

# A Perspective on Family Preservation

by Marsha Riben

Just what is family preservation? A catchy, yet meaningless phrase? A new-fangled slogan? A new term intended to disguise the same old practices? Merely an impossible goal set by naive idealists?

No. Family preservation presents a very real and concrete concept of keeping families together -- particularly single-parent families, welfare families, substance abuse families, and families in financial and emotion crises which threaten to tear them apart. In the past the only "help" offered to such families was to take their children into the protective custody of the foster care system and perhaps, if the children were still young enough to be considered "adoptable," into permanent placements.

In many cities and towns throughout the country, family preservation is becoming a functional reality. In New Jersey, for instance, the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), an agency once feared and dreaded by struggling parents "as the powerful state agency that takes kids away," has created a network of family preservation counselors who work intensively with troubled families.

The family preservation worker's goal is just the opposite of taking kids away, reports *The Star Ledger*, March 11, 1991.

Instead they work to keep families together by acting as therapists to help families change patterns of behavior that tend to destroy the family from within, and by acting as advocates who represent such endangered families. These counselors work with a maximum of two families at a time, dedicating up to 20 hours a week working with them. According to Maureen Braun, New Jersey's state coordinator for family preservation services, these agents "can do both hard and soft services, helping you repair a lock or toilet at the same time they help you better manage your child's behavior." And, in the course of their work, these specialized counselors may take on a school principal, a landlord, city hall, or even the telephone company.

Family preservation is real, alive, and actively in effect in New Jersey and elsewhere. What is happening in your state? If no similar program exists to help keep struggling families together, inform your local social service authorities about programs like that in New Jersey. For information regarding other programs geared toward family preservation, contact the National Association for Family-Based Services, P.O. Box 005, Riverdale, IL 60627

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