

SOCIAL SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: A FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the existing services involved in the process of early identification of developmental disabilities and discusses the role of social work at the stages of early identification and early intervention. Research has shown that delays in children's social, emotional, communicative and other developmental skills are closely associated with the family's level of social resources and the intensity of social work support. The purpose of the study is to determine the importance of family-centered social work with families during early childhood, to analyze its impact on children's development and to highlight its advantages compared to problem-oriented and professionally oriented social work models. In addition, the article examines the challenges encountered in the implementation of the family-centered model. All these aspects emphasize the necessity of developing the family-centered model of social work.

Keywords

Family-centered practice, family support services, family-centered social work, early intervention, early detection.

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1. Introduction

The timely identification of developmental delays in children remains a pressing issue in modern times, both from medical and social perspectives. Early identification and early intervention are among the most effective and cost-efficient strategies in addressing disabilities today. This issue is of particular importance not only in countries with a high level of social welfare but also in states such as Azerbaijan, where the institution of social work for children is still in the process of formation.

Studies and observations by specialists in the fields of health and social welfare indicate that early intervention provides multiple advantages for a child's development. The failure to identify developmental disorders at an early age negatively affects children's future social adaptation and educational opportunities. Social and emotional delays and behavioral problems in the preschool years are often linked to negative outcomes such as persistent behavioral difficulties, low social functioning, and academic challenges during school age. As McDonald et al. (2018) note, "A child's inability to participate in various social and play activities adversely affects his or her adaptability and psychological resilience".

Therefore, the early identification and intervention of developmental delays represent some of the most critical tasks facing both the medical and social work systems in any country. Developmental delay is not solely related to medical causes. For example,

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according to research in China, in 2017, approximately 17 million children under the age of five were deprived of their full developmental potential due to risk factors such as child poverty, malnutrition, lack of psychosocial stimulation and inadequate parenting environments (<https://www.unicef.org/china/en/reports/early-childhood-development-ecd>).

This, in turn, leads to an increase in the number of children with disabilities or developmental delays, a rise in the number of social service users, and consequently, a heavier economic burden on the state. Several studies have shown that early intervention services can reduce future costs for children with developmental disabilities and are therefore considered one of the most “cost-effective” and “sustainable” forms of intervention. For instance, a retrospective cohort study conducted by Lai et al. (2013) found that early intervention among children with an IQ below 70 led to improvements in IQ, which in turn reduced the need for special education services. In the United States, where the annual cost of special education per student is around 6,000 USD, this indicates a substantial reduction in public expenditure.

Similarly, a policy review presented by the Australian Institute of Criminology (<https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/crm/crm54>) emphasized that early intervention is a strategy with minimal immediate costs but long-term benefits. It can reduce risks related to youth involvement in crime and early social problems, ultimately leading to lower public spending.

The benefits of early intervention extend beyond the child - it also strengthens family cohesion. Parents and siblings acquire the skills to better understand and support the child, creating a nurturing, empathetic and developmentally supportive environment at home. Equipped with such knowledge and resources, families often become advocates of inclusion and awareness. In these cases, the primary role of social work is to strengthen family resources, provide psychosocial support and coordinate the complex process of intervention aimed at the child’s development. Social workers are often the first professionals to establish contact with the family, assess their situation and identify problems.

In countries where parents’ knowledge and skills regarding child development and parenting are limited, the role of the social worker in the early identification process becomes particularly important. The social worker’s function is not limited to risk assessment but also includes education, family empowerment and intervention coordination. By working directly with families, social workers provide parents with knowledge about children’s physical, emotional and cognitive developmental stages, enhance their ability to recognize early warning signs and develop skills to refer to appropriate services. This is especially vital in rural and regional communities where access to information and resources is limited.

Furthermore, social workers serve as mediators between healthcare, education and social protection institutions, ensuring the integration of the early intervention system. Their goal is not only to address the child’s immediate difficulties but also to empower the family so that they can manage similar situations independently in the future through their own resources and knowledge.

Thus, the active participation of social workers in early identification significantly contributes to the timely detection of developmental problems in children, enhances the effectiveness of early intervention and strengthens the social well-being of families.

Recent international studies have also shown that over the past 15 years, the awareness and formal involvement of social workers in family-centered early intervention

programs for infants and young children at risk of developmental disorders - or already experiencing them - have increased substantially (Malone *et al.*, 2000).

2. Social workers as coordinators of early intervention services

The functional role that social workers can play within early intervention teams and as coordinators of early intervention services is emphasized in various countries through the formal recognition of such professional responsibilities in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (Malone *et al.*, 2000).

Social workers, by observing children's development, assessing the family environment and collaborating with other professionals in early intervention teams, are uniquely positioned to identify potential developmental disabilities. They are often the first to recognize the risk of developmental delay in children growing up in vulnerable families. Numerous studies have shown that poverty, parental substance abuse, malnutrition, and a lack of parental education regarding child development play a decisive role in children's developmental outcomes. For instance, a study conducted by the U.S. Child Protective Services on 1,951 infants revealed that nutritional neglect significantly increased the risk of impairment in cognitive and language abilities (Helton *et al.*, 2018).

Nutritional deficiency and child neglect are typically linked to poverty or parental mental health problems. Financial hardship and psychological stress are among the primary social factors contributing both to parental neglect and to developmental delays in children (Jackson *et al.*, 2000). Poverty - manifested through material deprivation, unemployment and inadequate parenting behaviors such as lack of warmth, physical punishment or excessive screen time - serves as a strong predictor of child neglect (Slack *et al.*, 2004).

It is well-established that such *Adverse Childhood Experiences* (ACEs) have both short-term and long-term negative consequences for child development. Studies indicate that individuals with a higher number of ACEs are disproportionately represented among groups utilizing social services (Frederick *et al.*, 2020). This, in turn, underscores once more the critical role of social workers in early identification and intervention.

Social workers working with vulnerable families assess the child's development within the context of the family, identifying possible developmental delays or disabilities - that is, they conduct *family-oriented assessments*. They also work collaboratively with other professionals such as physicians, psychologists and therapists within multidisciplinary early intervention teams to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the child's needs.

Social workers are also instrumental in identifying resources and potential psycho-social or community-level needs that may affect a child's development - such as access to appropriate childcare or food security - and in providing support to families during the early identification process. After diagnosis, families frequently experience grief and confusion, often unsure about what steps to take next or where to turn for help. In this process, social workers not only provide emotional support but also help families chart a clear roadmap, deliver accurate information and guide parents in understanding their child's condition. They assist families in navigating existing support systems, making informed, evidence-based decisions and connecting with suitable community services or programs.

By equipping parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support their child's development and needs, social workers enhance the family's capacity to cope with challenges. Acting as coordinators of early intervention services,

they ensure that professionals from various disciplines and community resources collaborate efficiently for the well-being of the child and family. At the same time, they empower families and children to participate more actively in daily settings, thus promoting their full inclusion in society.

Social workers adopt a holistic approach to understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by children and their families in daily life. Social work does not operate in isolation; the child is always considered within the context of the family, school and community. In early childhood intervention, social workers are typically part of multidisciplinary teams that include medical professionals, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and early childhood specialists. Within child welfare practice, social work has long occupied a central position in collaborative thinking. As Frost *et al.* (2005) aptly note, social work is “a collaborative profession” - one that seeks to build bridges, mediate and negotiate both among professionals and between professionals and the children and families they serve.

Within the framework of early intervention, social work functions as a bridge connecting children and families with the broader community. This constitutes a multidimensional approach aimed at ensuring the well-being and development of both children and their families.

3. The family-centered model in social work

Approaches employed in social services targeting children and families have undergone significant transformation in recent years. This shift is characterized by a move from the traditional *professional-centered* model toward a more inclusive, collaborative *family-centered* model.

The recognition of the family as the central focus in social work has been on the agenda since the late 20th century. In 1981, Hartman, in her seminal article “*The Family: A Central Focus for Practice*”, wrote that “the family should be considered the primary institution of social service and be included in all helping efforts”.

For a long time, the professional-centered approach dominated both social work and early intervention practices. In this model, the specialist and their expertise occupy the central position, while the family is perceived as a passive recipient of services. Decisions, planning and evaluation are largely conducted by professionals and as a result, the family’s own resources and experiences are often overlooked - thereby undermining the sustainability of interventions. Moreover, the process of empowering families to overcome difficulties rarely occurs within this framework.

Conversely, the family-centered approach recognizes the family as a *key partner* in the child’s development. Within this model, the family is not the “object of the problem” but rather the “subject of the solution”. The relationship between professionals and families is built on the principle of equitable partnership. Decisions are made collaboratively, taking into account the family’s values, cultural context and priorities. Such an approach activates family resources, strengthens parental involvement in the child’s development and enhances sustainability and social well-being.

Research has demonstrated that family-centered services improve children’s socio-emotional development, enhance family relationships and increase overall satisfaction with services (Jimenez-Arberas *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, this model allows professionals to build relationships with families based on mutual trust, thereby increasing the effectiveness of interventions.

Ultimately, the family-centered approach is regarded as a human-centered and partnership-based model within modern social work and early intervention. It acknowledges the unique potential of each family and facilitates the delivery of social services in a sustainable, ethical and contextually responsive manner.

The work of Dunst and his colleagues (2007) has been instrumental in establishing the core principles of the family-centered approach for supporting children and families. The family-centered approach in social work integrates three essential components: it emphasizes strengths rather than deficits, promotes the family's control over choices and resources and fosters collaborative relationships between parents and professionals.

The “Family-Centred Practice” model is based on a set of distinctive principles:

- Recognition of family members’ strengths and resources - this approach acknowledges the capabilities and assets of parents and children rather than focusing solely on their deficits (Allen & Petr, 1998).
- Partnership with the family - families are viewed not merely as recipients of support but as active participants and decision-makers in the process (www.msf.gov.sg).
- Cultural and contextual sensitivity - the family’s culture, values and structural understanding must be considered in any intervention (Madsen, 2009).
- Integration of services within the family system - rather than working with the individual alone, the approach emphasizes collaboration with the entire family system (McDonald & Garrow, 2019).

Today, numerous studies highlight the advantages of shifting from a professionally-centred to a family-centred approach. Family-centred practice is particularly significant for fostering direct interaction between the helper and the helped, and for promoting children’s development and family functionality. In a meta-analysis conducted by Dunst *et al.* (2007) involving more than 11,000 participants across seven countries and 47 different studies, the effectiveness of family-centred approaches was confirmed. The study demonstrated that collaboration with families, participation, and a strengths-based orientation are essential components of effective social work practice (Dunst *et al.*, 2007).

From the perspective of supporting child development, the family-centred approach enhances parents’ roles in their children’s lives, increasing their knowledge of child development and improving parenting skills. This, in turn, positively influences children’s school performance and academic competence. The approach is known to be particularly beneficial for children with developmental delays or special needs (Jimenez-Arberas *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, family-centred interventions that include parent-focused activities have proven to yield significant benefits for parents themselves. Such interventions reduce parental stress, improve their skills and promote more positive attitudes toward their children (Berger & Font, 2015).

The application of family-centred approaches in social work increases the effectiveness of social services, as needs-based and person-oriented services are provided with the active participation of families. Each child’s needs are best met within their natural environment - namely, the family environment that ensures safety, well-being, and developmental support. The most effective way to create such an environment is to involve families in all child-related processes, ensure their participation and empower and support them.

The family-centred model enhances families’ awareness, enabling them to make informed decisions and act accordingly. Thus, it differs from models in which

professionals alone make decisions or families play merely consultative roles. Furthermore, it improves the quality and outcomes of services delivered.

Family-centred approaches strengthen relationships among family members, enhance mutual understanding and promote the development of positive intra-family interactions.

However, when applied across various fields of social work - including child welfare, mental health, substance use disorders and education - family-centred practice presents certain critical challenges. These include the scope of the model itself, the need for strengthened inter-system coordination, and the necessity of equipping social workers with appropriate skills to implement this approach effectively. For instance, maintaining a balance between professional and family roles is crucial, as imbalance may occur in decision-making or power dynamics between the social worker and the family. Additionally, depending on the family's level of awareness, literacy and worldview, some family decisions may not always serve the child's best interests or well-being.

In general, challenges encountered in family-centred practice are classified into three main groups:

- Family-related issues - stress and cultural differences;
- Professional-related issues - insufficient training, strained working relationships, and time constraints;
- Systemic and environmental issues - limited resources, inadequate legislation, and weak coordination among services.

A recent study by Pacheco-Molero et al. (2025), which analyzed 37 selected papers out of 1,858, identified the following major barriers faced by professionals in implementing family-centred practice:

- Families experience difficulties in understanding the goals and roles of the intervention;
- Professionals fear the reduction of their expert role and face challenges in adapting to the new “collaborative with families” role;
- A lack of sufficient training and practical skills, particularly regarding how to engage key parents or caregivers in natural environments;
- Coordination problems among services;
- Work-related challenges, including limited time, heavy workload and staff turnover;
- Deficiencies in legislative and administrative support.

4. Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that social workers play a crucial role in the early identification of disabilities in children and in the intervention process. Their engagement in child development through family-centred approaches and early intervention practices significantly improves developmental outcomes. The timely detection of developmental delays and the implementation of appropriate interventions have a direct impact on children's future social adaptation, educational opportunities and overall quality of life. In this context, the role of social workers becomes even more significant, as they can strengthen early intervention processes by supporting families, educating parents, monitoring children's development and facilitating access to appropriate resources. Consequently, it becomes evident that a family-centred social work model is more effective for families of children with developmental delays.

The application of a multidisciplinary approach in social services (involving social workers, psychologists, speech therapists and pediatricians) allows for the timely identification of developmental delays or disorders, helping to prevent disabilities and reduce the economic burden on the state. Expanding educational programs and psychosocial support services for parents ensures their active participation in family-based interventions. For the successful implementation of family-centred social work, it is essential that social workers possess professional knowledge in early development and family support and that early developmental screening becomes an integral part of the social service system.

These findings suggest that social work should not only focus on assisting the individual but also aim to strengthen the social environment of the family.

Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of family-centred practice:

- Professional training enhancement: Regular training for social workers on family-centred intervention principles, multidisciplinary collaboration and early childhood development.
- Cultural adaptation: Ensuring that interventions are tailored to the family's cultural and social context.
- System integration: Strengthening coordination among social services, education and healthcare institutions.
- Empowering family resources: Enhancing parents' knowledge and skills and ensuring their active involvement in decision-making processes.

Providing social support, early intervention and implementing family-centred approaches for families with children at risk of developmental delays are key strategies that promote children's development and enhance family well-being. An improved family-centred intervention model requires the professionalism of social workers, effective multidisciplinary cooperation and active partnership with families. Ultimately, this approach contributes substantially to the long-term well-being of both children and families, fostering social inclusion and strengthening the overall welfare of society.

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