

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 992

CG 015 435.

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TITLE

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Serving Troubled Children: Program and Policy  
Planning for the Future.

PUB DATE  
NOTE

Sep 80  
8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the  
American Psychological Association (88th, Montreal,  
Quebec, Canada, September 1-5, 1980).

EDRS PRICE  
DESCRIPTORS

MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
Accountability; \*Children; \*Delivery Systems;  
\*Ecological Factors; \*Emotional Disturbances;  
Environment; Financial Policy; Human Services; Mental  
Health; \*Policy Formation; \*Program Development;  
Psychological Needs; State of the Art Reviews

ABSTRACT

Current economic and political problems and the unclear nature of human services delivery systems create problems for the application of an ecological perspective in planning services for children with emotional disturbances. During conservative periods, the ecological approach, which emphasizes the role of environment, is generally replaced by psychological ideologies. The current procedure of organizing service agencies according to categorical services needed by target populations is a serious impediment to an integrated, environmentally oriented approach. Accountability should be person-oriented rather than designed for administrative convenience. Current resources must be used more effectively; ecological programs must rely on creativity and ingenuity. (JAC)

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SERVING TROUBLED CHILDREN: PROGRAM AND  
POLICY PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Presented at

The Symposium on Ecological Interventions  
With Troubled Children: Perspectives For The Future

September 1980  
American Psychological Association,  
Montreal, Canada

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Under the best of circumstances it is difficult to assess the utility of an ecological perspective for policy and program planning. While the ecological perspective provides an attractive and rational conceptual base, the challenge of transforming an ecologically based plan into a viable operational program is enough to dissuade most mortals. Given the economic and political problems of today and the unclear nature of our human services delivery system, the task of applying an ecological perspective to planning services for children becomes particularly troublesome.

In a real sense, the ecological perspective is caught in the crosswinds of conflicting philosophies and trends. On the one hand, the accelerating inflationary trend and the reactive efforts to control the spiraling costs resulting from these economic difficulties have not only increased the cost of mental health services, but also have stimulated a great concern for cost containment, service reduction and a variety of cost saving measures. While an ecological approach may not ultimately be more expensive, a shift from our current categorical approach to funding service delivery to an integrated delivery system would involve additional interim expenditures and a realignment of current funding patterns. In addition to the economic impediments, the political climate has not provided nurturance for an ecological approach. The increasingly negative public attitude toward government bureaucracy and the growing burden experienced by the taxpayers, most visibly represented by the Proposition 13 syndrome, has provided a readymade campaign issue for politicians interested in reducing expenditures for public human service programs. As Levine and Levine (1970) have observed, ideologies about the cause and treatment of psychological dysfunctioning do not exist independently of the political and

social climate of the times. The ecological approach, which emphasizes the role of environment, may be popular in times of political and social reform, but is generally replaced by psychological ideologies stressing intrapsychic functioning during conservative periods.

Finally, there is a growing tendency to demand accountability from service providers. While accountability in itself is not antithetical to an ecological approach, the tendency to utilize simplistic measurable objectives and outcomes, such as units of service and eligible target populations served, make it difficult to develop a genuine ecological approach.

On the other hand, there are several current factors and trends that are supportive of the ecological approach. For example, the recent emphasis on community support systems, expressed in a report of the President's Commission on Mental Health (1978) and the national and state level initiatives to develop comprehensive support systems for the chronically mentally disabled, represent concrete examples of acknowledging that an effective service system for the mentally disabled must take into account all aspects of the disabled individual's life. Unfortunately, in the field of mental health, these approaches have not been extended as quickly to children. While the education and social service fields have played a more significant role, in relation to troubled children, there is still a large gap between the ideal system of an environmentally oriented, integrated approach to serving children and the reality of current practice.

The tendency, in all human services, to view people holistically is an encouraging sign for those committed to the ecological approach. To the extent that we integrate our responses to the personal, biological, social, educational and spiritual needs of the child we are developing human services programs which go well beyond the traditional mental health approaches that focus primarily on psychological factors. In an era where specialization and fragmentation have prevailed, the concept of an integrated human service system represents a potentially significant counterbalance.

The final significant influence on the use of psychological approach is the resurgence of the controversial theme of preventive mental health services. The renewed emphasis on prevention, which may be characterized by a focus on specific target populations (e.g. high risk individuals), the accumulation of empirical evidence supporting selective approaches to prevention and the shift in perspective from dealing with predisposing causes a mental disability to the more practical approach of directing attention to precipitating factors and the types of supportive and competent building efforts that can be mobilized for vulnerable individuals (Bloom, 1979), represent a more conservative, but certainly legitimate use of the ecological perspective. One of the implications of the preventive approach is a tacit acknowledgement of the impact of the immediate environment and support system on the behavior of children at risk, as well as those who are currently experiencing difficulty.

Having presented an overview of the forces that support and impede the utilization of an ecological perspective in policy and program planning, let us examine some of the specific issues that must be resolved if we wish to effectively promote an ecological approach.

1. The current structure of organizing service agencies according to categorical services for target populations at the local, state and federal levels provides a serious impediment to an integrated, environmentally oriented approach. While it is administratively convenient to group according to homogeneous categories, and there are certainly problems with umbrella human service approaches, it should be acknowledged that this fragmentation must be counterbalanced if we are to develop and implement a holistic approach. In this regard, it will be interesting to observe the course of the newly seceded Federal Department of Education.
2. While the emphasis on accountability which has spawned an obsession with quantifiable objectives and specific units of service represents progress in the administrative area, we need to acknowledge that this is an interim step, which will have more negative than positive impact on the delivery of service unless it is integrated into a more balanced and comprehensive framework of services responding to individuals, rather than individuals adapting to administrative pigeonholes. We need more person-oriented accountability, rather than accountability designed primarily for administrative convenience.
3. It will be necessary to rethink our conventional attitude of solving human problems by throwing more money at them. An analysis of the economic and political situation leads to the inevitable

conclusion that new resources will not be available in the foreseeable future. We must concentrate on redeploying current resources in a more effective efficient manner. For example, how can we increase the utilization of natural support systems that are capable of providing many of the support functions currently being offered by the professional delivery system.

4. Acknowledging that some forms of accountability are both necessary and desirable, we are faced with the challenge of developing measurable program criteria and outcome indicators that enable us to answer critical policy and program questions without undermining the basic interactive nature of an ecological approach. For example, what are the tangible benefits of working with significant systems in a child's life, such as family and school as opposed to services focused exclusively on the child's behavior? How do we measure comparative impact of these two approaches? What are the cost benefits of the ecological approach?—There are other important policy program planning considerations that need to be addressed, but the length of this paper does not allow for a full treatment of these issues. Regardless of the particular issue, the challenge confronting the ecologically oriented planner remains the same. We are faced with a situation of rising expectations and diminishing resources. Our ability to institute sound ecologically based programs will be dependent upon our creativity and ingenuity in making better use of existing resources.

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