



## Community-Based Family-Focused Practice and Social Network Intervention

**Source:** Cox, K. F. (2005). Examining the role of social network intervention as an integral component of community-based family-focused practice. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 14(3), 443-454.

This paper examines research on the “contribution of informal support linkages in the achievement of treatment outcomes” (p. 446) in three models of family-based practice: Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFSP), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), and Wraparound. For the purposes of this review, the author defines support activities according to their functions; for example, support that provides “emotional sustenance, concrete or tangible aid, information, problem-solving, affirmation” (p. 445). She includes interventions designed to optimize existing support networks and to create new networks, variously labeled as network facilitation, network enhancement, or network intervention.

### IFSP and research on family social support interventions

Overall, only a small proportion of the research studies of IFSP explicitly addressed family social support interventions. Program data suggested that the emphasis was on the provision of tangible support, such as basic needs for food and clothing and child care. The available research indicates that, in general, the development of informal supports is a relatively low priority in the context of IFSP, at least as documented in these studies. Another issue pertinent to this research is the low baseline of family support for families receiving IFSP services. Thus, although measures of change in the level of support available may show positive improvement, families may still have inadequate social support at the termination of services.

### MST and research on family social support interventions

The identification of formal and informal sources of support and factors relevant to developing and maintaining support is integral to the MST model of practice. A review of randomized clinical trials of MST revealed “little information as to the success of MST in linking families with on-going community supports” (p. 448). Although a number of studies included measures of peer relations, the only identified treatment outcome was a reduction in levels of peer aggression in a study of juvenile offenders receiving MST. Evidence that MST programs that focus on intrafamilial and extrafamilial interactions produce better treatment outcomes, such as reduced substance use and recidivism, may point to the potential importance of enhancing family support networks.

### Wraparound and family social support interventions

Wraparound teams are designed to include non-professionals, such as family friends, relatives and community members, as well as professionals from multiple agencies providing services to the family. Thus, research in this field may be another source of information about approaches

to, and outcomes of, social support enhancement. The review by this author reveals that empirical data on the outcome of efforts to develop social support networks in the context of families receiving wraparound services is limited. The author identified a number of program measures, including frequency data on family requests for services, average number of service hours (provided by family support specialists), and percentages of families receiving services (e.g. parent-to-parent services, respite). Although anecdotal evidence indicated positive outcomes from social network intervention, empirical data on implementation and outcomes is not available in the literature.

## **Conclusions & Implications**

The author concludes that, although these three practice models (IFSP, MST, wraparound) include an emphasis on the enhancement of family support, this is not reflected in the design and implementation of empirical research on the models. One reason for this omission is that traditional approaches to program evaluation derive from deficit models, with an emphasis on using reliable and valid measures of problems and symptoms as a way of evaluating program effectiveness. As noted by the author, “in contrast, measures of functional strengths and environmental resources are underdeveloped and underutilized” (p. 450). This has important implications for the design and evaluation of future programs. Advancing understanding of the role of informal supports in treatment outcomes will require more attention to clarifying and operationalizing support concepts, support network intervention goals, and anticipated outcomes. Since the meaning of support is likely to vary with the family and community culture, it is also essential that such interventions are family-driven. Interventions that are individually tailored make the assessment of fidelity more challenging. Nevertheless, it is evident from this review that there is a need to develop more effective ways of developing and evaluating family support network enhancement practice.



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