



Differential response: A critical examination of a secondary prevention model

Amy Conley*

University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare, 120 Haviland Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-7400, United States

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Abstract

Whether and when to intervene and what services to offer families in crisis are critical questions in the field of child welfare. Policy makers and administrators struggle with how to target services appropriately to ensure provision to families at greatest risk while avoiding endangerment through miscalculation. This paper examines the differential (also known as alternative) response paradigm of child welfare services under which families at moderate to high risk for child maltreatment are offered preventative, strengths-based services. The Another Road to Safety Program, an example of a differential response program utilizing home visiting as a service delivery mechanism, is critically assessed to determine support for program assumptions in the child welfare literature base. The types of intervention strategies examined include voluntary service provision, home visitation, paraprofessional service delivery, and targeting of basic and concrete needs.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare is a high stakes field. With limited resources, administrators and workers have no choice but to target services to those families at greatest risk of child abuse and neglect. Yet the cost of doing nothing may be the greatest of all, if the development and well-being of children is threatened by poor parenting skills and a lack of financial resources, or in the worst case scenario, children die from parental injury or negligence. Mounting research indicates that a large proportion of children screened out at the hotline or unsubstantiated after investigation eventually

* Tel.: +1 510 541 0301.

E-mail address: a_conley@berkeley.edu.

come back into contact with the child welfare system (Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2003; Inkelas & Halfon, 1997; Wolock Sherman, Feldman, & Metzger, 2001). This is the crack in the system where all too many children and families fall, unable to access services until the severity of family problems has deepened and the family unit is under threat of dissolution. Rather than waiting until such cases are in severe crisis and warrant coercive intervention by child protective services, differential response offers an opportunity to engage families in voluntary services which address their identified risk factors.

Differential response is a fairly new approach to child welfare, more a philosophy than intervention. Under the differential response paradigm, agencies sort families by risk levels and offer services to those deemed at lower to moderate levels of risk, who under traditional child welfare services would often receive nothing. The differential response approach is characterized by voluntary provision, greater respect for families, and increased community involvement (Waldfoegel, 1998a). This new way of doing business is catching the imagination of policy makers and child welfare administrators throughout the country.

In California, one differential response program called Another Road to Safety (ARS) provides an intensive home visiting program that offers families concrete services and emotional support. The program ultimately seeks to ensure child safety, improve child development, and strengthen family functioning. This paper critically examines aspects of the ARS program, with reference to the larger child welfare literature, and discusses the relevance of the ARS model.

2. The case for reform

Why do some families repeatedly come to the attention of child welfare services without receiving an intervention? From the high volume of referrals, one may infer that a large number of mandated and other reporters recognize that families need help, though their problems may not rise to the level of statutory child maltreatment. In 2004, 3 million child abuse and neglect referrals concerning 5.5 million children were made in the United States. One-third of these referrals were screened out at the hotline level, without further attention from child protective services. Of the remaining two-thirds, more than one half (60.7%) were closed and given the disposition “unsubstantiated” because of insufficient evidence that a child was maltreated or at risk of future maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

Researchers have in recent years begun to focus on the substantiated/unsubstantiated distinction, questioning whether the two populations differ significantly. The evidence is mounting that families with substantiated and unsubstantiated allegations experience similar trajectories of child maltreatment recurrence and contact with the child welfare system (Drake et al., 2003; English, Marshall, Brummel, Orme, 1999; Inkleas & Halfon, 1997; Wolock et al., 2001), indicating that a reexamination and reformulation of the child welfare system’s approach to serving families is warranted.

There are two overarching strategies advanced for child protective services (CPS) reform. The first is narrowing of the CPS mandate and services. The high volume of unsubstantiated cases, according to researchers such as Douglas Besharov, represent an unnecessary intrusion into families’ lives, a waste of resources, and an over-taxation of the system that prevents real cases of maltreatment from getting the attention they need (Besharov & Laumann, 1996). The CPS mandate is also problematic, by placing alternating emphasis on child rescue and family preservation, when what is really needed is an individualized approach (Lowry, 1998). For these reasons, advocates of narrowing believe that reform should focus on the issues of over-inclusion, capacity, and service orientation (Waldfoegel, 1998b).

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