

## Session 4. *Strengthening Children, Families, and Children*

### **Family Support: A Force for Change**

**Edmund Gordon:** Thank you. We continue with a discussion of a paper, *Family support: A force for change* and it's going to be presented by the two authors, Sharon Lynn Kagan and Bernice Weissbourd. Bernice is a legend. She's changed the way in which America thinks about families and the families' committing of their lives, just as she has committed *her* life, to the improvement of support, support by families for children and support of families. She is the founder of Family Forces, Family Support America, and is the recipient of numerous awards. The second of the two presenters is my colleague at Columbia, Sharon Lynn Kagan. Actually, Sharon and I follow each other around. We first met when I was at Yale and we have reunited back at Teacher's College at Columbia. At Teacher's College, Sharon is the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy. She is also the Co-Director of the National Center for Children and Families at Teacher's College.

**Bernice Weissbourd:** Lynn and I have been working together for twenty-five years, so we decided we'd share these ten minutes. There's so much that has been said about Ed here and some of it has related to him as a valued critic, as one who doesn't tolerate fuzzy thinking. Bob summarized it by saying there's a subtext of terror. All of this is true. I would like to say that Ed has the remarkable ability to instill confidence and a sense of competence in his students and his colleagues. One of the many things I love about Ed is his tenderness and his caring and though I'm much older than he is, he's a mentor to me. So, thank you, Ed.

It is amazing to me that after two days of chronicling the areas in which Ed has made an enormous contribution, there's still another area and that's the area of family support. The following words delivered to an audience of thousands characterize the life and work of Ed Zigler, one whose very being is intricately enmeshed with the life and being of the family support movement in America. Ed said, and I quote, "Early on in my family support efforts, I adopted the principle that we shouldn't force millions of families to fit themselves into our programs, but rather make our programs as comprehensive and as family-friendly as possible."

Our chapter is dedicated to Ed. It chronicles the evolution of family support and honors his critical role in it. At the outset, it's crucial to note that family support began as a grass roots movement created by and for practitioners who run programs. While supported and advanced by academics, including Ed Zigler, its pulse is not academic or theoretical in orientation. Rather, family support etched its way onto the practice landscape, emerging as a robust, vital social phenomenon. Beguiling, the term 'family support' is widely used with very

different meanings. Designed for both poor and non-poor individuals, these grass roots efforts share a common set of principles. These principles are familiar to most in this room, so I am not going to enumerate them. They emphasize relationships based on equality and respect, building on families' competencies and affirming family cultural identities. They are based on an ecological approach to children and family development. Contemporary family support finds itself at home in multiple settings, using multiple mechanisms for translating these principles into action.

Five service delivery types characterize the field. One is family support centers, which is the one I'm sure most of you are familiar with and have probably visited. These are community-based programs. The second are support programs nested within larger organizations like schools, hospitals, or libraries. A third is organizations that adopt and work from the principles of family support practice, but do not have special family support programs, such as a child welfare agency. Fourth are community level systems of family support where the family support principles guide community planning. And, finally, family support can be delivered at the workplace where businesses support workers in managing work and family life. More than a network of programs, family support is becoming a way of thinking about how services might be delivered for all families. What binds family support is its unwavering commitment to its principles and to a way of delivering service that respects diverse families and honors their inherent capacities to nurture their children.

It is our belief that family support is at a critical juncture today. Despite its deep and rich roots and its ever-growing spread, many issues face those concerned about advancing family support. One issue is – and I was really struck that it was raised this morning and actually by Ed – is the lack of support for prevention. Inherent in its fiber, family support is about the prevention of poor developmental outcomes and family dysfunction. Although numerous social service efforts aim to prevent the negative consequences of, if not optimize, the social condition of children and families, prevention itself has not become the motivating force in children's policy as was hoped for. There is no disagreement about the concept of prevention. The real issue is that a crisis-orientation is deeply embedded in our culture. In part, policymakers find it difficult to put resources into prevention services when there are so many families and children in dire situations crying out for help. But, overcoming this Herculean ideological distance between a crisis and a preventive orientation is a critical challenge that requires concerted attention.

The second issue, one that stems directly from the crisis versus prevention issue, focuses on whether family support is seen as a special service for some – those in need or in crisis – or as a normative service for all. And this makes me think of Susan Muenchow's comments this morning about a similar issue in child care. If one accepts the first premise of family support, however, then the growth of family support must embrace a movement toward a normative system. The

premise connotes a commitment to all children and to a way of life and it supports a universal stance. In reality, we see both special and normative approaches taking hold. In some cities and states, family support is incorporated into school systems, thus making family support services universally available. In other situations, family support is focused in the communities with fewer resources or with particular populations in need. This variability suggests that both targeted and universal strategies are appropriate and necessary.

A third issue relates to family support as a coherent professional field. If family support is a field, it has yet to be professionalized and to acquire the accoutrements associated with professionalization. Family support does not have a certification system for its workers or an accreditation system for its programs. It has not developed an exclusive set of standards, though it does have guidelines for good practice. On the other hand, if family support is not a field, but a mindset that emphasizes the importance of relationships, a strengths-based orientation, and the empowerment of participants, what then is the need for professional structure? If family support were to take this less formal path, future directions might include making connections with other fields to incorporate family support concepts and initiating extensive training and public education efforts.

There's one more issue I will speak of and then Lynn will continue with others. Within the field, there's a growing realization that family support is even more than programs, principles and patterns of being. It is evolving into a social movement. Family support fits within the parameters of a social movement for several reasons. First, the very principles of family support are rooted in change. The history of these programs is predicated on a rejection of traditional practices and the ushering in of new attitudes and behaviors. The shift from treatment to prevention is one such attitudinal change. From the ecological understandings, we have shifted our sense of responsibility for the development from the organism itself to the context that encases the organism: the family and the community. *This* shift in thinking occasions a shift in behaviors so that parents and community assume more responsibility for child development.

A myriad of questions face family support in its development as a social movement. Can family support programs be a base from which parents mobilize to advocate for policies to support them and their children? Can expansion of family support premises and practices lead our nation to give priority attention to the healthy development of children and the well-being of families? And, of course, we must ask whether there is much chance of a social movement of this nature to gain momentum in the environment of today?

**Sharon Lynn Kagan:** I'm going to speak about two additional issues and then talk about some recommendations that we have. Not unexpectedly, one is about research and the other is about policy. I would suggest to you that in the domain of family support, we have a tremendous amount of program evaluation

research. This clearly is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition. We need more sophisticated research that will help us better understand the differential impacts of these different kinds of programs on different families. We also need much more information on cost-benefit analyses and cost information. And then I was very impressed by Hiro's comments this morning. I think we also need some additional research on the *spill down* effects or what the impacts are from one program to other programs.

Needless to say, as Bernice pointed out, these are *difficult* challenges for a couple of reasons. First of all, discreet family service programs are easier to evaluate than those that are deeply embedded in other institutions. But how do you know whether to attribute outcomes to family support services when you evaluate a family support program that is in a school or in a health agency? Second, it is very difficult in programs that are committed to voluntary participation to require random assignment and other scientific principles that we all advance.

The last issue that we want to talk about is the absence of a national policy agenda and I note that many of us have spoken about that around our discreet issues. I would suggest to you that family support had a brief shining moment in 1993 when the nation passed the Family Support and Family Preservation Act. Two years after that Act was passed, it morphed into something that looked quite different, actually something that had very *little* to do with family support and much more to do with family preservation. We believe that until there is a national agenda that focuses on family support, that artfully blends resource acquisition from public and private resources, a mix of local and state and federal commitments, *and* attention to the *infrastructure* needs that will make family support successful, we will not get where we need to go.

These issues suggest what some of our next steps should be, and I'll go through these very quickly. The first is that, in other fields, vision has been defined and well articulated. And although those of us concerned about the well-being of families have talked about this for a very, very long time, the real truth is, in light of America's changing demography, in light of changing world commitments, and in light of changing challenges that families are facing, we have *not* defined a *contemporary* vision of what we want family support to be. Many of the policies that we have been talking about are rooted in a 1960s/1970s vision of families. Families are not the same today .

The second next step is that there needs to be a commitment, if this is *going* to be a codified professionalized field, to step up to the plate, define its program standards and its outcome expectations for those who participate in it. The reality is we all are very frightened about the word 'accountability', but in truth we know that being accountable helps us have more fidelity to the intentions that we possess.

Third, there needs to be a *practice* infrastructure that advances quality. If family support is to become a bona fide field, there must be credentials that must be available, some accreditation. Indeed, there must be a code of ethics that characterizes the behavior of those who work directly with families.

Fourth, we feel that there needs to be a *policy* infrastructure and *policy* capacity. Indeed, we have a bunch of ideas and our paper delineates those: a national policy institute, advocacy arms, and we've heard so much about the importance of generating public will and doing it in a way that will be media friendly.

Last, we need to build leaders, like Ed Zigler, who possess the guts, the vision, and the fortitude to devote years of their lives to making this country better for children and families. I want to go off script and into my heart on this.

In thinking about today, I *chose* to talk about family for two reasons. One, I wanted to honor Bernice Weissbourd and our work together and two, I chose it because I think, in many ways, we all *are* a family. Families have characteristic genes that they share and, while we don't share biological genes, we do share some important ideological genes and they all come from Ed. We share a commitment to hope and to persistence and to tenacity and, I would say, to intellect and to street smarts, some of us have even learned how to play poker from Ed.

Those of us who have had the choice opportunity to work very closely with Ed over the years, have gotten something else. I have gotten, over and over again, the opportunity to watch Ed make some very hard choices, choices about issues. Countless people came through that office looking for support and Ed had to choose which ones he would put his name and his integrity behind. I've seen him make choices about students. I've seen him make choices about foundations and how to deal with foundations. I've seen him make very hard choices about which political stances to take. It's very easy to say one is non-partisan, but it *is* a partisan world and there are challenges that this man had to stand up to. I've seen Ed deal with family challenges. I've seen him deal with his own personal life challenges and I've seen him deal with the deaths of some very dear colleagues who have not been mentioned until this moment and I want to honor them: Al Solnit and Donald Cohen.

Steve said something that got me: "When we're dealing with Ed, we're dealing with a first class intellect and first class character." And I want to say that in every moment that I've worked with this man, what he has left indelibly on my body and being is a commitment to ethical judgment in every single thing he has done. We *need* to know that he is a political leader, a strategic leader, but we also need to acknowledge his role in *all* of our hearts and in *all* of our beings as a moral leader. And I want to say thank you for everything you've given me, for everything you've given all of us. I want to thank you for the deep roots you've given us and as importantly, for knowing that we all needed our wings to be able

to fly and for giving us the freedom to be able to do that. Thank you and we love you.