



Child Welfare: Policies and Best Practices (2nd Ed.)

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Book Review: *Child Welfare: Policies and Best Practices* (2nd Ed.)

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Book Review: *Child Welfare: Policies and Best Practices* (2nd Ed.)

Jannah Mather, Patricia B. Lager, and Norma J. Harris
Brooks Cole, 2007

Policy and practice come together in this optimistic and somewhat inspiring text. This book is informative and concisely written, and it has the potential to serve as both a resource and as a model for practice. It offers new hope and possibility to transform the child welfare arena into a playground of opportunity. It is somewhat unusual in that it is the first book in quite a while that combines child welfare policy and direct practice in a single text.

The book consists of 13 chapters and contains 306 pages of text. Chapter 1 begins with a very good synopsis of major legislation that has shaped the historical development of child welfare policy and practice. In writing that is clear, focused, and interesting, it shows the evolution of child welfare policy as being influenced by a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political forces, and paints a picture of where we are now. It should be noted that the authors do this in a manner that is not overwhelming to readers, but rather serves to empower them. After finishing only the first chapter, the reader is left with a sense of history, knowledge, and mission.

Chapter 2 looks at services, both formal and informal, that comprise our current service continuum. These services are categorized and described as ranging from the least restrictive supplementary services, to supportive, to the more restrictive substitute care services. Wrap-around services and family circles are introduced as alternative strategies for working within an environment that is residual in nature and lacks resources. This chapter points out some of the ways that front-line workers can make a difference in the lives of the families and the children with whom they work. It

inspires creativity and the recognition that one works within a community that is filled with resources and strengths.

Chapter 3 is an extension of the policies discussed in Chapter 1 that are still relevant today and which impact the current field of service. It includes up-to-date research and statistics on major program initiatives and explains some of the more intricate policy provisions that are currently in place.

Chapter 4 covers cultural competency from a strengths perspective, offers an excellent discussion of power and empowerment theory, and provides clear guidelines for working with individuals and families of cultural backgrounds that differ from those of the worker. This chapter acknowledges and discusses the need for both worker and client to feel empowered, and it offers innovative strategies and practice ideas for increasing a worker's sense of personal and cultural competence.

After these initial foundations have been laid, Chapters 5 through 10 address some specific issues and problems commonly encountered in the field of child welfare. These issues include neglect, abuse, and emotional maltreatment; child sexual abuse; behavioral and delinquency issues; divorce and loss; and adolescent sexuality and pregnancy. Each of these chapters incorporates a problem-solving process that is strengths-based with a multi-systemic perspective. Issues are defined, and current statistics and relevant research summarized. All of this is then followed by up-to-date policy and process guidelines, and a discussion of services, methods, and practice tips. These chapters are filled with data, ideas, and practical techniques, such as the "Pink Elephant" (Chapter 7) and the "Miracle Question" (Chapter 5). There are also sample contracts and interview guides, as well as team-building activities and evaluation techniques.

Chapter 11, "Permanency Planning and Adop-

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tion,” discusses the role of social work and the role of the courts in meeting the long-term needs of children. The processes of reunification and termination of parental rights are described. Issues such as mental-health needs and age of the child that make the goals of permanency and adoption harder to achieve are also discussed. Chapter 12 offers innovative ideas on prevention and early intervention that encourage creative collaborations. This chapter also explores the privatization of child welfare services.

Finally, Chapter 13 discusses leadership and the challenge of leadership in child welfare. Guest author Adrian Popa argues eloquently that the child welfare arena is filled with opportunity and challenge. She says that social workers within this field of practice have the skills and an ethical responsibility to meet these challenges. Leadership is discussed as an important component of successful practice and as a skill that can be developed. Transactional and transformational leadership theory is described as having potential as a means of engaging mutual support for a common purpose.

Child Welfare Policies and Best Practices (2nd Ed.) is more than just a text book; it is a model for practice. This book offers a skillfully woven guide to our complex web of child welfare policy, practice, and services. Chapter 1, by itself, makes this book worthwhile as a resource. This book lays a foundation that acknowledges the challenges of providing services to children and families and challenges us to find new and more innovative techniques. This book encourages creativity, and has the potential to inspire us, as workers, to do our best. Role-play dialogue, sample questions, and case vignettes make this book suitable for use as a training tool. Chapter 13 on leadership should be required reading for supervisors in the field of child welfare. The discussion and exercises in Chapter 13 on organizational culture are another example of material that would make for a great in-service or training tool.

A few strengths and weaknesses of this text are worth noting. Although the authors acknowledge kinship care as the “fastest growing” type of placement, there is a lack of depth in discussion of the issues and problems currently associated with this type of care. For example, the practice of informal

kinship care placements often denies parental reunification services as well as the provision of many other services and resources. The informal placement of children with kin has also skewed our data on out-of-home placement since these children are not counted by our current data collection systems. The cultural competency chapter could have provided more attention to religious diversity and its implications. For example, the Muslim culture is not included.

Chapters 3, 11, and 13 contain some discussion of independent living programs and aging out of the foster care system. These sections would benefit from the inclusion of discussion on network development and the need for positive adult role models and mentors. A discussion of homeless youth that ties into the urgency, opportunity, and challenge theme of the rest of the book seems appropriate. An example of an innovative transitional housing program for youth aging out of the foster care system might have been a worthwhile inclusion.

In a book that combines policy and direct practice, it is the opinion of this writer that there should be mention of the Hatch Act, which regulates the political activities of civil servants. What are some small and creative suggestions for practice that leaders can engage in if they wish to have an impact on the larger political systems?

Also worth mentioning are the impressive credentials of the authors of this textbook. Jannah Mather is Dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Utah. She is a well-known author with over 20 years of practice experience in the field of child and family welfare. Patricia Lager is an administrator with expertise in clinical social work practice with children and families. Norma Harris is credited as being a primary author of the national guidelines for child protective services and “recognized as a leader in all aspects of child welfare services.” She is Title IV -E Coordinator and Director of the Social Science Research Center at the University of Utah.