflected such neglect (Frankel, 1988; Fraser, Pecora, & Haapala, 1988; Nelson, 1988). It is critically important to describe more thoroughly the client population of the many family-centered, home-based programs. There has been recent interest in looking at client characteristics that may lead to more successful outcomes (Fraser et al., 1988; Nelson et al., 1988).

However, since client characteristics are not being explored as rigorously as other variables in examining the effectiveness of family-centered, home-based services, intervention tends to be cautiously employed. Child welfare professionals are increasingly faced with families presenting a multitude of problems. These families are characterized as having had prior contact with social services and as featuring histories of abuse and neglect, chemical dependency, domestic violence, and other problems that reflect their inability to function adequately in our society. Traditional casework intervention has not been found to be effective with these families (Fischer, 1973; Wood, 1978). Exploration into other types of intervention for these clients is desperately needed.

Research Background Questions/Hypotheses

Family-centered, home-based services have been found effective in preventing the placement of children in foster care (Frankel, 1988; Nelson, et al., 1988; Reid, Kagan, & Scholossberg, 1988; Stein, 1985). However, the current implementation of family-centered, home-based services is with a client population that has not been adequately defined in the research (Frankel, 1988; Fraser et al., 1988; Nelson et al., 1988). Hence it is unclear what type of client this intervention best services. Throughout the literature, scholars discuss the need for more research on the effect of client characteristics on outcomes.

This dissertation research addresses this lack of attention to client characteristics by analyzing the impact of client characteristics on program outcomes. The study's hypotheses are directed toward the effectiveness of family-centered, home-based services with the high-risk-for-placement families compared to low-risk-for-placement families.

Methodology

This paper presents an exploratory study on family-centered, home-based services, involving a secondary analysis of an existing database. Client characteristics are analyzed, and a subsample of high-risk-for-placement clients are identified, based on a scale of high-risk characteristics developed specifically for this research. The effectiveness of family-centered, home-based services with the low- and high-risk client is examined in relation to such outcome variables including placement prevention, family functioning, and improvement in problem areas.

A baseline study of the current practice of making service offers and setting goals with family-centered, home-based service clients was conducted in Hennepin County, Minnesota, in 1989. The resulting data provided the data source for this study. Specifically, 80 families referred to the family-centered, home-based services units of Hennepin County Family Services were analyzed. These families were randomly selected from the 480 cases opened between January 1 and July 1, 1988.

Of the 80 families randomly selected, 45 families engaged in services and are the focus of this study. The other 35 families chose, for various reasons, not to participate in the home-based program. Data for the current study was collected from an urban child welfare agency as a database for secondary analysis. Two sources of data were used: a post-hoc social worker questionnaire and case records information. The content validity of these two instruments was established through pilot testing with social workers and administrators from the agency. The case record information was collected by trained MSW students and an inter-rater reliability of 86% was achieved.

The client characteristics present in the database that are associated with the family are: number of children, residence, AFDC status, history of child abuse, history of sexual abuse, history of domestic abuse, history of child neglect, history of chemical dependency, history of mental illness, previous social services, prior placement, and prior home-based services.

In order to quantify the risk attributed to each client characteristic, a scaling technique was employed which placed a value of 1 (low risk) or 2 (high risk) on each variable. The value assigned to each variable was based on prior research and practice wisdom. The exploratory operational definition of a "family at high-risk for out-of-home placement" is derived from the extant literature on family-centered, home-based programs and foster care. These variables represent characteristics of individual family members as well as the family unit.

Client characteristics are first individually examined in relation to the dependent variables. Since practice effectiveness research has not examined client characteristics adequately, it was thought that this would be an important contribution to social work knowledge.

A high-risk for placement client is generally defined in the family-centered, home-based services research as a child who is at risk of placement outside the home. High-risk status is usually not further conceptually or operationally defined, nor is there an agreed upon definition (Magazino, 1983), which is a research problem in itself. As indicated in a review of the literature, there is a lack of intake criteria for many family-centered, home-based services programs (Frankel, 1988; Stein, 1985). Some critics claim that program success cannot be measured, since client characteristics and selection criteria are quite varied for different home-based programs.

The effectiveness of family-centered, home-based services with the low- and high-risk client are then examined in relation to the four outcome variables. These variables are as follows, placement prevention, family functioning, completion of the program, and improvement in problem areas.

Results

Of the 45 sample family cases 31% of the families had one child and 69% had two or more children in the home. The majority of families (60%) were city dwellers. The remaining 40% of the families lived in suburban areas. Only 40% of the families were receiving AFDC; 60% were not. An assessment of prior use of social services revealed that 82% of the families had utilized some type of service. In fact, 18% of the families had previously participated in a family-centered, home-based program. Case records showed that children in 27% of the families had experienced some type of prior out-of-home placement, i.e., foster care or institutionalization.

Chemical dependency was the most prevalent problem area found in the sample; in 53% of the cases a drug or alcohol addiction was present. Out of the three measures of child maltreatment, physical child abuse was documented in 42% of the cases. In over half of all cases with some form of child maltreatment, a chemical dependency problem was also indicated. Mental illness was documented in 24% of the cases, half of which also had chemical dependency present. While only 13% of the cases indicated domestic abuse, chemical dependency and physical child abuse were present in almost all of these cases.

There was no statistically significant differences between high-risk families compared to low-risk families on three program outcomes, prevention of foster care placement, family functioning, and completion of the program. Prevention of placement was achieved in 82% of the cases with high-risk families compared to 72% of low-risk families. High-risk families completed the program in 59% of the cases while low-risk families completed the program in 56% of the cases.

Measured by improvement of the identified problem area, low-risk families are more successful. Low-risk families made progress in 89% of the cases compared to 58% of the high-risk family cases.

Utility for Practice

Among the implications of these findings was the assertion that home-based services are effective with the multi-problem family. Social service programs are continually being refined to meet the current needs of society's families. In the quest for innovation, it is critical not to limit progressive programs to families who are at lower risk and who may prove to be more successful because of their lack of history in such programs. Home-based services continue to be highly valued as an option on the continuum of child welfare services that are available to families at risk of out-of-home placement. In assessing what services to provide a family, a more thorough understanding of both high- and low-risk characteristics will allow for better treatment plans.

The use of client characteristics as a measure of risk and potential program success positions this study as a model for continuing research in this area. The findings have significance for not only the child welfare field but also for the profession of social work.

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