Chapter 6: FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define family in light of contemporary family structure.
2. Describe the tension between the rights of children and the rights of parents.
3. Describe services and programs designed to help children and families.
4. Describe the belief systems that underpin opinions about child and family services.
5. Identify how the education system could be improved to help families and children.
6. Explain how diversity affects family and child welfare.
7. Apply the dynamic advocacy model to family and child welfare.

Rosa Works to Strengthen Families for the Sake of Children

As a child protective services social worker, Rosa advances child safety and identifies ways to strengthen the ability of families to protect children. People have often told Rosa that they don't understand how anyone could possess the temperament to work all the time with cases of child neglect and abuse.

For Rosa, one of the most difficult hurdles has been working with young children living in dire poverty. Most of the children assigned to Rosa are under the age of 6 and live with a single teenage mother who has less than a 10th-grade education and little or no employment history. Many of these children do not eat properly, live in substandard housing, struggle with basic medical care, and receive little support or attention from their biological fathers.

Rosa is keenly aware of the effects of childhood exposure to traumatic events, such as verbal altercations, acts of violence in the home and outside of it, and substance abuse. She knows how hard it is for children to live with caregivers struggling with mental health and chemical addiction issues.

Although Rosa's caseload of 23 children and families is very challenging, she is dedicated to her area of practice. She actively advocates for meeting the unique social–emotional needs of young children in challenged families, as well as providing family aid and support in the form of employment assistance, adult education, self-help, health care insurance, mental health services, housing, and child care.

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Interpersonal violence, poverty, and child maltreatment are just a few of the many issues social workers encounter when working with children and families. This chapter examines how the definition of family has changed over time and the diverse family types. Common problems facing the U.S. family, such as child abuse and violence, are also explored, along with the services available to children and families. A central theme in this chapter involves how social workers can advocate for children and families to create positive, lasting change.

Historically, child welfare has been a common and popular field of practice for social workers in the United States. Beginning in the early 20th century, protection of children from various forms of maltreatment and exploitation became a major concern. The early 1900s were characterized by industrialization, urbanization, and the rapid migration of people from various lands to an economically blossoming country. Economic growth, social disruption, and family stress went hand in hand. As economic growth and expansion took place, children were exploited for their labor in the workplace and very young children often faced harsh and neglectful living circumstances at home. These rapid and dramatic social and economic changes formed the backdrop for child and family services in the United States.

TODAY'S FAMILIES

The definition of what constitutes a family has changed in recent years and is often a source of debate in the United States. Most people would agree that a family is a social unit containing two or more members. However, families can vary significantly in composition, complexity, and size. For example, families can consist of a husband and a wife without children, cohabiting unmarried couples, single parents and their children, couples with children and extended family members, parents with children from previous marriages, and multigenerational family members. Although state laws differ concerning legal definitions, families also include same-sex marriages and partnerships.

Generally, regardless of its composition, the **family** constitutes a social unit where people form relationships and make a commitment to live together as a defined family group and provide for the group's social, emotional, and economic needs, including care of children. Given such a broad definition of family, it is important to note that family structure may or may not be based on **kinship**, which is common ancestry, marriage, or adoption. No matter how families are constituted, they are a critical reference group for their members (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2012).

Traditionally, families have been classified as a **nuclear family**, in which one or more parents live with their dependent children apart from other relatives, or an **extended family**, in which, in addition to parents and children, other relatives live in the same household or in close proximity. Today, who can define what constitutes a family and a marriage is a topic of considerable debate among politicians, religious leaders, special interest groups, and people from various cultural backgrounds. Differing views on the issue are aligned with personal or group values, belief systems, and experiences. People with a conservative ideology often define families in more traditional ways, and people with a liberal ideology tend to define families in the broader, more contemporary ways.

DIVERSE FAMILY FORMS

The traditional image of family is a young husband and wife, each married for the first time, with one or two birth children of their own and living in a single dwelling. That image is now undergoing change. Because of advancements in communication and transportation, family units are not confined to single dwellings such as houses or apartments. Some families have been affected by **transnational migration** for economic and other reasons, a situation that separates family members into two or more countries (Furman & Negi, 2007). Also, diverse forms of family abound in the contemporary United States (and perhaps always have). Separation, divorce, blended families, single parenting, and gay and lesbian marriages are common occurrences. These diverse forms of family composition also influence living circumstances.

Social workers practice with a variety of family types and need to be knowledgeable, nonjudgmental, and competent in serving their needs. Each family form also possesses unique strengths. The social worker strives to understand the challenges and abilities associated with each family type to promote and support healthy child and family development.

TIME TO THINK

What were your family circumstances growing up? Did you consider your family to be typical or atypical? Can you see strengths in your type of family?

How did your family influence your values and outlook on life, including thoughts about career, marriage, and children?

Divorce

Once stigmatized as a sign of a failed marriage, divorce today is more commonly viewed as a legal process of ending a marriage that allows spouses to become single and, if they choose, to remarry. Spouses seek divorces for a variety of reasons, including unhappiness, infidelity, employment, unemployment, mental health, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, disapproval of the relationship by relatives and friends, and newfound romantic relationships. Another cause of divorce is **irreconcilable differences**, where the couple have disagreements that cannot be resolved and neither spouse is blamed for the breakdown of the relationship.

Divorce need not necessarily be a negative occurrence or experience. Spouses can end relationships in amicable ways that benefit them and other family members. In addition, divorce can represent an opportunity for introspection and personal realization, especially with the help of professionals. This type of growth is useful as a foundation for new committed relationships.

In the United States, the probability of a marriage ending in divorce is between 40% and 50%. Divorce rates are traditionally lower for spouses with college degrees (Cherlin, 2010, p. 404).

Separation

Spouses may also seek a legal separation from each other, often as a precursor to divorce. Separation can be temporary or permanent. Some states encourage or mandate a time-specific separation as a type of "cooling-off period" for spouses to reflect on and examine their relationship and begin to define parameters for it. Topics typically addressed include housing, living circumstances and child visitation, financial commitments (including financial support of children), distribution of possessions (e.g., furniture, electronics, cars, animals), and banking accounts and loans.

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▲ Divorce may offer an opportunity for introspection for the parties involved.

Although physically separated, separated spouses maintain the legal status of being married. This is an important attribute with regard to medical insurance, taxes, financial matters, and so on. As an example, spouses may decide to separate rather than divorce to maintain satisfactory medical insurance coverage for family members. Disruption in health and mental benefits and coverage could have a detrimental impact for treatment and use of medicine, with powerful and potentially life-threatening results.

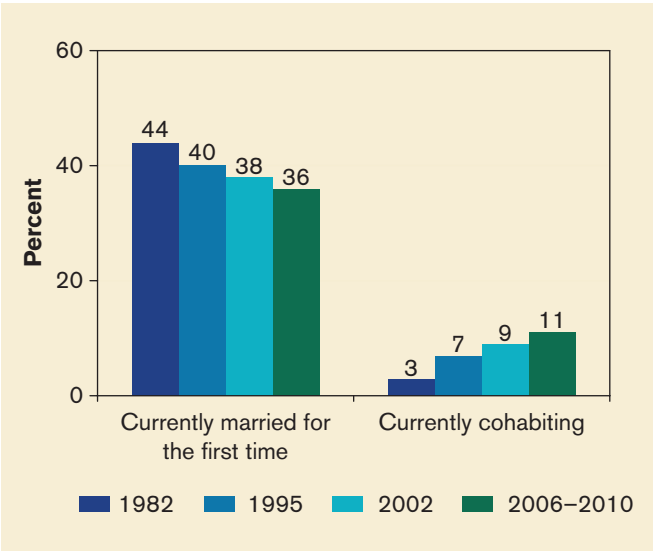
Blended Families

The term **blended family** typically refers to a family unit with two adults in a committed relationship, children from previous marriages or relationships, and children (if any) from the newly formed committed relationship. Blended families work hard to define the relationships of the children with their biological parents and stepparents, as well as the relationships amongst the various siblings. Many children in blended families have to share time between two families and two sets of parents, which necessitates planning and decision making about activities, celebrations, holidays, and vacations. Social workers often work with blended family members to help define reasonable and functional parental and childhood roles.

Single-Parent Households

When a family unit is headed by only one parent, it is referred to as a single-parent household. Typically, that single parent is the mother. Without the help and assistance of a second parent, single parents face challenges in caring for and financially supporting their children. In two-parent households,

EXHIBIT 6.1 Marriage and Cohabitation Among Women 15–44 Years of Age in the United States



Sources: CDC/NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, 2006-2010.

children have two caregivers and parents can rely on each other for social and emotional support.

However, an advantage of single parenting is that single parents have no everyday obligations and commitments to a spouse. Advantages for children growing up in a single-parent household include the potential to develop a sense of responsibility and independence at an earlier age.

Gay Marriage and Parenting

Gay marriage is a relatively new phenomenon and an emotional and highly polarizing political issue. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage. Since then, California and a number of other states have passed legislation legalizing same-sex marriages. Other states legally recognize civil unions for gay and lesbian couples; civil union is a legal status that can be helpful with regard to child custody, family leave rights, and similar matters. However, other states have passed laws banning legal gay relationships and marriage.

Social workers need to maintain an open mind about gay marriage and parenting. Gay parents are often unduly placed under special scrutiny regarding their parenting practices. It is important to realize, however, that same-sex parents, like heterosexual parents, can offer children a loving and caring environment for growth and development. The creation and maintenance of a stable, nurturing, and loving family unit is the key factor and does not depend on the sexual orientation of one's parents.

Cohabitation

When two adults decide to live together in a dwelling without legally formalizing their relationship through marriage, they are cohabiting. Cohabitation continues to be very popular in the United States (see Exhibit 6.1) and is employed by many couples as a step between being single and being married. Other adults, for a variety of reasons (e.g., lack of commitment, finances, legal issues, conflicting responsibilities) decide to forgo marriage altogether and live together as a couple. Gay and lesbian couples residing in states that do not allow same-sex marriage may have little other option than to cohabit.

FAMILY PROBLEMS

The family as a social structure is not necessarily declining in the United States, but it is most definitely undergoing change. With all the contemporary variations in family structure, children and parents need a range of programs and services that will help them adapt and adjust to new and evolving family roles and responsibilities.

The family unit and its members also face many of the social and personal problems of the day. Unemployment, poverty, mental health, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, natural disasters, and death of a loved one have powerful effects on families. Daily, family members struggle with these kinds of tribulations in the context of their unique family constellation and home. Social workers are employed to intervene with various family-based problems and advocate for programs and policies that strengthen and enrich family functioning and promote the rights and safety of children.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a general term that references a broad range of acts of violence (including assault, injury, and rape) against family members. Predominantly, acts of violence are perpetrated by men and against women and children.

Wives and children can be especially vulnerable to men in family constellations because of their economic and social dependence as well as men's physical dominance.

CURRENT TRENDS

Child Trafficking

CHILD trafficking occurs when child victims are recruited, transported, harbored, and exploited. Child trafficking is often cited as a contemporary form of slavery. Children are exploited for their labor, deployed as soldiers, and put to work in the commercial sex industry as, for example, prostitutes, escorts, strippers, and nude models. The United States is both a source and a destination for trafficked children, and it is also a transit country. It is estimated that more than 12 million people are the victims of human trafficking worldwide, with more than a million being children, constituting a $32 billion worldwide trafficking industry (Catholic Relief Services, 2014).

Many of the victimized children do not have families or caring adults to advocate for their protection and rights. Perpetrators of child trafficking often take advantage of being the only adult figures active in the lives of these children, who are very vulnerable to adult influence.

UNICEF has been a leading force in working to protect the lives of exploited children across the globe. Social workers partner with organizations such as UNICEF to educate people concerning child exploitation and protection and to develop programs and services to help these vulnerable and severely abused children. In the United States, UNICEF and helping professionals, concerned citizens, and members of faith-based organizations have advocated for specific pieces of legislation. One success was the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, signed into law by President Obama in 2013. This act supports the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons and serves as a major entity for coordinating antitrafficking programs and initiatives.

Are you familiar with human and child trafficking issues and programs in your area or state? Is this a personal area of interest for social work practice—why or why not? Discuss with classmates and friends how human and child trafficking is an affront to the dignity and worth of people. Even if inadvertent, how do people in the United States directly or indirectly support human and child trafficking?

Domestic violence is typically an issue of power and control. Perpetrators take advantage of vulnerable people in the household as a demonstration of dominance and the perpetrators' desire to control family members' behavior.

Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is a broad term used to encompass the abuse and victimization of children. Children are vulnerable to several types of maltreatment because they are typically incapable of caring and advocating for themselves, and instead rely on the adults in their lives. For much of history, the treatment of children was considered a private matter. Children had no political power and no rights as independent human beings. Most societies considered children to be the property of their parents (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013). But now their treatment has become a public matter as well as a private one.

The child-saving movement in the United States took place in conjunction with two noteworthy social changes (Finkelhor, 1996). First, social workers, nurses, schoolteachers, counselors, and legal advocates emerged as professionals and developed professional organizations devoted to seeking protection for children. Second, women entered the labor force in greater numbers and acquired newfound power to advocate for children's rights. As helping professionals, child advocates, and child advocacy groups became more plentiful and politically active, child maltreatment was criminalized, primarily through the passage of state-level child protective statutes. The child-saving movement is viewed today as a mark of societal development and modernization.

The practices, policies, and services put in place to promote child well-being and safety are generally referred to as **child welfare**. Child welfare includes a complex array of services provided by publicly funded child welfare agencies. **Child protective services,** programs through which social workers, law enforcement personnel, and health care workers respond to reports of child maltreatment, are a key component in publicly funded child welfare agencies.

Contemporary child welfare in the United States focuses on both children and families. The modern-day family is conceptualized as an adaptable social system that can be both functional and dysfunctional for children. For example, the family is the primary social unit for providing nurturance, sustenance, socialization, and care for children. Yet the family is also the social unit where most child maltreatment occurs, and parents are the primary perpetrators of violence against children 81% of the time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2011).

To understand child welfare, it is important to become familiar with several varieties of child maltreatment:

- **Child physical abuse:** Deliberately using physical force that injures or could potentially injure a child (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2009, p. 58). Examples of child physical abuse include forcefully hitting or punching, kicking, shaking, throwing, burning, choking, and stabbing.
- **Child sexual abuse:** Attempting (or succeeding in the attempt) to engage sexually with a child or to exploit a child for sexual purposes (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008, p. 11). Examples of sexual acts include touching the genitals, engaging in sexual intercourse, penetrating the child, sexually exposing oneself to a child, and engaging in voyeurism if a child becomes exposed or is engaged in sexual acts.
- **Child neglect**: Failing to meet a child's basic needs (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2009, p. 152). Child neglect can include but is not limited to physical, emotional, educational, and medical needs.
- **Child psychological maltreatment:** Intentionally conveying that the child is "worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or valued only in meeting another's needs" (Leeb et al., 2008, p. 11). Child psychological maltreatment can include public embarrassment, verbal cruelty, intimidation, threats, and deprivation of love.

Social workers practicing in child protective services receive special training for detecting and documenting various forms of child maltreatment. They learn to be suspicious of bruises and injuries that simply do not make sense or are illogical. For example, imagine that a parent claims that a small round burn on the child's arm was a result of play and skidding on the floor. The size, shape, and texture of the burn does not support that claim and instead is consistent with a cigarette burn. Additionally, social workers look for behavioral indicators of maltreatment, such as a child's extreme passivity and withdrawal to avoid the attention and provocation of a caretaker. Child protective social workers have a very demanding area of practice, and their abilities and decisions directly influence the quality of life and safety of children.

TIME TO THINK

Think about the factors that might motivate you to be a social worker. Do you think that working to make a difference in the lives of children would match your motivations? Would a practice focused on abused and neglected children be problematic for you? If so, why?

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

In the United States, publicly funded child and family services are often the result of state or federal mandates to protect and support the well-being and development of children. **Public child welfare agencies** typically serve large numbers of people, offer a variety of programs, and are less costly to clients. Public child welfare programs are often located in county-based departments of social or human services and include adoption, family life education, foster care, child protective services, in-home family-centered intervention, and residential services.

Conversely, **private child welfare agencies** usually focus on specific problems and subpopulations, rely on pay for service, see fewer clients, and are less bureaucratic in nature. It is not unusual for a social worker to develop professional expertise in practice with children and families in public child welfare agencies and then be lured away to a private, more specialized child welfare agency. Although salary and benefits for social workers in the public sector in departments of social services are often very competitive, private agencies attract people through smaller caseloads, greater professional autonomy in decision making, focused services, and less bureaucracy. However, many social workers are also dedicated to providing clients reliant on public child

The Famous Mary Ellen McCormack Case

Although difficult to imagine, the United States has not always had policies to protect children from physical, sexual, and mental abuse. The case of Mary Ellen McCormack in the late 1800s is frequently cited as a landmark case that brought attention to the horrors of child abuse. Mary Ellen, a 10-year-old girl from the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan, reported being the victim of almost daily whippings and beatings by her adoptive mother.

Since child protection laws were nonexistent at the time, Mary Ellen's case was brought to the attention of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, one of the only protective agencies in existence at the time. Eventually, Mary Ellen's heart-wrenching story made its way to a courtroom. Her case is credited as the impetus for the creation of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1874, which is believed to be the first child protective agency in the world (Markel, 2009). The story was featured in an article in *The New York Times* on April 10, 1874.

Consider for a moment why the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was established in New York City before the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. At that time, were parental rights for children's upbringing and care more prominent and powerful than today? For example, were whippings and beatings seen as acceptable? Are such abuse practices condoned anywhere today?

welfare services with "top-notch," quality intervention and services.

TIME TO THINK

Would you feel more comfortable working in a public or private agency? Why? Consider the importance of factors such as professional autonomy, mission, population served, salary, benefits, geographical location, and the degree of specialization in service delivery.

HISTORY OF CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

In the United States, the development of child and family services can be traced to the early 1800s. Young children were often left alone to care and fend for themselves while their parents worked or sought work, sometimes traveling to the growing cities to do so. Older, more able-bodied children were exploited as a source of labor in emerging industry. Powerless and vulnerable, many children found themselves without basics such as food and shelter and in unsafe living conditions. The situation was so unacceptable that by the mid-1800s government-run institutions were being established to house abandoned and needy children.

During the 1900s, abuse against children was defined as criminal. Considerable progress was made at the state level to pass laws to protect children from abuse and neglect. Recognition by the states of their societal obligations to protect those who were unable to protect themselves was an important step in the development of child and family services. The stage was set for establishing procedures, funding sources, and policies to intervene with children and thwart their exploitation and abuse.

In the 1960s, a more robust recognition of child abuse as a social issue occurred when Dr. C. Henry Kempe identified the **battered child syndrome** as a clinical condition and advocated that physicians report cases of child abuse to authorities (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962). Battered child syndrome can be a physical or psychological condition and typically involves persistent injuries (e.g., cuts, burns, bruises, broken bones, and

emotional abuse) inflicted on a child by a caregiver. In recent years, child welfare researchers and neuroscientists have given considerable attention to **shaken baby syndrome**, where infants and toddlers sustain serious brain injury as a result of being physically shaken.

With support from the powerful medical community, child abuse and protection became further recognized, and by the end of the 1960s, professionals (e.g., social workers, physicians, teachers) were required to report suspected cases of child abuse in every U.S. state (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2009, p. 16). Today, state statutes also mandate that professionals report suspected elder abuse. Furthermore, there is emerging interest in cross-sector reporting of various forms of interpersonal violence and animal cruelty. Veterinarians and animal care professionals with reasonable suspicion of child abuse or neglect would be required to report to departments of social services, and helping professionals with suspicion of animal cruelty would report findings to animal care and cruelty organizations (Long, Long, & Kulkarni, 2007).

PARENTAL VERSUS CHILD RIGHTS

Attempts to protect children are complicated by the ongoing controversy over parents' rights versus their children's rights. In the United States, parents are granted considerable latitude in disciplining and maintaining control over the behaviors and development of their children. In some instances, parental rights to exert discipline can supersede children's rights to protection. Parents often assert the right to raise and discipline their children as they see fit, and they can question oversight by social workers and other child protection professionals. Some parents also attempt to justify child maltreatment as a parental right.

The overlapping needs and rights of parents and children are mirrored in the subtle (but important) distinction between child welfare agencies and family service agencies. The mission of **child welfare agencies** is to promote the safety, well-being, and best interests of children. Meanwhile, the mission of **family service agencies** is to provide programs and services to support and strengthen families during challenges and transitions. Although strengthening families and improving family functioning are important for promoting the welfare and well-being of children, social workers are careful in practice to identify whether their client system is the child or the whole family. The interests of families and other family members (particularly parents) are sometimes at odds with the safety and best interests of children. For example, the rights of parents to discipline children who are disrupting family life can conflict with the goal of child protection.

A GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR CHILD PROTECTION

In the United States, **childhood** is often defined as the period from birth to age 18. The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** defines a **child** as a human being under the age of 18. However, the notion of childhood can be conceptualized and defined in a number of ways. In some societies and cultures, the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is less a matter of one's age and more a rite of passage. For example, children may become adults when they exhibit certain forms of physical maturation (such as the emergence of secondary sex characteristics and ability to procreate) or have attained specific abilities (such as educational attainment or work skills). Or a child may become an adult when called on, often out of necessity, to fulfill vital roles as a caretaker of younger children or a provider for the family.

Around the world, there has also been considerable debate about what kinds of actions and behaviors constitute child abuse and neglect, especially since cultures vary considerably in child-rearing practices. However, the UNCRC has determined that all members of the United Nations must eliminate any customs that are abusive to children and has created guiding principles to protect the safety and rights of children across national borders (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013, p. 10). Unfortunately, establishing widely shared definitions of what constitutes "abuse of children" is an ongoing challenge.

You might be surprised to learn that the United States has been one of two countries (Somalia being the other) to resist the ratification of the UNCRC treaty and policy statements promoting the protection of children and nonviolent discipline. The United States has been reluctant to restrict the individual rights of parents with regard to practices such as spanking of children (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013, p. 11). For example, fundamentalist Judeo-Christian religious traditions condone spanking and other forms of corporal punishment as a means for creating discipline and making children more obedient.

SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

Julian Supports HIV-Positive Children in Malawi

ESPECIALLY in developing countries, HIV-positive children with HIV-positive parents are often left to cope on their own. They face a double burden: the disease itself and its stigma, as well as life with chronically ill parents who often cannot adequately provide for them (Rowan, 2013, p. 241). HIV-positive children living under such circumstances are helpless and shunned. Being a survivor overshadows being a child.

As a social worker in Malawi, Julian has become very aware of these children and concerned about their bearing developmentally inappropriate responsibilities for taking care of not only themselves but also a dying parent. "Child" under these circumstances seems to Julian a misleading classification. This issue demonstrates how "childhood" varies and is relative to circumstances and context.

Much of Julian's time is spent finding guidance and support for these HIV-positive children, often from extended family members. As well as possible, Julian attends to the children's basic needs and safety, while advocating for additional goods, services, and any form of available social–emotional support.

Ask yourself, is it possible that in the United States, as in developing countries such as Malawi, some children could find themselves in situations where they must fend for themselves to meet their daily needs? What kinds of circumstances would put children in the position of assuming adult responsibilities over an extended period of time?

KEY CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

A variety of child and family services are offered in many counties and municipalities across the United States. Social workers are employed both to provide these forms of services and to actively advocate for their enrichment, resourcing, and effective use. As is the case regardless of one's area of practice, social workers helping provide these services to children and families typically begin their interventions with engagement and assessment.

As you consider and reflect on your interests in social work with children and families, consider each of these services as an opportunity for future professional development and employment. For example, can you envision yourself working in child protective services, intensive treatment, or adoption services?

- *Child protective services*. Social workers employed in public child protective (CP) services practice on the "front lines" of child welfare and are exposed to a variety of forms of child abuse and neglect. When child abuse or neglect is reported, CP social workers are the ones who help investigate the charges, take the child into custody if necessary, and ensure that the child receives preliminary medical and psychological services. CP social workers are typically required to complete special education programs before employment. These education programs are often made available to social work students willing to commit to public CP practice and are offered through training centers operated by the state department of human services or departments and schools of social work.
- *Family-based services*. This is a broad category of services that are designed to enhance and strengthen the family unit, not simply children. **Family-based services** include counseling, therapy, skill building, advocacy, educational, and other services for children, parents, and families. Family-based services can be preventive and treatment oriented. Social workers are employed in a variety of public and private family service agencies. Often the client's ability to pay, either through medical insurance or

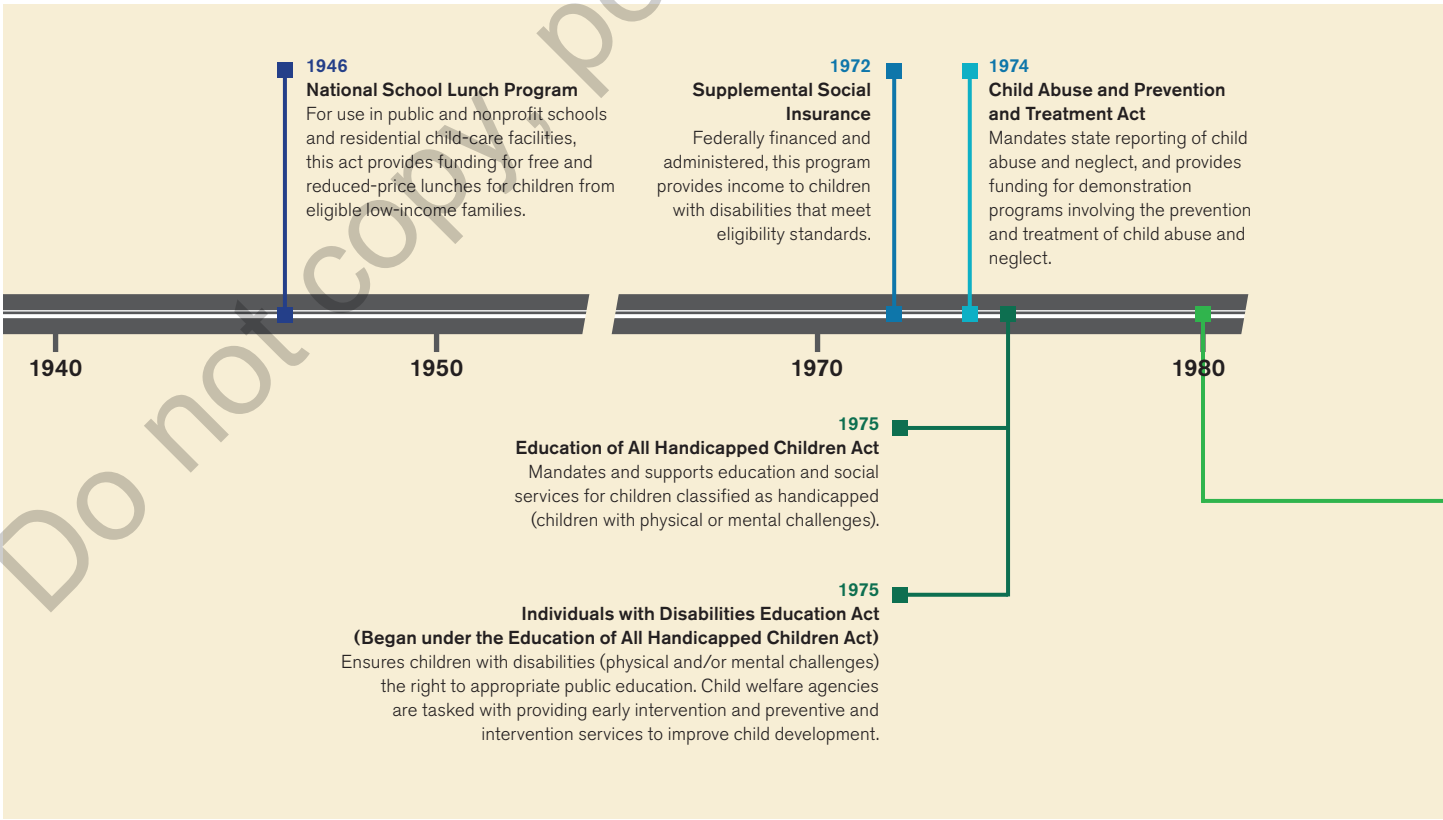
Source: ©iStockphoto.com/Steve Debenport

▲ Independent Living Services offer teens opportunities to learn how to support themselves.

out-of-pocket, determines whether public or private services are used. Many counties and states also work with school systems to organize and coordinate family-based services.

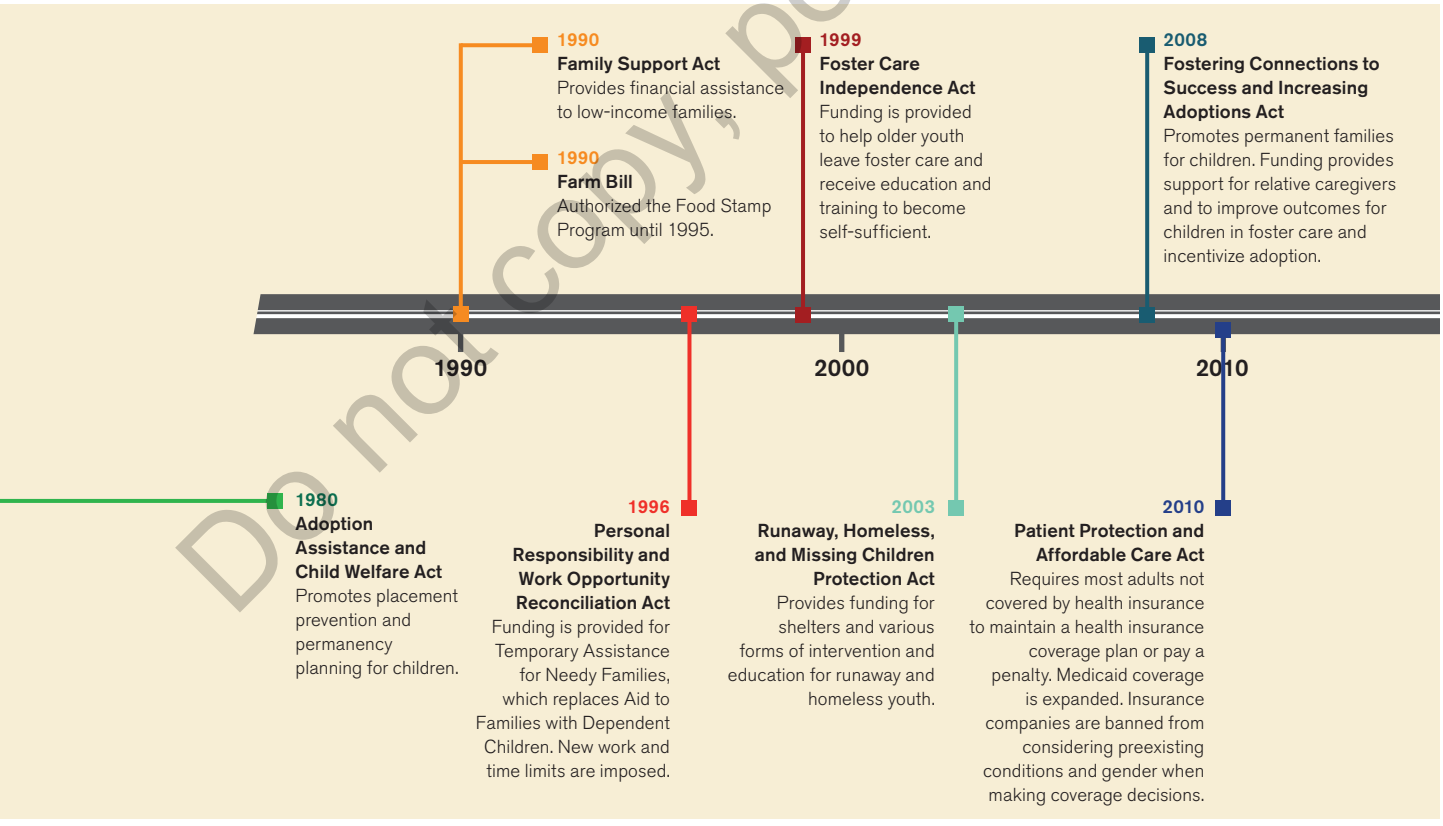
- *Family preservation services*. Social workers practicing in the field of **family preservation** focus on the early identification of families at risk of removal of a child and the implementation of concrete services to help prevent that outcome. In reality, however, family preservation services and intervention are often reactive rather than preventive and do not occur until a crisis increases the possibility that a child will be removed. This work involves case management, counseling, and skill building to enrich and strengthen the family and keep the family structure intact.
- *Family foster care*. If removal of the child for safety and well-being becomes necessary, one out-of-home placement option is family foster care. Immediate and extended family members are typically assessed as a first option. The second option is frequently **family foster care,** where children are cared for in a family setting by a certified foster care family. Although designed as a temporary form of

EXHIBIT 6.2 Noteworthy Legislation Concerning Child and Family Welfare



placement, family foster care becomes a permanent status for many children, for a variety of reasons. It is also not unusual for children to be moved from one foster care family to another. With advanced training, some family foster care providers earn a special designation as treatment or therapeutic foster care placements. Social workers often work directly with children in family foster care, families of children in foster care, and foster care providers.

- *Family reunification services*. When children are placed outside of the home, family reunification is the first consideration and is oftentimes viewed as the most desired outcome for children and youth. It is not an easy path, however. Although parents may articulate love for their children and want to be with them, parents with children in out-of-home placement struggle to become capable of caring for their children full-time. Social workers employed in family reunification services work with children in placement and their families, with the goal of successfully reconnecting them. This process often requires parents to make significant improvements in their personal growth, parenting skills, financial commitment, and interpersonal functioning. Family reunification must also deal with the trauma children experience before being removed from the home and while going through the reunification process. Advocating for the rights of children during reunification processes is another social worker responsibility.
- *Adoption services*. **Adoption** is the permanent rendering of legal and parental rights by a child's birth parents to adoptive parents. Social workers promote adoption, seek prospective adoptive parents, screen adoptive parents, make arrangements for adoption, help choose the adoptive parents, assist adoptive parents in developing a new family, and help birth parents create a better life for their children and themselves. Some social workers focus on special needs adoptions with children facing unique conditions, which could include physical, mental, and/or



emotional challenges. Adoptions typically take place through stepparent adoptions, independent adoptions (through attorneys, independent of agencies), agency adoptions (overseen by an agency), and intercountry adoptions (of foreign-born children). In each of these types of adoption, the needs and rights of children are the foremost concern.

- *Residential care*. The history of **residential care** for children in the United States can be traced back to the establishment of orphanages, which were designed to provide for the basic needs of children who had lost parents through death, disability, or abandonment. Interestingly, some current therapeutic group care facilities for children provide residential services in dwellings originally built as orphanages. However, today's contemporary residential group care facilities for children are treatment based, meaning that they are made available to some children and youth who need structure and stabilization in a nonfamily group setting. In recent years and for a variety of reasons—including lower cost and better therapeutic outcomes—residential group treatment services have given way to family-centered outpatient and family foster care. Social workers in group residential centers engage in treatment planning and implementation as well as aftercare planning and activities.
- *Independent living services*. An appreciable number of adolescents, many of whom are teenagers "aging out" of family foster care services (i.e., reaching the age of 18), are in need of independent living services. Social workers help these teenagers become independent by providing a range of services and promoting skills and abilities needed in adulthood. Support is often provided through collaborative efforts among foster parents, biological parents, and various service providers. Independent living services include transitional supervised living, group housing, scholarships, employment counseling, relationship building (with family members and friends), and connecting with needed resources. A special interest consideration is helping these older children develop and maintain constructive relationships with biological and foster family members.
- *Intensive treatment*. Social workers perform a variety of intervention services (specific types of therapy and counseling) that are classified as **intensive treatment.** Intensive treatment usually requires an appreciable time commitment and many resources during a condensed time; so social workers who operate in this specialty generally have smaller caseloads. Investing in intensive treatment with clients during crucial times in their lives is often more economical and effective than residential treatment.

Social Policy and Legislation Supporting Child and Family Services

In the United States, services to children and families are typically mandated and shaped by myriad state and federal policies and laws. Funding for children and family services is equally complex and relies on a combination of federal, state, and county or city monies, as well as insurance reimbursements and privately paid fees. To complicate matters, legislators are known to pass laws requiring children and family services without providing the necessary resources. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that the availability of quality services and programs for children and families can differ appreciably across state, county, and municipal boundaries.

Historically, the federal government has passed a number of laws to promote child and family welfare (see Exhibit 6.2). For example, the National School Lunch Program, Farm Bill, Supplemental Social Insurance, and Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act established sweeping programs providing needy children and families with food and financial and health care benefits.

Other legislation listed in Exhibit 6.2 has had a narrower focus, such as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act and the Runaway, Homeless, and Missing Children Protection Act. Without these specialized intervention programs, however, vulnerable youth and their caregivers would suffer considerable deprivation and struggle with everyday needs.

An appreciable amount of time and effort is required to advocate for the passage of federal and state laws promoting child and family welfare. Countless groups and organizations, and hours of persuasion, were required to bring these laws to fruition. Yet gaps in service delivery for effective intervention and treatment of children continue to exist in the United States—for example, affordable day care and early intervention services to help prevent removal of children from their families (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & DePanfilis, 2009). Children have suffered as a result of underfunding, and the federal funds that are provided tend to be allocated to placement services instead of being allowed to flow to

the family support services preferred by many states (Pecora et al., 2009). The lack of coherent funding for early intervention and family support services seems counterproductive to many social workers who are attempting to preserve families and keep children living at home.

Public Attitudes Toward Services for Children and Families

Public support for child and family services is frequently mixed. It depends on people's belief systems and is frequently not informed by the perspective of social workers and their clients. For example, social workers often hear neighbors and friends complain about paying too much in taxes for services to children and families when they should be providing for themselves. Friends and family members can erroneously and naively suggest that problems with children do not exist with **traditional families,** when children are reared by two married, heterosexual parents. Others may acknowledge the need for social welfare but believe that recipients should be limited to only those experiencing the direst of circumstances, believing the priority should be encouraging older youth to get married before having children and for parents to work.

Two distinct viewpoints concerning social welfare programs and services can be articulated:

- **Institutional or primary view of social welfare:** Humans are inherently good but are confronted with challenging needs (e.g., employment, health care, housing) and circumstances (e.g., unemployment, illness, divorce, loss of a loved one). Social and economic conditions such as unemployment, recession, and prohibitive costs for health care may also contribute to human need. Communities and society as a whole have a responsibility to help people by providing economic and social support services.

- **Residual or secondary view of social welfare**: People, including the poor and downtrodden, should be responsible for their own lot in life and not expect government intervention. Social welfare programs should be limited to helping people only in the direst situations and should provide only a safety net—that is, those services

EXHIBIT 6.3 Beliefs Shaping Negative Attitudes Toward the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

BELIEF	DEFINITION	SAMPLE COMPLAINT
Fiscal responsibility	Emphasizes reducing spending on social programs and identifying ways to cut people off from government assistance	I am tired of paying taxes to help other people. It is time the government gets out of the business of supporting children and families.
Self-sufficiency	Seeks ways to reduce reliance on public assistance in favor of doing for one's own self and benefit	He needs to pull himself up by his own bootstraps and learn to do for himself and his kids.
Less eligible	Discourages individuals and families from participating in social welfare programs through the creation of complex eligibility requirements and procedures	Not everyone should be able to receive benefits and aid. We need to make it difficult to receive assistance and discourage all but the neediest from applying.
Traditional families	Values marriage and two-parent child-raising practices, and social programs that keep marriages and families intact and discourage out-of-wedlock pregnancies and parenting	I am tired of supporting women having babies so they can be on welfare. These women need to get married and raise their children in a family.
Primacy of work	Promotes the importance of parents' finding and maintaining work, regardless of one's health, education, employability, and work experience	That parent needs to find and keep a job.
State and local control	Advances the idea that states and local communities, not the federal government, should define and find ways to address needs	If children and families need help, then their state or local government is best situated to determine what is needed and how to respond.

Source: Adapted from Long (2000, pp. 63–64).

that spare people from perishing. Social safety nets are not designed to assist people to overcome or move beyond their problems.

As a prospective social work student, it may be hard for you to understand the residual view of social welfare. You may be interested, therefore, in the literature describing the belief systems behind some people's disapproval of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, federal legislation passed in 1996 (Long, 2000). Those beliefs are explained in Exhibit 6.3. Although belief systems for both individuals and groups change over time, many of these beliefs persist and continue to prevent improvements in programs and services for families and children.

TIME TO THINK

Do some of the beliefs and opinions recorded here reflect the sentiment of your friends and acquaintances, or perhaps your own sentiment? How do you imagine children and families struggling to meet basic needs would react to these opinions?

Social Workers' Attitudes Toward Child and Family Services

Social workers strive to be objective and use scientific inquiry and research to guide their views concerning child and family legislation and programs. Social workers are particularly interested in the effectiveness of child welfare laws and service delivery systems and in the hope that the services and programs will permanently enhance and enrich the lives of children and families. Thus, when clients use school lunch programs, food stamps, Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families but are barely able to survive and unable to progress beyond their current living circumstances, social workers can share with the clients' frustrations. However, social workers realize that service provisions are limited and the ability of clients to move forward with their lives is influenced and limited by a number of factors, including upbringing, life experiences, personal motivations, social pressures, and the political environment (Kilty & Meenaghan, 1995).

Social workers use the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* to ground their practice. Paramount is the desire to use "knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems" and to "treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW, 2008, "Ethical Principles"). With the NASW *Code of Ethics* as a moral compass, social workers stay client centered and resist imposing or reinforcing counterproductive belief systems concerning children and families. A large part of the social work belief system is a commitment to client self-determination and the inherent dignity and worth of each person and each family.

TIME TO THINK

It is difficult for people, including helping professionals, to imagine themselves in a client's situation. Do you know any children who are at risk of removal from their homes? What kinds of services are available to them or have been implemented? Would it be difficult and stigmatizing for children and family members to partake of these services?

SOCIAL WORK IN SCHOOLS

In the United States, all children are required to participate in education. Thus, schools have been a long-standing venue for identifying and addressing the needs of impoverished, neglected, and abused children. **School social workers** emerged in U.S. schools in eastern cities (e.g., New York and Boston) toward the beginning of the 20th century, both to address student needs and to promote quality educational experiences. From the very beginning, school social workers were challenged with issues of racism, sexism, and social class (Joseph, Slovak, & Broussard, 2010), and many of those issues persist in contemporary school systems. Of particular note are the ways racial and ethnic discrimination has degraded educational opportunity for minority populations (Joseph et al., 2010).

The specific role of the school social worker varies in each school and organizational setting. School social workers practice in both primary and secondary school systems. They work with teachers, administrators, school counselors, community officials, agencies, and parents and children. A primary task is to promote and advocate for quality educational programs, outcomes, and experiences, and the well-being of students. Social workers assess the needs of children

and participate in recommending and securing services for schoolchildren and their families (Constable, 2009).

It is understood that, for students to function effectively at school, it is important to address their needs at home (e.g., their physical and mental health, family stability, safety, nutrition, and sleep) and at school (including instruction, physical setting, curriculum, teacher–student relationships, and student relations). School social workers find themselves employed in an organizational environment advocating for interventions, programs, services, and organizational change that support the best interests of their primary client population—the students. In addition to counseling students, school social workers intervene with family members, school officials, lawmakers, and community leaders to identify ways to enrich social conditions and circumstances for student success.

With regard to professional qualifications, school social work has become an increasingly specialized area of practice in the United States. National and state policy has promoted the credentialing of professionals in school settings, which has led in turn to certification, licensure, and advanced training for school social workers (Constable & Alvarez, 2006).

CHALLENGES FACING SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

School social workers become involved with students as a result of a variety of problems and behavioral manifestations, such as acting out in the classroom (verbally and physically), truancy, poor grades, interpersonal conflicts, a lack of personal hygiene, health issues (e.g., headaches, frequent illnesses), and inappropriate appearance (e.g., unkempt hair, dirty clothes).

Many factors are salient to problems with student performance and behavior. It is not unusual for school principals and teachers to point out student responsibility as well as the influence of family members and the home environment on school performance. Conversely, students and parents often allude to the importance of teachers, peers, and curricular matters in relation to student behavior. Frequently, students' problems are complex and involve many factors—not easily pinned on a single source.

Violence and Bullying

In the United States, children are exposed to multiple forms of violence. Modern media and entertainment expose

EXHIBIT 6.4 Seven Habits of Caring Relationships With Young People

HABIT	BEHAVIORS IN WORKING WITH YOUTH	UNDERLYING BELIEFS
Respecting	Giving young people a say in decisions that affect them	Young people's feelings are valid, and they are the best experts on themselves.
Empathizing	Seeing the world through the young person's eyes	The same story has many versions.
Being credible	Doing what you say you are going to do	Adults are accountable to the young persons they serve.
Listening	Putting the young person at the center of the story	Young people are valuable and worthy.
Affirming	Saying positive things to and about a young person and meaning it	Even troubled youth have positive qualities and constructive behaviors that can be acknowledged.
Instilling values	Being a role model and holding young persons accountable without blaming	Children must learn self-discipline, and those who teach them must practice what they teach.
Making time	Making time for children and youth a top priority	Young people are important and worth an investment in time and energy.

Source: Adapted from Laursen (2011, p. 9).

children to guns, shootings, killing, interpersonal violence, verbal abuse, aggressive behaviors, and bullying. Children witness violence at home, between adults and when adults inflict violence on children. In some communities, exposure to violence—punching, fighting, shootings, threat of physical harm, robbery, muggings, and use of weapons—is common and readily visible to children. Violent acts in schools include bullying, punching, fighting, homicides, and suicides.

Bullying is a form of aggression against others that is prevalent in elementary and middle schools. It involves physical, verbal, or psychological attacks, including harassment and intimidation, against weaker children or children who cannot defend themselves (Laursen, 2011, p. 4). Bullying can take the form of group bullying, racial bullying, cyberbullying, or gay bullying—among others.

In the United States up to 41% of students have been involved in bullying at school, either as a victim (23%), bully (8%), or both bully and victim (9%) (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). However, much of bullying behavior goes unreported.

Psychologically, research indicates that

> bully/victims were most likely to display internalizing symptoms, problems in peer relationships, and have poorer perceptions of the school environment. Both frequent bullies and bully/victims displayed aggressive-impulsive behavior and endorsed retaliatory attitudes. High-school students frequently involved in bullying tended to display the greatest risk for internalizing problems, but less risk for aggressive impulsivity. (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009, p. 100)

Social workers need to remember that student bullying takes place in a social context. To effectively prevent and intervene with bullying, the individuals involved and the social context in which bullying occurs must both be addressed (Bradshaw & Johnson, 2011; Laursen, 2011). A healthy learning environment must include caring relationships and a safe and secure educational setting. The seven habits for professionals who are trying to construct caring relationships with children, which can be helpful in addressing bullying, are shown in Exhibit 6.4.

Poor and Homeless Students

Poverty and homelessness constitute challenging barriers confronting school social workers. Whether poor and homeless as a result of unemployment, underemployment, or not being employable, poor and homeless families are highly transient, frequently changing home addresses and school systems. Although the homeless often find temporary housing in shelters, they are vulnerable and can easily find themselves out on the street at any time. Mental health and substance issues can also be contributing factors to instability. At a very basic level, poor and homeless children often arrive at school hungry and sleepy. These students are at considerable risk of poor school attendance and performance.

Parents and children also experience daily risk and considerable stress when everyday necessities and a dwelling become questionable. As a consequence, children adopt maladaptive behaviors, experience social and cognitive setbacks, and are prone to poor grades and high dropout rates (Groton, Teasley, & Canfield, 2013, p. 38). These are some of the reasons why school social workers and social work interventions focusing on the student's overall situation (family, teachers, living circumstances, school policies, community safety) are vital to student success.

An important piece of national legislation focusing on the needs of homeless children and families is the **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.** The act's mandates for homeless students include the following (Groton et al., 2013, p. 39):

- Streamlining enrollment procedures for homeless children so they can start school in a new place without all their previous school records, documentation of residency, and immunization records
- Employing homeless liaisons to advocate for the rights of homeless students
- Subsidizing homeless students' full participation in school events

Students With Physical and Mental Challenges

Knowing that language shapes social and personal realities and images, social workers are cautious and intentional with the use of words and language. In social work practice, care is taken not to label children with physical and mental challenges as being "disabled" or having a "handicap." Instead, social workers try to be positive and focus on strengths when referring to and working with children who have a physical or mental challenge.

CURRENT TRENDS

Best Buddies International

CHILDREN and adults benefit when they are surrounded by caring, loving, and supportive people, and provided with well-designed services. Best Buddies International is a global volunteer movement promoting opportunities and healthy relationships for people with intellectual and developmental challenges. Volunteers provide friendship, employment, and leadership opportunities for members of this population group. Best Buddies International programs foster one-to-one friendships between adults and between students. For additional information about Best Buddies International, visit the organization's website (www.bestbuddies.org).

To an extent, Best Buddies International is a worldwide adult program similar to local Big Brother and Big Sister programs—where boys are matched with positive male role models and girls are paired with positive female role models. These types of programs offer people social–emotional support, constructive relationships, and opportunities for developing interpersonal skills with others. Social workers have traditionally been employed in these venues and often have served in leadership roles. When working with adults with challenges and child and adolescent populations, social workers often refer parents and clients to these types of organizations.

What is your initial reaction to organizations such as Best Buddies International that heavily rely on volunteers? Consider the importance of professional oversight and developing a sound application and background check system for volunteers. Would you ever become a Best Buddy—why or why not? Discuss with classmates and friends the level of commitment required to serve as a volunteer with such programs.

Children with physical challenges face unique hurdles in schools, including limits on their participation in activities, being made to feel different through the use of accommodations, being stereotyped, and being bullied. School children with physical challenges have a right to be treated fairly, given their individual strengths and needs. Optimally, fairness is achieved when students and their parents participate in school decision-making processes that promote an appropriate and beneficial educational experience.

Children with mental challenges constitute a major public health issue. **Childhood mental disorder (CMD)** is a general term that includes all mental disorders that begin and can be diagnosed in childhood, such as Asperger's syndrome and developmental delays. CMDs are often identified during the school years and in conjunction with professionals in school systems. Estimates suggest that between 13% and 20% of children in the United States experience a CMD and that nearly $247 billion is spent each year on CMDs (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009).

A major law advancing the interest of students with physical and mental challenges is the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act,** reauthorized in 2004. This act promotes the rights of challenged students in a number of realms, including the following (Massat, Essex, Hare, & Rome, 2009, pp. 124–125):

- Using peer-reviewed research and scientifically based behavioral and instructional techniques for physically and mentally challenged students
- Expanding the definition of parent to include foster parents and nonparent caregivers
- Emphasizing a student's right to a free public education in the "least restrictive environment," in conjunction with a student's **Individualized Education Program**
- Bolstering the educational expectations and requirements of teachers and other educational staff

Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy, sometimes referred to as "children having children," is frequently cited by politicians, social scientists, and social service professionals as one of the nation's most serious social problems. Historically, people have objected to

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/Plougmann

▲ Teen girls often feel the consequences of pregnancy more than the father.

teen pregnancy on a values-oriented, moral basis involving a lack of responsibility and indulgence in premarital or casual sex. However, for many adolescent students, the everyday functional drawbacks of teen pregnancy and parenthood are as devastating as or more devastating than moral judgments.

Although teen pregnancy involves both a male and an adolescent female, the consequences of pregnancy for teenage girls are often far greater than for their male counterparts. Fathers may deny or contest paternity, or they may take responsibility for fathering and assist in caring and providing for their children. But if the father is also a teenager and a student, he may have very limited knowledge and resources for effective parenting. And it is often very difficult to legally mandate and enforce paternal responsibilities for fathers who have no employment or other resources.

For teen mothers, the pregnancy is a medical issue. Prenatal care also interrupts school attendance and extracurricular participation. Motherhood requires attention to child care, is a barrier to gaining experience and tenure in the labor force, and requires a reexamination of living circumstances. Reliance on parents, siblings, and extended family members for housing, food, clothing, and child care is common. But even with this help, teen mothers may not be able to continue in school.

School social workers and agency-based social workers assist teenagers and their families with transitions during this difficult time. They may explore with teen mothers enrolling in public assistance, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Medicaid, to provide minimal income and address medical needs. In addition to helping teen mothers with immediate needs for nutrition, clothing, furniture, shelter, and child care, social workers also focus mothers' attention on long-term issues involving continued education, father involvement, child support, transportation, affordable and safe housing, and employment.

IMPROVEMENTS IN EDUCATION TO HELP PARENTS AND CHILDREN

In the United States, public school systems are highly dependent on state and local funding for educational programming and services. This decentralized approach to supporting education lends itself to inequities, particularly on the basis of socioeconomic status. Students living in affluent areas are able to attend highly sought-after primary and secondary schools. Students living in economically disadvantaged areas, disproportionately from racial and ethnic minorities, are relegated to struggling school systems. Those school systems typically fall short in preparing students to work in a global economy (Heiner, 2013). Middle-class and rich kids, in contrast, attend better schools that help them prepare for better jobs. From this perspective, schools function to maintain class membership and distinctions.

Any real-estate agent will tell you that one of the very first questions buyers will ask when looking for a desirable neighborhood is, "Where are the best public schools?" Even if the buyer does not have or expect to have children, purchasing in an area with an excellent school system protects property and resale values. Yet many Americans, especially the poor and disenfranchised, can't afford to live where they would like their children to attend school.

To improve education, social workers not only promote quality academic experiences inside schools but also advocate for laws, policies, funding, and programs to help ensure

that students receive a quality education regardless of school location. The commitment people make when entering social work as a profession is both to help people in need and to address the social problems contributing to their difficulties. Advocating for quality educational systems and reducing inequities in education are excellent examples of how social workers can work toward larger-scale changes.

DIVERSITY AND FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE

People often conceptualize diversity and associated types of oppression in terms of a form of diversity familiar to themselves. For example, teenagers often dream about what they would do if only they were only old enough to vote, own property, drink alcohol, marry, and make legal decisions for themselves. They are focused on age discrimination. However, understanding how different forms of diversity impact individuals, groups, communities, and societies is vital in social work practice. Let's stretch our thinking beyond any personal form of diversity to examine how selected forms of diversity relate to child and family welfare and services.

- *Age.* Developmentally, young children are forming their personalities and learning about what is right and wrong. Children prosper through the presence of a stable family and positive adult and parental role models. Young children are especially vulnerable and dependent on family members for affection and basic needs, including food, shelter, clothes, medical attention, and nutrition. But they have limited rights and ability to advocate for themselves, especially when compared with parents and school officials.

- *Class.* Children living in economically challenged circumstances struggle with obtaining a safe living environment, quality child care or schooling, proper nutrition, suitable clothing, reliable transportation, and other basics. As for their families, unemployment, underemployment, and homelessness are common disruptive factors. Although many of the problems facing children and families transcend their socioeconomic status, having access to resources through social service agencies and the ability to secure needed help ameliorates the disadvantages of lower-class living.

- *Ethnicity.* Across the United States, many families identify themselves by ethnicity and enjoy strong bonds based on common ancestry, homeland, language, religion, and dialect. Members of a particular ethnic group also share values and expectations about individual behavior. Some ethnic groups believe in individual responsibility and reliance on help from within the ethnic group; they tend to rebuff helping professionals and social service programs. Members of other ethnic groups recognize the value of child and welfare services but prefer to receive help from organizations and professionals aligned with their cultural heritage. As an example of how cultural values can shape attitudes about issues such as work and social welfare, many Latinos possess a strong work ethic but often lack education and job skills to secure nonmenial employment. As a consequence, Latino population groups can struggle with the idea that people with lower-wage employment can simply work their way out of poverty (Acevedo, 2005).

- *Race.* Despite decades of advocacy for desegregation, school systems in the United States remain segregated on the basis of race and social–economic status. Racial desegregation laws and U.S. Supreme Court decisions from the 1960s mandated the end of racially segregated schools, but the phenomenon of **white flight** has rendered those decisions moot in many U.S. cities. In the early years of desegregation, Caucasian families moved from the city to the suburbs to escape desegregated schools and enrolled their children in better-resourced public or private schools. Minority families, disproportionately poor, came to dominate urban neighborhoods. For example, many African American families live in poorer urban neighborhoods and consequently must send their children to less-desirable public schools. The inability for all students to attend schools characterized by quality instruction, extracurricular activities, and integrative support with family members is one form of structural discrimination and institutional racism that persists in the United States.

- *Gender.* In the United States, women continue to be commonly viewed as the primary caretakers of children. When marital discord or family disruption takes place, mothers often assume custodial responsibilities for the children. Although state laws set standards for parental financial responsibilities and visitation with children,

SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

Pamela Facilitates Adoption for Gay and Lesbian Parents

PAMELA HOWARD is a BSW-level social worker employed at a large, urban children's advocacy center (CAC). She works in adoption services, especially for gay and lesbian parents. Primarily as a result of her practice experience, Pamela has an enriched sense of how members of lesbian and gay families can be stigmatized. She knows that adoptive gay and lesbian parents worry about their ability to gain legal custody and about their risk of losing it. There is a general lack of recognition of their parenting abilities, responsibilities, and rights.

In Pamela's state, gays and lesbians are allowed to form civil unions but not to marry. The legal ramifications for adoption by unmarried gay and lesbian couples are even greater than for married gay and lesbian couples. Many of Pamela's clients are concerned about their ability to adopt in the first place, as well as the limitations of their status in regard to custody, health care benefits, and educational rights and opportunities for their adopted children.

The CAC where Pamela works has an interdisciplinary and interprofessional orientation. Pamela has been able to work closely with a team of social workers, nurses, counselors, and other professionals to provide educational and supportive services related to the legal system, health care insurance, employers, and schools. One of Pamela's favorite colleagues at the CAC is an attorney, who has been a wealth of information for gay and lesbian adoptive parents. As a result of Pamela's interaction with this attorney, she is now entertaining the possibility of continuing her professional education in a program where she could simultaneously earn an MSW and a law degree.

Take some time to contemplate the host of professions (attorney, psychologist, public health official, nurse, counselor, and so on) that interface with social work and how each profession differs. Which professions focus on interpersonal, one-on-one intervention with children and families? Which professions focus on advocacy, policy development, and system-level change? Which types of helping appeal to you?

enforcement of legal obligations can be difficult. For example, it is not unusual for the noncustodial parent, often the father, to leave the state, be delinquent on child support, and seek undocumented forms of income. Also, women have been threatened by the fathers of their children not to pursue paternity or court-ordered child support. Women face unique and demanding situations, and they rely on child and family services for support in ways that often differ from those of their male counterparts.

- *Sexual orientation.* Marital and parental rights for gays and lesbians are currently grounded in state law and amidst change. In part, this is a social justice issue involving the ability of parents and children to be treated the same regardless of the parents' sexual orientation. However, this kind of legal limbo leaves many gay and lesbian parents with uncertainty and doubt. For example, what are the ramifications for parental and family rights if the family has to move from one state that protects their rights to another state that does not? If the parents divorce, separate, or split up, how do their parental rights differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts? With regard to everyday rules and practices, will school officials, employers, and health care providers treat gay and lesbian parents—and their children—with the same respect and dignity as they do heterosexual families?

- *Intersections of diversity.* It is not unusual for parents and family members to represent several types of diversity. For example, teenage mothers with little education, financial resources, or experience in the labor force are particularly vulnerable to poverty and a lack of economic opportunity. The cost of day care for a single, young mother is prohibitive, particularly when she may be qualified only for low-paying employment with irregular or unusual working hours. Young mothers from racial and ethnic minorities face the additional risk that prospective employers might discriminate on the basis of not only age but also race or ethnicity.

ADVOCACY ON BEHALF OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Federal interest in children arrived on the heels of a variety of social reform initiatives of the late 1960s and can be traced to the presidency of Richard M. Nixon. In response to recommendations from the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children and the 1970 White House Conference on Children, a National Center on Child Advocacy was established (McGowan, 1978). However, due to limited resources, shifting federal priorities, and mounting interest in the creation of a new National Center on Child Abuse, the National Center on Child Advocacy was never fully realized.

During the 1970s, recognition of the need for child advocacy led to strengthening of the services and programs serving children and families. The child welfare advocacy movement advanced the following major themes (McGowan, 1978, p. 277):

- Child development is influenced by interaction with families and transactions with other social systems (e.g., schools, child care providers, courts, medical providers, and court systems).
- Society has a responsibility for and obligation to children.
- Child and family services are a matter of right and entitlement.
- Children have rights in relationship to the social systems affecting them.

As with many social problems and issues, recognition of need and responsibility at the institutional, systemic level does not necessarily or immediately translate into social change or large-scale dedication of resources. The conceptual shift from rescuing and saving children from unfit parents to the development of comprehensive, integrated child and family services that support the healthy physical and emotional development of children and families has been decades in the making.

CURRENT TRENDS IN ADVOCACY FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

The contemporary social worker is moving away from viewing advocacy for children and families as mainly a social work responsibility and toward viewing it in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration. In recent years, **children's advocacy centers (CACs)** have emerged. CACs typically provide a broad range of services for children and families and are known for their interdisciplinary and child-focused approaches. CACs often employ professionals from law enforcement, social services, and mental health, offering a unified, centralized agency for providing services and programming for children and their families (Wolfteich & Loggins, 2007, p. 334).

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/elkor

▲ Families may represent several types of diversity.

It appears that CACs can improve investigations of child abuse (Wolfteich & Loggins, 2007). However, the effectiveness of CACs for addressing other child and family needs and advocating for needed services remains unclear, especially in the realms of early intervention and child maltreatment. People who provide services to children and families are hoping that interagency collaboration and interdisciplinary teams, as employed in CACs, will broaden the reach and strength of a variety of advocacy initiatives.

DYNAMIC ADVOCACY AND FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE

When advocacy involves children, who have limited rights, it continues to be relevant and important for social workers to advocate with and not simply for their clients. For social workers involved and child and family services, the concept of "best interest of the child" is a primary consideration. At the most basic level, children's needs for healthy development and maturation are the priority. But beyond that, the needs of children are often complex, multidimensional, and immersed in family problems and needs.

Determining the best interest of the child can be challenging for other reasons as well. Advocacy with children is

centered on the question, "What do you want?" (Hoefer, 2012). However, children express their desires and needs through words, action, and inaction. Their cries for help can take a number of forms (e.g., acting out, bed-wetting, withdrawal, pleading or frightened facial expressions, clinginess, physical distance). Because the actions of children are open to interpretation, social workers must take care to ensure that they consider the individual before them and not make assumptions based on stereotypes about children (Boylan & Dalrymple, 2011, p. 24).

Economic and Social Justice

What constitutes just services and a just life for children? All children deserve the potential for health, well-being, and a good quality of life, as well as the ability to mature and develop in culturally appropriate ways. Children, especially young children, struggle intensely with their limited ability to exert power and impact decisions affecting their lives. Much of the history of child welfare has focused on saving children from maltreatment and abusive and neglectful circumstances, not empowering children to effect change. Children have been seen as dependents, without adult rights, and their perspectives have not typically been valued in policy and legislative development.

Social workers have challenged these premises and supported child advocacy initiatives in a number of realms. Organizationally, **guardian ad litem** programs appoint individuals to speak and advocate on behalf of children in court systems. Similarly, school social workers advocate for changes in policies, programs, and personnel in educational systems to benefit students.

Social workers can solicit the meaningful participation of children in decision making and educational processes in a number of ways:

- Conducting interviews and surveys designed to gain children's insight into issues, problems, and solutions
- Joining a child advisory or advocacy council
- Speaking at public forums and professional workshops about the needs and interests of children
- Organizing clubs to support children in need and at risk, and disseminating information
- Creating art, films, and music to express children's needs or working with the children themselves to produce such art, films, and music

Supportive Environment

The plight of many children and families is grounded in social–economic circumstances and conditions. In the United States, the affordability of rent or the ability to make a house payment determines where you live. In turn, the location of your dwelling impacts your access to extended family members, employment, public transportation, health care, education, day care, social services, shopping, and recreation.

Exposure to crime and pollution are also based on place of residency. Social workers and clients partner with government and law enforcement officials and local businesses to advocate for community safety watches and groups, as well as entities dedicated to effective air, water, and waste-control systems. People living and working in impoverished neighborhoods share common interests and bonds to reduce crime and maintain a healthy and safe environment.

Human Needs and Rights

Through their education and training in the area of human behavior and the social environment, social workers acquire the theoretical foundations and knowledge they need to analyze human development from birth through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and older age. This foundation is necessary for social workers to understand and facilitate both smaller, micro-oriented changes and large-scale, macro-oriented changes throughout various stages of human development.

When advocating for change with specific populations, social workers must be keenly abreast of the unique needs, limitations, and rights associated with various age groups. For example, in the case of early-childhood intensive treatment programs, it is unrealistic to believe that young children can verbalize and specifically ask for certain types of services. Children deserve the right to successful childhood development, and it is the social worker's professional and ethical responsibility to advocate for and pursue social change for one of society's most vulnerable population groups.

Political Access

Support for children and family services, as with many forms of social services, is a political issue based on dominant belief systems. For example, some politicians oppose social programs and services in an effort to demonstrate **fiscal responsibility,** reduce government intervention in the lives of people, and support traditional families and family

self-sufficiency. Other politicians recognize the vulnerabilities and complexities associated with children and families in a complex and changing society. They often couch their support for the funding of programs and services for children and families in terms of promoting compassion for and protection of children and strengthening the family unit, regardless of the family structure. It should be noted that support for children and family services cuts across party affiliation.

Provision of services for children and families is dependent on funding and resources. One way social workers may advocate for more funding and resources is by becoming more involved in the political process—whether campaigning for politicians, social service funding, levies, or legislation to protect children. In the process, social workers may align themselves with political figures, parties, and associations to educate people about and promote effective services and programs for children and families. Social workers have also been elected to political offices in local and state government as well as the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, where they can become directly involved in crafting policies favorable to children and families.

YOUR CAREER AND FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE

When working with children and families, social workers may be protective service workers, information and referral specialists, therapists, or program professionals. In each of these roles, social workers collect information and rely on data to inform best practices. Research skills are involved in a number of other social work roles as well:

- *Program evaluators* use their research abilities to provide information to help make decisions about the aspects of service programs that work best for children and families, and the ones that need to be adjusted.
- *Advocates* and *educators* collect and use data to educate the public, politicians, administrators, and other decision makers concerning the experiences and problems of children and families.
- *Community organizers* collect information and gather and rally consumers of services, professionals, and community members to promote changes in policies, practices, and laws to address the needs of children and families.

Each of these roles depends on the ability to use qualitative and quantitative research skills to collect and analyze information:

- **Qualitative research** highlights data that are descriptive in nature and not quantified into numbers. Data are gathered through methods such as case studies, focus groups, observation, interviews, and archival research. Generally, qualitative research focuses on small groups of people to understand a phenomenon or social unit in depth.
- **Quantitative research** involves collecting from a larger group of people data about social behaviors, phenomena, programs, and social units. Generally, it often relies on surveys and checklists, and it generates data that are converted into numbers and analyzed statistically.

TIME TO THINK

Think about a social work topic that is of particular interest to you. What kind of research, qualitative or quantitative, might be the most effective way of studying that issue?

How might you use qualitative and quantitative research in fields such as public administration, community relations, politics, management, or other social work–related careers?

SUMMARY

The people of the United States are in the midst of a debate about what constitutes marriage and a family. Simply consider the debate about the rights of gays and lesbians to marry and assume legal responsibilities for each other and their children. Regardless of the outcome of these debates, the U.S. family has changed, and social workers practice with families in

need, no matter their composition or circumstances. Child and family services should be viewed as a major element for helping maintain a social fabric that has always heavily relied on individuals committed to family and mutual support.

Social workers play an important role in assisting couples, parents, and children adapt to contemporary demands concerning work, child rearing, relationship building, and self-fulfillment. Social workers also advocate for social legislation, policies, and social welfare programs to address the rights and needs of children and family members. In practice, social workers both assist with the day-to-day trials and tribulations of family life and identify ways to protect and advance the rights of children and families.

TOP 10 KEY CONCEPTS

child maltreatment
child protective services
child welfare
domestic violence
extended family
family
kinship
nuclear family
qualitative research
quantitative research

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. For social workers, what constitutes a family in the United States today? How does that definition align with your personal values and beliefs? How has the definition of family changed over the past four decades?
2. What attributes are needed to be a social worker in child protective services and to deal with instances of child abuse and neglect?
3. Why do parents have more rights than children do? Is this simply a matter of convention and tradition? Why or why not? Are there times when the rights of parents should supersede the rights of children? If so, when and how? Why are parents required to participate in intervention programs for the benefit of their children? To what degree is this requirement political? To what degree is it practical?
4. Why is advocacy such an important responsibility for social workers engaged in child and family services?

EXERCISES

1. Given the multiple definitions of family in contemporary society, determine whether gay and lesbian parents should have comparable rights to heterosexual parents. Base your conclusions on statistics from your state or locale describing the outcomes for children raised by same-sex parents, single parents, grandparents as parents, foster parents, and residential care for children.
2. On the Internet, identify a child welfare BSW or MSW program near you. How appealing is the program? Does the program sponsor an open house or any opportunities to talk with or contact the program coordinator, students, or recent graduates?
3. In a private setting with friends or family members, broach the topic of government spending for services and programs to protect children. Identify belief systems that support their opinions. Are their views surprising to you? What are the probable sources of their belief systems and thoughts?
4. Consider volunteering at a residential program for children. Research the type of commitment you would be making. Does it involve a criminal background check, references, and drug screening? Ascertain if and how services for families and parents are integrated with the residential program.
5. Research your local child protective services agency. Who provides and advocates for such services? For example, does your local child protective services agency hire licensed helping professionals (social workers and counselors), or are these positions filled by nonprofessionals? If the latter, in what areas of providing and advocating for services to children and families do you think the nonprofessionals would need to improve their skills?
6. Visit a family court and determine who appears to be looking out for the best interests of children. Is a guardian ad litem present? How are the views and interests of parents placed before the court?

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Child Advocates, Inc. (www.childadvocates.org/?gclid=CK-a07XGybECFUgDQAodWgsAsg): Describes how court-appointed volunteers advocate for children and child protection
- The Child Welfare League of America (www.cwla.org): Provides a description of this coalition of private and public agencies that serves vulnerable children and families through a variety of publications and services, including advocacy
- eHow money website (www.ehow.com/how_4685372_becoming-child-protection-social-worker.html): Examines becoming a child protection social worker
- National Association of Social Workers (www.socialworkers.org/advocacy/updates/2003/081204a.asp): Provides a fact sheet on Title IV-E child welfare training program
- South Dakota Department of Social Services and Division of Child Protection Services (dss.sd.gov/cps): Describes state social and child protective services
- UNICEF (www.unicefusa.org/assets/pdf/Toolkit_End-Trafficking_Oct_2012.pdf): Informs and guides professionals on how to fight human trafficking

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