

# HOW CAN SOCIAL WORKERS IMPROVE THE DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES OF CHILDREN IN FAMILIES WITH SUBSTANTIAL LIABILITIES?

KLAUS WOLF

UNIVERSITY OF SIEGEN, GERMANY

*The developmental opportunities of children growing up in highly troubled families are limited for a wide variety of reasons. The liabilities of parents – resulting from, for example, poverty, psychological or physical disorders, or their own biographical issues – can easily lead to serious problems for the children. The question for social workers is the following: in what ways can social work prevent such an outcome or influence it in a positive way?*

## INTRODUCTION

Any society needs to confront itself with the following issue: What is to be done with children who are not looked after and sufficiently cared for by their biological parents? A brief look at human history demonstrates widely varied responses to this problem, many of

which would not seem particularly agreeable or humane to us today. For example, there are reports of marketplaces in the Middle Ages with pillars where children could be abandoned (Niederberger, 1997, p. 24). Some of the children would be selected and taken along by market customers; the rest would be “fetched by the birds,” as one contemporary source puts it.

In comparison, the practice of setting up a “baby hatch” at convents seems somewhat more humane. Such devices can sometimes still be seen in old convents (e.g.: <http://www.roma-antiqua.de/forum/galerie/rom-bei-nacht/p55885-babyklappe-santo-spirito.html>). On the outer convent wall, there was a box into which a baby could be placed. Next to the box was a bell. When the bell was rung, nuns from the convent came and cared for the baby well – or at least, we hope so. Today, there are similar devices in several large German cities, not connected with convents, but, instead, with social service facilities (e.g.: <http://www.tdh.de/content/themen/weitere/babyklappe/index.htm> and from the inside: <https://www.familienhandbuch.de/angebote-und-hilfen/vor-der-geburt/babyklappe-sinn-und-problematik>).

For a variety of reasons, parents might be unable to provide sufficient care for their children. Then, the question arises: Do the children simply remain without care? Who might provide care instead? Sometimes, the parents are not totally incapable of providing care and are simply not able to carry out certain functions for their children. In such cases, other questions arise, such as:

- ◆ How can the parents become motivated to take over these functions after all?
- ◆ Can they be enabled to provide more comprehensive care for their children?
- ◆ Or, perhaps: Can other people take on all or some of these functions?

The answers to such questions also depend on the political, social, and economic conditions predominant in a society. In this context, societal patterns of interpretation and meaning-making and general ideas of normality are significant factors, ideas, for example, about the

intergenerational relationships between parents and children, about the specific responsibilities of women and men, and many other types of moral judgments. Political decisions, legal norms, and financial guidelines are also important. Finally, we can also ask professional services involved in social work:

- ◆ What kind of support can you offer children and their families?
- ◆ Can you enable children who live under unfavorable conditions to still undergo a positive development?
- ◆ Can social work effectively help make improvements here?

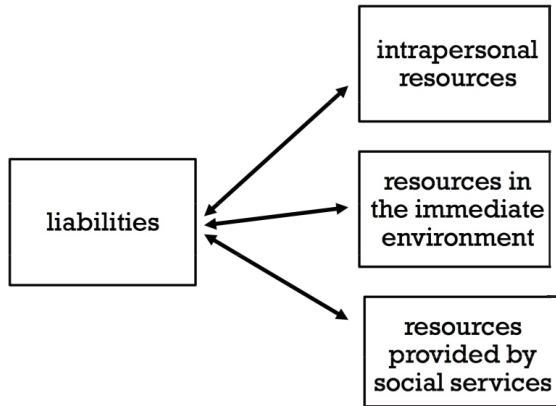
I am certain that social work can considerably improve developmental conditions for children. It can also provide better opportunities for families so that they can cope with their problems. In order to do this, the services require qualified personnel and appropriate instruments. But social work cannot fundamentally change the injustices predominant in any particular society. Perhaps it can help make such injustices perceptible – and it should do this – but that would not eliminate the injustices.

## RESEARCH

At my chair for social pedagogy at the University of Siegen, we have carried out an entire series of research projects on growing up under unfavorable conditions. These widely varied projects do share a common feature: we carry out very detailed narrative, biographical interviews with people who live or have lived under very unfavorable conditions and have them relate their entire life-story.

We analyze these biographical reports using a theoretical model we refer to as the balance between liabilities and resources (Wolf 2007). In this way, we analyze the relationship between, on the one hand, the liabilities, problems, and unresolved issues and, on the other, the resources people need to cope with and resolve their problems. If there is a balance between liabilities and resources, then people can cope with their problems themselves. Yet, often enough important

resources required here and now are simply not available. As you can see here, we distinguish three different kinds of resources to help counteract the liabilities:



1. Intrapersonal resources, that is, a person's traits and abilities (what was called temperament in earlier resilience research),
2. Resources in the immediate environment (support, for example, from other family members, from neighbors or friends) (Werner, Smith, 1998), and, finally,
3. Resources which can be provided by social services.

This third group of resources is especially interesting for social work, since here we are examining what social services can do for people. We can develop quality standards with reference to what has been experienced as helpful, to what has proved to be useful in difficult situations. Sometimes, this can directly follow from what was said during the interviews, but often there is a need for interpretation to come to such conclusions. In this context, people are considered to be active, human subjects in concrete social and material conditions.

The question is not: What disturbing circumstances do these people encounter and how can they be treated? But rather: How can we support people in resolving their problems? Professional social services

can respond to the question of what is to be done with children who are not looked after and sufficiently cared for by their biological parents in three different ways:

1. The first response is that social services try to improve the living and developmental conditions of the children in the family so that the children are then able to undergo a good development in their now transformed family.
2. The second response aims at improving the children's access to persons outside the nuclear family. In these relationships, they should discover resources which their parents lack.
3. The third response aims at providing accommodation in a different family, that is, in a foster family.

## THE FIRST RESPONSE

The first response consists in an improvement in developmental conditions resulting from making changes within the family. In Germany, this is referred to as family support social work. One member of the family, in most cases the mother, goes to the office of youth welfare, reports on problems, and applies for some form of support. Often enough, there are other forces exerting pressure, for example, the school, maintaining, "You need to go to the office of youth welfare. Things cannot just go on this way." Sometimes, somewhat older children or teenagers directly contact the office, stating that there are significant problems at home and that they see no solution.

The social worker at the youth welfare office is a qualified employee with a degree from a technical college or a university. She will consider what exactly the problem is and what she can do to help solve it. If this person is really well qualified, she will produce a so-called 'social work diagnosis', in which the problems are described and explained (Uhlendorff, Cinkl, Marthaler, 2006). She will also have developed some initial ideas of how to make the lacking resources available. To this end, she will recruit another social worker to take the concrete steps involved in this form of family support. This second

social worker is usually not employed at the office of youth welfare, but, instead, is an employee of some other agency, often a church or a non-profit organization. She will visit the family at their apartment on a regular basis, perhaps twice a week, for a year or two. She will advise family members, accompany them when they need to see the authorities, mediate if problems arise with their landlord or school, and develop new ideas on how to set up their daily routines or even on how to better furnish their apartment. As time progresses, this person will be able to discriminatingly assess the risks and opportunities that the children face and to make concrete suggestions for changes (Wolf, 2011).

What, then, are the quality standards that have a strong influence on how effective this support is? I would like to briefly mention three of them. Our research and the resulting pilot projects have underscored their particular relevance.

But, first, the context of this research should be briefly outlined. At the university, we are primarily engaged in basic research, for example, on the resilience of children in families with substantial liabilities. That is the responsibility of university research. Then, we sometimes suggest pilot projects focused on improving the practice of social work. Political and administrative committees then decide whether these pilot projects are carried out. If so, they need to allocate funds for them; they are not funded with university financing. Then, I can hire employees who work, for example, for a period of two years on such a pilot project. These employees are often people who earned their degrees in our department with high honors or academic personnel who do not have a permanent position. They can use the findings from their pilot project within the context of their doctorate work. A substantial part of my own work is to provide guidance for the pilot projects and dissertations.

To return to our question once more: what influences how effective the family support through social work is? A key issue is whether one succeeds in establishing a relationship of trust. Often, the people concerned have had bad experiences with the authorities. They are sensitive towards what seems to be a form of interference and control;

they are afraid of having personal information from the core of the family become known to outsiders (Wolf, 2011).

The social worker needs to respect these sensitive areas and take them into consideration; otherwise, the family will isolate itself and can then no longer be helped in a purposeful way. One woman from Tyrol in Austria – where we also supported a research project (Hofer, Lienhart, 2008, p. 3) – expressed this in an interview as follows: “The best professor or doctor doesn’t help a bit, if you have no trust in the people you’re dealing with.” This describes the connection quite precisely. Trust is the necessary foundation; only then is the social worker’s specialized knowledge of import. Without trust, even this specialized knowledge might seem to be more threatening than anything else. Depending on family members’ previous experience, trust can be established quickly, sometimes as early as the very first conversation. But it can also take a considerable amount of time and only develop very gradually. If a fundamental trust has been established, then even factors involving monitoring can be tolerated, or direct coaching procedures can have positive effects. A further consequence can be that actively proposed new suggestions for transforming family life are adopted. But if trust has not yet been established and the social worker already makes attempts at monitoring, the results are negative. The family goes into seclusion; a constructive form of contact becomes increasingly difficult; the children’s situation demonstrates no sustainable improvement.

A further key category concerns whether the problems that parents have are also dealt with or only the problems that parents cause. If the message given to the parents simply amounts to: “You need to function in better ways for your children. You’re doing this wrong and that wrong. Your poor child is suffering from all of this and cannot develop properly” – then we find only negative outcomes.

The children’s situation can also be improved by providing support for the adults. The better they can cope with their general problems in life, the more they can help their children. If the adults find the social worker to be interested in their difficulties and competent at helping to solve their problems, then the social worker’s influence

will also be greater in other areas. Having a negative attitude towards the parents while at the same time intending to 'save' the children is extremely counterproductive. Let me emphasize this point: whoever treats parents with disdain cannot provide good social work. This also applies to cases of child neglect and familial violence. This means that much is required of professional support, since negative feelings cannot simply be prevented. Instead, they need to be processed in the context of good teamwork so that they can be reduced to a level that does not make the work impossible.

A third key category has to do with encouraging and activating family members. Sometimes, it is tempting to act in their place and, for instance, deal with the problems involving the authorities. But once the support is terminated, people would no longer have access to this resource. For this reason, it would be better if they can have new experiences of their own effectiveness. Let me explain this with the help of a brief passage from an interview. One client described it this way:

*The best thing for me was to talk to Ms. W. about things. Whenever something had not worked out right with the authorities, I would tell Ms. W. about it and explain the situation to her. Then, she would tell me what I had to do and would ask, 'Should I go along?' But I would say, 'No, it's enough for me if I can talk to you about it. I'll try it out alone.' And then, afterwards, when everything was over, after a couple of days I would call her up again and tell her that everything was OK. And then she was glad that I had managed that all by myself. [Wolf, 2011, p. 192].*

Here, the client remains the force behind a course of action. She has support that she can make use of, but after the conversation she is confident enough to go to the authorities on her own. She is able to do that and she has then accomplished something through her own actions. This is an experience of one's own effectiveness that has repercussions that go beyond the concrete situation. People become active when they hope to be able to reach a goal. If they are simply put under pressure, there are other, negative effects. In this context, we have developed a theory of the processes which provide



encouragement. So much for some of the key categories relevant to the first response. Here, the activities were focused on improving the children's socialization conditions within the family by making changes in the family itself.

## THE SECOND RESPONSE

The second response finds an answer to this question: How can social services improve children's access to resources outside their nuclear family? For some families, a fundamental change in parent-child interaction is improbable. In such cases, parents' unfavorable experiences in their own birth families, a lack of positive family experience or mental illnesses can lead to persistent deficits in childcare. Nonetheless, there may be good reasons not to remove the children from the family and place them in some institution or in a foster family. In constellations of this type, we recommend taking on a different perspective and observing the child in his or her socialization networks and expanding these networks.

### **Socialization networks**

The social worker determines as far as possible together with other family members, especially with the children, which persons are or could become important attachment figures. Such persons can be sought in the following networks:

- ◆ other family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings already leading independent lives, and others;
- ◆ friends, their parents and other relatives who can help to care for the child;
- ◆ attachment figures in the social environment such as neighbors, adults in clubs, church communities, and other institutions;
- ◆ attachment figures from educational and social service institutions such as schoolteachers, kindergarten teachers, nursery school teachers, and others.

Thus, the task of the social worker is to establish, promote, and stabilize such network contacts. This also includes obtaining permission from the parents and constructing an organizational framework, for instance, for weekend visits at the grandparents' or for staying overnight at a good friend's house. Other people who can sometimes be recruited for such tasks include kindergarten employees, schoolteachers, or sports coaches. Alone, none of them can completely replace parental functions, but all of them together can become a network that promotes development. We call them socialization networks, which they become if and when the child can find resources there that are needed for successful development. Since this concept also includes socialization work achieved by peers, it is a broader concept than one limited to education.

These networks or, rather, these functions of networks are especially valuable if the children can find exactly those resources here which are lacking in their families. Generally speaking, the more easily a child has access to places and people that promote development, the better things are. We can think of this as a general way of enhancing life experiences through socialization resources. But in this specific context, the issue is the compensatory function for a particular child. The backdrop to this is provided by the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses involved in the familial field of socialization and the search for a response to the weaknesses through fresh access to resources outside the family which reduce precisely this deficit.

Let us consider a case study that was part of our research. A ten-year-old girl is doing well in school. This astounds the social worker responsible for family support social work because the girl receives no help with her schoolwork at home. Her mother, with her own negative school experience in mind, constantly tells her not to put up with anything at school. No money is provided for school activities ("That really takes the cake – money for school!"). No one at home is interested in the girl's good grades. Nevertheless, the girl likes going to school and is successful there. This is surprising. Apparently, she resists adopting her mother's opinions on school. How does she manage to do this?

In the course of a conversation with the girl, the social worker learns that the girl often (though never for a long time) talks about school with a neighbor who lives two floors above her in the same high-rise building. The girl says of her neighbor, "She is really nice and knows a lot about anything having to do with school. I show her my report card and we're both happy if I've gotten good marks. I'm especially good at math and sports." When the two run into the girl's neighbor on the stairwell, the social worker tells her that the girl has told her their secret and she thanks the older lady for her support.

Here, nothing in the family situation has changed. The girl has discovered the necessary resource herself and makes use of it. The social worker stabilizes the situation a bit, but is also worried about what will happen when the secret becomes known and considers how she might be able to help the mother accept the "division of labor" with her neighbor.

Anja Frindt is one of the people who worked on this research project. She has found concepts and findings of resilience research to explain and theoretically position the search for helpful third parties in family support. She states:

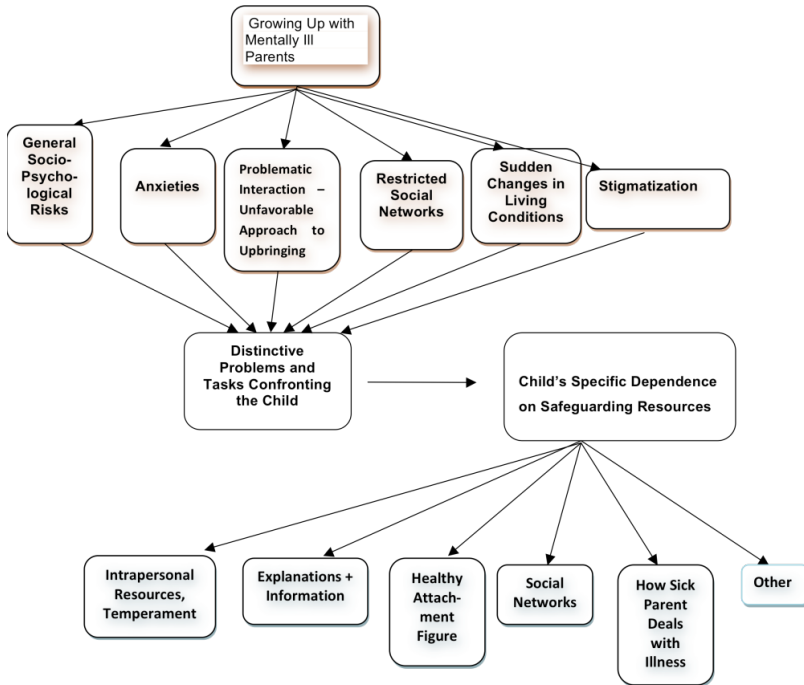
*Research on resilience demonstrates that children who grow up under desolate family circumstances can undergo an astonishingly favorable development under certain conditions. In three areas, researchers have discovered safeguarding factors that can help children to develop surprisingly favorably despite numerous and substantial liabilities in their families: in the child him- or herself, in the family, and in the community. The Kauai Longitudinal Study demonstrates the importance of resources in the community, where certain significance is attributed to friends, relatives, neighbors, and older people. Resilient children tend to rely on such people and to seek advice and comfort from them in times of crisis. For developing a positive perspective on life, resilient children are often helped by friendships with children from stable families and by those children's parents. Often, a further positive role model is a favorite teacher who is interested in the children and presents challenges for them. [Frindt, 2009, p. 256].*

Elsewhere, she has summarized the findings of her qualitative research in this way:

*In the course of our research, we again and again encounter professionals who state that children in these families eagerly absorb the suggestions from such persons. In this way, their childhood needs become fully satisfied. Parents find the efforts to help their children valuable. Suitable third parties assume important educational functions and responsibilities, expand the children's individual freedom, and provide them with ideas beyond what their families could do. These helpful third parties clearly enrich the children's socialization. There are also other areas in which the idea of taking such people into consideration is becoming more and more noticeable: with reference to sponsorship or to family group conferences, at which families negotiate solutions to their problems with the help of a mediator and often with reliance on existing familial networks. [Frindt, 2010, p. 26].*

The search for helpful third parties can also be considered as an expansion of the socialization networks. Then, we think of a child's socialization network as consisting of several sectors. One sector would be the socializing work of other family members, of the parents and of the siblings, a dimension that is often underestimated. In further sectors, access to persons relevant to socialization is made possible for the first time, or made possible again following a disruption, or extended. Thus, the goal is to expand the networks. The child is not simply thought of as a family member. Not all of the socializing work is expected from the parents; in comparison to traditional thinking, this model is less family-centered and less parent-centered. This results in new opportunities for courses of action on the part of social workers.

We were able to demonstrate this very systematically with reference to children who grow up with mentally ill parents. The interconnections are illustrated in the following diagram.



Growing up with mentally ill parents confronts children with distinct problems. Research has shown, for example:

- ◆ that such children often have special fears, for instance, that their parents might hurt themselves;
- ◆ that the type of upbringing practiced is often unfavorable (involving sudden and arbitrary changes);
- ◆ that the children’s access to other people is limited;
- ◆ that again and again unforeseeable changes occur (change in location if parents are hospitalized in the psychiatric ward);
- ◆ that the children experience stigmatization.

All of this leads to special liabilities facing the child (Lenz, 2005). A social worker is hardly in a position to prevent such liabilities.

She cannot cure mental illnesses. But in such a situation, a child requires special, safeguarding resources. These can often be provided by the social worker.

We are well-informed that children can deal with the liabilities much better if a person they trust explains the illness to them, discusses with them how they might react, and answers all the questions they might have about the illness, including whether it is hereditary. These sorts of explanations and this type of information and people with whom they can talk about what they experience at home – these are what children require not just a single time, but, instead, on a daily basis. The social worker can see to it that this space in the life of the child is occupied. She can try to find such people in the family's networks, to support them and to reinforce them. If she cannot find anyone there who could complete this task reliably and on a regular basis, then she will have to do this herself. A good social worker can manage to do this. But when the support program is over, the child has no more access to her and is on his or her own again. That is not a favorable outcome. For this reason, contact to people who can remain long-term is much better.

The statements illustrate additional resources that have been confirmed by empirical research:

- ◆ access to a healthy attachment figure inside or outside the family;
- ◆ good contacts to other children. These allow for experiences that can relativize and compensate some of the liabilities. These contacts can quickly be terminated, either because the children are ashamed because of their parents or do not want to leave them alone. In such cases, the social worker needs to provide support;
- ◆ in cooperation with the psychiatric specialists, sometimes the way the sick parent deals with his or her illness can be changed so that the children can better cope with the resulting problems.

I hope to have clarified this second response with the example of children of mentally ill parents. The children remain in their family,

although developmental conditions are limited and fundamental changes and improvements are unlikely. But there are additional people involved in caring for the child and in this way some of the limitations can be diminished.

In a very interesting presentation she made at the University of Siegen, Dalija Snieškienė reported that children are sometimes left without anyone to provide care for them by parents who permanently settle in a different country and start a new life there. Of course, this is a significant liability for the children. It would be particularly interesting to investigate how children cope with this situation, which resources prove to be especially important as safeguarding factors, and how social workers can effectively offer them support here. This would have to be examined in detail, differentiating between girls and boys and taking into account how old the children are and what kinds of relationships they have to the parents who leave them behind. Then, we would have new insights into socialization networks and, in turn, could develop new ways of providing support through social work. I would strongly endorse such a research project. It would provide us with profound insights into such socialization processes and into the ways children deal with substantial liabilities.

### THE THIRD RESPONSE

The third response to the question of what is to be done when parents cannot provide sufficient care for their children consists in finding the children a new place to live. This might be a home or a different family. There are many advantages to finding a different family that is suitable. Such families are especially appropriate for allowing young children to feel at home. But the families then need to be well prepared and require professional guidance and support (Schofield, Beek, Sargent, 2000; Biehal, 2010). Otherwise, the risk of breakdown is high and a positive development of the children is in danger.

Finally, the advantages to having children cared for by a foster family in comparison to institutionalization can be briefly outlined here. In a new family, a long-term home for the children can be provided and

deep-rooted emotional relationships can develop. Under favorable conditions, children can develop a stable and reliable attachment to adults who can fulfill parental functions for them on a long-term basis. The conditions surrounding their socialization here are much more similar to other forms of socialization within society at large, while large-scale institutions provide very different living and learning conditions. In particular, younger children with more long-term needs for care and who still lack close relationships can often develop favorably in foster families. Nevertheless, there are risks involved in growing up in foster care. Hence, it is important to develop an efficient foster care system in which professionals can provide the necessary support for children and their foster families.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, then, we have seen how professional social services can help a society to find an ethically sound response that embraces the latest research findings to the question: What can we do if parents cannot bring up and appropriately care for their children? The three responses are as follows:

1. Social services can improve the living and developmental conditions within the family by advising the parents and stimulating changes in their educational roles with beneficial effects.
2. They can improve the children's developmental conditions by providing better access to persons outside the nuclear family and promoting socialization networks.
3. They can locate a different family as a temporary or long-term alternative to the biological family and support the foster family so that the children now have new developmental opportunities.

For every individual case, it is necessary to determine which response is best for which children and which family at which particular point in time.



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