

Lessons Learned from Applied Family Social Systems Early Childhood Intervention Research and Practice

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Purpose of the Presentation

- Briefly describe my transition from child-centered to family systems intervention practices (and the foundations for the transition)
- Describe the key components of an applied family social systems model and approach to early childhood intervention practices
- Describe lessons learned from research and practice implementing applied family social systems early childhood intervention

Relationships Between Experience, Theory, and Practice

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them”
Aristotle

“Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play”
Immanuel Kant

“The only justification for our concepts and systems of concepts is that they serve to represent the complex nature of our experiences”
Albert Einstein

“It does not matter how beautiful your theory is...If it doesn't agree with (empirical evidence) it is wrong”
Richard P. Feynman

The Transition from Child-Centered to Family Systems Early Childhood Intervention

The transition from a child-centered to a family systems approach to early childhood intervention evolved over an extended period of time where results from research and practice informed the development of a family systems approach to early childhood intervention. This transition involved changes from:

- Child-focused intervention practices **only** to family systems intervention practices (including child, parent, parent-child, and family)
- Deficit-based to competency-based early childhood intervention practices (focusing on child, parent, and family strengths)

Background of CJD's Early Childhood Intervention Experiences

1968-1971	Temple University (Philadelphia, PA)
1971-1972	George Washington University/Georgetown University Hospital (Washington, DC)
1972-1974	Infants' Program (Morganton, NC)
1974-1976	Northern Virginia Parent-Infant Education Program (Arlington, VA)
1976-1979	George Peabody College (Nashville, TN)
1980-1992	Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC)
1992-1996	Child and Family Studies Program (Pittsburgh, PA)
1996-2007	Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC)
1996-2022	Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute (Asheville, NC)

Child-Focused Early Childhood Intervention Experiences

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|-----------|--|
| 1968-1971 | Temple University (Philadelphia, PA) |
| 1971-1972 | George Washington University/Georgetown University Hospital (Washington, DC) |
| 1972-1974 | Infants' Program (Morganton, NC) |
| 1974-1976 | Northern Virginia Parent-Infant Education Program (Arlington, VA) |

Georgetown University Hospital Field Placements (Washington, DC)

- Therapeutic preschool for young children 3 to 5 years of age with Behavioral Challenges
- Preschool program for young children 3 to 5 years of age at-risk for poor developmental outcomes
- University Affiliated Program for training students to work with children with disabilities or medical conditions and their families (Multidisciplinary Team Evaluations)
- Infant Stimulation Program for children with disabilities (Birth to three years of age)

Infants' Program (Morganton, North Carolina)

- First state-funded early intervention program in the United States for young children with identified disabilities or developmental delays
- Two multidisciplinary teams each including a pediatrician, nurse, psychologist, social worker, and early childhood educator (CJD) who conducted independent child assessments where the results were used to develop a professionally-prescribed child-focused intervention plan
- Home-based model to promote parents' use of professionally-prescribed intervention practices to promote child acquisition of professionally-identified behavior

Family Systems Focused Early Childhood Intervention

- 1976-1979 George Peabody College (Nashville, TN)
- 1980-1992 Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC)
- 1992-1996 Child and Family Studies Program (Pittsburgh, PA)
- 1996-2007 Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC)
- 1996-2022 Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute (Asheville, NC)

George Peabody College (Nashville, Tennessee)

- Doctoral student in developmental psychology that included an emphasis on the ecology of children's behavior and development (e.g., Hobbs, 1978)
- Infant/Toddler Program for children with disabilities
- Family, Infant and Toddler Project (Gabel, 1981)
- My studies, research, and practice at Peabody were my first introduction to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513-531.

Gabel, H. (1981). *An ecological framework for intervention with young handicapped children and their families: The Family, Infant and Toddler Project*. Paper presented at the Annual International Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children, New York.

Hobbs, N. (1978). Families, schools, and communities: An ecosystem for children. *Teachers College Record*, 79(4), 756-766.

Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC)

My 12 years as the director of the Family, Infant and Preschool Program focused on:

- Development of a family systems intervention model and practices
- The transition from deficit-based to strengths-based child, parent, and family practices
- Practitioner adoption and use of family-centered help-giving practices
- Research and evaluation of different types of family systems intervention practices

Family Social System Theories

Family systems theories consider a child embedded within a family system, a child and family embedded within informal and formal social networks, and both families and social network members embedded within broader-based programs and organizations where events within and between social networks and programs have direct and indirect effects on child, parent, and family behavior

Cochran, M., & Brassard, J. A. (1979). Child development and personal social networks. *Child Development, 50*, 601-616.

Cochran, M., & Niego, S. (2002). Parenting and social networks. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol. 4. Social conditions and applied parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 123-148). Psychology Press.

Garbarino, J. (1982). *Children and families in the social environment*. Routledge.

Hobbs, N., Dokecki, P. R., Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Moroney, R. M., Shayne, M. W., & Weeks, K. H. (1984). *Strengthening families*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Applied Family Social Systems Models

- Applied family social systems models focus specifically on child, parent, family, and social network variables that can be **operationalized** as intervention practices for positively influencing child, parent, and family behavior and functioning (Dunst, 2022)
- Operationalization (Babbie, 2021) of any intervention practice is considered necessary to be able to (a) delineate the key characteristics of a practice and (b) determine if the key practice characteristics are implemented as intended and have expected effects or outcomes

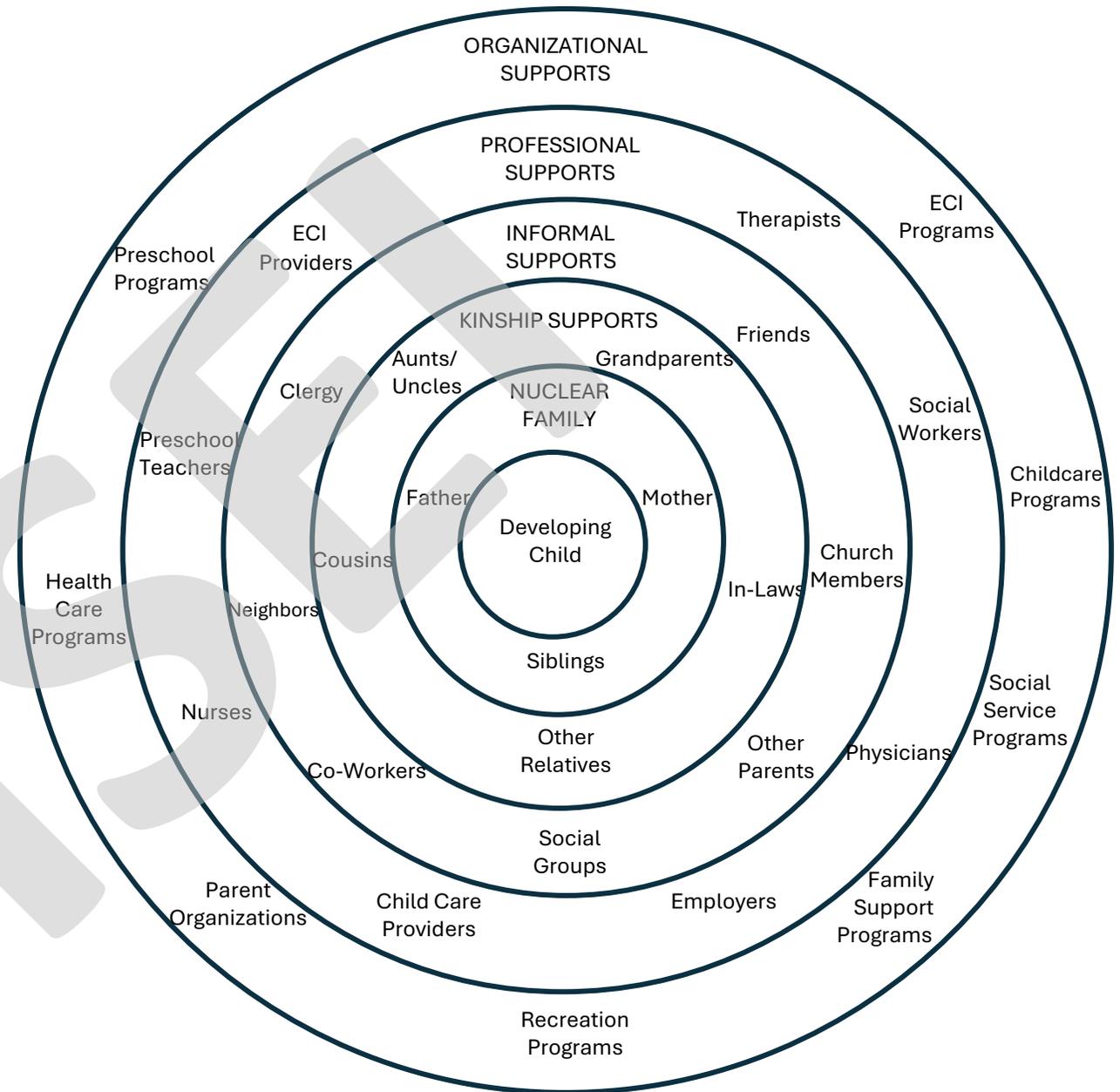
Babbie, E. (2021). *The practice of social research* (15th ed.). Cengage.

Dunst, C. J. (2022). Child studies through the lens of applied family social systems theory. *Child Studies*, 1, 37-64.

Bronfenbrenner's Systems View of Parenting

“Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family ***depends on the role demands, stresses, and supports*** emanating from other settings....Parents' evaluation of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of their children, are related to such external factors as flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of childcare arrangements, the presence of friends and neighbours who can help out in large and small emergencies, the quality of health and social services, and neighbourhood safety. The availability of supportive settings is, in turn, a function of their existence and frequency in a given culture or subcultural”
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7, emphasis added).

Framework for showing the embedded relationships of informal and formal social network members and organizations



Evolution of the Applied Family Social Systems Model of Early Childhood Intervention

- 1985 Dunst, C. J. (1985). Rethinking early intervention. *Analysis and Intervention in Developmental Disabilities*, 5, 165-201.
- 1986 Trivette, C. M., Deal, A., & Dunst, C. J. (1986). Family needs, sources of support, and professional roles: Critical elements of family systems assessment and intervention. *Diagnostique*, 11, 246-267.
- 1987 Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (1987). Enabling and empowering families: Conceptual and intervention issues. *School Psychology Review*, 16, 443-456.
- 1988 Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Deal, A. G. (1988). *Enabling and empowering families: Principles and guidelines for practice*. Brookline Books.
- 1990 Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Thompson, R. B. (1990). Supporting and strengthening family functioning: Toward a congruence between principles and practice. *Prevention in Human Services*, 9(1), 19-43.
- 1994 Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Deal, A. G. (Eds.). (1994). *Supporting and strengthening families: Methods, strategies and practices*. Brookline Books.
- 1996 Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (1996). Empowerment, effective help-giving practices and family-centered care. *Pediatric Nursing*, 22, 334-337, 343.
- 1997 Dunst, C. J. (1997). Conceptual and empirical foundations of family-centered practice. In R. Illback, C. Cobb, & H. Joseph, Jr. (Eds.), *Integrated services for children and families: Opportunities for psychological practice* (pp. 75-91). American Psychological Association.
- 2000 Dunst, C. J. (2000). Revisiting "Rethinking early intervention". *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20, 95-104.
- 2004 Dunst, C. J. (2004). An integrated framework for practicing early childhood intervention and family support. *Perspectives in Education*, 22(2), 1-16.
- 2009 Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (2009). Capacity-building family systems intervention practices. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 12(2), 119-143.
- 2016 Dunst, C. J., & Espe-Sherwindt, M. (2016). Family-centered practices in early childhood intervention. In B. Reichow, B. A. Boyd, E. E. Barton, & S. L. Odom (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood special education* (pp. 37-55). Springer International.
- 2017 Dunst, C. J. (2017). Family systems early childhood intervention. In H. Sukkar, C. J. Dunst, & J. Kirkby (Eds.), *Early childhood intervention: Working with families of young children with special needs* (pp. 38-60). Routledge.
- 2022 Dunst, C. J. (2022). Child studies through the lens of applied family social systems theory. *Child Studies*, 1, 37-64.

Bronfenbrenner's Descriptions of the Microsystem Influences on Children's Learning and Development

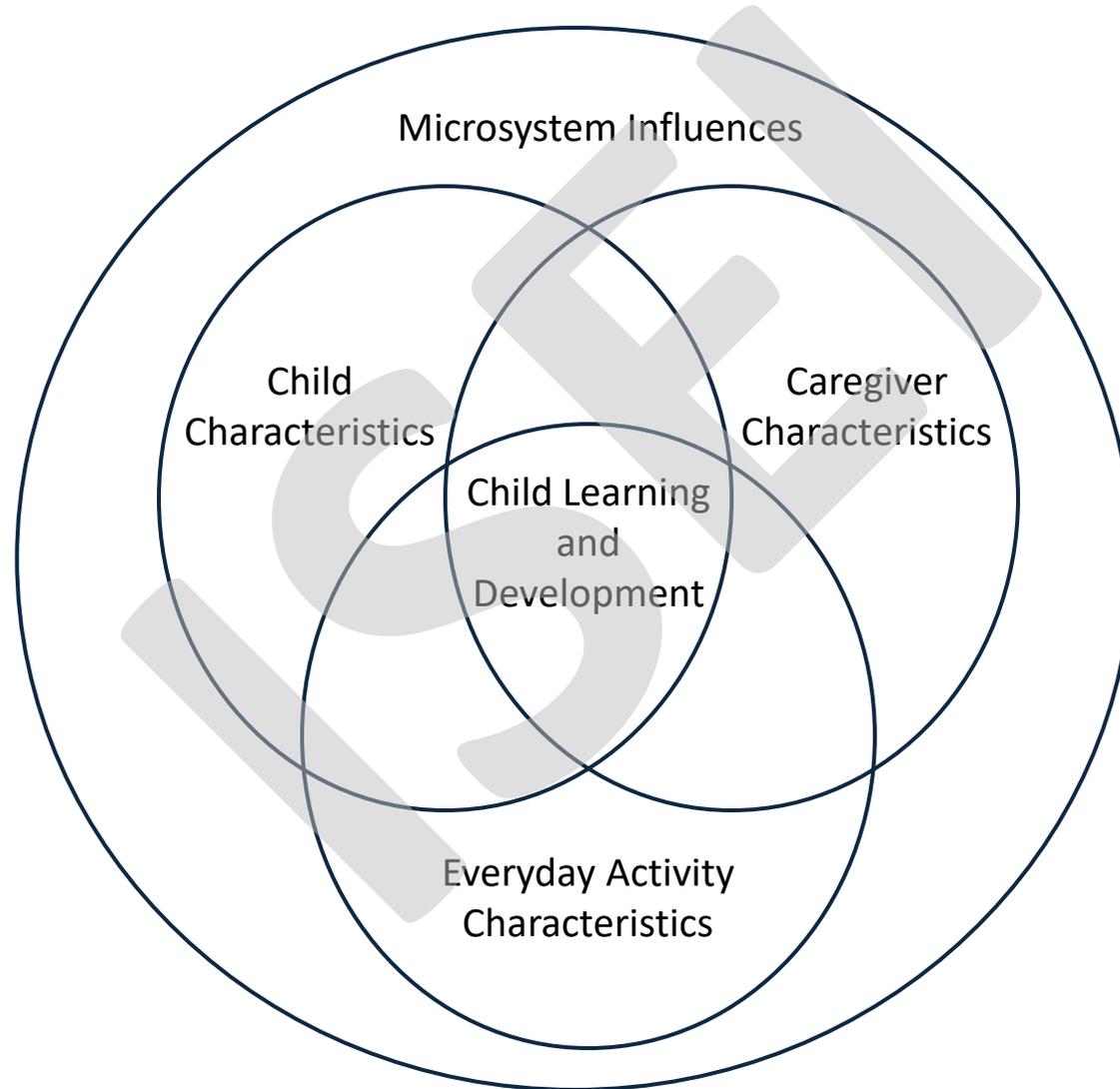
- “A microsystem is the complex relations between a developing person and the (social and nonsocial) environment in an immediate setting containing that person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514)
- “A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)
- “The personal characteristics likely to be most potent in affecting the course...of (child) development (include) those that set in motion, sustain, and encourage...interactions between the (developing child) and to aspects of the proximal environment: first, the people present in the settings; and second the...features of the setting that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained and more complex interaction with an activity in the immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993)

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513-531.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993). The ecology of cognitive development: Research models and fugitive findings. In R. H. Wozniak & K. W. Fischer (Eds.), *Development in context: Acting and thinking in specific environments* (pp. 3-44). Erlbaum.

Framework for Conceptualizing Factors Influencing Child Learning and Development



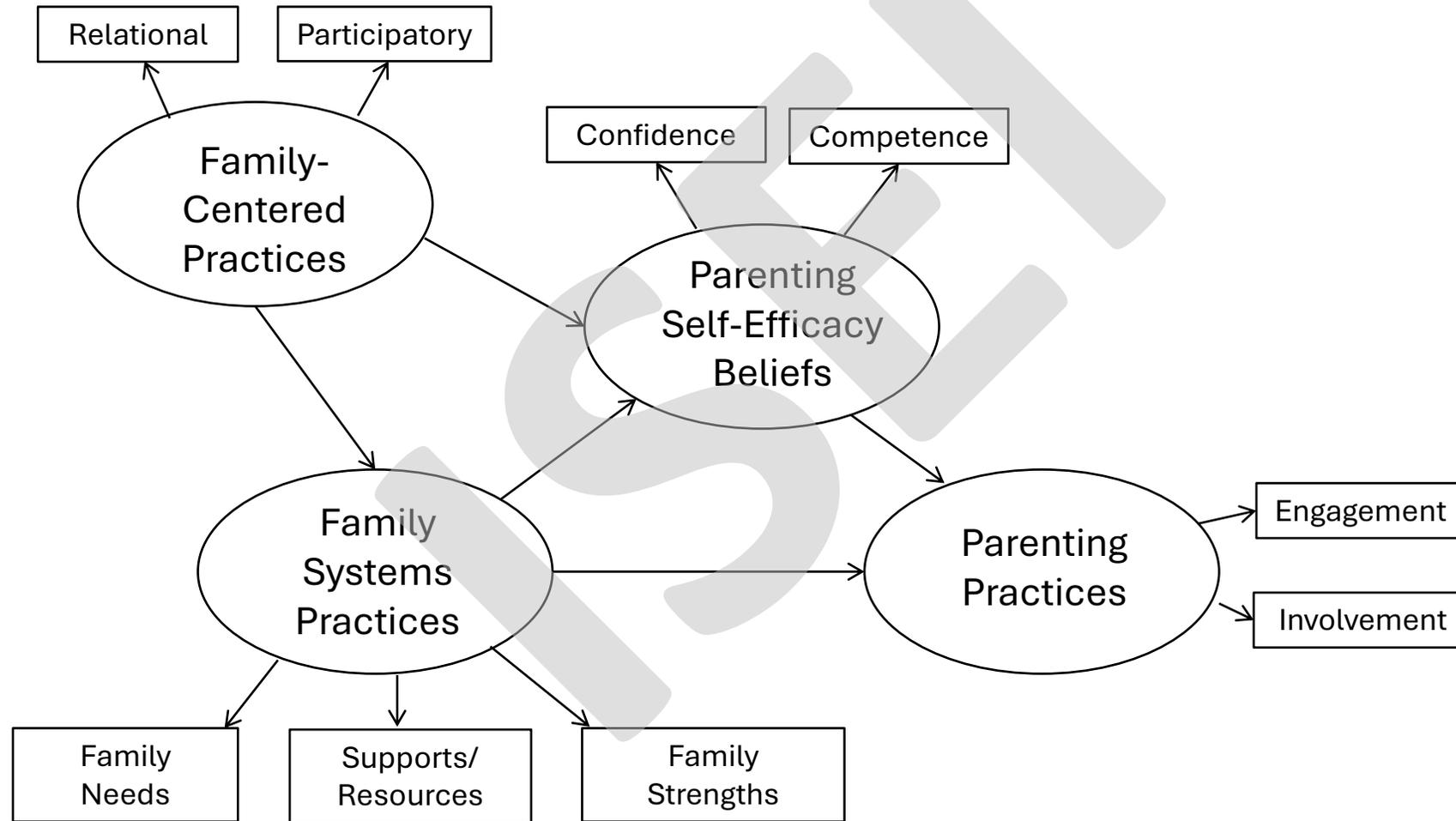
Optimal Conditions for Child Learning and Development

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979):

- “The optimal conditions for (child) learning and development...are facilitated by the participation of a developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal (microsystem) activity with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment (e.g., parent) where the **balance of power gradually shifts in the favor of the developing person**” (p. 60, emphasis added)
- My dissertation research investigated the shift in balance of power between mothers and their infants and toddlers with Down Syndrome and mothers of typically developing infants and toddlers between 8-10 months of age and 16-18 months of age. Findings showed a shift in balance of power for the children who were typically developing but not for the children with Down Syndrome
- The failure to find a shift in balance of power for the children with Down Syndrome was due to a large degree to the intervention practices the mothers were taught to use by early childhood intervention practitioners. In debriefing sessions following the observation of each mother and their child, I asked the mothers why they did not respond to child initiations to obtain an object or to engage in a child-desired activity. In every case, the mothers’ explanation was framed in terms of how they were instructed to “elicit behavior from their children”

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Relationships Between Family-Centered and Family Systems Practices and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

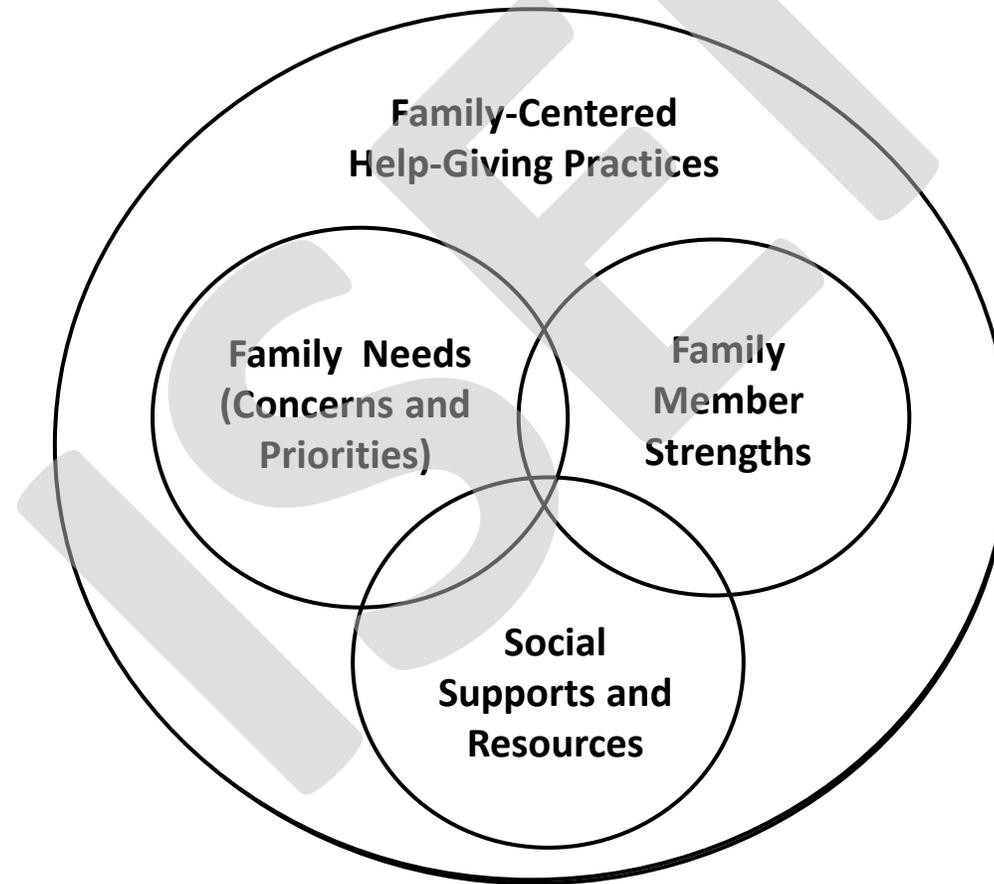


Relationships Between the Family Social Systems Model Practices and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

Parenting beliefs and practices include but are not limited to:

- Parents' abilities to execute parenting behavior in order to have expected consequences (parenting confidence)
- Parents' judgments of how well they performed parenting responsibilities (parenting competence)
- Parents' efforts to engage their children in everyday learning activities (parental engagement)
- Parents' active involvement in home-based or center-based early childhood intervention (parental involvement)

Applied Family Social Systems Intervention Model



Main Focus of the Applied Family Social Systems Model Components

Needs (concerns and priorities) are viewed as determinants of how people spend time and energy obtaining supports and resources and to have the time and energy to engage in desired activities

Family strengths include the abilities and interests of family members used to obtain needed supports and resources or engage in desired activities

Supports and resources include the different types of information, assistance, experiences, opportunities, etc. to meet family-identified needs or to engage in desired activities

Family-centered (capacity-building) help-giving practices include practices used by practitioners to strengthen the ability of family members to obtain supports and resources or engage in desired activities

Family Needs, Concerns, Priorities, and Early Childhood Intervention

- Needs theories include the tenet that unmet needs motivate individuals to pursue resources to achieve needs satisfaction (e.g., Maslow)
- Family needs in areas unrelated to “carrying out” parenting roles and responsibilities can interfere with the time available for parents to interact with their children
- Unmet needs unrelated to early child intervention is at least one reason why parents differ in terms of parents’ provision of children’s everyday learning opportunities and their commitment to and involvement in early childhood intervention programs

Relationship Between Family Needs and Early Childhood Intervention

“Intervention programs that place major emphasis on involving parents directly in activities fostering their children’s development are likely to have a constructive impact at any age, but the earlier such activities are begun, and the longer they are continued, the greater the benefit to the children. One major problem still remains.... **[Many] families live under such oppressive circumstances that they are^{ld} neither willing nor able to participate in the activities required by a parent intervention program.** Inadequate health care, poor housing, lack of education, low income, and the necessity for full-time work...**rob parents of the energy to spend time with their children”**
(Bronfenbrenner, 1975, p. 449, emphasis added)

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1975). Is early intervention effective? In B. Z. Freidlander, G. M. Sterritt, & G. E. Kirk (Eds.), *Exceptional infant: Vol. 3. Assessment and intervention* (pp. 449-475). Brunner/Mazel.

Relationships Between Family Needs, Adequacy of Family Resources, and Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Intervention

- At the time I became Director of the Family, Infant and Preschool Program, (too many) staff members described parents as noncompliant and uncooperative in terms of implementing professionally-prescribed early childhood intervention practices that staff considered necessary for child learning and development
- I pointed out to the staff that perhaps the reason parents did not implement professionally-prescribed intervention was because they were devoting time and energy to meeting other unmet needs
- This led to a line of research and practice to identify the reasons why parents differed in terms of their involvement in our early childhood intervention program (e.g., Dunst et al., 1988)

Dunst, C. J., Leet, H. E., & Trivette, C. M. (1988). Family resources, personal well-being, and early intervention. *Journal of Special Education*, 22, 108-116.

Research Evidence for the Relationships Between Family Needs, Adequacy of Family Resources, and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

Findings from two recently completed meta-analyses (Dunst, 2023, 2025) yielded evidence that:

- Unmet family needs are **negatively** related to parenting self-efficacy beliefs (confidence and competence) and parenting engagement and involvement practices
- Adequacy of family resources are **positively** related to parenting self-efficacy beliefs (confidence and competence) and parenting engagement and involvement practices

Dunst, C. J. (2023). Meta-analyses of the relationships between family systems practices, parents' psychological health, and parenting quality. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(18), Article 6723.

Dunst, C. J. (2025). Meta-analysis of the relationships between family systems practices and parenting beliefs and participation in early childhood learning. In S. Phillipson, W. Goff, & W. S. Garvis (Eds.), *Handbook on families and education: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 90-108). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Lessons Learned from Family Needs Research and Practice

- The reasons why some parents are not actively involved in early childhood intervention are multiply determined
- Unmet needs unrelated to early childhood intervention are one reason why parents may not be able to commit the time to be actively involved in early childhood intervention
- Unmet needs are just one factor associated with parents' involvement in early childhood intervention (see e.g., Hackworth et al., 2018; Lee, 2015)
- Noncompliance or being uncooperative are not major reasons for parents' lack of interest in early childhood intervention

Hackworth, N. J. et al. (2018). What influences parental engagement in early intervention? Parent, program and community predictors of enrolment, retention and involvement. *Prevention Science*, 19, 880-893.

Lee, Y. H. (2015). The paradox of early intervention: Families' participation driven by professionals throughout service process. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 9(1), 1-19.

Family Supports, Family Resources, and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

- Applied family social systems intervention practices considers social network members as sources of support for information, advice, guidance, encouragement, etc. for (a) enhancing parent and family psychological well-being and decreasing stress associated with child rearing and (b) influencing parenting beliefs and practices associated with child learning and development
- The supports and resources provided or available to parents by social network members are considered one condition necessary for parents to have the ***time and psychological energy to carry-out parenting roles and responsibilities***

Relationship Between Family Social Networks, Family Social Support, and Early Childhood Intervention

- Social networks include both informal and formal social network members. Informal social network members include a spouse or partner, relatives and friends, neighbors and co-workers, clergy and church members, etc. Formal social network members include teachers, childcare providers, social workers, therapists, physicians, nurses, and human and health care programs and organizations
- When a child with a disability or delay and his or her family become involved in early childhood intervention, early childhood practitioners and programs become a part of a family's social support network

Family Social Support Network Members and Early Childhood Intervention

- Early childhood intervention practitioners who are able to establish collaborative relationships with parents are almost always identified by parents as informal social network members
- Findings from research syntheses of family social support studies show that support from informal social support network members is associated with more positive benefits compared to support from formal social support network members (Dunst, 2023; Dunst et al., 1997)

Dunst, C. J. (2023). A meta-analysis of informal and formal family social support studies: Relationships with parent and family psychological health and well-being. *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, 16(2), 514-529.

Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Jodry, W. (1997). Influences of social support on children with disabilities and their families. In M. Guralnick (Ed.), *The effectiveness of early intervention* (pp. 499-522). Brookes Publishing Company.

Research Evidence for the Relationships Between Family Social Support and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

Findings from meta-analyses of family social support studies of parents of children with identified disabilities, medical conditions, developmental delays, and other at-risk conditions (Dunst, 2022, 2025) show that the provision and availability of different types of social support and resources from informal and formal social network members are related to:

- Mothers' and fathers' positive judgements of parenting confidence and competence
- Increased parent provision of everyday child learning opportunities and increased involvement in early childhood intervention

Dunst, C. J. (2022). Systematic review and meta-analysis of the relationships between family social support and parenting stress, burden, beliefs and practices. *International Journal of Health and Psychology Research*, 10(3), 1-27

Dunst, C. J. (2025). Meta-analysis of the relationships between family systems practices and parenting beliefs and participation in early childhood learning. In S. Phillipson, W. Goff, & S. Garvis (Eds.), *Handbook on families and education: Theory, research and practice*. Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.

Examples of Social Network Influences on Parenting Beliefs and Practices

- Childcare assistance provided to parents of children with identified disabilities by personal social network members at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, North Carolina) in order for parents to be able to obtain needed family resources and to have the time and energy to interact with their children
- Informal social network members as role models (Cochran & Niego, 2002) for effective parenting practices at the Northern Virginia Parent-Infant Education Program (Arlington, Virginia)

Cochran, M., & Niego, S. (2002). Parenting and social networks. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol. 4. Social conditions and applied parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 123-148). Psychology Press.

Lessons Learned from Social Support Research and Practice

- Families of children with developmental disabilities, medical conditions, developmental delays, and other at-risk conditions more often than not need social support and resources other than that provided by early childhood intervention programs
- Family social systems early childhood intervention is responsive to the need for different kinds of social support and resources and includes interventions to build family capacity to procure those supports and resources

Relationships Between Family Member Strengths, Parenting Beliefs and Practices, and Child Learning Opportunities

- The transition from deficit-based to strengths-based early childhood intervention proved the most difficult for myself and many of the practitioners with whom I worked
- This is likely the case because many, if not most, early childhood intervention practitioners do not receive preservice or in-service training that involves a focus on child, parent, or family strengths as a major component of early childhood intervention
- Julian Rappaport's (1981) descriptions of empowerment proved the foundation for facilitating the transition from deficit-based to strengths-based practices

Rappaport, J. (1981). In praise of paradox: A social policy of empowerment over prevention. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 9, 1-25.

Applied Family Social Systems Models and Empowerment

According to Rappaport (1981):

“Empowerment implies that many competencies are already present or at least possible...Empowerment implies that what you see as poor functioning is a result of social structure and **lack of resources** which make it impossible for existing competencies to operate (p. 16, emphasis added)”

This contention was used to develop a guiding principle for facilitating practitioners’ understanding of and a focus on family member strengths as a key component of early childhood intervention practices

Guiding Principle for Strengths-Based Early Childhood Intervention

- All children, parents, and families have existing strengths (capabilities, competencies, etc.) as well as the capacity to become more competent...and ***THERE ARE NO EXCEPTIONS.***
- According to Stoneman (1985), “Every family (member) has strengths and if the emphasis of [intervention practices] is on supporting strengths rather than rectifying weaknesses, chances of making a difference in the lives of children, (parents, and families) are vastly increased” (p. 462).

Stoneman, Z. (1985). Family involvement in early childhood special education programs. In N. Fallen & W. Umansky (Eds.), *Young children with special needs* (2nd ed., pp. 442-469). Charles Merrill.

Two Approaches to Describing Strengths-Based Practices

- Strengths defined as family and family member traits and relationship qualities (e.g., appreciation, commitment, purpose, balance) that promote and enhance positive child, parent, and family functioning (e.g., Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985)
- Strengths defined as family and family member skills, behavior, abilities, preferences, and interests (e.g., Powell et al., 1997) used to (a) obtain or procure resources and supports or (b) engage in desired activities (including the provision of everyday child learning opportunities and involvement in early childhood intervention)

Powell, D. S., Batsche, C. J., Ferro, J., Fox, L., & Dunlap, G. (1997). A strength-based approach in support of multi-risk families: Principles and issues. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 17*, 1-26.

Stinnett, N., & DeFrain, J. (1985). *Secrets of strong families*. Little Brown.

Research Evidence for the Relationships Between Trait-Based Family Member Strengths and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

Findings from trait-based family strengths research syntheses include evidence that different types of family qualities are positively related to different types of parenting beliefs, behavior, and practices

Dunst, C. J. (2021). Family hardiness and parent and family functioning in households with children experiencing adverse life events: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Psychological Research*, 14(2), 93-118.

Dunst, C. J. (2021). A meta-analytic investigation of the relationships between different dimensions of family strengths and personal and family well-being. *Journal of Family Research*, 33(1), 209-229.

Dunst, C. J. (2023). Meta-analyses of the relationships between family systems practices, parents' psychological health, and parenting quality. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(18), Article 6723.

Dunst, C. J. (2025). Meta-analysis of the relationships between family systems practices and parenting beliefs and participation in early childhood learning. In S. Phillipson, W. Goff, & W. S. Garvis (Eds.), *Handbook on families and education: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 90-108). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Dunst, C. J., Serrano, A. M., Mas, J. M., & Espe-Sherwindt, M. (2021). Meta-analysis of the relationships between family strengths and parent, family and child well-being. *European Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 2021, 5, Article 5.

Relationships Between Behavior-Based Family Strengths, Parenting Beliefs and Practices, Child Behavior and Learning

- National survey of parents (mostly mothers) of children birth to 6 years of age to determine if parents' interests and abilities are sources of children's everyday learning opportunities (Dunst, 2020)
- Community-based intervention where parents (mostly mothers) and both children's and community members' interests and abilities were used as sources of young children's learning opportunities (Dunst, 2008)
- Children's and community members interests and abilities as sources of young children's learning opportunities (Dunst, 2001)

Dunst, C. J. (2008). *Parent and community assets as sources of young children's learning opportunities: Revised and expanded*. Winterberry Press.

Dunst, C. J. (2020). Parents' interests and abilities as sources of young children's everyday learning opportunities. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 20(1), Article 4.

Dunst, C. J. (2001). Participation of young children with disabilities in community learning activities. In M. J. Guralnick (Ed.), *Early childhood inclusion: Focus on change* (pp. 307-333). Brookes Publishing Co.

Lessons Learned from Family Strengths Research and Practice

- Family and family member strengths operationalized as abilities, skills, preferences, interests, etc. focus on behavior associated with positive child, parent, and family functioning
- Behavior-based family and family member strengths research and practice show that strengths operate as factors influencing family member engagement in desired activities
- Using family member strengths as building blocks for strengthening existing and promoting the acquisition of new competencies is a much more productive approach than only correcting real or implied weaknesses

Family-Centered Practices and Early Childhood Intervention

Family-centered practices are defined as a particular type of help-giving used by early childhood intervention practitioners that include but are not limited to:

- Treating families with dignity and respect
- Information sharing so family members can make informed decisions
- Acknowledging and building on family member strengths
- Active family member involvement in obtaining child, parent, and family resources
- Practitioner responsiveness to families' changing circumstances

Dunst, C. J., & Espe-Sherwindt, M. (2016). Family-centered practices in early childhood intervention. In B. Reichow, B. A. Boyd, E. E. Barton, & S. L. Odom (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood special education* (pp. 37-55). Springer International.

Foundations of Family-Centered Practices

Contemporary definitions and descriptions of family-centered practices are grounded in belief and value statements for how professionals should interact with, treat, and involve families in their children's care, learning, and development. Three sets of independently developed value statements all include nearly identical family-centered principles and practices

- Center on Human Policy. (1986). *A statement in support of families and their children*. Syracuse, NY: Division of Special Education and Rehabilitation, School of Education, Syracuse University
- Family Resource Coalition. (1987). *What are the assumptions of the Family Resource Movement?* Chicago: Family Resource Coalition
- Shelton, T. L., Jeppson, E. S., & Johnson, B. H. (1987). *Family-centered care for children with special health care needs*. Bethesda, MD: Association for the Care of Children's Health

Relationship Between Family-Centered Practices and Effective Help-Giving Practices

- A research review of help-giving practices research found that practices associated with competency-enhancing consequences (Dunst & Trivette, 1994) overlap considerably with what are generally considered the key features of family-centered practices (Dunst & Trivette, 1996)
- Family-centered practices are used by practitioners to facilitate parents' use of other types of intervention practices and are **not** a substitute for other kinds of child, parent, parent-child, or family interventions

Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (1994). What is effective helping? In C. J. Dunst, C. M. Trivette, & A. G. Deal (Eds.), *Supporting and strengthening families: Methods, strategies and practices* (pp. 162-170). Brookline Books.

Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (1996). Empowerment, effective help-giving practices, and family-centered care. *Pediatric Nursing*, 22, 334-337, 343.

Two Types of Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices

Research my colleagues and I have conducted (see Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016) has consistently found two distinct types of practices that constitute subcategories of family-centered help-giving practices:

- Relational family-centered practices
- Participatory family-centered practices

Dunst, C. J., & Espe-Sherwindt, M. (2016). Family-centered practices in early childhood intervention. In B. Reichow, B. A. Boyd, E. E. Barton, & S. L. Odom (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood special education* (pp. 37-55). Springer International.

Relational Family-Centered Practices

- Relational practices include behavior typically associated with effective clinical practice, including, but not limited to, compassion, active and reflective listening, empathy, and effective communication
- Relational practices also include practitioner beliefs and attitudes about family and cultural strengths, values, and attitudes, and practitioner sensitivity to these beliefs and values as part of intervention practices

Participatory Family-Centered Practices

- Participatory practices include behavior that actively involves family members in (a) informed choice and decision making and (b) using existing strengths and abilities as well as developing new capabilities needed to obtain resources, supports, and services or engage in desired activities
- Participatory practices also include practitioner responsiveness to changes in families' life circumstances and flexibility in how help is provided to children and their families

Early Childhood Intervention Practitioners' Use of Family-Centered Practices Help-Giving Practices

Analysis of individual practitioners' use of family-centered help-giving practices at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC) found the following pattern of results:

- One group of practitioners was good at using relational practices, but did not routinely use participatory practices
- Another group of practitioners who were good at using participatory practices were also good at using relational practices
- We found very few practitioners who were good at using participatory practices and who also did not use relational practices

Relationships Between Family-Centered Help-Giving and Parenting Beliefs and Practices

Meta-analyses of family-centered help-giving practices studies find direct effects of family-centered practices on (1) practitioner use of family social systems practices, (2) both direct and indirect effects on parenting self-efficacy beliefs, and (3) both direct and indirect effects on parenting practices and child learning and development

Dunst, C. J., Hamby, D. W., & Raab, M. (2019). Modeling the relationships between practitioner capacity-building practices and the behavior and development of young children with disabilities and delays. *Educational Research and Reviews, 14*(9), 309-319.

Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Hamby, D. W. (2008). *Research synthesis and meta-analysis of studies of family-centered practices*. Winterberry Press.

Trivette, C. M., Dunst, C. J., & Hamby, D. W. (2010). Influences of family-systems intervention practices on parent-child interactions and child development. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 30*, 3-19.

Practitioner Adherence to and Use of Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices

Research, practice, and practitioner training at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, NC) included efforts to:

- Monitor practitioner use of relational and participatory family-centered help-giving practices
- Provide practitioner capacity-building professional development to promote adoption, adherence, and ongoing use of family-centered help-giving practices (see e.g., Dunst et al., 2011, 2019)

Dunst, C. J., Espe-Sherwindt, M., & Hamby, D. W. (2019). Does capacity-building professional development engender practitioners' use of capacity-building family-centered practices? *European Journal of Educational Research*, 8(2), 515-526.

Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Deal, A. G. (2011). Effects of in-service training on early intervention practitioners' use of family systems intervention practices. *Professional Development in Education*, 37, 181-196.

Assessing Early Childhood Intervention Practitioner Adherence to Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices

Adherence to family-centered practices is measured in terms of program participants' judgments of the extent to which early childhood intervention practitioners interact with and treat participants and their families in ways consistent with the intent of family-centered practices.

Measuring Adherence to Family-Centered Practices

- In an adherence study or survey, program participants (i.e., parents) are asked to indicate on a 5-point scale ranging from ***never*** to ***always*** the extent to which staff treat or interact with the respondent and his or her family in the ways consistent with family-centered practices
- Surveys that we have conducted include 5 or 6 relational family-centered help-giving practice indicators and 5 or 6 participatory family-centered help-giving practice indicators

Criterion for Measuring Adherence to Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices

- Percentage of indicators receiving the highest rating on a 5-point scale indicating that a respondent and his or her family are ***always*** treated in the way consistent with the family-centered practice scale indicators
- A stringent definition of adherence was used at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program(Morganton, NC) because we adopted a set of family-centered principles where families were “promised” they would be treated in ways consistent with family-centered practices

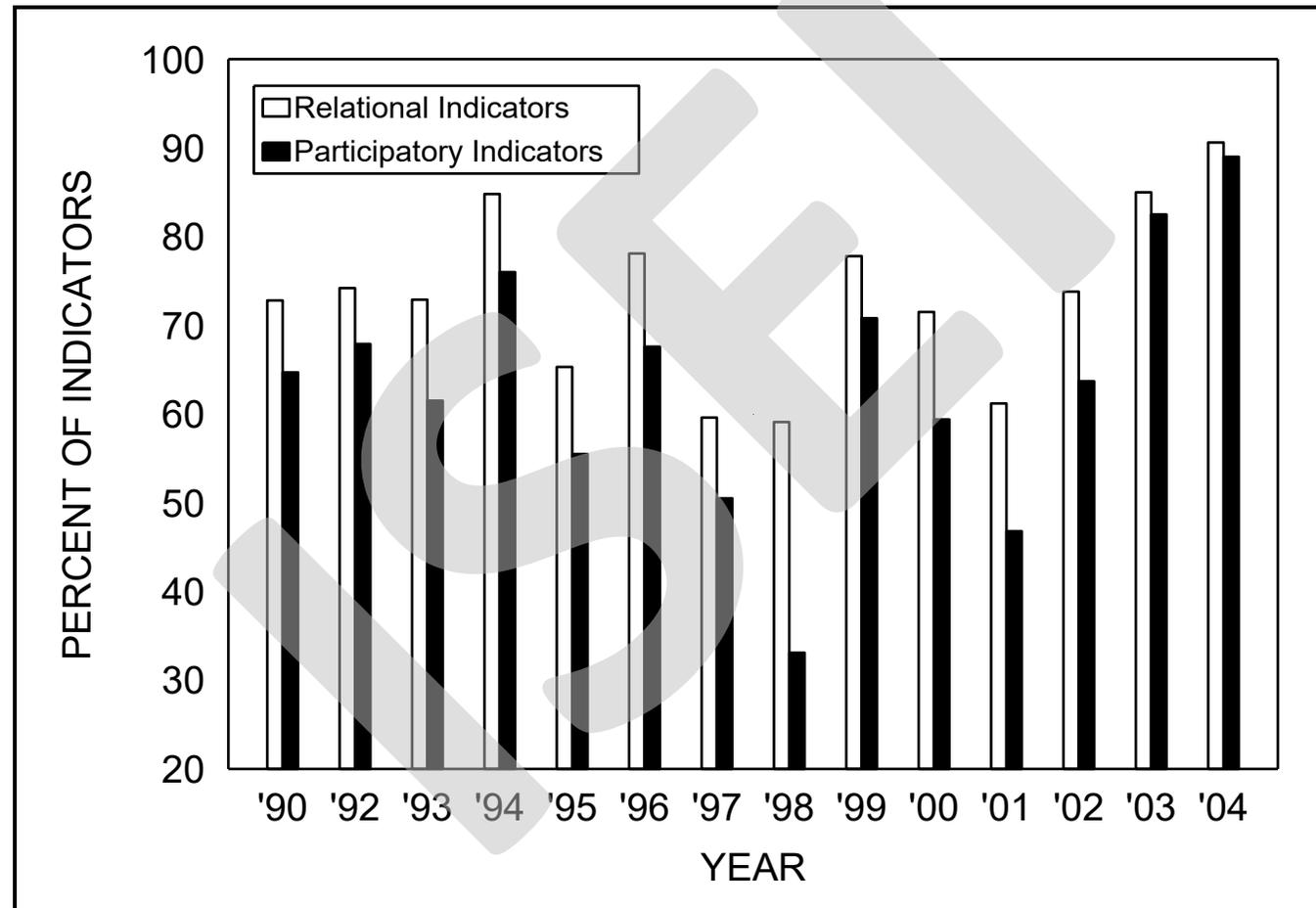
Family, Infant and Preschool Program Guiding Principles

- Families and family members are treated with dignity and respect at all times
- Staff are sensitive, knowledgeable, and responsive to family, cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity
- Family choice and decision-making occur at all levels of participation in the program
- Information necessary for families to make informed choices is shared in a sensitive, complete, and unbiased manner
- Practices are based on family-identified desires, priorities, and preferences
- Staff provide supports, resources, and services to families in a flexible, responsive, and individualized manner
- A broad range of informal, community, and formal supports and resources are used for achieving family-identified outcomes
- Staff build on child, parent and family strengths, assets, and interests as the primary way of strengthening family functioning
- Staff-family relationships are characterized by partnerships and collaboration based on mutual trust, respect, and problem-solving
- Staff use help-giving practices that support and strengthen family functioning

Sources of Information for Measuring Adherence to Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices

- Eighteen (18) studies (Dunst & Trivette, 2005) conducted between 1990 and 2004 at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (Morganton, North Carolina)
- One thousand ninety-six (1096) program participants
- Thirteen thousand five hundred and eleven (13,511) indicators

Degree of Practitioner Adherence to Relational and Participatory Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices



Lessons Learned from Family-Centered Research and Practice

- Maintaining early childhood intervention practitioners' routine use of family-centered practices requires ongoing attention to and monitoring of practitioners' use of help-giving practices (e.g., use of a family-centered practices checklist to provide practitioners standards against which they can self-assess their help-giving practices)
- The use of capacity-building professional development practices that support and strengthen practitioners' understanding, use, and adherence to family-centered practices. Capacity-building professional development engenders practitioners' use of capacity-building family-centered help-giving practices
- Real-life opportunities and experiences to use family-centered practices with feedback and guidance from a practitioner who is highly competent using family-centered help-giving practices

Final Thoughts Regarding Lessons Learned

- Applied family social systems early childhood intervention captures the complexity of real-life experiences of young children with disabilities and delays and their families
- Applied family social systems early childhood intervention emphasizes the use of intervention practices informed by research evidence
- Applied family social systems early childhood intervention incorporates supports and resources from informal and formal social network members into intervention practices for meeting child, parent, and family needs
- Applied family social systems early childhood intervention practitioners use family-centered capacity-building practices to strengthen existing and promote acquisition of new child, parent, and family capabilities

PowerPoint Presentation

Applied Family Social Systems Research and Practice

- The PowerPoint presentation is available on ResearchGate (<https://researchgate.net>) by searching for the title of the keynote presentation (Lessons learned from applied family social systems early childhood intervention research and practice)
- Additional information about the applied family social systems early childhood intervention model, research, and practice can be found on the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute website (<https://puckett.org>) and ResearchGate (<https://researchgate.net>)