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## Introduction

**T**he family is the “most powerful, the most humane, and, by far, the most economical system for building competence and character” in children and adults, according to testimony before a subcommittee of the U.S. Congress (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 4). Increasingly policymakers, professionals, and family members recognize that one of the best ways to help individuals, children and adults alike, is to focus on those people who so strongly influence their lives, their families. An individual’s family is often part of the problem, is always affected by the problem, and usually needs to be involved in the solution.

Yet policymaking in this country and in Wisconsin often focuses on individuals without assessing their impact on the well-being of families. For example, policies and programs usually focus on the specific needs of children, youth, the elderly, women, the disabled, and the poor, with little or no attention to the families in which these individuals live. This “family deficit” in policymaking may have consequences for the nation as profound and long-lasting as those of the more widely-heralded federal deficit (Blankenhorn, 1990).

The current debate of policy issues might benefit by shifting away from the predominant focus on individuals and moving toward an emphasis on how policies help or hurt, strengthen or weaken families. Thus, this briefing report does not promote a particular legislative agenda for the state of Wisconsin, but rather proposes a perspective that could be used to assess the impact of any policy or program on family well-being.

### Overview of the Report

This report is divided into four sections. In the first section, we ask, “Why do we need a family perspective in policymaking?” To answer this question, we review why families are important and why family issues are being met with increasing interest and enthusiasm. We give specific examples of how policies and programs focus on individuals rather than families and summarize the evidence that a family orientation works. We then identify specific criteria for assessing the impact of policies and programs on family well-being; these criteria have been used successfully in 30 Family Impact Seminars in the U.S. Capitol over the past four years.

Second, we address a question posed to us by several state legislators, “What is a family?” and what implications do different definitions have for policies and programs. A prominent law professor also answers this question from a legal perspective, detailing how families have been defined in Wisconsin law over time.

Third, the report gives a snapshot view of the state of families in Wisconsin today, overviewing the changes that have occurred in families and households. Finally, the report discusses the value of a family perspective by showing how families are deeply involved in health promotion and treatment, and by illustrating how a family orientation might affect the debate of health care policy. While there are important family issues involved in policies designed for adults and the elderly, this report will focus primarily on issues affecting families with dependent children.

### **Why Are Families Important?**

While it has been said that the only two inevitable things in life are death and taxes, an obvious third one is the family (Doherty, 1992a). Everyone is born into a family and 98 percent of children in this country grow up in families and are likely to do so in the future (Carnegie Council on Children cited in Seeley, 1985). The family produces society's children, and the family, more than any other social institution, is responsible for making and keeping human beings human (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In the family, core values are taught and learned, and parents pass on to children the invaluable traits of character, competence and citizenship.

Families carry out a variety of functions critically important to society. They share resources, economically support their members, and care for the elderly, the sick, and the disabled in ways that no other institution can do or do as well. Furthermore, families are fundamental to a free economy and a democratic society, guarding against a concentration of power, resources, and loyalties.

Increasingly, this umbilical cord connecting the well-being of the family to the well-being of society is being recognized. According to Doherty (1992a), the family can be no healthier than society, and society can be no healthier than the family. In this next section, we turn to why families are increasingly being recognized as an essential national resource (Moen and Schorr, 1987).

### **Why the Recent Focus on Families?**

In recent surveys, the family emerges as the central element in the lives of most Americans. Four out of five Americans report that the family is their first or second source of greatest joy. Interestingly, 90 percent of married people find their greatest joy in the family, but so do over half of single Americans and almost three-fourths of those who are currently divorced (Mellman, Lazarus, and Rivlin, 1990).

Since the family is viewed as so central to American lives, family issues have recently met with widespread interest and enthusiasm, not only in this country but in European countries as well. Recent changes in the family and society have spurred interest in family issues. Since recent changes in Wisconsin families are discussed in a later section of this report, they will be only briefly summarized here.

### **Increasing Social Problems**

Social problems such as child abuse, delinquency, school failure, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency have generated interest in families; in recent surveys, Americans cite the family as one of the root causes of our nation's most pressing social problems (Mellman et al., 1990).

### **Changing Family Structures**

Families are experiencing unprecedented changes in structure and form including decreases in marriage rates and increases in the rates of separation and divorce, the number of cohabitating couples, the number of children born out of wedlock, the number of single-parent families, and the labor force participation rates of women (Kamerman and Kahn, 1978).

These changes in family structure have promoted debate about whether these changes will affect the ability of the family to carry out its core functions. Some view these changes positively, citing the resiliency of the family and its ability to adapt to changes; others, however, view these changes as a sign of family decline and express concern about the negative consequences of that decline, especially for children. Nevertheless, these changing family forms have sparked discussion about changing needs and the role government should play in providing programs and services.

### **Aging of the Population**

Our country, like others, is experiencing a gradual decline in the birth rate. Whether or not one views this as a concern, a related issue is the corresponding increase in the ratio of elderly in the population. Thus, the issue becomes how a reduced labor force will be able to support the pensions and social security cost of a large aged population (Kamerman and Kahn, 1978). Since families produce society's children, this demographic trend is heavily a family issue.

### **Growing National Consensus Regarding the Need to Support Families**

What began as a grass roots movement (Weiss and Halpern, 1990) is now drawing attention from several state and national commissions. Perhaps one of the strongest mandates for a family focus in policymaking emerged from the White

House Conference on Families. The call for a systematic analysis of how laws and regulations affect families was one of the top six recommendations of the conference, gaining support from almost 90 percent of the 2000 delegates (Ooms and Preister, 1988).

More recently, the National Commission on Children (1991) released its agenda for children and families. The Commission is a bipartisan body appointed by the President, the President pro tem of the U.S. Senate, and the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Members include politicians such as Bill Clinton, academics such as T. Berry Brazelton, advocates such as Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the AFL-CIO, teachers, doctors, agency heads and volunteers. According to this report:

*“...The condition of children’s lives and their future prospects largely reflect the well-being of their families. When families are strong, stable, and loving, children have a sound basis for becoming caring and competent adults...Many of the nation’s gravest social problems are rooted in damaged families” (p. 249).*

The private sector echoes this same sentiment in a report from The Committee for Economic Development which consisted of 200 educators and CEOs of the country’s leading corporations including Exxon, Proctor & Gamble, AT&T, Goodyear, Ford Motor Company, Bank America, and General Foods. In their report on improving the prospects for disadvantaged children (1987), they recognize that parents are the best caregivers for their children:

*“Parents want the best for their children, even when they themselves lack adequate parenting skills...By providing appropriate education in caregiving for parents, society is certain to circumvent some of the problems that children from deprived homes generally bring with them to school” (p.24).*

The Council recommends supporting families through home-visiting, parent-child centers, and family resource programs.

Several government commissions have recommended family-oriented policies. In Wisconsin, the Governor’s Task Force on Family and Children’s Issues issued a report in 1990 (Governor’s Task Force, 1990) recommending that Wisconsin needs “*a clearly defined blueprint for the future to direct the development of child and family services across the state*”. The report included such recommendations as early childhood family resource centers, early and comprehensive prenatal care to pregnant mothers, and educational programs for parents of adolescents to develop communication and information skills.

In a 1988 report from Governor Cowper's Commission on Children and Youth, the first recommendation for investing in the future of Alaska's children is investing in programs to promote parenting skills and family strengths. A task force appointed by Governor Blanchard in 1988 to review services to children in Michigan recommended family support programs. A Minneapolis report on school readiness included substantial family support components (Weiss and Halpern, 1990).

### **American Policy Focuses on Individuals, Not Families**

Despite this widely recognized importance of the family, the United States has no explicit national policy for families (Eshleman, 1991; Moen and Schorr, 1987). The United States is one of the only countries in the world without a mention of family in the constitution. Not until 1981 was the word "family" used in the title for a subcommittee of the U.S. Congress (Peery cited in Ooms, 1984). The United States, with all its agencies overseeing such areas as health, commerce, labor, energy, transportation, defense, and agriculture, has no agency devoting its attention entirely to families (Eshleman, 1991).

Based on this, policies and programs in the United States too often focus on individuals the unwed mother, the mentally retarded, the elderly, the poor and fail to recognize that most individuals come in families. Several examples are cited below:

- ❖ Despite recent legislative reforms, too often children are removed from their homes rather than taking steps to strengthen troubled families so children can stay in their own homes; in Wisconsin, only 12 of 72 counties are presently providing family preservation services to help keep families intact.
- ❖ Programs like Wisconsin's Healthy Start attempt to provide health coverage for pregnant mothers and their families who do not meet eligibility guidelines for other programs. By the year 2002, the goal is to cover all children up to age 18; in the meantime, even though many sicknesses are contagious, some children in the family may be covered but not others.
- ❖ Welfare and tax policies often have built-in financial disincentives to marriage (for example, AFDC restrictions to single parent families and marriage penalties in the tax code).
- ❖ Historically, programs and policies have been directed at teen mothers with little or no attention to teen fathers; attention to teen fathers is a relatively new phenomenon and the programs are few in number and limited in resources.

- ❖ Policies often do not encourage family members to be involved in the care of hospitalized ill children, substance-abusing children or frail elderly; research suggests, however, that family involvement speeds and sustains recovery (Ooms and Preister, 1988).
- ❖ Teenage pregnancy has obvious repercussions beyond the teenager. The parents of a pregnant daughter can do much to lessen the detrimental effects of pregnancy. As a result, the 1981 legislation for Adolescent Family Life Demonstration Grants Program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services was clearly ground-breaking legislation; programs were required to involve family members in their services. However, no guidelines were given about how to involve families nor was technical assistance provided to program evaluators. Not surprisingly, the evaluators' reports from these 60 programs provided no information about whether they succeeded in involving family members in their services (Ooms and Preister, 1988). Passing family-sensitive legislation is necessary, but not sufficient; steps must also be taken to help programmers implement and evaluate the intent of the legislation.
- ❖ Most program evaluations measure outcomes for individuals who are the targets of most social programs; program effects on family life are rarely studied.

### **Evidence That a Family Orientation Works**

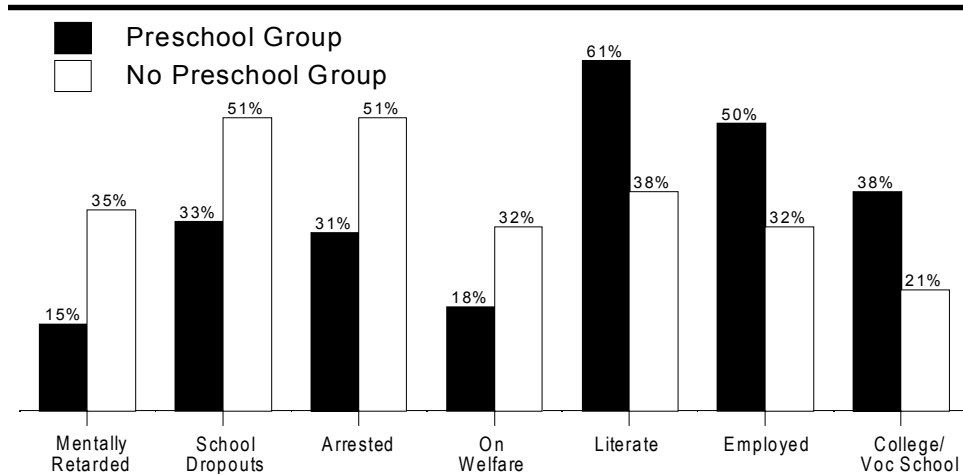
The lack of a family focus in policymaking is not intended to suggest that the government is totally uninvolved in or neutral to families. A wide range of public policies deal with such family issues as social security, health and medical care, child welfare, education, and day care. Yet government's image of its client is most often the individual, with families only an afterthought (Moen and Schorr, 1987).

Recent evidence suggests that our policies and programs may be more successful if we put families first rather than ignoring or superseding them. This same observation was made in scientific journals over a half-century ago. Child therapists wrote of their frustration when they would cure a child's emotional problems and then send the child home to the family and neighborhood that had contributed to the problem in the first place. Of course, the child's problem would re-appear.

To illustrate this point, we begin with the research on preschool and home visiting programs followed by specific evidence of the protective role played by the family in delinquency, academic achievement, and child abuse.

- ❖ Head Start and other preschool programs, originally intended to prevent school failure among at-risk populations, have prevented more than poor report cards. Early childhood intervention programs have resulted in significant, long-lasting and positive results on childrens’ intellectual and social skills, socioeconomic standing, and social responsibility (Weikart and Schweinhart, 1991). Perhaps the most promising results have emerged from the Perry Preschool Program. This program includes a daily, high-quality preschool program for low-income 3 and 4 year-olds, frequent home visiting to mothers, and monthly small group meetings. At age 19, this preschool program increased the percentage of participants who were literate, employed and attending post-secondary education. At the same time, program participants were less apt to be mentally retarded, school dropouts, welfare recipients, or in trouble with the law (See Figure A).

**Figure A**  
**High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Age-19 Findings**



**Note:** All group differences are statistically significant,  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

Why are preschool programs successful? While these programs do vary in purpose and methods, the evidence suggests that the long-term success of preschool programs is due, not only to the high quality of the preschool component, but also because the program enables parents to function better (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Through a combination of parent education, home visits, creating formal and informal support networks, and involving parents in the classroom and on policy-setting boards, these programs benefit parents and through parents, their children (Valentine and Zigler, 1983).

- ❖ Turning to delinquency, most programs to prevent juvenile delinquency focus on individuals and few have shown lasting success (Zigler, Taussig, and Black, 1992). Longitudinal evidence from the Perry Preschool Project, the Syracuse University Family Development Project, and the Yale Child Welfare Research Program give some indication that these early childhood intervention programs may reduce juvenile delinquency. These studies provide evidence that primary prevention is less

- expensive saving as much as \$2,400 per child in court and penal costs, and more effective than intervening later once the behavior has begun to crystallize and become more immune to change. Simply stated, the point is to help parents succeed early on so they can help their children succeed throughout life (Zigler et al., 1992).
- ❖ In the field of academic achievement, studies suggest that parents who are more involved in such school activities as monitoring school progress, helping with homework when asked, and attending parent/teacher conferences, are more likely to have children who are performing well in school (Bogenschneider, 1988; Stevenson and Baker, 1987). Even though parents tend to be more involved when their children are younger, studies suggest beneficial effects on students as old as high school age (Bogenschneider, 1988).
  - ❖ For youngsters who are underachievers, studies suggest that interventions such as support groups for parents have been even more successful than working with the child. Parents welcome the opportunity to learn from each other and benefit from knowing others who are experiencing the same problems (McCall, 1986).
  - ❖ Turning now to the conditions that contribute to family violence, one of the best predictors of a child-abusing family is social isolation (Werner and Smith, 1982). McCubbin (1985) conducted research on a United States Army unit stationed in West Germany where reports of child and spouse abuse exceeded the national averages. As a result of his research, McCubbin recommended that the military transfer Army families in entire communities rather than individually. In this way, the families were able to rely on the same neighbors and friends, an already established social network; this eased the transition and stabilized families.

While these trends are encouraging, it would be premature to conclude that family involvement will increase the effectiveness of any program or policy (Staton, Ooms, and Owen, 1991). Even the substantial benefits of early intervention must be treated with caution. In some families, strengths must be “built up” before they can be “built on” (Weiss and Halpern, 1990).

Some researchers suggest that working through the family to enhance the caregiving skills of the parent, while important, is not enough. Parents can change but it takes a long time (Ramey, Bryant, and Suarez, 1987). For deprived, poorly educated parents, it is somewhat unrealistic to expect family enrichment, parental support, or parent education to work alone; a better solution may be comprehensive approaches of working with the family together with educating the child. And for many poor families, their basic needs for income, housing, or health care are a prerequisite to helping them become effective parents.



## A Checklist for Assessing the Impact of Policies on Families

At a minimum, findings like those cited above do suggest that the essential first step in developing family-friendly policies is to ask the right questions: “What can government and community institutions do to enhance the family’s capacity to help itself and others?” (Weiss, 1988, p. 33). “What effect does (or will) this program (or proposed policy) have for families? Will it help or hurt, strengthen or weaken family life?” (Moen and Schorr, 1987; Ooms and Preister, 1988). While these questions sound disarmingly simple, they oftentimes can be difficult to answer.

To aid policymakers, the Family Criteria (Ad Hoc) Task Force<sup>1</sup> has developed a tool to help assess the intended and unintended consequences of public policy and social programs on family stability, family relationships, and family responsibilities. The tool includes a set of six basic family principles that serve as the criteria for making policies and programs more sensitive to and supportive of families; each principle is accompanied by a series of family impact questions.

The criteria and questions listed below are not rank ordered (Ooms and Preister, 1988). Sometimes these criteria will conflict with each other and trade-offs will be required. Also, they need to be considered along with other types of criteria, such as cost effectiveness. Some questions are basically value-neutral, while others incorporate specific values. Not everyone may agree with the values and the questions may need to be rephrased accordingly. We do believe, however, that this tool reflects a broad, non-partisan consensus, and will be useful to people across the political spectrum.

The following family criteria and family impact questions were developed by the Consortium of Family Organizations based upon the work of Ooms and Preister (1988). (See pages 16 and 17 of this report.)

These family impact questions helped shape the design of 30 seminars held by Family Impact Seminars for federal policymakers on issues as varied as family poverty, youth-at-risk, child care, poverty, the unwed father, family resource programs, and the parent’s role in teenage health problems. Furthermore, this tool can be used to:

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<sup>1</sup> The *COFO Family Policy Report* is a publication of the Consortium of Family Organizations (COFO), consisting of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), the Family Resource Coalition (FRC), Family Service America (FSA), and the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR). Formed in 1977, the nonpartisan Consortium is committed to the promotion of a family perspective in public policy and human services. Collectively, COFO comprises nearly 50,000 professionals working with families in every state of the union, faculty members in every major university in the nation, nearly 300 family agencies and more than 2,000 family resource programs providing services to millions of families annually, and more than 10,000 volunteer board members.

- ❖ Help prepare questions for legislative hearings
- ❖ Review a policy proposal, draft regulation, or draft bill
- ❖ Study the implementation and assess the outcomes of an existing program

These criteria are meant to supplement, not replace, evaluation research on the effectiveness of programs. Interestingly, such research may show the intended goals of a policy or program are being met, while the family impact analysis may show the goals are counterproductive by having negative consequences for families in unintended ways (Eshleman, 1991).

In summary, one measure of the worth of society, a measure that has stood the test of history, is the concern of one generation for the next (Bronfenbrenner and Weiss, 1983). A nation's family policy is one measure of that concern. All too often policy in this country is based primarily on the individual with family considerations only an afterthought. Family impact analyses is one way to build policies and programs that put families first. To do that requires consideration of the definition of family, a topic we turn to in the next section.

# TOOL #4

## COFO'S FAMILY IMPACT QUESTIONS

Increasingly, policymakers and their staff at all levels of government ask: **What effects does (or will) this program (or proposed policy) have on families? Will it help or hurt, strengthen or weaken family life?** These questions sound disarmingly simple. In fact, they are very complex. A policy may have different effects on different types of families and on various dimensions of family life. Research may determine whether the intended goals of a policy or program are being met. But evaluative criteria are needed as yardsticks to assess whether the goals are having negative consequences for families in unintended ways.

COFO has developed a tool to serve as a basic framework for such investigations: a set of six guiding principles to serve as the criteria and a checklist of basic family impact questions. COFO believes that these principles, or family criteria, represent a general consensus on goals for family policy.

### CHECKLIST: A TOOL FOR ANALYSIS

✓ Check those principles and questions that apply to the particular program or policy.

- 1. **FAMILY SUPPORT AND RESPONSIBILITIES: Policies and programs should aim to support and supplement family functioning and provide substitute services only as a last resort.**
  - How does the proposal (or existing program) support and supplement parents' and other family members' ability to carry out their responsibilities?
  - Does it provide incentives for other persons to take over family functioning when doing so may not be necessary?
  - What effects does it have on marital commitment or parental obligations?
  - What effects does it have on adult children's ties to their elderly parents?
  - To what extent does the policy or program enforce absent parents' obligations to provide financial support for their children?
  - Does the policy or program build on informal social support networks (such as community/neighborhood organizations, churches) that are so essential to families' daily lives?
  
- 2. **FAMILY MEMBERSHIP AND STABILITY: Whenever possible, policies and programs should encourage and reinforce marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, especially when children are involved. Intervention in family membership and living arrangements is usually justified only to protect family members from serious harm or at the request of the family itself.**
  - What incentives or disincentives does the policy or program provide to marry, separate, or divorce?
  - What incentives or disincentives are provided to give birth to, foster, or adopt children?
  - What criteria are used to justify removal of a child or adult from the family?
  - What resources are allocated to help keep the family together when this is the appropriate goal?
  - What services are provided to help family members living apart remain connected and, if appropriate, come together again?
  - How does the policy or program recognize that major changes in family relations such as divorce or adoption are processes that extend over time and may require continuing support and attention?

- 3. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND INTERDEPENDENCE: Policies and programs must recognize the interdependence of family relationships, the strength and persistence of family ties and obligations, and the wealth of resources that families can mobilize to help their members.**
  - To what extent does the policy or program design recognize the influence of the family context upon the individual's need or problem?
  - To what extent does it involve immediate and extended family members in working toward a solution?
  - To what extent does it acknowledge the power and persistence of family ties, especially when they are problematic or destructive?
  - How does it assess and balance the competing needs, rights, and interests of various members of a family?
  
- 4. FAMILY PARTNERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT: Policies and programs must encourage individuals and their close family members to collaborate as partners with program professionals in delivery of services to an individual. In addition, parent and family representatives are an essential resource in policy development, program planning, and evaluation.**
  - In what specific ways does the proposed or existing program provide full information and a range of choices to individuals and their close family members?
  - In what ways is the policy/program sensitive to the complex realities of families' lives and their need to manage and coordinate the multiple services they often require?
  - In what ways do program professionals work in collaboration with the families of their clients, patients, or students?
  - In what ways does the program or policy involve parents and family representatives in policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation?
  
- 5. FAMILY DIVERSITY: Families come in many forms and configurations, and policies and programs must take into account their different effects on different types of families. Policies and programs must acknowledge and value the diversity of family life and not discriminate against or penalize families solely for reasons of structure, roles, cultural values, or life stage.**
  - How does the proposal or program affect various types of families?
  - If the proposed or existing program targets only certain families, for example, only employed parents or single parents, what is the justification? Does it discriminate against or penalize other types of families for insufficient reason?
  - How does it identify and respect the different values, attitudes, and behavior of families from various racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds that are relevant to program effectiveness?
  
- 6. TARGETING VULNERABLE FAMILIES: Families in greatest economic and social need, as well as those determined to be most vulnerable to breakdown, should have first priority in government policies and programs.**
  - Does the proposed or existing program identify and target publicly supported services for families in the most extreme economic or social need?
  - Does it give priority to families who are most vulnerable to breakdown?
  - Are efforts and resources targeted on preventing family problems before they become serious crisis or chronic situations?

\* Adapted from *A Strategy for Strengthening Families: Using Family Criteria in Policymaking and Program Evaluation*. T. Ooms & S. Preister, Eds. A consensus report of the Family Criteria Task Force. Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar, 1988.