

Discussant for Family Sensitive ECE Practice Panel

Dr. Jay Fagan

Temple University

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I want to start by saying that I am very encouraged by the Consortium's decision to host this panel discussion and by the authors' thoughtful work on concepts about family-related practice. Much of my career as a researcher has focused on fathers in ECE settings. I still regard the work with fathers in the context of ECE settings as important and necessary, but I don't think the goal was ever to involve fathers at the expense of involving families. I think that the field needed time to figure out what role fathers play within the context of EC. Although the work with fathers is far from complete, it is probably timely to return to the family. The authors and participants of this panel help us to take steps to do that.

I would like to make a few comments about the names which have been suggested for making ECE more family focused. Bromer et al. refer to family sensitive practice. Halgunseth refers to family engagement. Some might say that it doesn't matter which terms we use, as long as the focus is on better relationships between families and ECEs. However, I would suggest that the name says volumes about how these relationships are conceptualized. I think the authors should make more explicit why they have chosen to use the terms that they use, and why they have decided not to use other terms which are often discussed in the literature, such as family-centered practice. I prefer the term "family-sensitive caregiving" rather than "family centered caregiving" because it suggests that ECE is concerned and responsive to families, but it is also

child-focused. The focus on children can sometimes veer away from family issues and concerns, and this is sometimes well justified.

I would also like to comment on the theoretical perspectives discussed by the authors. Bromer et al. do not make their theoretical orientation explicit. Halgunseth refers to the ecological perspective and social exchange theory as frameworks for her conceptualization of family engagement. These are two very appropriate theoretical perspectives, but I would like to suggest several other theoretical perspectives for consideration. The first is the theory of complementary roles (Litwak, 1985). This perspective suggests that quality of care in institutional settings such as ECPs (including family day care settings) depends upon how the motivations, task specificity, and technical capacities of primary and secondary groups complement each other. ECPs and families overlap in their functions, but not entirely. ECPS are efficient in taking care of groups of unrelated children on a day to day basis. Child care staff are paid to provide their technical knowledge about child care and child development and provide affordable care to groups of children so that the costs of going to work for parents do not exceed the costs of child care. They bring socialization experiences to children that families are not readily able to do. On the other hand, families are efficient in adapting to individual children and their individualized needs. They can more easily accommodate children's dietary needs where ECPs could not. Parents can bring knowledge of the idiosyncratic needs of children to child care staff so that staff are able to help children adapt to the program. They can adapt to children when they are sick where ECPS cannot. The essence of this perspective is that ECPS and families can complement each other in their various roles.

This conceptualization broadens the discussion of ECP and family so that the focus shifts from just the family to that of both groups. What is the advantage of employing this

conceptualization? One advantage is that families sometimes need to make adjustments so that they can be supportive of the work that child care providers do, or of the special needs of the program itself. For example, parents may sometimes need to assist when there is a turnover in staff in the ECP. Parents may also need to assist when a number of caregivers call out sick from work. Focusing on complementary roles places emphasis on mutual assistance between family and ECP. In many ways, the conceptualization of complementary roles is not so different from social exchange theory as discussed by Halgunseth. Social exchange theory focuses on the exchange of resources. ECPs offer resources for families and families offer resources to programs.

A second advantage is that theory of complementary roles allows for the fact that sometimes ECPs and families fall short of fulfilling their obligations to each other. Families may not spend time in the ECP, they may rarely visit children in the program, they may not respond to caregiver attempts to engage them. At other times, ECPs may not feel they can adapt to the needs of families. ECPs and families may need advocates who can sort out the complementary needs of each group.

The theory of complementary roles does not supersede notions of family sensitive practice or family engagement, but it may be useful in conceptualizing and putting into practice services that are indeed beneficial to families and children, as well as to ECPs. In reviewing the family sensitive assessment tools presented in Bromer et al.'s paper, I noted that very few of the instruments included items addressing complementarity. Elicker et al.'s Parent-Caregiver Relationship Scale seems to give some consideration of this concept, with items such as, "I trust this parent will tell me important things about this child," and "I consider this child's parent to be a true partner in raising this child." A few additional sample questions that may address

complementary roles are: (1) “I can count on this child’s parents to consider the needs of the classroom and everyone in the group when the need arises,” and (2) “I have someone I can turn to for help when the parents and I don’t see eye-to-eye on things involving this child.”

I would also like to suggest that to promote a real family orientation in ECPs requires a family systems approach to thinking about the relationships between ECPs and families. One of the hallmarks of family systems theory is that it focuses on the interrelationships between all family members as well as what role the ECP may play in relation to the family system. Thus family systems theory recognizes the multiple and indirect influences that ECPs may have on families. For example, siblings who share the same teacher in an ECP may be brought closer by virtue of having had a shared experience. Think about the times that you and one of your brothers or sisters shared stories about a former teacher in school. ECP staff may be encouraged to have siblings play a significant role in assisting a younger brother or sister to adapt to the program. The benefits of such practices may reverberate throughout the family and ECP. Siblings are brought closer to one another, parents are supported by knowing that the older sibling has been helpful, and the ECP learns that the older sibling can be turned to for help when the need arises.

Family systems theory does not suggest new ways of being sensitive to families. Its usefulness is in thinking about how ECPs can affect families and in thinking of families as complex units. Families are formed of units of interconnected relationships and action patterns where individuals respond and interact with one another as individuals, as partners (i.e., couple subsystem), and as sons and daughters (i.e., parent-child subsystem). Individuals affect one another through their own personal resources and stresses and through the quality of their relationships, which can then have a spillover effect on the relationship with others in the system

(parent-child subsystem). Thus, ECPs influence children directly, but also indirectly through their effects on parenting behaviors. The ECP might also influence parenting (parent-child subsystem) through its effects on the couple dyad. At the individual level, children's experience in the ECP also influences their own development both directly and indirectly through its effects on parenting. To illustrate these points, I refer to my own research which has looked at mothers' and fathers' responsibility for childcare and its effects on achieving a sense of balance between work and family. I have found that wives report higher levels of work-family balance when husbands are more involved in dropping children off and picking them up from day care. Husbands' sense of work-family balance is not affected by wives assuming responsibility for child care, on the other hand. One can see that the involvement of parents in the ECP reverberates through the family system in ways that might not be apparent and that involve the spousal subsystem.

I guess that what I am getting at here is that I don't want to oversimplify the notion of family sensitivity. Family life can be complicated, and the interaction between ECP and family may be complex. I worked with a couple several years ago who were having some marital difficulties around parenting values and practices. The wife disapproved of her husband's handling of their son's behavior, and vice versa, but he reacted passively to his wife and she was more aggressive. The ECP staff were drawn into the conflict so that a triangular relationship developed. The ECP were not aware of their own role in relation to the couple's struggle. So this is what I mean when I say that family systems are complicated.

I don't expect ECP staff to become family systems experts, nor do I expect that they would carry out the role of family therapist. But I also would not want them to ignore the complexity of forming relationships with families.

I would like to share one final thought. I have taught child development and human behavior theory courses for some time now in a school of social work. I have had many students over the years who work in schools and ECPs. I have been struck by the lack of understanding about how to work with families. School staff often do not seem to understand the behavior of their children because they do not understand what is happening in the family. One reason they do not understand the family is because they have not engaged the family. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard graduate social work students say that they are not supposed to make home visits and that home visits are not conducted by the school. Instead the complaint is that the parents do not come into school for meetings. A student shared the following case just a few weeks ago: Two brothers are students in a residential school in Philadelphia. They were placed there due to a history of child maltreatment. The mother died this past summer. The boys are refusing to do any school work and grades are slipping precipitously. The boys have not seen their father over the years, but he recently got involved with them. Both the father and the deceased mother's family are now engaged in a custody battle over the boys. The boys have both said they don't want to be at the school, and that seems to have something to do with their poor academic performance. Now it seems fairly obvious that the families hold the key to the boys' academic success. Yet, the school staff were not engaging the family and did not see the family dynamic as the unit of attention.

This leads me to say that family sensitive practice is most certainly the direction to go. But, what will it take for ECPs to become genuinely family sensitive. This is a tall order and one that should not be taken lightly.