

# When Children Weep: Integrating Ecological Thinking into Child Welfare

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## Abstract

*Child welfare systems across the country have been continuously criticized for failing to protect at-risk and abused children. It is widely recognized that improvement of child welfare systems requires a multifaceted approach, and some researchers suggest that challenges within the child welfare system are best addressed using a systems or "ecological" perspective. This article outlines important considerations in applying ecological theory in child welfare practice and uses the state of Florida as a case study to illustrate the organizational obstacles that prevent child welfare workers from using an ecological approach in service delivery. The authors conclude with recommendations for how child welfare workers can overcome those obstacles and more effectively integrate the ecological approach into child welfare practice.*

## Introduction

Throughout the United States, child abuse and neglect cases have become the focus of media attention. Children abused by their parents, maltreated by foster parents, or misplaced by child welfare systems have been identified by critics as evidence that child welfare systems designed to protect children are failing (Vieth, 2006; Mullings, Marquart, & Hartley, 2004; Donnelly & Oates, 2000). The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect found that children are being abused frequently and seriously (Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996). In 2004, out of an estimated 3 million reported child abuse and neglect cases in the United States, approximately 872,000 children were verified as victims of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Although child welfare systems

across the country are being scrutinized and criticized, sometimes harshly, it is important to recognize that addressing the needs of children in protective care is a complex task that involves a myriad of helping professionals and organizations. For children subjected to both family problems and an impaired protective system, the sometimes tragic results can range from medical, physical, social, and developmental problems to (in severe cases) death (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006).

The struggle of child welfare systems to respond to the challenges they face is not a new phenomenon. This problem has made national headlines and spurred public discomfort for decades (Child Welfare League, 2006a, 2006b). In the 21st century, child welfare workers and other helping professionals have to consider the special needs of the increasing numbers of abused children and their families (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). Researchers express concern about the vulnerability of children in our society, and especially the fragility of those children who need protection from troublesome family dysfunctions if they are to reach optimal development and functioning (Janzen, Harris, Jordan, & Franklin, 2006). Family challenges, such as divorce, illness, crime, societal violence, poverty, and poor parenting, can have tremendously negative impacts during the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. Critics of child welfare systems assert that children requiring safe and nurturing environments are frequently failed by a system that is overloaded with cases, inadequately staffed, and lacking in sufficient resources and staff training (Zell, 2006; Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007). Other

critics identify greater funding as the way to improve child welfare services (Child Welfare League of America, 2006a). Despite the challenges they face, child welfare systems around the country continue to provide services aimed at protecting children, and strive to offer the necessary services to address this population's needs.

The authors recognize that improvement of child welfare systems in the United States requires a multifaceted approach that examines all aspects of the system(s). They agree with some researchers who argue that challenges within these systems can best be addressed using a systems or *ecological* perspective that takes into consideration the interaction within and between various systems in a child's life (Crittenden, 1992; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). This article is intended to help child welfare workers become familiar with ecological theory components that can be utilized in assessments and interventions with high-risk and abused children and their families. Herein we present various aspects of the ecological perspective that can guide service delivery in child welfare; to do so, we use Florida as an example, a state with rapid population growth of 11.3% between 2000 and 2005, as compared to an overall population growth for the country as a whole of only 5.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), and with a child welfare system in need of improvement. Specifically, we encourage child welfare workers to provide services that assess and address the micro, mezzo, and macro factors of a high-risk or abused child's ecology. The authors describe challenges faced by workers in Florida's child welfare system as examples of obstacles that prevent integration of the ecological approach into service delivery and conclude with recommendations for practitioners who wish to use this perspective.

## Ecological Theory

### *Concepts for Understanding Child Maltreatment*

Unlike other theories or frameworks that use a linear approach, ecological thinking:

- focuses on person-environment exchanges
- recognizes that many individuals and systems contribute to the challenges faced by children and families in the child welfare system
- emphasizes the important interplay that occurs over time among these individuals and systems (Germain & Gitterman, 1996).

As a form of systems theory, the ecological perspective can help child welfare workers identify, assess, understand, and address the complex dynamics and interactions between the at-risk or abused child and her or his environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The existing literature on child abuse recognizes that this multifaceted problem requires a framework that addresses all the contributing factors from a systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Garbarino & Barry, 1997; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Psychosocial problems—including domestic violence, parental psychopathology, alcoholism, poor parenting, and drug use—have been cited as contributing factors in child maltreatment and thus require attention from an ecological perspective (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980). According to ecological thinking, child maltreatment results not only from problems at the micro level, but also in large part from difficulties across support systems and resources (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978). Addressing these contributing problems while protecting the child is important in effective child welfare service delivery.

According to the linear approach found in other theories, such as cognitive behaviorism, it may be assumed that change

can be made primarily within the individual, without addressing or changing the other systems that are affecting the individual's situation (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). In contrast, by focusing on the ecology of the child's world, the child welfare worker is able to influence many systems, identify the various resources needed, and begin to implement interventions for each of the systems (i.e., child, family, community, school) affecting the child. American culture tends to be linear and individualistic, and consequently research surrounding child abuse and neglect has frequently focused on the dyadic relationship of parent-child, victim-perpetrator, and therapist-client (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978). It is tempting to say that because the parent abused the child, therefore the parent needs to be fixed, the parent is the perpetrator, the child is the victim, and the therapist is going to fix the client. This, however, is linear thinking. The ecological approach to child protection seeks to understand the interplay between the child and all the systems affecting the child and society (Garbarino, 2000), by assessing the interactions among individual, family, community, and societal factors and their effects on a child's well-being and development (Wright, 2004). When child abuse or neglect is present, certainly changes must be made on the part of the individual parent; however, from the ecological perspective, other essential questions must also be asked, including:

- What is going on with other parts of the systems that affect the child's life?
- How does each system contribute to or help change the problem?
- What can be changed? (rather than "Who can be changed?") (Germain & Gitterman, 1996)

During the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner (1979) introduced his Ecological Systems Theory, which outlined various contextual systems affecting child development. These four systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems) are all

considered powerful shaping contributors in children's lives. *Microsystem* refers to settings in which the child is directly involved, such as family, school, or child-care environments (Garbarino, 2000). It is in these settings that the child actively interacts with others and develops. Others include as a microsystem the child's own individual needs, personality, and abilities, as manifested in the child's unique biological and genetic makeup (Boyd & Bee, 2006). Microsystems should be assessed over time, because, like individuals, they change over time (Garbarino, 2000). A *mesosystem* consists of the relationships between the microsystems in which the child is an active participant (Garbarino, 2000). Mesosystems may include agencies designed to treat and prevent child abuse, school systems, social work agencies, and hospitals. A child is impacted by and also impacts these systems. An *exosystem* is a system that affects the child even though he or she does not have a direct role and is not an active participant in that system (Garbarino, 2000). Examples of exosystems include the parents' workplace, funding agencies, the court system, state legislatures, and policy-making entities.

For example, a child's home environment may be directly impacted by and impoverished if a parent's workplace is stressful, lays the parent off, or requires long hours (Garbarino, 2000). Changes in state legislative funding that affect child abuse prevention programs are examples of how an exosystem may place children at risk for abuse. Conversely, when funding for child abuse prevention programs is available, abuse rates are more likely to decrease. The term *macrosystem* refers to the "general organization of the world" (Garbarino, 2000, p. 84). This includes the values, beliefs, expectations, and traditions of the child's culture (or cultures). An example of how a macrosystem may affect children and families is an ethnic group's underutilization of formal institutional services that have the potential to act as additional supports or resources for an at-risk family. Instead,

cultural values may dictate that families seek informal, and perhaps less effective, supports that do not help to protect the family or the child (Zambrana, 1995). The importance of neighborhood or community in child maltreatment has been well documented (Garbarino, 2001). Children from impoverished neighborhoods with high rates of crime and violence may be at "high risk" of maltreatment; therefore, an awareness of influences and interventions at this level is critical. An important aspect in preventing child abuse and its recurrence is the strengths perspective, at the micro level (with the child), mezzo level (family), and macro level (policy).

Critics of the ecological perspective question the conceptual usefulness of the framework (Wakefield, 1996), asserting that it lacks empirical support and is a perspective rather than a formal theory. However, as noted earlier, both Bronfenbrenner and Garbarino have amassed evidence in support of the ecological perspective. Moreover, because it offers a model for identifying the various systemic needs and influences on the child and all the related systems, the ecological perspective is a valuable tool for child welfare workers. Finally, the ecological approach as a form of systems theory has a lot in common with social work's "biopsychosocial" or "person-in-environment" frameworks (Crosson-Tower, 2004), in that the overall goal of the ecological approach is to understand and improve the person-in-environment fit, while recognizing the interplay among various individuals and systems.

Two central constructs of the ecological approach are adaptation, or the individual's ability to adapt to the environment; and coping, or the individual's ability to deal with and overcome a problem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner (1986, 1989), an individual's resiliency in adapting to risks presented by the environment depends on the number and nature of the relationships

that exist between the individual and the environment. The quality and nature of these relationships can serve as factors protecting against child maltreatment (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For example, a child may find some balance for the negative effects of parental maltreatment in a teacher who takes a special interest in validating the child and fostering the child's self-esteem. It is natural to think of adaptation as always being positive. However, in the context of abuse, adaptation can take the form of a child simply accepting the abuse as part of normal life, believing that the abuse is deserved or inevitable, and not reporting it.

A number of components influence adaptation in relation to social integration, such as the nature of the environment itself (high or low risk). For example, poverty is associated with a significantly elevated risk of child maltreatment and other forms of violence (Garbarino & Barry, 1997); however, studies have indicated that two economically similar neighborhoods may have different rates of child maltreatment (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Deccio, Horner, & Wilson, 1994). For example, Deccio, Horner, and Wilson (1994) found that in a high-risk neighborhood, the unemployment rate was three times greater than that in a low-risk neighborhood. In addition, they found that a greater percentage of families in the low-risk neighborhood had been in their homes for more than five years, were more likely to have a telephone, and were more likely to be employed. The individuals in the low-risk neighborhood had a more "stable" environment, more resources, and more support systems that included friends and neighbors (Garbarino & Barry, 1997).

#### *A Practice Model: The Life Model*

Bronfenbrenner (1986) emphasized that all environments and systems affect human development. Germain and Gitterman (1996) went on to expand the ecological perspective to a practice approach they termed the Life Model. The role of the Life Model in terms of practice is to "elevate the level of fit between

people and their environments” (Germain & Gitterman, 1996, p. 26). The primary goals when implementing the Life Model in practice are:

- to alleviate life stressors by helping people draw on personal and environmental resources for effective coping
- to influence the social and physical environmental forces to be responsive to the individual’s needs.

More recently, others have actively applied the ecological framework to understanding the needs of children and families that come to the attention of child welfare systems (Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006; Garbarino & Barry, 1997). For example, removing a child without addressing the needs of the child’s microsystem (family members), including concrete needs (i.e., food, shelter, and protection) and mental health needs (i.e., love, nurture, and emotions), is no longer considered good child welfare practice. If the needs of the microsystem are not addressed and the child is returned, the chance of maltreatment recurrence increases dramatically (Lipien & Forthofer, 2004). Howe (1983) and Maluccio (1981) discuss using an ecological approach in permanency planning, and emphasize the importance of the interactionist perspective in assessing and moving families toward permanency planning. Permanency planning can best be achieved when all the systems affecting the child have been assessed and interventions are applied where needed. Regarding work with families in foster care, Howe (1983) points out the influence of theoretical perspectives and fundamental attribution error on assessing and understanding child abuse, returning the child to the family, and finding an appropriate placement.

In the ecological approach, an individual is assessed not only according to personal attributes and experiences, but also within the context of his or her social and everyday environment. For example, a maltreated child is viewed more accurately

when an assessor considers the concrete needs of the family, the neighborhood influences, and the systemic educational, economic, and cultural factors that directly or indirectly impact the child’s well-being (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). The essence of the ecological approach is keeping a broad rather than narrow view of the problem and recognizing that abuse may be the result of a combination of factors related to the child, the parent, and the environment (Howe, 1983). Following this perspective, an overt problem such as child physical abuse may exist because of and within the context of many other factors, such as substance abuse, mental illness, poverty, and discrimination. It is important that child welfare workers be aware of the various ecological factors that place a child at risk (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In the following section, we briefly describe some of these characteristics, as related to the child, the parent or family, and the community.

## Children Most at Risk of Abuse

Certain child characteristics are associated with an increased risk of abuse. These characteristics include being under the age of six, with infants or toddlers being especially at risk (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006; Osofsky, 2007). Younger, preschool-age children are not able to defend themselves from abuse, and may lack the verbal ability to report maltreatment. Younger children who have multiple caregivers may be exposed to different parenting and disciplinary styles, some of which may not be developmentally appropriate and may result in maltreatment of the preschool child.

Research suggests that children with difficult temperaments, developmental delays, or disabilities are at increased risk of abuse (Westcott & Jones, 1999; Howe, 1983). How the child welfare system manages, responds to, or serves children with special needs is paramount to the child’s future development—yet there is little available research focused on improving worker knowledge and skills related to vulnerable children with

disabilities (Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2006). Child disabilities may be overlooked as factors contributing to parenting challenges and possible child maltreatment. The National Symposium on Abuse and Neglect of Children with Disabilities (1995) reported that one of the ways social service systems could be improved would be to train workers on disabilities (in addition to improving interagency collaboration and coordination). Recent research indicates that although collaboration does seem to be occurring, both formally and informally, the majority of agencies do not have a written policy relating to service delivery to individuals with disabilities (Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2006).

Interventions using an ecological perspective should be developed to ensure that all children who are being abused or mistreated, including those with disabilities, receive the best possible care. Intervention models can include components at the micro level, such as identifying at-risk behaviors in psychosocial assessments; at the mezzo level, by providing family interventions focused on effective parenting skills and anger management; and at the macro level, by developing productive collaborations between agencies. Agency policies (which should be written) will be most effective if they address all risk factors of abuse and include characteristics and needs that require special caretaking, such as mental health and behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and medical conditions.

According to nationally available data, in addition to age and disability, children are also victimized disproportionately by race. African-American children were found to be maltreated almost twice as often as European-American children (victimization rates = 19.9 and 10.7 per 1000, respectively; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Many studies have discussed the reasons for this disproportionate representation (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Gurak, Smith, & Goldson) most recently asking whether

the disproportion is caused by racial bias in risk assessment (Brissett-Chapman, 1997), underreporting among white client populations (Lane, Rubin, Monteith, & Christian, 2002), discriminatory child welfare policies and systemic deficits (Lawrence-Webb, 1997; Woodley Brown & Bailey-Etta, 1997), the culture of poverty (McRoy, 2004), or institutionalized racism in the larger culture (Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, Needell, & Park, 1996).

### *Parental/Family Characteristics of Parents Who Were Maltreated as Children*

Parents who have a history of physical abuse may be at higher risk for abusing their own children (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). It is easy for a clinician to see a red flag when a parent discloses his or her own history of physical abuse; however, care should always be taken not to assume that this individual is an abusive parent. The relevance of the past abuse may lie in the behavioral aspects associated with abuse, such as learned behaviors that parents may utilize when disciplining children (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). Volatile home environments are risk factors for abuse (Slep-Smith & O'Leary, 2005). Appel and Holden (1998) estimated that in 40% of violent families, the violence consists of both partner abuse and child abuse. The probability of co-occurring child abuse is directly related to frequency of partner abuse (Ross, 1996).

Children who witness violence in the home are 15 times more likely to be physically abused or neglected (Knickerbocker, Heyman, Slep, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2007; Mullings, Marquart, & Hartley, 2004; McAlister-Groves, 2002; Henderson, 2000). There is an abundance of data on the relationship between intimate partner violence and child abuse (Edelson, 1999; Lyon, 1998; Shepard & Raschick, 1999; Little & Kaufman Kantor, 2002).

To illustrate using a recent case, Gilberta Estrada, a 25-year-old mother of four from Texas, hanged her children and herself. Three of the children, aged 5, 3, and 2, died.

Ms. Estrada's sister, who found all of them in a closet in their mobile home, rescued the eight-month-old infant. Ms. Estrada had a restraining order against her abusive partner, the father of her infant daughter. In understanding this case from an ecological perspective, a child welfare worker would consider the mother's depression, the domestic violence, the impact of a marital separation, the father's violent history, and the family's financial struggles ("Authorities Rule," 2007).

This is just one example of how intimate partner abuse is related to child abuse. Studies have shown that women who are abused by their partners are more likely than other women to abuse their children (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1995). This is not to say that the victim of the abuse is always the one who abuses the children. Often both the parent (usually the mother) and the children are being abused by the battering spouse or intimate partner. In fact, it is usually not until the children become targets of abuse that the mother seeks protection for herself and the children.

In a study with a national sample of both men and women who had been in abusive relationships, the frequency of each parent's abuse of their children was examined. The study found that 24% of the battered women abused their children more than twice a year, compared to 50% of male batterers who abused their child more than twice a year (Saunders, 1994). The study concludes that although both battered women and their partners are at risk of abusing their children, men who batter are at greater risk. These families may have multiple problems, such as in Ms. Estrada's case, where intimate partner abuse, mental health problems, and poverty were all present. In that case, although the abuser was removed from the situation, only this one component of the "system" was addressed, with devastating results. According to the ecological perspective, presence of the abuser is just one of many factors that can contribute to child maltreatment.

The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) found that single parenthood was a risk factor related to child abuse and neglect. This may be a direct result of inadequate social and practical support networks within these families (Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996). Single-parent families are systems with many variations: they may arise when there has been a marital separation or divorce, a spouse has died, or a person becomes a single parent by choice. Single-parent families may sometimes face multiple problems, mostly revolving around loss or stress, such as economic issues due to low income or lack of child support, the need to juggle work and home responsibilities, shortage of affordable child care, lack of educational opportunities, and (usually) the lack of another adult in the home to share parenting responsibilities. Single parents may experience role overload as they try to fulfill the roles of both parents (Janzen et al., 2006; Aronson-Fontes, 2005). These families are often socially isolated, which exacerbates emotional problems in both the parent and the children. Social isolation may also result in a lack of contact with positive role models and reciprocal helping relationships (Garbarino, 1985). All of these problems affect the parent-child relationship. Given the enormous stressors and obstacles they face, it is easy to see why single-parent families are at risk of child abuse and neglect.

Researchers recommend that in assessing single-parent families, the child welfare worker explore the family's relationships with broader social systems, such as schools, church, welfare, and legal systems, and specifically determine if any of these systems acts as a support mechanism or protective factor for the family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002). Equally important is exploration of the extended family system that in some cultures plays a major supportive and buffering role. For example, in Latino families, extended family members may take children into their households for periods of time, providing

an unofficial respite period for overloaded and overstressed parents (Aronson-Fontes, 2005; Zambrana, 1995).

### *Community Characteristics That Elevate Risk of Child Maltreatment*

It is sometimes easier for child welfare workers to address the risk factors for abuse on a micro level. However, intervening at the mezzo or macro levels can help to ameliorate certain other risk factors. Intervention research supports the inclusion of parents and larger systems in treating children with behavioral problems (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). Interventions such as parent training and parent anger management groups that include the adults in the child's social ecology are more effective than child-focused interventions alone (Weisz, Weiss, Han, Granger, & Morton, 1995). A child who is exposed to violence in the neighborhood or school is at higher risk of developing behavioral problems, consequently putting her or him at risk of abuse. Early intervention at the school or community level is likely to have a far-reaching effect, as opposed to working with the individual child after the behavioral problems arise.

The NIS-3 study found that poverty in communities was directly correlated with the incidence of maltreatment; predominantly neglect (Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996). Studies have indicated that assistance in meeting basic needs, as opposed to traditional counseling interventions, may be of more benefit in averting neglect (Chaffin, Bonner, & Hill, 2001). The "Welcome to the State of Poverty" welfare simulation (Chapman & Gibson, 2006) applies an ecological perspective for participants by helping community citizens role-play what it is like to be in a lower socioeconomic status. Appreciating the challenges that are associated with lower-income communities may reduce the negative perceptions resulting from fundamental attribution error (Howe, 1983), and may enable the general community and child welfare workers to understand the various factors

inherent in the lower socioeconomic status of individuals who seek and/or require child welfare services.

Another important aspect of community is the cultural context of the family. Understanding the various phases of the family life cycle, trends in family configuration, family stressors, family boundaries, and family culture is an important aspect of integrating an ecological approach. Child welfare workers should carefully assess the family's life cycle and the stresses and tensions that result from the family's transition from one stage to another. For example, the second phase of the family life cycle, known as the *expansion phase*, involves an increase in family size with the addition of young children and later adolescents. During the earliest phases of this stage, the young couple or single mother is managing a new child—in many cases, a first child. Depending on the case, this family or single parent who comes to the attention of the child welfare system may experience financial struggles, face child-care challenges, lack a support system, need adequate housing, lack parenting knowledge, struggle with mental health problems, live in an unsafe community, and/or have other children with behavioral or medical challenges. Using an ecological approach requires that the child welfare worker assess the imminent risk to the children, identify all the stressors and how they are contributing to the high-risk child abuse situation, make the appropriate referrals, provide good case management, and offer follow-up services. Similarly, a family system with an adolescent child at risk for child abuse presents the child welfare worker with opportunities not only to examine the child abuse and parenting patterns, but also to acknowledge and integrate the continually changing and challenging developmental needs of adolescents that may increase the risk of child abuse (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996).

Cultural identity, rituals, values,



and behaviors are all important aspects of family systems and influence how families communicate with child welfare professionals (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Curren, 1984). While it is not the intention of this article to provide an extensive review of these important cultural components, the authors wish to identify a few useful considerations for working with diverse family systems. Across the United States, child welfare workers provide services to diverse families that include single-parent families, extended families, minority families, and gay- or lesbian-headed families. Understanding this diversity, as well as each family's unique makeup, is important when assessing the child and the family system. For example, in many minority or ethnic families, the extended family plays an important role that can provide support ranging from supply of necessary tangible items to emotional support (Zambrana, 1995). Therefore, the child welfare worker will need to consider the appropriateness of involving extended family as an additional source of support.

Diversity in languages spoken by families is another important factor in child welfare service delivery (Cheung, Nelson, Advincula, Cureton, & Canham, 2005). Family members often find it easier to express difficult content and feelings in their native language. This has implications for the use of interpreters when child welfare workers do not speak the dominant language of the child or the family. A primary problem in assisting families in which adults do not speak English is the use of children as interpreters; when an agency resorts to this dangerous strategy, the non-English-speaking parent may feel undermined and experience discomfort with the role reversal (Zambrana, 1995).

Currently heightened awareness of disparities in health and mental health has led to an increase in studies examining the relationship between child maltreatment and ethnicity (Elliot & Urquiza, 2006). The growing body of empirical evidence

includes information on ethnic differences in disclosure (Meston, Heiman, Trapnell, & Carlin, 1999), definitions of abuse (Collier, McClure, Collier, Otto, & Polloi, 1999), and the recognition of culturally influenced methods of corporal punishment (Terao, Borrego, & Urquiza, 2001). Research surrounding ethnicity and physical abuse has focused on childrearing and disciplinary techniques among ethnic groups. For example, the percentage of incidents of physical abuse fell between 8 and 17% across ethnic groups, but the rates for African-Americans and Asian-Americans were a bit higher (15.3% and 16.6%, respectively; Administration for Children and Families, 2007).

Evidence suggests that there are ethnic differences in parenting which may or may not be abusive, but which may sometimes lead authorities to make a direct correlation between ethnicity and child abuse. This information is best interpreted with caution, as the relationship between child abuse and ethnicity does not occur in isolation, and can co-exist with other types of abuse (Elliot & Urquiza, 2006). Differences in parenting are influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, acculturation, learned parenting styles, and neighborhood variables. Further research is needed to assess the interplay among the biopsychosocial variables related to abuse.

It is important to consider how ethnic groups interact with helping organizations or their representatives, who may sometimes be perceived as outsiders by a minority ethnic community. A trusting relationship will enable the child welfare worker to adequately assess the situation and deliver quality services. However, developing a trusting relationship may be challenging, and is affected by how the media portrays the child welfare system and the client's previous experiences with child protective agencies (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Zambrana, 1995). Although child welfare workers cannot be knowledgeable about all cultures, it is recommended that they seek

out additional training and guidelines on cultural competency that will prove useful in assessing, understanding, and engaging diverse family systems (Narayan, 2002).

Child welfare systems are intended to protect children by helping to meet the basic physical and emotional needs of victims who have been removed from their homes or who are at risk of being removed, and by helping parents to develop more effective parenting skills. These systems are also charged with addressing the complex needs of the child's family, finding stable and loving homes for those children who cannot return to their families, and helping to prevent initial and subsequent abuse and neglect in at-risk families. The expectations of child welfare systems outlined in this description are daunting, at the very least, and often overwhelming, especially given the ubiquitous problems of inadequate funding and staffing. It is no wonder, then, that child welfare systems throughout the country are faced with high-profile criticism, class-action lawsuits, and a demand for major overhauls due to their inability to meet their goals.

As if the task of protecting children in and of itself were not challenging enough, child welfare agencies are facing severe organizational problems that impede use of the ecological approach with at-risk or abused children and their families. Such problems include large amounts of required reports and paperwork, increasingly complex cases, staff shortages, high caseloads, high worker turnover, and low salaries (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). These problems hinder the delivery of comprehensive, quality services that could address the various ecological factors causing or contributing to the abuse situation. We illustrate these problems using the state of Florida as an example.

## Case Study: Florida

### *Child Maltreatment in Florida*

Florida has one of the highest child victimization rates in the country (35.3 per 1,000 children in 2003). In 2003, there were approximately 250,000 reports of child abuse and neglect in Florida, of which about 140,000 were substantiated as cases. In 2003, 101 children died in Florida as a result of abuse or neglect (Child Welfare League of America, 2006b). For the period 1999–2004, the Florida Child Death Review Team reported that of the 275 children who died of child abuse or neglect, 227 or 83% were under the age of six (Florida Child Abuse Death Review, 2004, 2007). The same Review Team reported that 95 and 171 children died of child abuse and neglect in 2005 and 2006, respectively, and determined that 80% of the deaths could have been prevented. In the 2007 report, the Death Review Team included the following data on child drowning and reported that Florida had the third highest overall unintentional drowning death rate of children in the United States in the five years from 1999 to 2003 (p. 7). In 2003, Florida surpassed California, the most populous state in the nation, in the number of children aged one to four who drowned. Florida overwhelmingly has the highest unintentional drowning rate in the nation for the one- to four-year-old age group, with a rate of 8.38 per 1,000,000 (p. 29).

Unfortunately, the Florida child welfare system has received widespread negative publicity related to its inability to properly track children in the system, making it easy to forget that thousands of children are protected by the same system. An example of a Florida case that received major media attention involved the system's lack of knowledge that a four-year-old female had been missing from her foster home for a year; to this day, she has not been found, and is feared dead (Hunt, 2006). In another infamous case, various child welfare workers missed the opportunity to remove a six-year-old girl from her abusive

home before she was killed by her father (Schneider, 2007). Another example exposed a Florida child welfare worker's falsification of information about a supposed home visit to a child on the same day that the child was killed ("DCF Caseworker," 2002). Florida has the third highest foster care population in the nation, behind California and New York (Pew Commission, 2004). Each day, about 30,000 of Florida's children are in out-of-home care awaiting reunification or adoption. There are a disproportionate number of African-American children in the system: about 42% of Florida foster children are African-American, yet Florida's population is only 21% African-American (Perez, O'Neill, & Gesiriech, 2003).

The Florida Department of Children and Families exemplifies many of the problems found in child welfare agencies across the country: low salaries, high turnover rates, employee burnout, and increasingly complex cases. All of these problems exist within a fragmented system that demonstrates difficulty in communication and collaboration between its own departments, let alone with other community service providers. Certainly, some of these issues arise from unique challenges specific to Florida, such as the competition for service funding between two major vulnerable populations, children and the elderly. Based on the 2000 census, about 23% of Florida's population is less than 18 years of age, whereas about 18% of the population is 65 years of age or older. This requires that the state, despite limited revenue sources, simultaneously fund quality services to two diverse population groups.

Before we examine how child welfare workers can adopt ecological theory, it is essential to briefly identify the organizational challenges that prevent child welfare workers from using an ecological approach. The authors of this article, who are familiar with Florida's frequently criticized system, herein briefly identify several organizational problems

that contribute to the difficulties child welfare workers experience in integrating an ecological perspective when assessing cases and providing service delivery.

### *Large Caseloads, Low Salaries*

There are many reasons why large child welfare systems break down. Too often, the challenges are blamed on employees, who are easy scapegoats for systemic ills. For example, the Florida media has initiated finger-pointing that has resulted in overemphasis on a few problem employees. Some problem areas attributed to employee performance have included lack of or inappropriate documentation and recordkeeping, disappearance of files, lack of home visits by employees, lack of training, and criminal backgrounds. In 2002, Department of Children and Families officials cautioned the public to consider that only 183 employees out of a total 24,000 had been found to have previous criminal records (Kidwell, Grotto, & Figueras, 2002).

While no one can deny that all systems have some employees who are lacking in training, skills, or judgment, most child welfare employees are committed to their jobs of monitoring and protecting children. Other organizational challenges, such as large caseloads, inadequate computer tracking systems, and lack of time to work closely with foster care parents or biological parents may prevent workers from using an ecological approach in child welfare.

Throughout the United States, child welfare workers labor under large caseloads that prevent them from making the consistent and ongoing monitoring visits necessary to ensure the safety of children in the system. The same high caseloads prevent child welfare workers from working closely with all of the systems in a child life's (including the family system, extended family members, and community organizations). The average number of cases per worker is typically between 24 and 31 children, though some caseloads are as high as 100 children per staff member (National

Association of Social Workers, 2007). These overwhelming caseloads are accompanied by low salaries and frequent turnover in staff, which can result in inadequate and ineffective monitoring of the children in this system (Child Welfare League of America, 1990).

In 2002 after a two day search Florida authorities found the beaten body of a two year old, Alfredo Montez in the woods. After soiling his pants, his babysitter retaliated by killing the child. The child's case worker was charged with falsifying records after she falsely reported that she had checked on the boy the very day he was killed. The caseworker had a caseload of 50 children and earned a salary of \$28,000 a year (Padgett, 2002). Some Florida districts average 66 cases per worker, and family service counselors average 32 to 50 cases (National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, 2002). While this may not sound like much, for each case child welfare workers are expected to monitor children who are already in the system, conduct ongoing assessments, document visits and progress, interface with biological and foster care parents, and provide other needed resources to both the children and the families they serve. This may leave very little time for good-quality, comprehensive assessments and for addressing the daily living, psychosocial, health, and mental health needs of the child. As a result, even less attention may be focused on the child's ecological context, which includes the family system and its individual members. The only way that child welfare workers can provide effective services for their cases in each of these areas is by working additional hours. As a result, it is sometimes easier for child welfare workers to remove the child from immediate danger and to provide only minimal (if any) direct services to the family.

### *Communication and Computer Systems*

Critics of Florida's child welfare services have identified the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) computer record system as an additional problem.

DCF's computer network is not user-friendly, and it is difficult for workers to maneuver through the screens and menus of its software. The Florida computer system does not coordinate with other state systems and does not allow workers to track families that avoid or evade the child welfare system by moving from state to state (Steckler & Chesnutt, 2005). An audit requested by the Florida DCF Secretary discovered that despite the \$230 million and more than 10 years spent on developing it, the department's computer system, known as HomeSafenet, is not an effective way of tracking children either within or out of the state (Steckler & Chesnutt, 2005). When child welfare systems are not able to track families across states, they lack or lose important information on the child's and family's history, ecological risk factors, and other data already obtained by other states; Florida's system is also unable to communicate or coordinate effectively with out-of-state computer systems. The lack of a reliable computerized data-gathering and tracking system prevents workers from developing and maintaining an organized profile of the child's ecological context.

### *Foster Care*

Traditionally, the information gathered on children in the Florida child welfare system has been limited to descriptive statistical data, providing incidence of child abuse and neglect reports in foster homes, group homes, and other institutions (Spencer & Knudsen, 1992). Consequently, only limited data is available for use in assisting child welfare systems across the country to improve service delivery and protect children. For example, a study conducted by McFadden and Ryan (1991) examined child abuse and neglect allegations against foster care parents in the early 1980s, but did not report the numbers of children cared for within the homes; therefore, rates of abuse and neglect per 100 or 1,000 children cannot be determined. As of September 30, 2005, there were 513,000 children in foster care in the United States, with a disproportionately high number of

those in Florida (29,312, according to the Administration for Children and Families, 2007). Like other states, Florida has only limited data available on children in foster care, and few studies examine the problems and successes of children placed in out-of-home care in Florida. However, the high number of children in the Florida foster care system implies that child welfare workers have many ecological systems to assess and bear a huge responsibility for providing the services called for by each system.

## Implications and Recommendations

Currently, many services for abused children and their families are fragmented, provided incompletely, and do not utilize an ecological approach to address the child's or family's problems. Agencies that work with victims of child abuse need to work with the family as a whole to address intimate partner abuse, substance abuse, and mental health issues, as well as problems arising out of poverty and the other social factors that in many cases are linked to child abuse. The authors suggest that child welfare assessments include comprehensive information on the overall functioning of the family system, and specific information on how each family member may be a protective or risk factor in the child maltreatment.

The current literature reports rates, patterns, frequency, and correlations of recurrence, but these studies do not provide any adequate theoretical frameworks to explain why child abuse and neglect reoccur (English, Marshall, & Orme, 1999). There is a need for better theory in the field, and it is hoped that the ecological approach and the Life Model will contribute to remedying this problem. Of equal concern is the lack of evidence-based research on the efforts to privatize child welfare systems, primarily because privatization is still in the early stages (Humphrey, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2006).

Recognizing the importance of prevention services, advocacy for state and

federal funding for these programs and public education should continue to be at the forefront of child welfare practice. It is essential that child welfare workers and other child advocates draw attention to the complexities and challenges of providing services to at-risk or abused children.

Public education and awareness at the macro level may be the most effective way to influence widespread change in child abuse prevention (Asawa, Hansen, & Flood, 2008). Prevent Child Abuse America (PCAA) has been a leading force in the United States in developing and implementing community-based efforts aimed at focusing more attention on the problem of child maltreatment. The media have proven to be a valuable tool for mobilizing such community prevention efforts. Through the use of television, radio, print, and billboards, PCAA has increased awareness of child abuse (Asawa, Hansen, & Flood, 2008). These and many other efforts have resulted in annual public opinion polls that reflect a steady decline in reported rates of aggression and corporal punishment as a form of discipline since 1988 (Daro & Donnelly, 2002). As the Florida chapter of PCAA, the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida helps to strengthen Florida's families by funding research and demonstration projects and disseminating public education on child maltreatment (<http://www.ounce.org/PreventionServices.asp>). Through various programs, training, and consultation efforts, another program, the Child Abuse Prevention Project (CAPP) collaborates with various agencies to increase awareness of child maltreatment and provide services to 16 counties in north central Florida (<https://capp.peds.ufl.edu/>).

At the international level, Turner and Sanders (2006) developed a multilevel parenting and family support program at the University of Queensland in Australia, known as the Triple P (Positive Parenting Program). The overall goal of the program is to promote safe environments, build positive relationships between parents and children, increase emotional and social support, and

normalize parent education, all in an effort to reduce the risk of child maltreatment. What makes this program different from others with the same overall goal is that it incorporates interventions at five levels, ranging from individualized treatment (micro) to group interventions (mezzo) to public seminars (macro) (Asawa, Hansen, & Flood, 2008). The program's success has led to the dissemination and implementation of the Triple P interventions in 14 countries.

## Conclusion

How can child welfare workers and other social service workers use the ecological approach in the assessment and service delivery process? Child abuse and neglect do not occur in a vacuum. The ecological approach provides a framework for the assessment, evaluation, and treatment of children who have been abused or are at risk of abuse. Utilizing an ecological perspective allows child welfare workers to better understand and deal with the complexities of child abuse by focusing not only on the child, but also on the familial, communal, and societal contexts that contribute to or influence the abuse (Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005; Sidebotham, 2001). Effective service delivery can be provided only when child welfare workers consider all the systems and individuals in the child's ecology.

More empirical research is needed to continue evaluating the effectiveness of this approach in child welfare practice. From a practice or direct service delivery perspective, child welfare workers are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

1. Seek training and supervision to become familiar with the ecological approach and its application to child welfare cases.
2. Continue to seek out supervision and training on the identification of child abuse and neglect and the risk and protective factors for all forms of child maltreatment. This is

especially important when making home visits and assessing the child's ecological context.

3. Include an assessment of all the systems (child, family, extended family, community) within the child's ecological context that contribute to or influence abuse and/or neglect of the child.
4. Seek training resources on case record documentation that takes into account documentation of risk and protective factors, an assessment of the ecological systems affecting the child, new psychosocial stressors encountered by the family system, and progress made by the family and child.
5. Identify resources within the child's ecological context that can serve as protective factors or can assist the abused child and his or her family.
6. Seek supervision and peer support to address the vicarious traumatization that may be experienced by child welfare workers. Remember that self-care of the child welfare worker is important.
7. Identify, assess, and integrate cultural factors within the child's and family's ecological context that can be utilized to engage the culturally or racially diverse child and family.
8. Continue to advocate, whenever possible, at all levels for child welfare reform.

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*Shawn Lawrence, PhD, LCSW*, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Central Florida's School of Social Work. Her teaching interests include psychosocial pathology, medications and social work practice, and children's services. Her ecologically focused research emphasizes the development of interventions, prevention, and cognitive-behavioral change strategies aimed at decreasing childhood obesity. She is currently a member of the School Health Advisory Committee in Flagler County, Florida, a committee designed to improve the overall mental and physical health of students in Flagler County. Prior to joining the faculty at the University of Central Florida, Dr. Lawrence was employed as a retention strategist at the Women's Health Initiative, Western New York Vanguard Center. While at the Women's Health Initiative, Dr. Lawrence conducted her dissertation research (The Predictive Factors of Adherence in Participants in the Women's Health Initiative Calcium Vitamin D Study at the Western New York Vanguard Center). Dr. Lawrence's future goals include the creation of a tri-county family-based physical activity / nutrition program with the anticipated outcome of preventing childhood obesity through altering both behaviors and cognitions.

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*Erin Toole, MSW*, served as a graduate research assistant at the School of Social Work in the University of Central Florida and provided research support for this manuscript. She is now focusing her attention on volunteer work in various nonprofit agencies in the Panama City, Florida, area. She is involved in the work of several faith-based support groups and a local pregnancy resource center. Through her volunteer work, conference attendance, and professional contacts, Erin is currently striving to expand her knowledge and skill in counseling adoptive parents, adopted children, and birth mothers who choose adoption for their children.