

What is "Family Preservation"?

Family preservation does not mean what critics say it means.

The term "family preservation" has a very specific meaning. It refers to a systematic determination of those families in which children could remain in their homes or be returned home safely, and provision of the services needed to help ensure that safety.

There are many ways to accomplish this – often the best ways involve nothing more than providing cash assistance, so family poverty is not confused with neglect.

When cases are more complicated, a family is on the verge of being broken up, and hard services and counseling need to be combined, there is another option: Intensive Family Preservation Services.

The term "family preservation" originally was coined to apply specifically to such programs, when they rigorously follow a series of policies and procedures pioneered by the first such program, Homebuilders, in Washington State.

Among those policies and procedures:

- The intervention begins when the family is in crisis. A Homebuilders intervention is designed for families whose children otherwise face imminent removal to foster care.
- The intervention is short -- usually four to six weeks -- but extremely intense.

Family preservation has been falsely characterized as a "quick fix." In fact Homebuilders workers have caseloads of no more than three,¹ so though they are with a family for no more than six weeks, they can spend several hours at a time with that family -- often equivalent to a year of conventional "counseling."

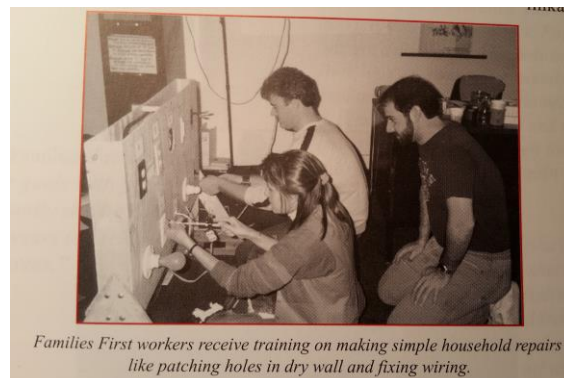
Furthermore, the end of the intervention does *not* mean the end of support for the family. The Homebuilders model requires that the family be linked to less intensive support after the intervention to maintain the gains made by the family.

- The worker spends her or his time in the family's home, so she can see the family in action -- and so the family doesn't have the added burden of going to the worker's office. The worker gives his or her home phone number

to the family and is on call 24 hours a day.

- The worker begins with the problems the family identifies, rather than patronizing the family and dismissing their concerns.
- Workers are trained in several different approaches to helping families, so they don't become hostile to those families if their first attempts to help don't work.
- But perhaps most important, family preservation workers combine traditional counseling and parent education with a strong emphasis on providing "hard" services to ameliorate the worst aspects of poverty.

Family preservation workers help families find childcare and job training, and get whatever special educational help the children may require. They teach practical skills and help with financial problems. They make basic home repairs. This photo shows therapists from Michigan's version of Homebuilders in 1998.



Families First workers receive training on making simple household repairs like patching holes in dry wall and fixing wiring.

They even do windows. Faced with a family living in a dirty home, a family preservation worker will not lecture the parents or demand that they spend weeks in therapy to deal with the supposed psychological trauma of which the dirty home is "obviously" just a symptom. The family preservation worker will roll up her or his sleeves and help with the cleaning.

This has a number of benefits:

- First and foremost, poverty is the single best predictor of actual child maltreatment, and broad, vague laws make it easy to confuse poverty itself with "neglect" (See [Issue Papers 5 and 6](#)). A few hundred dollars in "flexible funds" for a security deposit on a better

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apartment may be the most important "therapy" a family needs.

- Once basic survival needs are taken care of, a troubled parent can start to work on other problems. It's a lot easier to concentrate on how to be the best possible parent when you're not worrying about where your next meal is coming from or whether your family is about to be evicted.

- By providing the concrete help a family says it needs, family preservation workers set themselves apart from many of the "helping" professionals families have dealt with. They have proven they can deliver. Where everything had seemed hopeless, the family preservation worker has provided hope.

What Family Preservation is not

The child savers have given family preservation a different meaning: all purpose scapegoat. They have slapped the label onto any child abuse death anywhere under any circumstances.

Agencies have eagerly embraced this scapegoating, since it is far safer for *them* to blame a law or policy that supposedly mandates "family preservation" than to admit that a child died because of their own bungling or budget cuts (see [Issue Papers 8 and 9](#)).

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1. Some critics of family preservation set up a straw man by first claiming that family preservation workers can have caseloads as high as six, and then saying such programs don't work. A program with a caseload of six is **not** an Intensive Family Preservation Services intervention.