PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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Social work is at an important stage in its development. All professions must be responsive to changing social and economic conditions if they are to meet the needs of those they serve. This series focuses on sound practice and the specific contribution which social workers can make to the well-being of our society.

The British Association of Social Workers has always been conscious of its role in setting guidelines for practice and in seeking to raise professional standards. The conception of the Practical Social Work series arose from a survey of BASW members to discover where they, the practitioners in social work, felt there was the most need for new literature. The response was overwhelming and enthusiastic, and the result is a carefully planned, coherent series of books. The emphasis is firmly on practice set in a theoretical framework. The books will inform, stimulate and promote discussion, thus adding to the further development of skills and high professional standards. All the authors are practitioners and teachers of social work representing a wide variety of experience.

JO CAMPLING

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Focus on Families

Family Centres in Action

Christine Stones

Foreword by Roger Singleton

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First published 1994 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-60233-1 ISBN 978-1-349-23229-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-23229-1

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Florencetype Ltd, Kewstoke, Avon

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Foreword

The past fifteen to twenty years have seen a striking growth in the development of family centres. The approaches pioneered by the centres to meet the needs of children and their carers have their roots in a rich diversity of services and social work methods, including playgroups, nurseries and community work, as well as direct work with families. Their location in the community and the recognition of the interdependency of the needs of adults and children have contributed to the success of family centres and this is particularly reflected in the enthusiasm and support for them shown by users and legislators. The Children Act 1989 has further stimulated this enthusiasm as local authorities, health authorities and the voluntary sector seek to improve ways of meeting the needs of children in all communities.

However, the term 'family centre' can be as misunderstood as the use of the word 'family'. The common perception of families as two parents and two children no longer describes the reality of many families. In reflecting this diversity, family centres offer a range of approaches to meet a variety of purposes in order to tailor their services to the needs of those who use them.

This book is an excursion into the dimensions and critical issues that underlie the generic term 'family centre'. I hope that it will prove useful for students, practitioners, managers and service providers by highlighting common features of family centres and providing some useful frameworks and analyses on which to build.

It is written by staff at Barnardo's Fulford Family Centre in Hartcliffe, Bristol, whose Project Leader, Christine Stones, is

the primary author. The centre, which is run by Barnardo's and jointly funded with Avon Social Services Department, opened in 1984. It offers an integrated approach to work with families with children under 5 – providing counselling and therapeutic services, groupwork activities and welfare rights advice, as well as undertaking community development work. From its opening, a central feature has been its emphasis on partnership with parents, and its parents' committees and Parents' Council are established features of the Centre's operation.

At the time of writing all of the original staff group continue to work at the Centre, joined by new team-members. This is a tribute to their capacity to develop and reflect on practice in a way that re-energises and sustains them. Under Christine Stones's leadership the team has developed a range of articles, papers, external research and other studies. They enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship with Professor Phyllida Parsloe and the University of Bristol.

It is on this base of extensive and in-depth experience, coupled with a theoretical and research perspective and wide knowledge of other centres, that the quality and authority of the book rests. It draws together many of the ideas and debates on family centres and develops understanding of the processes and issues at the heart of family centre work. Christine Stones identifies the different dimensions of centres in her typology outlined in Chapter 3. The attention to issues of partnership with parents, gender and race is a recurrent theme of the book. Practical examples give depth and illumination to the discussion of more abstract issues. It is a readable, informative and thought-provoking book.

Barnardo's takes no special credit for the development of the family centre approach. A wide variety of individuals and organisations, both voluntary and statutory, have contributed to the innovative work which is characteristic of centres nationwide. Similarly, Fulford Family Centre does not claim to have all the answers. It does, however, face all the dilemmas which readers with knowledge and experience of family centre work will recognise. I join the contributors to this book in hoping that everyone involved with

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family centres will find it of value in the continuing development of effective and non-discriminating services which meet the needs of children, families and the wider community.

ROGER SINGLETON
Senior Director
Barnardo's

Acknowledgements

This book is attributed to a single author but several people were responsible. The stimulus for publishing arose from the experiences of a group of staff initiating and developing one family centre. Writing the book has been a team effort and would have been impossible without the team's commitment and enthusiasm.

Individual written contributions were as follows:

Frances Fox	counselling
Owen Gill	evaluation
Phil Holford	welfare rights and organisational partnership with parents
Terry Jones	groupwork
Maggie Proom	community work
Jackie Sims	community work and practical and material resources
Dave Smith	management issues I
Penny Snow	volunteers

In addition, Felicity Marks and Jackie Sims were central in producing the ideas for the Child Perspective chapter.

We are grateful to Jane Crane for obtaining feedback from Fulford parents and greatly appreciated the willingness of so many parents to share their experiences of Fulford with Jane.

Owen Gill, Daphne Norbury, Phyllida Parsloe, Drew Reith, Jill Reynolds and Dave Smith provided helpful comments on the draft manuscript. I am particularly indebted also to Daphne Norbury for her willing assistance with the detail and intelligibility of the final text. Sue Gaines's support was vital in ensuring that Fulford's administration continued

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smoothly over months of my preoccupation with writing and editing. All of the above-named also provided the encouragement necessary for the completion of this book.

As a staff team we are indebted to Barnardo's, in particular our Divisional Management Team and Nora Dixon (Coordinator for Research and Development), for making time available for us to write. The resources of the Barnardo's library staff, David Potter, Frank Emmott and Joan Pickton, were invaluable.

The interest and support of family and friends, throughout the long process of writing and editing, has been essential.

Lastly, but above all, we are grateful to all the families who have shared so freely and enabled us to learn so much as together we have discovered the role of family centres.

CHRISTINE STONES

Introduction

The inspiration for this book arose from the experience gained by a team of workers in establishing Fulford Family Centre, a Barnardo's project, in Bristol. The centre opened in 1984 and since then the staff have learned an enormous amount from each other and from the families using the centre. Fulford Family Centre, like the majority of such centres, works with young children and thus issues relevant to work with families with young children are a major focus of this book. The centre is neighbourhood-based and has developed an integrated approach to work with families. This is founded on a philosophy which views the problems and possibilities facing families with young children as arising from a number of interacting factors. Such a perspective refuses to locate issues of child development, neglect or abuse either solely within the individual family or simply within the community or social structures. Rather it recognises the multiple, interconnected factors which must be addressed when considering the health and development of children and their families.

The staff and centre have also gained much from contact with workers and participants in other centres through the Family Centre Network and other channels. Therefore, although the book arose from immersion in one particular family centre, it is informed by theory-and-practice wisdom from numerous other sources. As will be seen, family centres are so multifarious that it is impossible to provide one comprehensive text which is utterly relevant to them all. However, family centres have enough in common for it to be hoped that anyone with an interest in them will discover valuable material in this text.

Whilst diverse sources have contributed to this book, inevitably the greatest influences have been the experience of a specific staff group in a particular family centre. As a result certain important perspectives are either absent or 'borrowed' and some issues are not covered comprehensively. This is perhaps most obvious in terms of race and disability. The authors and the largest majority of the families participating in Fulford Family Centre are white and able-bodied and this will probably be very apparent. Nevertheless, anti-discriminatory practice should underpin the work of every family centre regardless of the composition of staff group or families served. So in this book, as in our work, we have attempted to grapple with the implications of oppression and discrimination and have sought to make the family centre equally accessible to and effective for all families. In some instances it has been difficult to find sources of published material which compensate for limitations of experience and provide broader perspectives.

The concerns of any family centre are so extensive and varied that a rich expanse of literature bears some relevance to its work. As a result, an introductory text to family centres has to be highly selective. Several large textbooks have been written on areas which this book mentions in a passing paragraph. Hence, for example, little or no detail is provided about fundamental principles of child protection, family therapy or practice teaching but a variety of excellent sources already exist on these and other pertinent subjects. This may at times be frustrating for readers, but the intention is to cover those aspects most important to family centres on the assumption that readers will consult other texts for more detailed theory and practice.

In attempting to produce a coherent account of family centres and their work, a certain structure and order has been imposed. Readers familiar with life in a family centre may find that this presents them with an air of unreality at times! It is difficult to capture in the written word the liveliness and flux, the heights and depths of experiences, the seeming chaos and confusion, the delights and demands which are the reality of most family centres.