



THE FAMILY IMPACT RATIONALE

AN EVIDENCE BASE FOR THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS

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The Family Impact Institute welcomes reactions to this report from readers in order to help us prepare a revised edition. Please send your comments on how useful you find it and how it can be improved to Karen Bogenschneider, Director, Family Impact Institute, Nancy Nicholas Hall, 1300 Linden Drive, Room 4109, Madison, WI 53706. You can also email kpbogens@wisc.edu.

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INTRODUCTION

Families have long been recognized as a basic building block of society by researchers, policymakers, and professionals alike (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2004). Researchers have confirmed these long-standing sentiments with recent evidence of the valuable role families play in promoting academic success, economic productivity, social competence, and so forth (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b). Policymakers from across the political spectrum endorse families as a sure-fire, vote-winning strategy (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995; Strach, 2007). Professionals who educate or deliver services to families recognize the value of family-centered approaches for effectively and efficiently achieving program goals (Brown et al., 2010; Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007; Spoth, Kavanagh, & Dishion, 2002).



Photo courtesy of Olivia Little.

Yet pro-family talk is no longer enough (Coalition of Family Organizations, 1988). It is one thing to endorse the importance of families to a strong and vital society. It is quite another to act on the growing evidence on the value of family support and to systematically place families at the center of policy and practice (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2004). Despite widespread agreement that families are showing signs of distress, family considerations are seldom addressed in the normal routines of policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation. For example:

- ▶ Leaders of state legislatures report being unaware of how families are faring in their districts, what family programs are available, and how effective they are (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995).
- ▶ State and federal governments have nonpartisan service agencies that routinely consider the economic impact of policy decisions, yet no formal entity exists for examining the family impact of policy decisions (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).
- ▶ In residential treatment centers for youth, family support is recognized as important to recovery. Yet 88% of staff have not heard of the principles of family-centered treatment or, if they have, report needing further training to implement them (Brown et al., 2010).
- ▶ The vast majority of teachers report feeling ill prepared to meet the needs of culturally diverse families (Winton, 2000). Also, state K-12 teaching credentials and requirements for family involvement tend to be general and aspirational (Epstein, 2011); only three states (i.e., Arizona, Mississippi, and South Carolina)

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We need to shift the rhetoric from appreciating families to prioritizing them as worthy of study, investment, partnership, and political action.

explicitly require specialized training on parent involvement for administrators, staff, and/or teachers (Education Commission of the States, 2005).

The concepts of family support and family impact still remain “highly abstract and seldom operationalized” (Ooms, 1995, p. 7). What is needed is to shift the rhetoric from appreciating families to prioritizing them as worthy of study, investment, partnership, and political action. The first step is reviewing research and theory to determine whether it is important to incorporate family considerations into the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies, programs, and organizations. We build on Ooms’ earlier work (Ooms, 1995; Ooms & Preister, 1988) that focused primarily on family impact analysis, which we incorporate as one component of an expanded family impact lens. This broader conceptualization and new language may make it easier to communicate the importance of family considerations to policymakers and professionals.

The *Family Impact Rationale* provides:

- ▶ An explanation of what the family impact lens is, how it can be used, and who would find it useful;
- ▶ Specific examples of what the family impact lens can accomplish;
- ▶ The empirical and theoretical evidence for making families a focus of policy and practice decisions; and
- ▶ The past relevance of family impact analysis and its continued importance for contemporary families in a changing society.

This rationale lays out the evidence for why the family impact lens is important and what fundamental principles are at the core of family well-being. The companion *Family Impact Handbook* details how to operationalize support for family well-being. Both share the same purpose—to strengthen and support families in all their diversity across the lifespan.

WHAT IS THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS?

Our definition of the family impact lens has two important dimensions that distinguish between (1) family-focused policies or programs (i.e., what is enacted or established) and (2) family-centered practices (i.e., how policies or programs are implemented; Dunst et al., 2007).

When policies or programs are enacted or established, the family impact lens considers:

- ▶ how families are affected by the issue;
- ▶ in what ways, if any, families contribute to the issue; and
- ▶ whether involving families in the response would result in better policies and programs.

When policies or practices are implemented, the family impact lens considers (Dunst et al., 2007):

-
- ▶ *practices that treat families with dignity and respect;*
 - ▶ *information sharing so families can make informed decisions;*
 - ▶ *family choice regarding available services and the extent of participation; and*
 - ▶ *family involvement in parent/professional collaborations and in decisionmaking about family goals.*
-

Such family-centered practices are interchangeably referred to as *family-centered services* and *family-centered helpgiving*. They have been adopted as practices-of-choice in settings as varied as early childhood and family support programs, neonatal and pediatric care units, and services for the developmentally disabled (Dunst et al., 2007).

Bringing the family impact lens to policies, programs, and organizations can occur in a number of ways in a range of settings. Below we propose three purposeful, intentional, and research-based strategies. These are more fully presented and described in the companion *Family Impact Handbook: How to View Policy and Practice Through the Family Lens*.

- 1) The family impact discussion starters are five questions that parallel the five family impact principles. The discussion starters can be used to build awareness of family considerations. They can also provide an organizing framework for thinking about how policies, programs, and organizations may have intended and unintended consequences for family well-being.



Photo courtesy of Jenn Seubert.

- 2) The family impact checklist includes the five principles along with 33 accompanying questions to assess the impacts on family well-being. The checklist can be used as a stand-alone tool to guide policy and program design, implementation, and evaluation.

KEY TOOL #1

FAMILY IMPACT DISCUSSION STARTERS

How will the policy, program, or practice:

- ▶ support rather than substitute for family members' responsibilities to one another?
- ▶ reinforce family members' commitment to each other and to the stability of the family unit?
- ▶ recognize the power and persistence of family ties, and promote healthy couple, marital, and parental relationships?
- ▶ acknowledge and respect the diversity of family life (e.g., different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds; various geographic locations and socioeconomic statuses; families with members who have special needs; and families at different stages of the life cycle)?
- ▶ engage and work in partnership with families?

The purpose of a family impact analysis is to identify ways to make policies, programs, agencies, and organizations more sensitive to and supportive of families.

- 3) A family impact analysis is a more formal and in-depth process that builds on the family impact checklist to examine the intended and unintended consequences of a policy or program on family responsibility, family stability, and family relationships. The purpose of a family impact analysis is to identify ways to make policies, programs, agencies, and organizations more sensitive to and supportive of families.

HOW THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS CAN BE USED

The family impact lens can be operationalized using a range of methods at different stages of policy and program development. Raising the family impact discussion starters or performing a full family impact analysis can be preliminary processes conducted at an early stage when a policy or program is being designed, at an intermediate stage when a policy or program is being implemented, or at a later stage when being reauthorized or evaluated. For example, the family impact lens can be used to:

- ▶ help prepare questions or testimony for hearings, board meetings, or public forums;
- ▶ investigate and generate board, panel, or commission recommendations on broad social problems or policy responses;
- ▶ design program evaluations in ways that intentionally take family considerations into account;

- ▶ review rules, legislation, laws, or programs to point out how well they do or do not address families' needs; and
- ▶ evaluate the culture, policies, and practices of agencies or organizations (including self-assessments) to identify ways in which they are strong in their support of families, and what gaps exist.

Depending upon the turnaround time, a full family impact analysis may be warranted. Family impact analysis is typically conducted by those familiar with families and/or the program or policy, and can consist of an in-depth empirical analysis, a computer simulation, or a qualitative examination. The choice of analysis depends on the time and resources available, the types of information and data that exist, and whether new data are needed. Typically, it is a qualitative process that draws from existing evidence to estimate likely consequences. If the impact to be measured is quantitative (e.g., benefit levels), computer modeling can be used to generate the family impacts. If the goal is return on investment, a cost-benefit analysis can be conducted. If the goal is to understand program effects from the family or organizational perspective, interviews and focus groups can be conducted with administrators, service providers, and participating families (Ooms, 1995).

As a point of clarification, family impact analysis is quite different from evaluation research. Evaluation research focuses on whether the goals of a policy or program are being met. In contrast, family impact analysis examines how policy or program goals may benefit families or produce negative consequences, oftentimes unintentionally.

WHO WILL FIND THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS USEFUL

The family impact lens can be useful to anyone seeking to examine how a rule, legislation, law, program, agency, or organization might affect families. Anyone can use the family impact discussion starters. However, a formal family impact analysis is most incisive and comprehensive when conducted by a person or team of people who (a) have expertise and experience in family science, (b) know well the specifics of the program or policy, and (c) have familiarized themselves with the family impact procedures in the *Handbook*. Family experts and/or policy analysts should be sought out as needed to provide or collect data that can inform the analysis. We expect the *Rationale* and *Handbook* will be of use to several audiences, including:

- ▶ human services professionals who educate or provide services to families, as they strive to identify specific practices and procedures for being more sensitive to and supportive of families in all their diversity;
- ▶ legislative staff, as they weigh policy options and respond to requests to conduct family impact analysis on policies currently being debated or discussed;
- ▶ policy analysts, to bring the family impact lens to their work as they review and evaluate policies and programs, and provide family considerations that policymakers may want to incorporate into their deliberations and decisions;

Family impact analysis is best conducted by those with expertise in families, family impact analysis, and the specifics of the policy, program, agency, or organization.

- ▶ executive agency staff, as they create and evaluate rules and regulations to implement policies that will impact families;
- ▶ program or organization staff, as they examine their policies, culture, and operating procedures to determine their level of family sensitivity and support;
- ▶ policy and program evaluators, as they identify research questions, conceptualize studies, determine samples, select measures, conduct analyses, and draw implications; and
- ▶ educators (e.g., Cooperative Extension, policy schools, family science programs) as they teach future professionals and the public how to approach issues in family-centered ways.

The family impact lens can point out when certain types of families are inadvertently overlooked or forgotten.

WHAT THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS CAN ACCOMPLISH

The family impact lens considers the past, present, or probable future effects on family well-being of a rule, legislation, law, program, agency, or organization. The family impact lens can be useful to policy and practice in a number of ways. For example, it can uncover unfair circumstances where certain types of families receive benefits and others in a similar situation do not. It can identify how involving families in programs and policies can improve results and, thereby, save taxpayer dollars. The family impact lens can point out when certain types of families are inadvertently overlooked or forgotten. Several specific examples are given of how the family impact lens can:

- ▶ reveal who is and is not eligible to receive benefits,
- ▶ enhance effectiveness in reaching policy and program goals,
- ▶ increase efficiency in reaching policy and program goals that provides a greater return on investment,
- ▶ inform program design,
- ▶ guide program implementation, and
- ▶ indicate whether some families benefit more than others.

Policy/program eligibility. A family impact analysis in one state revealed that a mother and father who live with their child are eligible for the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) whether or not they are married. If a parent and his or her partner (not the legal parent) live with the child, the partner is not eligible for coverage unless they marry. However, if they marry, their joint earnings may raise them above the income cutoffs for the program (Normandin & Bogenschneider, 2005). Similarly, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) can penalize marriage when both partners work. If a cohabitating couple earning \$20,000 to \$30,000 annually decides to marry, they lose an average tax credit of \$1,700 per year (Berlin, 2007).

Policy/program effectiveness.

In three well-designed welfare reform studies, investments in parental employment, particularly among fragile families, improved their children's school performance and (sometimes) their social development as well (Berlin, 2007).

Also, in an evaluation of 17 Early Head Start programs, impacts were better for children and parents when center-based care was combined with home visits. In such programs, children scored higher on language and social-emotional outcomes than in programs that included only center-based care; parents also read to their child more often, reported fewer instances of spanking, and exhibited more support and less detachment in semistructured play (Love et al., 2005).



Photo courtesy of Janean Dilworth-Bart.

Policy/program efficiency. In a rigorous cost-benefit analysis of 571 criminal justice prevention and intervention programs, those most effective in reducing future crime and in producing benefits that substantially outweighed program costs were the ones targeted at juveniles. Of these, the single most cost-beneficial prevention program and the five most cost-beneficial rehabilitation programs were family-focused approaches (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006).

Policy/program design. Programs too often target individuals rather than families. Despite evidence of the value of family engagement in early childhood programs (Bogensneider & Corbett, 2010b), fewer than 10% of federally funded programs provide comprehensive services that include family social services, parental support, and medical services and referrals (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). In responsible fatherhood programs, little headway is made in improving fathers' relationship with their children without explicitly involving mothers (Knox, Cowan, Pape Cowan, & Bildner, 2011).

Policy/program implementation. Family involvement proved pivotal to program implementation in a meta-analysis of 47 studies including 11,000 participants from 7 different countries. Participants were involved in programs and services such as elementary school, family support programs, mental health services, neonatal intensive care units, preschool, special education, rehabilitation centers, etc. The family-centered approach proved relatively more effective for all outcomes and resulted in:

- ▶ higher satisfaction with the program, resource levels, and services;
- ▶ stronger self-efficacy beliefs; and
- ▶ higher ratings of child behavior, parenting behavior, and adult and family well-being (Dunst et al., 2007).

Family involvement proved pivotal to program implementation in 47 studies including 11,000 participants from 7 different countries.

Policy/program targets of interest. Without the family impact lens, policies or programs can advertently, or inadvertently, target only some relationships in families and overlook others (e.g., the abused spouse or noncustodial parent). In a family impact analysis of seven Congressional hearings on international adoption, a content analysis of the testimony revealed that the interests of birth parents were seldom represented. Strikingly absent were advocacy groups representing birth parents, any participant self-identifying as a birth parent, or any person specifically speaking on their behalf. When discussed, birth parents were characterized as being unable to care for their child, overburdened by a large number of children, or unqualified to function as a parent because of addiction, lack of education, or character flaws. Positive emotions of birth parents such as *love* or *caring* for the child were never mentioned, whereas *loving* was the most common descriptor of adoptive parents (Ittig, 2004).

Families can be used as a criterion for assessing the advertent and inadvertent impact of policies on family well-being.

WHAT ISSUES MIGHT BENEFIT FROM THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS

The family impact lens can be applied to a number of issues, some that are explicit family policies and some that are implicit but nonetheless would benefit from family considerations (see definitions in Key Definition #1). Family policy encompasses all those policies that address the five main functions of families—family formation, partner relationships, economic support, childrearing, and caregiving. Examples of family policies include child care, child support, divorce, family violence, juvenile crime, long-term care, marriage, teenage pregnancy, welfare reform, etc.

A broad range of policies fall outside these explicit family functions, but nonetheless would benefit from the family impact lens. For example, a tax reform law that lowers taxes for individuals, many of whom happen to live in families, would not be considered family policy. Other policies addressing health care, housing,

poverty, substance abuse, and unemployment would not be considered family policies because they are not aimed specifically at families (Bogenschneider, 2006). For such policies, family considerations can also play critical implicit roles, three of which are mentioned here (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).

First, families can be used as a criterion for assessing the advertent and inadvertent impact of policies on family well-being. To cite one current example, political discourse

Photo courtesy of Olivia Little.



on prison policy focuses primarily on the prisoner as an individual, with little analysis of the effect of incarceration on family earnings, family relationships, and parenting practices. Second, families can be used as a means to achieve other policy goals, such as when families are used to determine who is eligible for benefits; currently, 80% of U.S. immigration policy is based on family connections. Third, families can act as administrators of public benefits to their members. For instance, parents' economic status is used to determine eligibility for student financial aid, regardless of how much money parents plan to provide (Strach, 2007).

KEY DEFINITION #1

WHAT IS POLICY, FAMILY POLICY, AND THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE?

Policy is a plan or course of action carried out through a law, rule, code, or other mechanism in the public or private sector (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).

Family policy has been defined explicitly as an end goal. Family policy encompasses five explicit functions of families: (a) family formation (e.g., to marry or divorce, to bear or adopt children); (b) partner relationships (e.g., to strengthen commitment and stability); (c) economic support (e.g., to provide for members' basic needs); (d) childrearing (e.g., to socialize the next generation); and (e) caregiving (e.g., to provide assistance for the disabled, frail, ill, and elderly).

The *family impact lens* in policy is a companion term that acknowledges the implicit yet often critical role family considerations play in a broad range of policies by analyzing (a) what the consequences are of any policy or program on family well-being (e.g., prison policy, social security reform), (b) how families are used as a means to accomplish other policy ends (e.g., workplace policies that promote employee productivity by providing child care for sick children), or (c) when families act as administrators of other benefits (e.g., eligibility for student financial aid). The family impact lens in policy or program decisions focuses on what policies or programs are enacted. The family impact lens in practice focuses on how policies or programs are implemented through family-centered supports or services.

WHETHER A SINGLE DEFINITION OF FAMILY IS NEEDED

We do not think defining family is central to conducting a family impact analysis, but nevertheless we discuss it briefly in Key Definition #2. We do not offer a single definition of family, but instead suggest that defining family is based upon context and use. This lack of a single preferred definition may seem unsatisfying, yet precedence exists in policy settings. No legal definition of *family* appears in the

U.S. Constitution, the federal statutes or regulations (Ooms, 1998), or many state statutes (Bogenschneider, Kaplan, & Morgan, 1993). Because it is not a matter that can be resolved by research, defining family is ultimately a question of values and priorities—the types of decisions that policymakers are elected to make.

KEY DEFINITION #2

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

We take the position that the definition of family will vary depending upon what a policy or program is trying to accomplish. Existing definitions of family can be categorized in several ways, two that we cover here:

- ▶ structural definitions that specify family membership according to certain characteristics such as blood relationship, legal ties, or residence; and
- ▶ functional definitions that specify functions that family members perform, such as sharing economic resources and caring for the young, elderly, sick, or disabled (Bogenschneider, 2006; Bogenschneider et al., 1993; Moen & Schorr, 1987).

Rather than seeking a single universal definition, either a structural or functional definition can be written to reinforce the intent of a specific policy or program (Eshleman, 1991; Moen & Schorr, 1987). For example, if the issue were child support, a structural definition of family would require financial support only from those people related to the child by blood, marriage, or adoption; however, using functional definitions of family would require financial support from any committed caregiver. If the issue were care for the elderly, structuralists would provide benefits only to those who have legal responsibility for the dependent; functionalists, however, would provide benefits to any close companion who provided care if the care prevented institutionalization.

When specific legislation is considered, structural definitions seem more appropriate for some policy goals and functional definitions for others. We believe that definitions will vary over time, across jurisdictions, and in different political environments (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).

WHY IS THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS IMPORTANT?

The family impact lens moves our attention beyond the individual or a single dyad to a relationship between two or more persons tied together by blood, legal bonds, or the joint performance of family functions. Instead of a telescopic view that narrows in on one member of a family, the family impact lens is a kaleidoscope view that includes the perspective of all the members or complex relationships within a family system. This conceptual distinction is often overlooked in policy debate. For example, children's or women's policy is often incorrectly equated with family policy even though an individual is targeted, not a family relationship or family unit. *Family* is sometimes misused to represent some, but not all, relationships in families.

For example, *family* can be used as shorthand to refer only to the relationship of the mother and child, with no mention of the father, grandparents, or others who are intimately involved (Cowan & Cowan, 2008; Henderson, 2004). The term *single-parent family* often masks the role of cohabiting or nonresidential parents in the lives of their children (Bogenschneider, 2000, 2006). Thus, *family* becomes a code word for certain types of relationships (e.g., custodial parents, two-parent families), while others are ignored (e.g., families of color, same-sex parents).

Focusing on families broadens political discourse because it embodies an essential quality found in few frameworks and one that is seldom advanced by special interest groups—commitment to others even when such actions require personal sacrifice. *Pro-family* means something quite different from *pro-people*. For example, lobbyists or special interests typically ask, “What does the policy or program do for me, for my people, or for my personal agenda?” Basically, who will win and who will lose in a narrow, self-serving sense? The family impact lens can counter these individualistic, narrow, or parochial agendas by moving away from a concentration on overly specific problems or single solutions and toward a more holistic, multidimensional way of thinking about policy challenges. This family-centered view enlarges our organizing frame by adopting a lifespan perspective that considers families from the cradle to the grave and acknowledges multiple forms of intra-family sharing (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).



Photo courtesy of Janean Dilworth-Bart.

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EMPIRICAL RATIONALE FOR THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS

We argue that families should be established as a central focus of policy and program analysis because of the many contributions they make to society (see Key Tool #3 in the *Family Impact Handbook*). For example, families are a fundamental foundation for generating the productive workers a sound economy demands. Families also contribute to raising of the caring, committed citizens a strong democracy requires. Family policies and programs are an efficient investment of public resources to achieve societal goals, and an effective means of promoting positive child and youth development. The empirical evidence for these important contributions to society is summarized below (for an expanded discussion of recent research, see the family policy decade review by Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).

The mother/infant attachment relationship was related to qualities of good citizenship at ages 15 and 16—involvement, leadership, self-confidence, and social competence.

Families are a fundamental foundation for raising productive workers.

In the midst of a global economic transformation, every nation's competitiveness will depend more than ever on its human capital, specifically the education and social skills of its labor force (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). For example, in a 30-year longitudinal study, researchers were able to predict which children would drop out of school with 77% accuracy using only one variable—quality of care up to age 42 months (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Well before these children started school, researchers were able to predict the probability of becoming a high school dropout. The odds of dropping out were even greater when parents were neglectful or disengaged.

Similarly, educational attainment by age 23 depended on young adults' early and cumulative history. Based on the quality of early care, researchers could also predict

which children would return to high school or obtain their GED. In sum, children's early experiences provided powerful predictors of later development, especially when considered in combination with later care, peer relationships, and the immediate environment (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Families contribute to the rearing of caring, committed members of society.

Secure attachment relationships, which develop from parenting that is sensitively responsive and reliably available, predict many qualities that societies value in their citizenry. For example, in longitudinal studies, children who were securely attached to their mothers were more empathetic, more self-reliant, and less hostile with their peers (Sroufe, 1988). The attachment relationship between a mother and infant was significantly

Photo courtesy of Cassandra Musser.



related to a number of quantities of good citizenship at ages 15 and 16—involvement, leadership, self-confidence, and social competence in problem-solving situations (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000).

What's more, parenting competence is also remarkably consistent across generations; positive parenting at age 2 in the first generation predicted positive parenting at age 2 in the second generation (Conger & Conger, 2002; Sroufe et al., 2005). Also, the quality of caregiving at age 3½ predicted the quality of romantic relationships over two decades later at ages 23 and 26.

Family policies and programs are an effective means of promoting positive child and youth development. Recently, great progress has been made in family-centered prevention science (Spoth et al., 2002). Several examples are cited in recent family policy decade reviews, some that focus on a method of family support and others that focus on a specific social problem (Bogenschneider, 2000; Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).

For example, home visiting is a method that has been used by virtually every successful early intervention program for highly stressed or difficult-to-reach families (Weiss, 1993). Nurse home visiting that occurred prenatally and during the first two years of life resulted in improvements in the life course of mothers and their children 15 years later (Olds et al., 1997; Olds et al., 1998). Compared with families that received only transportation and developmental screening, the families that received nurse home visiting had lower rates of child abuse and neglect, fewer arrests of the child and mother, a delay in subsequent births to the mother, and reduced family dependence on welfare.

Family approaches also have proven effective in preventing risky youth behaviors. The Adolescent Transitions Program developed by the Oregon Social Learning Center contrasted a randomly assigned control group with comparison groups that provided interventions for parents only; for youth only; for parents and youth combined; and with only self-study materials (Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh, & Soberman, 1996). Over time, the youth-only group actually reported more smoking and worse school behavior than did the control group. Apparently bringing high-risk youth together, no matter how skillfully, glamorized inappropriate behaviors so that participants more eagerly adopted them. Compared with the combined control and self-study groups, the parent-only training proved most effective in improving youth behavior at school, and also in reducing tobacco and marijuana use one year later. Surprisingly, no benefits occurred for the combined parent-youth intervention. Thus, interventions retain their cost-effectiveness when training parents is emphasized and bringing together at-risk youth is avoided (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999).

Family policies and programs are an efficient investment of public resources to achieve societal goals. Families carry out a variety of functions critically important to society. Economists have estimated the value of these functions if families were unable to provide them. Recently, Folbre (2008) used a replacement

Positive parenting at age 2 in the first generation predicted positive parenting at age 2 in the second generation.



Photo courtesy of Galina Barskaya (Fotolia.com).

cost approach to estimate the value of unpaid time that parents devoted to the rearing of children under age 12. Her estimates were conservative using, for example, the \$7.43 average hourly wage for child care workers in 2000 (only the results for middle-income parents are reported here). The value of parental time was an estimated \$14,338 per year per child under age 12 in two-parent, middle-income families. When both time and cash were included, a parent's investment was over \$23,000 per year.

Folbre (2008) also estimated the value of the cash support for childrearing that the federal government provided in 2000 to be \$920 to \$2,200 per year per child under age 18. (Estimates included tax

subsidies or transfers, social insurance for death and disability, and means-tested benefits for low-income families, but excluded tax subsidies for child care and college.) Taken together, government cash subsidies represented a small portion of childrearing costs. For a child under age 18, the government provided 10% to 25% of a middle-income parent's annual cash expenditures and only 4% to 10% of cash and time expenditures.

Similar returns are found when we look at the later end of the lifespan. The vast majority of long-term care is provided by informal caregivers, with two thirds provided by family members (Feinberg, 2012). This contribution does not show up in government budget ledgers. The economic value of informal caregiving, provided by those aged 18 or older to adults with limitations in daily activities, was an estimated \$450 billion in 2009 in comparison to the \$361 billion spent by Congress and state legislatures in 2009 for Medicaid's medical and long-term care (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2011).

“ The family is the most powerful, the most humane, and, by far, the most economical system known for building competence and character. ”

Summary. In sum, government cannot afford to fully replace the functions families perform for the benefit of their members and for the good of society. As aptly put by Bronfenbrenner in testimony before the U.S. Congress: “The family is the most powerful, the most humane and, by far, the most economical system known for building competence and character” (1986, p. 4).

Still, families do better in a supportive policy environment—one in which, for example, schools actively seek parental engagement; employers recognize that workers are also family members; agencies and organizations are family-centered in their philosophy and operation; and laws support family members' roles as caregivers, parents, partners, and workers (Bogensneider, 2009). A vital role remains for government to supplement and complement the private investments families make. Policies and programs, along with community institutions and societal norms and values, shape the extent to which families can fulfill their functions and develop new capabilities when challenged to do so (Patterson, 2002).

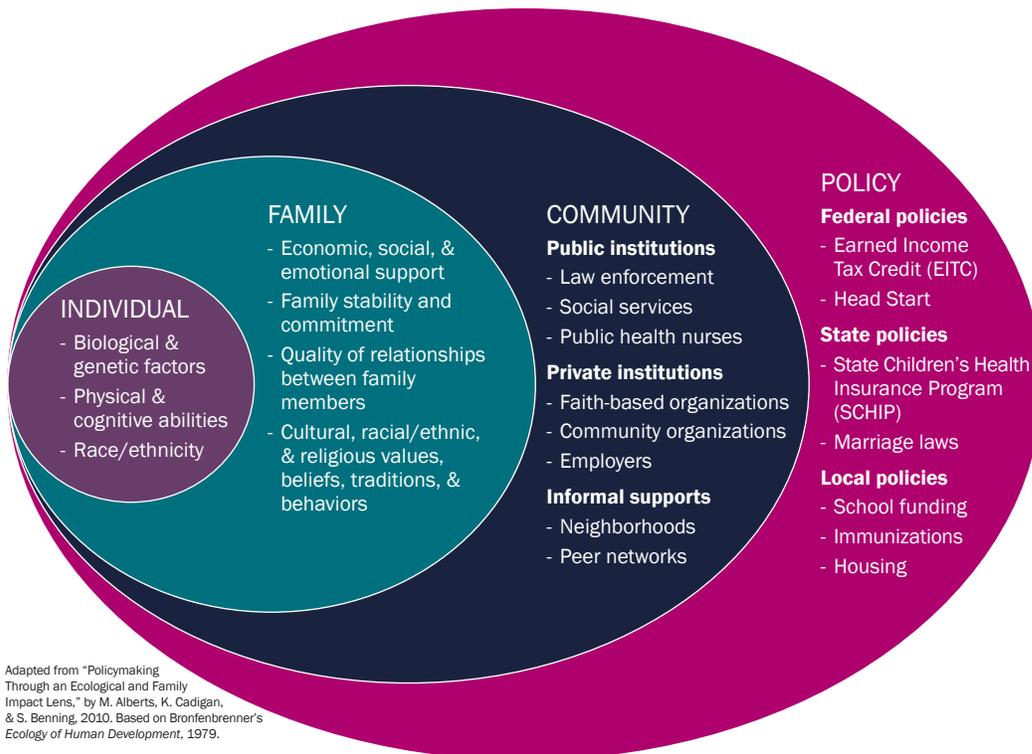
THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS

Theoretically, the family impact framework and methodology is highly eclectic. *Ecological family systems theory* frames the impetus for the family impact lens, *self-efficacy theory* provides the rationale for and core components of supporting autonomous family functioning, and the *open policy windows* theoretical framework guides the methodology.

Ecological family systems theory. Ecological family systems theory helps explain why policies and programs are important to family functioning and how family functioning, in turn, is important to individual development. Ecological family systems theory is an amalgam of Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) concentric nested circles representing human ecology and Minuchin’s (1974) structural family systems theory. According to Bronfenbrenner, families are the first and foremost influence on individual development; policies and programs shape the environment in which families operate and, in so doing, can strengthen or undermine family functioning (see Figure 1 adapted from a diagram developed by the Minnesota Family Impact Seminars). According to Minuchin, organizational processes that maintain family systems (e.g., boundaries, power, transactional patterns) serve several ends. Internally, these processes promote the psychosocial protection of family members. Externally, they help members adapt to changes in their cultural, economic, and social contexts. The more contexts change, the more crucial families become.

Families are the first and foremost influence on individual development.

Figure 1. Circles of Influence in Individual and Family Development



Adapted from “Policymaking Through an Ecological and Family Impact Lens,” by M. Alberts, K. Cadigan, & S. Benning, 2010. Based on Bronfenbrenner’s *Ecology of Human Development*, 1979.

Families make many essential contributions to their members and society. Public and private policies can support these contributions in several ways. For example, without policy, there would be no State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which covered 7.7 million children across the country in 2009 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010). Without policy, 25 million families would not have received one of the most effective anti-poverty programs, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). In 2007, the average EITC credit for a family with children was \$2,488. In 2009, EITC benefits lifted an estimated 6.6 million people out of poverty (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2009). Without policy, we would not have Head Start, which since 1965 has promoted school readiness for more than 30 million children (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about>).

Self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy theory provides a rationale for supporting family autonomy in ways that supplement rather than supplant family responsibility. If decisions were aimed at building family responsibility, it could mean more government intervention in the short term, but it could also mean less government and lower costs in the long run. Prevention and support services that are made available at earlier stages when a problem is developing may help avoid more intensive interventions when a problem becomes a crisis or chronic situation (Coalition of Family Organizations, 1989). When families break down and are unable to fulfill their responsibilities, the costs to taxpayers of funding child welfare, long-term care, and other assistance programs can be enormous.

If families are to assume responsibility for supporting the development of their members, they need to function effectively which stems, in part, from their beliefs about self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). To build family self-efficacy, policies and programs need to incorporate relational practices that treat families with dignity and respect, and participatory practices that foster family choice and involvement (Dunst et al., 2007). *Relational practices* involve active listening, compassion, empathy, and respect that relay positive beliefs about family strengths and capabilities. *Participatory practices* are individualized, flexible responses to family needs that allow choices and involvement in decisionmaking about family goals.

In a recent meta-analysis of 47 studies, increases in both relational and participatory practices were associated with more positive and less negative perceptions of child, parent, and family behavior and functioning (Dunst et al., 2007). Relational practices, because they are strength-based, appear to focus family members on more positive aspects of their family's functioning, their child's behavior, and their own actions. Participatory practices, perhaps because they actively involve family members in goal setting and decisionmaking, are positively related to a family's capacity for autonomous functioning.

These practices are included in the family impact checklist because they appear to have transcontextual validity, yielding similar results when used in different disciplines and diverse settings (e.g., early childhood programs, mental health

Building family self-efficacy requires relational practices that treat families with dignity and respect and participatory practices that foster family choice and involvement.

programs, neonatal intensive care units, public schools, rehabilitation centers, and specialty clinics). Programs that utilize both relational and participatory practices exert direct effects on family responsibility and also indirect effects through their influence on strengthening family self-efficacy.

Open policy windows theoretical

framework. Kingdon's (2003) mid-range theory of open policy windows informs the selection of methods that are best suited for applying the family impact lens. Kingdon uses the analogy of open policy windows to emphasize when the conditions are right for social change on an issue. When policy windows are open, policymakers are willing to invest their time, energy, and political capital because their efforts are more likely to pay off. Policy windows open when three conditions for social change converge: problems are recognized, policy solutions are available, and the political climate supports change. Typically, elected officials such as legislators, the President, or the Governor select the problems to place on the legislative agenda, whereas policy participants such as academics, policy analysts, and agency officials identify policy solutions. Elected officials determine which policy solutions are politically and economically feasible.

Kingdon's theoretical framework advanced our thinking beyond the single family impact method of the 1980s to developing different methods depending on the unique role of the user in the policy process. For example, policymakers' role typically is to identify which issues could benefit from a family impact analysis, what they hope to learn from it, who is best positioned to conduct an analysis, and when it may be most politically and economically feasible to apply the results. Others such as academics, policy analysts, and agency staffers are more apt to conduct the analysis and draw family and policy implications. Given these different roles, we developed a two-page guide for policymakers that (a) presents the five questions we term the *family impact discussion starters* to help determine which issues might benefit from an in-depth analysis, and that (b) guides decisions about who might have the expertise to conduct the analysis. For policy analysts and family scientists, we developed this 31-page rationale and a 45-page handbook with specific procedures and protocols for (a) conducting a detailed family impact analysis and (b) drawing implications about how the policy or program affects specific types of families and particular family functions. Typically, it is up to decisionmakers to weigh these (often competing) implications and determine what actions are most feasible given current political and economic realities.



Photo courtesy of Jenn Seubert.

Moving beyond the single family impact method of the 1980s, different methods have been developed targeted toward different users.

PAST AND CURRENT RELEVANCE OF THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS

Just how much is society changing? Is this family impact lens as important now as when it was initially proposed (as family impact analysis) in the 1980s? We argue that it is important today because of the changes that have occurred in families, the economy, young adulthood, life expectancy, and fertility, all which have occurred in the context of a growing interest in evidence-based policy and the high esteem in which families are held. Before we look forward, we first look back to the history of family impact analysis.

Family-centered practice was discussed in the 1950s, although it was not until the 1970s that it came to the forefront of contemporary thinking (Dunst et al., 2007). Family impact analysis dates back to U.S. Senate subcommittee hearings held in 1976 on the state of American families. Prominent scholars like Urie Bronfenbrenner, Margaret Mead, and Edward Zigler argued that policies and programs be routinely analyzed for their impact on families. In the 1980 White House Conference on Families, family impact legislation requiring family impact analysis was one of six top recommendations, with 80% of delegates giving it their highest endorsement (see Ooms, 1995).

During the 1980s, the idea of family impact statements was occasionally proposed in Washington in various forms. In 1987, President Reagan issued an executive order that required agencies to review any proposed new policies for their potential impact on families (Ooms, 1995). In 1997, President Clinton signed an executive order that narrowed the scope of family impact statements to only policies specifically affecting families (Elrod & Spector, 1998). Several states enacted laws or executive orders requiring family impact statements (see Bogenschneider, 2006).

Policymakers often invoke the symbol of family because it appeals to common values with the potential to rise above politics.

Photo courtesy of Olivia Little.



In short, most of these proposals were never seriously implemented. Despite this initial enthusiasm, the idea of family impact analysis appeared to be premature for a number of political, procedural, and philosophical reasons (Bogenschneider, 2006; Ooms, 1984; 1990). Politically, policymakers often invoke the language and symbol of *family* because it appeals to common values with the potential to rise above politics (Strach, 2007). Yet figuring out how to incorporate family considerations into the normal course of policymaking has proven surprisingly elusive. Perhaps the potential of family

impact analysis, as originally proposed, appears too time-consuming for busy policymakers.

Procedurally, family impact analysis has been constrained by the required skill sets and inadequate training of those conducting the analysis. For example, policy analysts have substantial policy expertise, but little family science background; family scientists have substantial family expertise, but little policy science background. Both are needed to conduct analyses that are policy-relevant and family-sensitive.

Philosophically, the foundation of our political culture probably plays a role. Arguably, progress toward the idea of the family impact lens has been stymied because of the long-standing individualistic tradition of the U.S. The authors of the U.S. Constitution intentionally omitted the mention of *family* to avoid any semblance of the patronage system that dominated the English monarchy against which they were rebelling. Nearly every family historian has noted how this culture of individualism established early in the nation's history has come into conflict with family allegiances and solidarity in ways that the founding fathers may not have anticipated or intended (Browning & Rodriguez, 2002).

Ironically, the family impact concept has not been fully embraced during the very same time that a massive encroachment of the public sphere into family life has occurred. In a review of family policies across the 1990s, Bogenschneider (2000) concluded that families had become a legitimate focus of government at all levels. Considering federal and state expenditures during the first half of the 1990s, expenditures on child care tripled, direct cash benefits to families doubled, and family services increased by 50% (Kamerman & Kahn, 2001). By 1998, over two thirds of the states (34) were funding statewide programs for infants and toddlers, and half (25) were funding programs on parenting (Knitzer & Page, 1998). The American public widely supported these expansions of family policies and programs. In a 1988 public opinion poll, over 4 in 5 Americans endorsed a role for government in supporting their family (Hewlett & West, 1998).

Recent public policies arguably have resulted in some of the most remarkable socioeconomic changes for families in the nation's history (Wertheimer, 2003). When the welfare reform law passed in 1996, 32% of parents living in poverty were in the labor force; only 4 years later, that figure rose to 43%—a seismic shift in such a short time. Recent policies have also more directly targeted family functions than ever before. The 1996 welfare reform law was the first federal policy to explicitly address marriage and family formation (Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004); its 2006 reauthorization provided \$150 million for demonstration and evaluation projects



Photo courtesy of Cassandra Musser.



Photo courtesy of Olivia Little.

Since 2000, public investments in families have grown to the point where per-capita spending is now at the highest level in U.S. history.

to promote healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood (Nock, 2005). The *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* of 1994 named parental involvement in education as one of eight national education goals (Skocpol & Dickert, 2001).

Since 2000, public investments in families have continued to grow in scope and generosity. Expenditures on some 80 means-tested programs have increased to the point where per-capita spending is now at the highest level in U.S. history (Moffitt, 2008). A number of family functions now are shared with social and government institutions (see Key Tool #4 in the *Family Impact Handbook*). An accumulating body of evidence provides a convincing rationale for the family impact lens. A number of compelling examples exist of the effectiveness and efficiency of family-centered policies and programs in high-risk and normative settings, for young and old, for purposes of prevention and intervention.

As public investments in families have continued to expand and as support for family-centered policies has grown, is family impact analysis still needed? How important is it in contemporary society? We argue that the family impact lens is now as important, if not more important, because of the changes that are occurring in families, the economy, young adulthood, life expectancy, and fertility. Moreover, public interest in evidence-based decisions is growing, and families continue to be held in high esteem across the political spectrum because of the functions they perform for society.

Changes in families. Contemporary families vary in a number of ways from families in an earlier era (see Key Tool #5 in the *Family Impact Handbook*), three of which are mentioned here. First in the last few decades, families in the U.S. have become more racially and ethnically diverse. In 2006, the foreign-born comprised over 12% of the population—the largest percentage since early in the 20th century (Cherlin, 2010). By 2009, racial and ethnic minorities made up 35% of the U.S. population (Mather, 2010). Projections predict that by 2042, people who are non-Hispanic White will no longer make up the majority of the population; what's more, this will happen for the population under age 18 in just over a decade—by 2023 (Jacobsen & Mather, 2010). Second, in the last half century, gender differences have decreased with men and women becoming more similar in the ages at which they leave home, marry, and have children (Furstenberg, 2010). Third, as both nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation have increased, family formation has become less sequenced, especially among lower-income youth. Instead of couples marrying,

divorcing, and then remarrying and having another child, fragile families today experience greater partner instability and more multiple-partner fertility. Mothers find themselves ending relationships and searching for a permanent partner often at the peak of fertility (McLanahan, 2009).

Changes in the economy. In 2008, Americans are said to have experienced “the biggest contraction in economic well-being in a generation” (Edin & Kissane, 2010, p. 470). In the midst of this economic downturn, social class differences have become more pronounced (Furstenberg, 2010). The income disparity between the richest and poorest segments of the U.S. population has grown steadily, reaching a level not seen since the late 1920s (Greenstein, 2008). In particular, inflation-adjusted earnings for workers at the lower end of the income distribution have not increased since 1979 (Haskins & Sawhill, 2007); ethnic minority families and children have been the hardest hit (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Whereas poverty rates have dropped for the elderly over the last few decades, child poverty increased in the 1970s and remains high (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). Such economic changes make it more difficult for contemporary families to make ends meet, even when fully engaged in the workforce.

Changes in young adulthood. Contemporary youth are taking longer to leave home, attain economic independence, and form families of their own. Compared to three or four decades ago, when 18 and 21 were the ages of adult status, young people are taking nearly a decade after high school to achieve economic independence and social maturity. The success with which young people make this transition depends, in part, on the resources and supports their families are able to provide. Compared to families of modest means, affluent families are more able to finance education and health care costs, and provide a residence and the other supports children in their early twenties may need for family formation, job preparation, and civic engagement. However, public policies rarely extend beyond age 21 despite the need of vulnerable youth for services such as foster care, juvenile justice after-care, special education, and so forth (Berlin, Furstenberg, Jr., & Waters, 2010).

Changes in life expectancy and fertility. In the U.S., the population aged 65 and over is projected to increase from 40

Young people are taking nearly a decade after high school to achieve economic independence and social maturity.

Photo courtesy of Jenn Seubert.





Photo courtesy of Janean Dilworth-Bart.

Family impact analysis is one strategy for raising evidence-based considerations to those who want information and data to ground policy and program decisions.

million in 2010 to 72 million in 2030 (Administration on Aging, 2009). When increasing life expectancy is considered in the context of decreasing fertility, this means that more generations are alive and there are fewer members in each generation. This trend has translated into a protracted period of caring for elderly loved ones who are frail and dependent (Bengston, 2001). The majority of this care is provided by family members.

Growing interest in evidence-based policy and program decisions. The quantity of research has expanded dramatically in recent decades, yet its role in shaping

political debates and informing policy decisions has seldom approached a level warranted by the magnitude of the investment by government and philanthropic communities. At the same time, over the last 20 to 40 years, calls for evidence-based policy and practice have become so commonplace in North America, Europe, and other developed countries that they have been characterized as “routine” (Huston, 2008, p. 9). Take for instance the 2002 No Child Left Behind law that mentioned “scientifically based research” 111 times. The fact that this lexicon of *evidence-based policy* has caught on so quickly indicates a hunger for evidence. Yet ironically, we have scant evidence about effective ways to deliver evidence to those who make policy and program decisions (Bogensneider & Corbett, 2010a). Family impact analysis, because it is based on the latest research about the attributes of strong families and best practices for family engagement, is one such strategy for raising evidence-based considerations to those who want information and data upon which to ground policy and program decisions.

A valuing of families that continues in contemporary society. Focusing on families has the potential to foster political consensus and build common ground because families are widely embraced as a normative ideal. An analysis of five longitudinal data sets on U.S. public attitudes confirmed a strong, traditional commitment to marriage, children, and family. This commitment did not erode between the 1960s and 1990s, and may well have increased in recent decades. Americans expressed a greater acceptance of divorce, yet they also believe that children should have two parents and that marriage should be ended only under extreme circumstances. However, some traditional attitudes are changing. For example, a substantial majority of Americans in the 1990s reported egalitarian attitudes on most men’s and women’s roles, and three fifths of high school seniors endorsed cohabiting before marriage (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

The normative valuing of marriage and family is also embraced by policymakers. The Congressional Record included 271,430 entries between January and October 2002; of these, 87,016 used family words and images. In an average week, family-oriented words were invoked 218 times, making their way into one third of all speeches, statements, tributes, etc. With the exception of only two weeks, family-oriented words appeared every week Congress was in session for over a decade (Strach, 2007). These mentions of family cut across gender and political party. The language and symbol of family appeals to common values that hold the potential to rise above politics and to provide common ground where it exists. We believe there is ample common ground today, as was initially argued by the Coalition of Family Organizations (COFO) in 1988:

We believe there is now a broad agreement in our nation about the definition of the problems and the general ends that need to be achieved on many family issues. Understandably, disagreements arise most often over the means to obtain them . . . For example, most Americans believe that absent parents should be required to provide economic support for their children; welfare mothers should be expected to become self-supporting; young teenagers should delay sexual activity; and employers should modify work schedules and fringe benefits to mesh better with family responsibilities.

— COFO, 1989, p. 6

Broad agreement continues to exist, but concrete options are needed to move beyond common ground to shared action. The family impact lens can help policymakers and professionals be more strategic in their decisions by steering them toward empirically supported strategies that are both family-sensitive and policy-relevant.

Summary. As spending on families grows, the sheer size of the investment raises concerns about whether the resource commitment is justified, specifically whether family programs are working and if they could be improved. The family impact lens is as important now as ever. The more families and societies change, the more the family impact lens is needed to capture those changes, and to help families adapt so they can buffer their members from harm. Given widespread agreement about the end goal of supporting families, the time and effort put into bringing the family impact lens to policy and practice

Photo courtesy of Stephanie Eddy.



may pay off because it can strengthen and support families in the important functions they perform for the benefit of their members and the good of society.

The family impact discussion starters, the family impact checklists, and family impact analysis are three purposeful, intentional, and evidence-based strategies for identifying ways that policies and programs can complement the private contributions families make to the public good. For several concrete processes, procedures, and tools to implement these strategies and bring the family impact lens to policy and practice, the reader is referred to the companion *Family Impact Handbook: How to View Policies and Programs Through the Family Impact Lens*.



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