Introduction

Taking Child and Family Rights Seriously: Family Engagement and Its Evidence in Child Welfare

Public child welfare in the United States and internationally is increasingly turning to family engagement as a mechanism for advancing children's safety, permanency, and well-being. Pragmatically, family engagement is a way to involve or reinvolve the family and their social support networks in caring for children and youth in partnership with professionals. Ethically, family engagement is a way to uphold both child and family rights.

Child and family rights evoke the cultural identity of children, young people, and their families, as well as their human rights, to make decisions over their lives. Taking child and family rights seriously recasts clients—whatever their age or abilities—as full participants in their families, communities, and services rather than as dysfunctional individuals (Connolly & Ward, 2008; Gal, 2011). This approach orients child welfare to fulfill its mission to protect children while supporting parents, especially those who are from low-income, disorganized communities and in need.

Because child welfare provides involuntary services and typically must work within legally defined timeframes (i.e., Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997; Evans, 2011), workers face particular challenges in engaging families who may fear, reject, or evade interventions (Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009). These challenges are all the greater in relating to families of color and those living on low incomes. When workers do not work regularly with minority groups, they tend to conflate poverty, race, and risk and remove children of color from their homes at higher rates than they do white

children (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011). Greater scrutiny by child welfare acerbates tensions not only between parents of color and workers, but also between their communities and child protection (Roberts, 2008).

A strategy for respecting culture and safeguarding children is for child protection to broaden the definition of family beyond the immediate family to include their relatives and social kin—the "family group." Given their shared histories, the family group can align emotionally and culturally with the children and their parents in ways that workers cannot. The family group can help workers better understand what is happening in the family, identify indicators of danger and safety, avoid unnecessary placements, and contribute to lasting solutions.

Engaging the family group has the potential to allow families to enact their "ethic of care" (Williams, 2004, p. 73); mobilize family members' resources (Morris, 2007), including opening their homes to their young relatives (Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010; Sheets, Wittenstrom, Fong, James, Tecci, Baumann, & Rodriguez, 2009); and reduce adversarial relations within families and between families and their workers and the courts (Burford, Pennell, & Edwards, 2011). Such positive results, however, are not always the case.

Parents may feel all the more shame and isolation once their larger family hears about their failings to care for their children, to avoid drug use, and to maintain their households (Rockhill, Green, & Newton-Curtis, 2008). These negative repercussions point to the necessity of conference coordinators sensitively preparing parents, children, and their relatives for working together (Healy, Darlington, & Yellowless, 2011). Likewise, workers need an agency environment that supports them in addressing issues with clarity, a down-to-earth manner, and a "soft, mindful, and judicious use of power" (De Boer & Coady, 2007, p. 35).

This special issue examines how taking child and family rights seriously reshapes child welfare practice, policy, and research. In what ways does this stance influence theorizing child welfare, redesigning services, and constructing evidence? In what ways does collective decision-making that engages the family group advance both child and family rights? And when family groups are engaged in making

and carrying out plans, what happens to children, their families, and the involved agencies?

Matters of Language

The special issue reflects experiences, service settings, and frameworks from various continents and countries. Although tilted to the United States, the authors, anonymous reviewers, and editors are an international group. In preparing this special issue, some immediate differences in language emerged.

One distinction concerns the terms used to identify the meetings involving extended family. Similar to two international reviews of family engagement (Burford, Connolly, Morris, & Pennell, 2010; Nixon, Burford, & Quinn, 2005), outside of the United States these meetings are referred to as "family group conferencing." Within the United States, they are variously identified as "family team meetings," "family group decision-making" (FGDM), and "team decision-making" (TDM). Studies also examine strategies other than meetings about a single family. Examples are "family finding" to search for and engage extended family and "multiple family groups" to provide mutual support and overcome barriers to participating in treatment.

Other differences relate to specifying the involved people. What is the definition of "family" in such disparate continents as Africa, Asia, and Europe, and thus, who would be the focus of family engagement? How should authors refer to the "unborn infant," and what are the ramifications, especially as translated into a framework of child and family rights?

Another issue is the identity of families. Contributors to this issue from the United States, given historic and contemporary disadvantage of people of color, see it as incumbent on them to study the effects of "race." In their statistical analyses, the researchers routinely applied categories from the U.S. Census Bureau to describe the racial makeup of their evaluation participants. In contrast, outside the United States the language of "ethnicity" rather than race-based identities was more common.

Perspectives on Family Engagement

The eight articles in this special issue all expand the definition of family engagement beyond the worker-client dyad and shift the focus to the larger family and to the service or policy setting. At the same time, the articles present diverse perspectives on family engagement. These differences stem partially from how the authors define family engagement within a rights framework and partially from the national trends to which they are responding. Table 1 summarizes the authors' definitions of family engagement, their links between rights and family engagement, and the main findings of their studies.

In the United States, the growing awareness of the importance of maintaining or reestablishing family ties is reflected in passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. This legislation emphasizes children's rights to stay connected to their families and relatives and to avoid or exit state care where possible. Funded under this legislation, an Iowan experimental study defined family engagement as involving the extended family in decision-making and as relative caregivers. The researchers Landsman and Boel-Studt examined the impact of family finding (extended family search and engagement) on increasing family engagement and use of kinship placements. Their preliminary findings suggest that the intervention increases the number of family members involved and the likelihood of family reunification or kinship care.

Two articles focus on the fidelity with which family engagement is delivered. The first reports a statewide study of FGDM in Pennsylvania. In framing children and family rights, Rauktis and colleagues adopted a relationship model rather than an individualistic model of rights. Accordingly, they defined family engagement as service providers' partnering and sharing power with families and their communities. The researchers assessed the extent to which family members and workers agreed that FGDM was carried out according to its principles and associated practices. Overall, participants rated the model as being delivered with moderate fidelity. Higher levels of agreement were found for service providers compared to family members and for white respondents relative to African American respondents.

Table 1
Perspectives on Family Engagement

Country and Authors	Definition of Family Engagement	Link of Rights Engagement	Main Findings
Iowa, United States: Landsman & Boel-Studt	Involving the family group in planning and as placement resources	Children's rights to family group connections	Family finding increases family group involvement, reunification, and kin placement
Pennsylvania, United States: Rauktis, Huefner, & Cahalane	Service providers' partnering with families and communities	A relationship model of rights empowering both children and their families	Agreement on model fidelity of FGDM is moderate and varies by role and race
United States: Crampton, Usher, Wildfire, Webster, & Cuccaro-Alamin	Engaging family and community in decisions about children's placements	Children's rights to safety and cultural continuity	Coverage of key elements of TDM is associated with reunification or exit to relative care
Victoria, Australia: Tsantefski, Humphreys, & Jackson	Engaging substance-addicted mothers in treatment	Family engagement as balancing infant rights to protection and parental rights to decision-making	Mothers preferred services during the perinatal period over the postnatal period because of fears of infant removal and lack of supports
Florida, United States: Day & Bazemore	Providing kinship care	Restorative justice practices offering a means of holding youth accountable and repairing cross-generational harm	Chronic youth offenders commit higher rates of domestic violence in grandparent than parental households
Scotland: Gallagher, Smith, Wosu, Stewart, Hunter, Cree, & Wilkinson	Involving family members in shaping social work approaches	Discourse of rights as encouraging service-user engagement and countering managerialism	Families trust workers who are honest and participatory and help them fight for their rights
Northeast, United States: Gopalan, Bannon, Dean-Assael, Fuss, Gardner, LaBarbera, & McKay	Attending treatment	Empowerment of caregivers to make informed choices about services	Multiple family groups overcome barriers to accessing child mental health services
Global: Lenzer & Gran	Participating in decision-making about young relatives	Child, parent, and family rights as undergirding family engagement	International treaties delineate child, parent, and family rights and make space for family engagement

The second article on model fidelity relates coverage of key elements of a systemic reform called "family to family" to its outcomes for children. In their national study, Crampton et al. note that the intent of the initiative is to expose all children and families in the intervention sites, thus, precluding random assignment to treatment and control groups. Instead the researchers used a large data sample to analyze the relationship between fidelity to aspects of TDM and the rate of exit from care to parents or relatives. They report statistically significant and positive interactions but with variations by race and ethnicity.

Another two studies—the first in Victoria, Australia, and the second in Florida, United States—reported major problems with family engagement. The Australian researchers, led by Tsantefski, examined engagement of substance-addicted mothers in treatment. Using a practice-based case study of a women's alcohol and drug service, the researchers interviewed the mothers and learned that they were far more satisfied with services during the perinatal period than during the postnatal period. After the birth, they became fearful that their babies would be removed from their care and wished that child protection had acted earlier to involve the fathers and their families.

The Florida study defines family engagement as grandparents' providing custodial care to their grandchildren, a living arrangement that has sharply climbed in recent years. Using a statewide juvenile justice database, Day and Bazemore determined that teens who are chronic and serious offenders commit domestic violence in their grandparent households at a greater rate than those living in two-parent or single-parent homes. Proportionately the rate is highest for white females and lowest for black males and Hispanic males. The authors propose that restorative justice approaches that involve the extended family and encourage youth to take responsibility for their actions hold out promise of repairing the harm across generations and addressing its underlying causes.

Following on the heels of the problems with family engagement, the next two articles—one from Scotland and the other from the northeastern United States—provide solutions on how to overcome barriers to engaging families. The Scottish study responded to a

growing critique in the United Kingdom of managerialism, that is, the dominance of bureaucratic and technocratic norms. Gallagher and colleagues used a practitioner-led research method to identify inhibitors and facilitators of family engagement in child welfare. Social workers interviewed or conducted focus groups with adult family members and their workers. What they learned reinforced the importance of building trusting relationships and upholding the rights of families to make decisions over their lives.

A study in the northeastern United States also looked at barriers to and facilitators of family engagement, here defined as attending treatment. As part of a larger randomized controlled trial of multiple family groups, Gopalan and colleagues evaluated the program's impact on families' accessing children's mental health services. As expected, the evaluators found that the child welfare families reported more barriers to treatment than their non–child welfare counterparts. Nevertheless, the two sets of families had no statistically significant differences in attendance rates. The findings indicate that the program succeeded in supporting family engagement, and the authors credit the program's nonstigmatizing approach and co-facilitation by parent advocates as empowering caregivers to make choices about needed services for their children.

International treaties offer another means of scrutinizing child, parental, and family rights vis à vis family engagement. In the concluding article, Lenzer and Gran define family engagement as the participation of family group members in decisions about their young relatives. Using a socio-legal analysis, Lenzer and Gran developed a typology of the rights identified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as treaties from three regions— Africa, South Asia, and Europe. These treaties all affirm the family as the fundamental societal unit and specify rights of relevance to different stages of the family engagement process. The typology also identifies gaps in rights that would support family engagement.

This special issue offers an array of definitions of family engagement and places these definitions within a child and family rights framework. All the studies push out the concept of family beyond the immediate family to a larger network of informal resources. Their

findings point to the benefits of family engagement in child welfare and also to its dangers when implemented without adequate supports and resources. For the most part, the reported studies do not access the views of young children. The difficulties of conducting research in child welfare given the mandatory nature of the services and the vulnerabilities of client groups are acknowledged. Nevertheless, this issue highlights the need to increase our efforts to amplify the voices of children and to work out ways of placing children's rights more fully on the research, policy, and practice agendas.

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