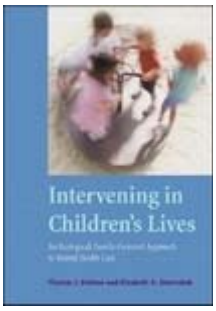
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Emphasizing the Child's Ecology and Family

A Review of

Intervening in Children's Lives: An Ecological, Family-Centered Approach to Mental Health Care
by Thomas J. Dishion and Elizabeth A. Stormshak
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007. 319 pages. ISBN 978–1-59147–428-9. $69.95

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Reviewed by

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In the 1980s, federal legislation imposed an emphasis on professionals providing education and mental health services. Short, Simeonsson, and Huntington (1990) declared that the legislation relevant to disabled children was “a new national blueprint for expanding the opportunities and benefits of early intervention and preschool services to children and families” (p. 88). The family chorus was joined by the voice of Meisels (1989) decrying intervention programs that were isolated to children: “their [children's] needs can only be fully appreciated and understood within a family context” (p. 452). Woody, LaVoie, and Epps (1992) added, “it is clear that there must be more school-based services to families” (p. 11).

Family-oriented legislation has reinforced three concomitants. First, regardless of context, interventions for children should involve families. Second, all education and mental health interventions should be planned and monitored, as reflected in individualized treatment plans for quality care within mental health services (Woody, 1991) and individualized education plans and family service programs for appropriate education within special education and other education-related services, which now require parental involvement (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2003). In other words, any professional intervention must establish that it is appropriate to and effective for the needs of the service user(s). Third, the aforementioned planned approaches need to be empirically based (Weisz, Jensen-Doss, & Hawley, 2006).

In their book *Intervening in Children's Lives: An Ecological, Family-Centered Approach to Mental Health Care*, Thomas J. Dishion and Elizabeth A. Stormshak adopt the three aforementioned principles. That is, their fundamental premise is that children need planned interventions that rely on family involvement and have an empirical basis.

The ecological approach advanced by Dishion and Stormshak, which they call EcoFIT, focuses on families, peer groups, communities, and schools. It has six unique features: It is empirically based, family centered, and assessment driven; social interactions and motivation to change are addressed; and interventions should be suitable for health maintenance. The discussion of each of the six features is predicated on extensive citations for behavioral science information, with the results being insightful descriptions. Throughout the material, there is consideration given to ethical implications.

It seems to me, as a trainer of psychologists, that there is often (a) a reluctance to forsake individual interventions (i.e., seeing the child alone) and (b) a wish to cling to unstructured and (dare it be said)

“old-fashioned” approaches, such as play therapy (Axline, 1947). One reason for the reluctance to engage in family interventions may be the therapist's concern about the parents’ acceptance. In fact, it appears that parents generally have positive attitudes toward child therapy (Nevas & Farber, 2001), perhaps because the parents recognize “collaborative relationships with the therapist may enhance parental insight into responses and attitudes toward their child, in turn increasing parental effectiveness” (p. 169). As an aside, fathers are included in intervention less than mothers, notwithstanding that “fathers can facilitate the child's therapeutic change and maintenance of change” (Duhig, Phares, & Birkeland, 2002, p. 394). Failure to adopt modern views, such as about the need for treatment plans or empirical support for interventions, may come from habituated behavior or refusal to invest in advancing professional knowledge and skills.

Modern interventions do not mandate abandonment of more traditional approaches. For example, play therapy may still be useful and can involve the parents: “Engaging the family in play therapy activities offers a rich observational field for evaluating the family system in action” (Thompson, Rudolph, & Henderson, 2004, p. 369). What cannot be avoided is adopting a theoretical framework that has empirical support for the techniques and strategies that are applied in child intervention; in the Dishion and Stormshak book, it is clear that they believe a cognitive–behavioral approach is the best suited for their ecological approach.

Intervening in Children's Lives is impressive for its well-documented, yet concise, presentation of a rationale for helping children in a manner that considers the real world in which the child lives and recognizes that it is essential to involve the child's family in the interventions. This book is superior for providing the student or practitioner with ideas for staying abreast with research and is a source for gleaning ways to formulate and implement interventions.

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