
Introduction

To those who ask, “Why do we need a book devoted specifically to African American families?” we reply that after over sixty years of nationalizing child welfare and instituting reforms aimed at improving conditions for all children in care, African American children hold a unique and uncontested disproportional position in the out-of-home care system. National reports from the federal government document a significant number of active cases among African Americans resulting from referrals to child protective service (CPS) agencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Studies have also documented the fact that African American children are not the target for family preservation services, even though they continue to represent a “special needs” population due in large part to their disproportionate numbers in out-of-home care (Denby & Curtis, 2003).

These facts result in complex questions that are difficult to answer, such as why disproportionality continues after years of policy and program reform and intervention. Ultimately, finding answers requires a change in the historical approach to examining the social conditions in which children are raised and the cultural context in which they are served and should result in a different response. Political pundits and child welfare experts alike will differ about the most appropriate response to the “why” queries, but our knowledge of history confirms one certainty—the experience of African Americans in this country is political, and the experience of children and families in the child welfare system is also political.

From the introduction of African Americans to this country through the slave trade system, to subjugation both socially and politically during slavery and its aftermath, the experience of African Americans in systems

intended to educate, inform, and provide services has been fraught with discrimination and differential treatment. The child welfare system has historically been exclusionary and/or ineffective when confronted with the child welfare needs of the African American family in this country. From adoption practices in place after passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, which in effect ignored the existence of the African American family or deemed it too “pathological” and therefore too complex to “correct,” to the implementation of policies aimed at correcting past failures of the out-of-home care system by reducing the number of children referred to child protective service agencies, African American children and families are not typically the focus of instructional references.

Thirty-four years ago the National Urban League published *The Strengths of Black Families*, by Robert Hill. The book documented social research findings that challenged popular assertions by some sociologists at the time, that the “black family” is “‘matriarchal,’ it is unstable, it does not prepare black people for productive lives, and it is the prime source of black economic weakness” (Hill, 1972:ix). Hill’s work had a tremendous impact on future conceptualizations of social policies regarding the structure and function of the black family. However, child welfare professionals continue to compare the experiences of African American families with those of whites and others and insist that the effect of policies for one segment of the population is the same for all; they approach intervention with families in like form with little consideration of cultural differences.

This book provides a focused examination of research and analyses of policies that directly affect the institutional care provided to African American children and their families. Analyses of practices, programs, policies, research, and recommendations for corrective action are based on recognition of cultural competence as an ethical tenet for the social work profession; cultural adaptation is introduced as a means of achieving needed change within the overall service system and infrastructure as it relates to African American children and families.

Policy formulation may have different effects on various segments of the population. For example, policy formulated with the goal of permanency for children may not take into account the life experiences of all families coming into contact with the CPS system. Some families in the CPS system may be negatively affected by the criminal justice system, but not all incarcerated parents are incapable of or uninterested in par-

enting. Policies that impose time limits or restrictions around permanent placement decisions without consideration of time incarcerated can prevent the reunification of potentially viable family units. This is a particular concern in the African American community, as statistics show that 75 percent of incarcerated women are African American (Karger & Stoesz, 2009).

One of the challenges to the profession of social work is to demonstrate the importance of and need for practitioners to assume more visible and active roles not only in offering quality services but also in advocating and formulating effective child welfare policy. Until social workers do more to inform the policy-making process that affects our practice with children, we limit our influence to reform the system of care for all children. When engaged in training professionals for child welfare service, instructors must emphasize strong analytical skills. Objective interpretation of policies and research findings may result in subjectively crafted programs aimed at addressing the specific needs of the underserved.

For example, practitioners must consider the effect of policies aimed at promoting health and safety for children, but which may in fact limit or prevent opportunities for parents to be empowered to reform behaviors and resume parenting responsibilities. Not all parents who have health-related problems with alcohol or other drugs or who may be incarcerated are incapable of resuming some of their parenting responsibility. Policies and practice methods must consider differences between stumbling blocks that may be overcome and willful behaviors that the parent has no interest in changing or treating. With a growing number of parents having their parental rights terminated, is it unreasonable to suggest a supportive role for some parents in the life of their child following incarceration and successful completion of a drug or alcohol treatment program?

Finally, we argue that an evidence-based practice approach to child welfare service delivery with African American families incorporates the cultural adaptation of practices, policies, and research goals. Such adaptations aimed at the most vulnerable children within the CPS system nationwide will benefit the entire child welfare system. This book will have immediate utility for professional practitioners, students, advocates, and policy makers because it integrates practice, policy, and research to determine the best outcomes for children.

REFERENCES

- Denby, R., & C. M. Curtis. 2003. Why Children of Color Are Not the Target of Family Preservation Services: A Case for Program Reform. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 30 (2): 149–73.
- Hill, R. B. 1972. *Strengths of Black Families*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Karger, H., & D. Stoesz. 2009. *American Social Welfare Policy: A Pluralist Approach*. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson Education.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. 2008. *Preliminary Estimates for FY 2006 as of January 2008*. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb>.

Cultural Adaptation in Effective Child Welfare Practice with African Americans

A CULTURAL ADAPTATION FRAMEWORK

Many authors have called for a critical examination of the United States child welfare system as it relates to African American children and families (Curtis & Denby, 2004; Denby & Curtis, 2003; Dixon, 2008; Hill, 2006; McRoy, 2008; Roberts, 2002, 2008; Testa, 2005; U.S. GAO, 2007). Examiners of the U.S. child welfare system have based their critiques on historical, cultural, political, and service reviews. Most recently, some child welfare scholars have challenged researchers to develop new theories that build on historical traditions and establish evidence-based practices and policies. Traditionally, proponents of evidence-based practices search for appropriate frameworks and practice effectiveness by questioning, searching, analyzing, and then applying and evaluating their conclusions (Cournoyer, 2004). However, the child welfare system reforms that are needed go far beyond the implementation of evidence-based models. What is required instead is a system transformation that takes into account cultural adaptations of policies, research, and practice so that the system is more responsive to the particular needs of African American children and families.

In this text we call for an analytical framework that guides policy, research, and practice interventions for African American families in the child welfare system. However, we believe that the traditional critique of the child welfare system is shortsighted in that its parameters usually extend to a mere mention of historical, cultural, and political influences. While these components are essential to advancing a sound analytical framework, we examine what cultural adaptations are needed to the overall service system and infrastructure as it relates to African Americans in the child welfare system.