



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 26
Issue 3 *September*

Article 14

September 1999

Review of *Social Work with Children and their Families: Pragmatic Foundations*. Christopher G. Petr. Reviewed by Dorinda N. Noble, Louisiana State University.

Dorinda N. Noble
Louisiana State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, Marriage and Family Therapy and Counseling Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Noble, Dorinda N. (1999) "Review of *Social Work with Children and their Families: Pragmatic Foundations*. Christopher G. Petr. Reviewed by Dorinda N. Noble, Louisiana State University.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol26/iss3/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Petr, Christopher G. (1998). *Social Work with Children and their Families: Pragmatic Foundations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Working with children and families is complex because family life is complex. The child exists in the context of the family; the family exists in a larger societal context. Social workers who deal with children and families, consequently, are well advised to think of themselves as professional tri-athletes in cross-training: they must develop skills and knowledge in several interacting, overlapping, and probably conflicting systems. Schools, work, religious organizations, marriage, health delivery systems, extended families: these are only a start to the long list of systems that affect the child in the family. Not only do systems conflict, but values do, too. Societal values and standards about family integrity, children's needs, and societal obligations are muddled and often contradictory.

Given this complex and confusing state of affairs, it is a relief to see a book that tries to put a practical framework around work with children and families. Though Petr's style and content is appropriate for the more advanced student, it attempts to put conceptually intricate and detailed material into a context that can be applied to realistic case situations—and the book largely succeeds in this goal. It integrates practice and policy to help the student "cross train" in this demanding field. The book, because it weaves together so many threads of policy, practice, and attitude, is best suited to a student who has the conceptual skills and professional experience to grapple with integrated material. Given that caveat, it is a well-written, readable book.

The major framework of this book is built around eight pragmatic perspectives, which are the author's way of organizing concepts and goals that improve work with children and families. The first of these perspectives is one that is rarely highlighted in textbooks: it is Petr's admonition that workers must avoid adultcentrism, or the inclination of adults to view children's needs and problems from an adult viewpoint, rather than from the child's perspective. Seeing human development as a ladder of stages, leading to a specific pinnacle of adulthood, implies that children are both undeveloped and incompetent. Petr maintains

that the competencies of children are consistently underestimated by authorities, and he points to the growing body of literature on children's resilience to buttress his argument. Adults, Petr further maintains, frequently label children with various mental health diagnoses for engaging in behavior, such as opposing adult control, that is only normal and appropriate for children. To overcome adultcentrism, the book encourages workers to develop skills in listening to and engaging the whole child, not simply the verbal child.

In addition to avoiding adultcentrism, Petr offers pragmatic perspectives encouraging the worker to 1) center on the family as the unit of attention, centering on family strengths; 2) discover and highlight family strengths; 3) honor diversity and difference; 4) wisely negotiate the legal mandate to provide the least restrictive alternative for children; 5) see children in their ecological framework and develop collaborative skills with professionals from other domains; 6) understand and improve the chaotic way in which children's services are funded and organized; 7) measure and be accountable for the outcomes of their work with children. To illustrate these pragmatic perspectives, the author relates case vignettes and examples, and gives specific suggestions for how to translate these perspectives to case situations.

The author (who is associated with a school which focuses on the strengths perspective) does a particularly good job at explaining the idea of how to identify and build on clients' strengths. This emphasis on strengths is built into much of the content of the book. Petr also weaves in material on very current developments and issues in services to children and families, such as the contention around the least restrictive alternative mandate, which is often a point of controversy between care providers, families, and policy-makers/ service funders; the mushrooming growth of managed care structures in children's services and its implications for social workers; the infrequently discussed matter of gay and lesbian teens in an often hostile world; and the growing pressure for services providers to produce measurable (and hopefully positive) outcomes. The student who reads this book should, upon completing it, understand many of the current controversies and realities of working with children and families, and some of the

attitudinal barriers professionals may have in working effectively with children.

The student will not understand all of the services areas, however. Petr's book, like all books, is limited. He chooses to highlight two service areas, child welfare and mental health, and only briefly touches on education, health, recreational, or rehabilitation services. The book does not purport to cover the broad spectrum of children's services, and it does not. What it does accomplish, and in a creative way, is to craft a way of thinking, a mindset, a perspective for approaching children's services. The author weaves this mindset into the policy and practice issues he covers in the book, but when one closes the book, it is the altered way of *thinking* that one takes away. And learning new slants on thinking is the best cross-training any professional can do.

Dorinda N. Noble
Louisiana State University

James L. Payne, *Overcoming Welfare: Expecting More from the Poor and From Ourselves*. New York: Basic Books, 1998. \$26.50 hard-cover.

The ideological struggle to shape America's social policies has been fought for more than a decade, and many would agree that it has been largely won by those on the political right. The enactment of the 1996 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* embodies ideas promoted by thinkers on the right, and was championed by conservative political leaders. The enactment of this legislation was touted as a major achievement of the *Republican Revolution* of 1994, and is regarded by Republican leaders as a significant step towards the creation of a vibrant, enterprise society.

It may be surprising, therefore, that income support programs continues to come under attack from those on the political right. Despite the retrenchments and limitations imposed by the 1996 legislation, writers such as James Payne, a former fellow at the Heritage Foundation, continue to believe that attempts to reform welfare have failed in the past, and will fail in the future. This,