

Does Family Preservation Work?

Family preservation is one of the most intensively-scrutinized programs in all of child welfare. Several studies -- and real world experience -- show that Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS) programs that follow the Homebuilders model safely prevent placement in foster care.

- Michigan's Families First program sticks rigorously to the Homebuilders model. The Michigan program was evaluated by comparing children who received family preservation services to a "control group" that did not. After one year, among children who were referred because of abuse or neglect, the control group children were nearly twice as likely to be placed in foster care, as the Families First children. Thirty-six percent of children in the control group were placed, compared to only 19.4 percent of the Families First children.¹

- Another Michigan study went further. In this study, judges actually gave permission to researchers to "take back" some children they had just ordered into foster care and place them in Families First instead. One year later, 93 percent of these children still were in their own homes.² And Michigan's State Auditor concluded that the Families First program "has generally been effective in providing a safe alternative to the out-of-home placement of children who are at imminent risk of being removed from the home ... The program places a high priority on the safety of children."³

- An experiment in Utah and Washington State also used a comparison group. After one year, 85.2 percent of the children in the comparison group were placed in foster care, compared to only 44.4 percent of the children who received Intensive Family Preservation Services.⁴

- A study in California found that 55 percent of the control group children were placed, compared to only 26 percent of the children who received Intensive Family Preservation Services.⁵

- A North Carolina study comparing 1,254 families receiving Intensive Family Preservation Services to more than 100,000 families who didn't found that "IFPS consistently resulted in fewer placements..."⁶

- And still another study, in Minnesota, found that, in dealing with troubled adolescents, fully 90 percent of the control group children were placed, compared to only 56 percent of those who received Intensive Family Preservation Services.⁷

Some agencies are now using IFPS to help make sure children are safe when they are returned home after foster care. Here again, researchers are beginning to see impressive results. In a Utah study, 77.2 percent of children whose families received IFPS help after reunification were still safely with their birth parents after one year, compared with 49.1 percent in a control group.⁸

Critics ignore all of this evidence, preferring to cite a study done for the federal government which purports to find that IFPS is no better than conventional services. But though critics of family preservation claim that this study evaluated programs that followed the Homebuilders model, that's not true.

In a rigorous critique of the study, Prof. Ray Kirk of the University of North Carolina School of Social Work notes that the so-called IFPS programs in this study actually diluted the Homebuilders model, providing service that was less intensive and less timely. At the same time, the "conventional" services sometimes were better than average. In at least one case, they may well have been just as intensive as the IFPS program -- so it's hardly surprising that the researchers would find little difference between the two.

Furthermore, efforts to truly assign families at random to experimental and control groups sometimes were thwarted by workers in the field who felt this was unethical. Workers resisted assigning what they considered to be "high risk" families to control groups that would not receive help from IFPS programs. In addition, the programs studied failed to target children who actually were at imminent risk of placement.

Given all these problems, writes Prof. Kirk, "a finding of 'no difference between treatment and experimental groups' ... is simply a non-finding from a failed study."⁹

Prof. Kirk's findings mirror those of an evaluation of earlier studies purporting to show that IFPS was ineffective. The evaluation found that these studies "did not adhere to rigorous methodological criteria."¹⁰ In contrast, according to Prof. Kirk, **"there is a growing body of evidence that IFPS works, in that it is more effective than traditional services in preventing out-of-home placements of children in high-risk families."**¹¹

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Does Family Preservation Work (continued)

Prof. Kirk's assessment was confirmed by a detailed review of IFPS studies conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy. According to this review:

"IFPS programs that adhere closely to the Homebuilders model significantly reduce out-of-home placements and subsequent abuse and neglect. We estimate that such programs produce \$2.54 of benefits for each dollar of cost. Non-Homebuilders programs produce no significant effect on either outcome."¹²

Some critics argue that evaluations of family preservation programs are inherently flawed because they allegedly focus on placement prevention instead of child safety. But a placement can only be prevented if a child is believed to be safe. Placement prevention *is* a measure of safety.

Of course, the key words here are "believed to be." Children who have been through intensive family preservation programs

are generally among the most closely monitored. But there are cases in which children are reabused and nobody finds out. And there are cases -- like Joseph Wallace -- in which the warnings of family preservation workers are ignored. No one can be absolutely certain that the child left at home is safe -- but no one can be absolutely certain that the child placed in foster care is safe either -- and family preservation has the better track record.

And, as discussed in Issue Paper 1, with safe, proven strategies to keep families together now widely used in Alabama, Pittsburgh, Florida and elsewhere, the result is fewer foster care placements *and* safer children.

Indeed, the whole idea that family preservation -- and only family preservation -- should be required to prove itself over and over again reflects a double standard. After more than a century of experience, isn't it time that the advocates of foster care were held to account for the failure of *their* program?

Updated January 3, 2011

1. Carol Berquist, et. al., *Evaluation of Michigan's Families First Program* (Lansing Mich: University Associates, March, 1993).

2. Betty J. Blythe, Ph.D., Srinika Jayaratne, Ph.D, Michigan *Families First Effectiveness Study: A Summary of Findings*, Sept. 28, 1999, p.18.

3. State of Michigan, Office of the Auditor General, *Performance Audit of the Families First of Michigan Program*, July, 1998, pp. 2-4.

4. Mark W. Fraser, et. al., *Families in Crisis: The Impact of Intensive Family Preservation Services* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1991), p.168.

5. S. Wood, S., K. Barton, C. Schroeder, "In-Home Treatment of Abusive Families: Cost and Placement at One Year." *Psychotherapy* Vol. 25 (1988) pp. 409-14, cited in Howard Bath and David Haapala, "Family Preservation Services: What Does the Outcome Research Really Tell Us," *Social Services Review*, September, 1994, Table A1, p.400.

6. R.S. Kirk, *Tailoring Intensive Family Preservation Services for Family Reunification Cases: Research, Evaluation and Assessment*, (www.nfpn.org/resource/articles/tailoring.html).

7. I.M. Schwartz, et. al., "Family Preservation Services as an Alternative to Out-of-Home Placement of Adolescents," in K. Wells and D.E. Biegel, eds., *Family Preservation Services: Research and Evaluation* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991) pp.33-46, cited in Bath and Haapala, note 3, supra.

8. R.E. Lewis, et. al., "Examining family reunification services: A process analysis of a successful experiment," *Research on Social Work Practice*, 5, (3), 259-282, cited in Kirk, note 6, supra.

9. R.S. Kirk, *A Critique of the "Evaluation of Family Preservation and Reunification Programs: Interim Report"*, May, 2001.

10. A. Heneghan, et. al., Evaluating Intensive Family Preservation Services: A methodological review. *Pediatrics*, 97(4), 535-542, cited in Ray Kirk, Ray Kirk, *Final Report: A Retrospective Evaluation of North Carolina's Intensive Family Preservation Services Program*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Jordan Institute for Families, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina) August, 2000. The quote about studies not adhering to "rigorous methodological criteria" is from Kirk.

11. Kirk, note 6, supra.

12. Washington State Institute for Public Policy, *Intensive Family Preservation Programs: Program Fidelity Influences Effectiveness*. February, 2006, available online at <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/06-02-3901.pdf>