

❖ PREFACE

More than two decades ago, Joan Laird and Ann Hartman (1985:xvi–xvii) reminded us that “every society at every time must make some provision for its children in need.” When Laird and Hartman, the editors of the classic text *A Handbook of Child Welfare: Context, Knowledge, and Practice*, wrote this statement, the field of child welfare was determinedly implementing a new federal mandate that outlined such provisions. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 identified a range of management and practice requirements intended to prevent the unnecessary placement of children and reunify families when placement could not be prevented. The *Handbook of child welfare* outlined the philosophical underpinnings as well as the policy and practice emphases of that period. It provided detailed discussions that shaped the understanding and commitments of numerous cohorts of students who subsequently entered practice in the field. It is important for us as co-editors of this volume to acknowledge the influence Laird and Hartman’s text has had in our teaching, in our professional child welfare practice, and in our development of this text. This volume is inspired by, and yet different from, that significant work.

Indeed, since 1985, when Laird and Hartman collected the essays in their volume, child welfare as an institution and a field of practice has continued to experience transformations in the provisions for children, youth, and families in need. Despite the hope associated with the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, the field has struggled during the intervening years with insufficient funding, increased public concerns about the safety of children, and generally disappointing outcomes with regard to achieving permanency for children and youth who enter care. Throughout the country, stresses within and on the child

welfare system have kept many state agencies in the news and on the defensive.

Although in the past two decades many changes have occurred in practice and in ideological and planning orientations, change is perhaps most vividly seen in the primary legislation that currently forms the foundation of child welfare policy in the United States: the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). This legislation replaced the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act). The key principles that form the foundation for ASFA are conceptualized as the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and youth. ASFA puts into place legislative provisions that are intended to insure that child safety is the paramount concern in all child welfare decisionmaking, to shorten the time frames for making permanency planning decisions, and to promote the adoption of children and youth who cannot safely return to their own homes. This legislation also requires a focus on positive results for children, youth, and families, and promotes the strengthening of partnerships among child welfare agencies and other service delivery systems to support families at the community level.

Recognizing the significance of these multiple and complex changes, but especially attentive to ASFA's increasing influence on child welfare policy, programs, and practice, we decided to utilize these three concepts—safety, permanency, and well-being—as the primary framework for this text. It seemed timely to ask colleagues across the country—academics, policymakers, and practitioners, all of whom are deeply committed to child welfare—to commit to writing their views about the current status and changing complexity of services to children, youth, and families in twenty-first-century America. We believe that using this framework has permitted our contributors to thoroughly examine both the explicit and subtle challenges and opportunities to improving child welfare practice and offer practice and policy guidelines that fall

within the broad strokes of the ASFA decision-making framework.

We asked our contributors to outline the major assumptions and values of child welfare today and identify and elaborate the recent research and knowledge that currently support practice in a wide range of areas relevant to the field. Even as the contributors have been writing their chapters, the states and the U.S. Children's Bureau have been engaged in an extensive review process that has now been completed. The findings of the first 52 Child and Family Services Reviews, which have been integrated into the text where relevant, provide an additional source of information regarding the current strengths and concerns of child welfare, thereby further informing the agenda for future change efforts.

As child welfare practitioners, teachers, and researchers, both of us have, like Laird and Hartman (1985:xxiii), subscribed to an ecological perspective. This perspective provides an excellent framework for understanding and evaluating the nature of social and institutional responses to children, youth, and families in need. Furthermore, we both believe that it is important to emphasize family-centeredness in child welfare policy and practice. The philosophical concepts of family-centered practice and permanency planning are infused throughout this text. Both acknowledge the complex reality that, although a family is the best place for children and youth to grow up, for some, their families of origin may not be safe or nurturing. We believe that providing as much support as possible to birth families to assist them in being safe and nurturing permanent caregivers for their children, while at the same time planning for another permanency option if efforts are not successful, must be accomplished through a family-centered orientation. Furthermore, seeking the optimal connection a child can have to family, culture, and community in our efforts to achieve permanency reflects both an ecological and family-centered practice orientation.

Throughout this text, the contributors emphasize that strengthening and supporting all families—birth, kinship, guardian, adoptive, and foster—is the best way to insure children’s safety, stability, continuity in family relationships, and timely permanence.

Through its provisions, ASFA legally reinforces the linkage between strengthening and supporting families and good outcomes for children and youth. Although it places the safety of children and youth first, it also provides for family preservation and family support services to prevent children from being removed from their families when it is safe to do so; maintains a commitment to agencies undertaking reasonable efforts to preserve families; encourages concurrent planning to insure permanency through either reunification or another permanent placement within shorter timeframes; and encourages the initiation of permanency planning efforts as children and their families have an initial contact with the child welfare system. Almost a decade after the passage of ASFA, practitioners continue working to change their policies and practices to better serve children, youth, and families while striving to comply with its complex legislative mandates and with other child welfare legislation. An urgent need remains for the adequate funding of child welfare agencies; sufficient resources are required to strengthen the capacity of child welfare practitioners to integrate policy and practices which are designed to reflect the field’s developing knowledge base, increase accountability, and improve outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Another philosophical orientation that guided our work on this volume is that of evidence-based practices (Gambrell 2003; Gibbs 1989, 2003). Over the past 20 years, this orientation has increasingly permeated child welfare in ways that have moved the field of children, youth, and family services in new directions. We asked contributors to acknowledge and identify not only promising approaches to child welfare practice, but also those practices that are grounded

in empirical evidence. The profession of social work, as well as the society more broadly, has placed greater emphasis on evaluating to what degree identifiable outcomes have been achieved; that value on outcomes has also extended to the field of child welfare. Contributors were also asked to address the significant value and ethical issues relevant to their discussions, as well as the range of services and practice approaches required to address the needs and experiences of the diverse population of children and families served by the child welfare system. Where relevant, contributors were asked to include illustrative fictional or disguised case examples.

Utilizing safety, permanence, and well-being as its organizing and guiding principles, this text provides a framework for examining and exploring child welfare practices and policies in the twenty-first century. Within this framework, there are clearly differences of perspective among our authors. The field of children, youth, and family services and indeed social work embrace a wide array of diverse perspectives and practices. Although this edited volume has a unifying framework to provide structure for the authors and for the readers, it has been our intention that diverse perspectives and practices be incorporated.

A historical and legislative overview of child welfare grounds the text in time and place and provides elements of context critical to all subsequent parts of the volume. Following this overview, the main body of the text is divided into four sections, each of which is prefaced by an overview of the section. The overall introduction and four section overviews intentionally include few cited references to enhance the flow of these sections. The ideas contained in these introductory pages are cited extensively throughout the text.

Section I explores and examines the varied perspectives that frame what is currently known about child and adolescent well-being. Although safety is given prominence in AFSA legislation and language, we have intentionally situated

the initial focus on child and adolescent well-being. Philosophically, we believe that without adequate attention to well-being, important developmental issues will be disregarded with a resultant weakening of the foundation for both safety and permanency. Assuring children's safety and achieving permanency for them requires that all those involved in their care and services understand their developmental and special needs; the care supports, and services required to support their ongoing development and well-being; and the ways in which resilience and both risk and protective factors are relevant to the assessment of and planning for each child and youth. Consistent with this philosophy, the chapters in Section I provide a needs-based approach to understanding experiences and services that support well-being. The first chapters address the broader issues of this area, beginning with an in-depth examination of resilience and risk, followed by assessment of children, youth, and their families and then by engagement of families and their communities in service planning. The section then enters into the various realms of children's and youth's health, mental health, and educational needs and concludes with issues pertaining to gay and lesbian youth, runaway and homeless youth, and spirituality.

Section II explores the critical issues pertaining to child and adolescent safety. Drawing from the theoretical literature, research, and best practices in the area of child maltreatment, this section begins with an overview of the salient issues pertaining to prevention of physical child abuse and neglect and moves into an extensive discussion of the areas of child protection. A thorough examination of risk assessment and of practice considerations for agency staff and others involved in answering the question, "will this parent abuse or reabuse his or her child in the near future?" follows. Section II also provides an extensive overview of the policies, practices, and research that provide a foundation for family preservation services and examines which children and parents are most and least

likely to benefit from such services. Over the past two decades, the field of child welfare has recognized the need to develop programs and practice approaches addressing particular problems that increasingly place large numbers of children and youth at risk of maltreatment and placement outside their homes. Therefore, Section II concludes with comprehensive reviews of the practices, policies, and research as these apply to two critical problems confronted daily in serving children, youth, and families: substance abuse and domestic violence.

Section III is devoted to a wide array of issues related to permanency for children and youth. This section provides an extensive overview on each of the major permanency goals—reunification, permanent placement with relatives, adoption, guardianship, and another planned permanent living arrangement—and on the primary out-of-home placement settings. These include foster family care, relative care, and residential programs. Other content areas relevant to the selection of permanency goals and achieving permanence are also explored, including kinship and sibling connections, adoption disruption, youth development, parent-child visiting, birth parent issues, and post-permanency services.

The volume concludes with a view of the systemic issues that affect children, youth, and family services. The initial chapters in Section IV focus on systemic issues that negatively affect all or specific groups of children and youth, including placement instability, the overrepresentation in the child welfare system of children and youth of color, immigration issues, and the role of fathers. Other practice-related systemic issues are also addressed, including the role of courts and the legal system in child welfare, the essential need for recruitment, development, support, and retention of foster families, a report on the process and outcomes of the federal Child and Family Services Reviews, and the roles of continuous quality improvement, strategic planning, and accreditation in child welfare.

References

Adoption and Safe Families Act. (1997). P.L. 105-89.
Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act. (1980). P.L. 96-272.
Gambrill, E. (2003). Evidence-based practice: Sea change or the emperor's new clothes. *Journal of Social Work Education, 39*(1), 3-23.
Gibbs, L. E. (1989). Quality of Study Rating Form: An instrument for synthesizing evaluation studies. *Journal of Social Work Education, 25*(1), 55-67.

Gibbs, L. E. (2003). *Evidence-based practice for the helping professions: A practical guide with integrated multimedia*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thomson Learning.
Laird, J., & Hartman, A. (eds.) (1985). *A handbook of child welfare: Context, knowledge, and practice*. New York: Free Press.

