

## SYMPOSIUM REVIEW

### *Caring for Troubled Children: Residential Treatment in a Community Context*

By James Whittaker (with Richard Small, Robin Clarke and Jerome Beker)

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979

With all of the interest today in deinstitutionalization policies and programs, few persons are giving serious attention to issues concerning the improvement of residential treatment programs for children. Since these institutions are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they deserve our study and attention. Thus, this book by Whittaker and his colleagues is pertinent because it was prepared to provide a set of principles and guidelines for a new approach to residential care, identified by the authors as "the ecological approach to child treatment." Obviously, the authors have attempted a most difficult task—to write a prescriptive textbook for both professional and para-professional audiences. There is a wealth of practice and research knowledge on this topic, but unfortunately it has not been well synthesized or integrated so that a set of practice principles can be readily formulated. Given the magnitude of the task undertaken, Whittaker succeeds fairly well, but there is unevenness in the quality of the several chapters and the book lacks the distinctive character of earlier classics in the field (Aichorn, Redl & Wineman, Bettelheim). Perhaps its greatest shortcoming is the failure of the authors to be explicit about their own values and assumptions regarding these children and their treatment in residential settings. Another was the failure to include several of the new innovative approaches, as developed in runaway shelters, alternative schools and in specialized programs for children with specific problems or attributes. More attention should have been given to the use of research findings in the formulation of practice principles (e.g. findings from the longitudinal study of the Massachusetts facilities for children and youth). It is often difficult to evaluate guidelines offered by the authors because one does not know the empirical basis for the principle.

The book begins on a defensive tone. Whittaker says that he wishes to counter the overly negative views about residential care of children, but unfortunately he, himself, fails to address the fundamental question as to whether young children (who are the focus of this book) should be treated in institutional environments, nor does

he examine why the deinstitutionalization movement has grown so strong. The United States still falls behind most of western society, in that it overemphasizes the use of institutional treatment modalities. For more than a decade, federal grants have been available to states to encourage the development and use of alternatives to institutions for children and youth, but there is little evidence that the total number of children, so cared for, has declined. In fact, given the declining birthrate, it is probable that the rate of institutionalization has increased, at least in some states. We have shifted from housing children in public to private institutions and have changed some of the formal goals, but little else may have been modified. Unfortunately, anyone who has been an observer of juvenile institutions over a long period of time gains the impression that contemporary concerns reflect the self-interests and preferences of various adult constituencies—judges, attorneys, social workers, teachers, psychiatrists, and even parents. One finds little evidence to indicate that there is a general concern with enhancement of effective socialization and treatment services for troubled children.

The book opens with a brief historical look at where we have been in the residential treatment of children, but Whittaker tends to ignore the social control functions of institutions that many assert have been the predominant characteristic since the houses of refuge opened in 1824. The review fails to consider the rich history that spells out many of the problems and constraints which have inhibited the development of viable residential treatment models. Whittaker delineates four critical issues that provide a basis for the development of the sets of practice principles and guidelines offered in this book. These include:

1. Treatment of children must be conceptualized on a continuum from home-based models to residential options with an effective linkage between the various options and their relevant social systems.

2. Residential treatment must have explicit goals where the program will function to support the family, not treat the child in isolation. Treatment technologies must focus on growth and development in the child's total life sphere, rather than on remediation of a particular problem.

3. An adequate theory of changing behavior is an essential component, but such a theory must incorporate multiple factors and be geared to the total range of development and the ecology of the child's world.

4. Residential programs must be able to demonstrate effectiveness, cost efficiency and public accountability.

Few would disagree with these as significant issues for programming, but their achievement is indeed a substantial undertaking!

Whittaker offers a framework for the development of a therapeutic milieu for "troubled children," but this is not a prescriptive paradigm linked explicitly to a theory or theories of behavior and its change as he has advocated in his statement of principles. In his examination of diagnostic approaches, he decries superficial labelling, as well as traditional diagnostic approaches. He espouses a "naturalistic assessment," but in explicating that approach, he relies almost exclusively on the usual psychological attributes of the child, rather than on behavior. Also, minimal attention is given to specifying the critical environmental variables that are to be examined. Children are often referred to as isolated, troubled and overly dependent. He suggests that the prevailing view of "these" children is as follows:

Troubled children nearly always come from troubled families that exhibit a certain amount of pain and strain. Since the family, in particular the parents, represents the major source of influence in the child's early development, the child's problems are either directly caused by or unconsciously influenced by the pathology or shortcomings of the parent or parents. (p. 29)

Although the author states that he rejects this view, his alternatives appear to incorporate an acceptance of the perspective to a considerable extent. For example, the description of the desired therapeutic milieu is conceptually attractive, but it is biased in terms of middle-class white culture. In contrast, the majority of youth who are institutionalized in the United States today come from poor and minority families who reside in crowded cities or in isolated and depressed rural areas. More than a decade ago Rapaport criticized the incongruencies of the therapeutic milieu, as developed by Maxwell Jones for the working class youth who were assigned to that institution. This criticism seems particularly appropriate today because most of the institutionalized children will sooner or later return to very difficult living situations. They need to be helped to learn to survive successfully in their own worlds, rather than in one that can be fabricated only temporarily for them.

The book contains a careful review of several major approaches to residential treatment, including psychoanalytic, behavioral, social interactional, and re-educational models. Unfortunately, no attempt was made to analyze these comparatively or to suggest the conditions under which one model might be more appropriate than the other. Moreover, no attention was given to some of the

newer approaches, such as experiential education, wilderness programs, or community service.

The chapter on "Group Living with Troubled Children" is one of the highlights of the book and should be particularly helpful for child-care workers, counselors, and trainers. The group living environment is viewed as the critical medium for growth and change. Its major components include incentive systems, program activities, and group intervention technologies. The worker's critical role is that of teacher of social, emotional, and cognitive skills, but Whittaker cautions the reader against preoccupation with technique or with simplistic cookbook approaches.

Although the importance of community linkages are alluded to throughout the book, the details for the development of such linkages remain superficial and do not reflect awareness of a number of alternative approaches that have been developed for children's programs. The chapter, "Parents as Partners in Helping," is disappointing because of its brevity and ambiguity. Minimal attention is given to methods and techniques for aiding the development of family networks or support systems. Particularly disappointing is the lack of attention to the situation and needs of single parent families or to families where there are several children, but only one is severely ill or handicapped. Again, there is a wealth of new literature and research that could have been examined and utilized in formulating practice principles. The chapter on "Schools as Partners" is far more comprehensive and reflective of new ideas and approaches. The conceptual framework, as outlined on page 159, should be useful to teachers, child-care staff, and social workers. There appears to be an unrealistic expectation with regard to the resource capability of the average public school today. Similarly, it is unrealistic and unwise to suggest that a child-care worker can function as the key facilitator of interaction with the public school, given the size and bureaucratic complexity of most school systems.

Program evaluation is supported, as necessary and desirable throughout, but the specification for its use did not reflect the level of knowledge and expertise available today. Attention is focused almost exclusively on individual level variables with no mention of organizational factors. Likewise, outcome and impact variables were emphasized, but little mention was made of process and effort components. However, this is one of the few volumes pertaining to services to children, where explicit recommendations were offered for the involvement of children and their parents in the evaluation of residential treatment program experiences.

Despite the reservations expressed above, this book can be uti-

lized effectively by practitioners, responsible for residential treatment of children. It is clearly superior to much of the available literature. It reflects the informed experience and wisdom of a group of colleagues, clearly dedicated to humane and effective care for children. Perhaps the best that one could hope for would be that the authors would now design an empirical test for their model and report back to us in several years, a refined set of principles and guidelines from that demonstration research. Such approaches are urgently needed throughout the field of the human services.

Rosemary C. Sarri  
University of Michigan

### *Caring for Troubled Children, A Review*

The care of disturbed children in residential foster care settings is a difficult and complex undertaking that today involves the efforts of specialists from several disciplines. Over the years, there has developed a substantial body of literature that is aimed at one or more of these specialist groups, broadly intended to improve the quality of service provided to these children and their families. The volume written by James Whittaker, entitled *Caring for Troubled Children* is a recent addition to this literature. Whether this addition represents a contribution, however, is a matter of doubt. The doubt derives from two serious problems in this work. The first concerns its lack of focus; the second, its generally weak scholarship. I will take up each problem in turn.

The child care literature is diverse. It includes detailed case studies of programs (Redl, Bettelheim, Black), instructional treatises on therapeutic interventions (Redl), large scale quantitative organizational analyses (Vinter), small scale experiments on program modalities, and, of course, broad overviews of the field. Published works having these various foci are intended primarily for specific audiences: practitioners, program planners, scholars, and students. While much of the literature is by and for social workers, some is not. As one reads *Caring for Troubled Children*, its substance appears to encompass portions of all the subjects listed above (and more) and to be directed in part at several of the audiences. The problem is that it is not consistently concerned with any of the audiences or topics, nor does it develop any of its topics sufficiently for any particular audience.