



ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

## **Achievements and Challenges of the Service System for at-Risk Children and their Families: Two Decades of MJB Research**

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Including an introduction by Moti Winter,  
Formerly, Senior Deputy Director-General, Ministry of Labor and Social  
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The study was made possible by a special grant from Nancy Hackerman  
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# Introduction

**by Moti Winter**

*Formerly, Senior Deputy Director-General, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA), and Head of the Division for Personal and Social Services*

For many years, the dominant ethos in Israel held that major national tasks could be tackled by hard work and common sense. This ethos guided Israel's government service since the establishment of the state in 1948 with considerable success.

In public administration, especially governmental, a director was expected to take responsibility and make major decisions on policy or the development of national programs, in most cases, without systematic data or ongoing research.

At the end of the 1980s, when I took office as Director of the Service for Children and Youth at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA), I came up against this situation. Yet, I had to make highly complex decisions and formulate policy that would significantly affect the welfare and future of large numbers children and parents.

Furthermore, these decisions involved hundreds of millions of shekels that had to be allocated appropriately for the benefit of at-risk children and their parents.

The question of children at risk in Israel was brought into sharp relief at the end of the 1980s, following a number of severe incidents of child murders and injuries. The attention focused on the issue subsequently saw the legislation of the Law for the Prevention of Abuse of Minors and the Helpless, 1989. The law, to my mind, marked a crossroads in the state's approach to children and youth at risk. It caused the social, education and health systems to refocus their attention on the topic, resulting in the allocation of substantial funds to develop services for at-risk children and their parents.

At the same time, the media and the public began to show interest in the issue. This was accompanied by criticism that repeatedly made its way to the Knesset. We were called upon to provide immediate, practical answers to the questions at hand.

Yet the resources at our disposal for basic research and evaluation studies were insignificant and there was little we could do to remedy the situation. In this predicament, and in coordination with MOLSA's

Research, Planning and Training Division, we turned for assistance to the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) – specifically, to the Center for Children and Youth. We needed research on the many projects being developed at the Service for Children and Youth, and subsequently also at the Service for Individual and Family Welfare, the Service for Adoption, the Juvenile Probation Service of the Division for Correctional Services and more.

This relationship, formed more than 20 years ago, created an extraordinary model of authentic partnership between MJB and MOLSA.

To a large extent, the studies described in this booklet illuminated our way and helped us to formulate the child-welfare policy that developed over the years, and the key programs which were developed by the Service for Children and Youth. Some of these programs were developed with the assistance of JDC-Ashalim and almost all of them were accompanied by MJB evaluation studies.

Later, we turned to MJB for formative studies once we understood the importance of this tool to accompany the development of major projects as they were evolving: Community 2000, Towards the Community, 360<sup>0</sup> – the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk (hereafter: 360<sup>0</sup>).

I became one of MJB's foremost clients, and I would like to briefly illustrate the impact of some of the studies on policy development.

The first study to generate considerable attention related to the Decision Committees, charged with deciding whether a child requires out-of-home placement (they are now known as the Committees for Treatment Planning and Assessment). Before the study was published, the committees had served as a professional team (interdisciplinary committee) determining a child's out-of-home placement and, in certain cases, a personal treatment program for children in the community. A comprehensive study (by T. Dolev, Prof. R. Benbenisty and A. Timer ) primarily exposed the great difficulties in the field over attempts to locate appropriate care in the community, and the abundant use made by the committees of out-of-home arrangements due to the extreme lack of community solutions.

Apart from exposing the acute lack of community services, the study demonstrated the vast importance of the "institution" of Decision Committees as the professional "heart" of the Social Service Departments when it came to recommending treatment strategies, and of data infrastructure for planning new services.

In my opinion, the recommendations of this study provoked considerable attention among the ministry's top echelon at the Service for Children and Youth and at the Division for Personal and Social Services. Subsequently, they led to the accelerated development and reform of the Committees for Planning Treatment and Assessment, as well as to the development of the Community 2000 pilot program, which served as the bases for the implementation of the national policy of Towards the Community.

In 1989, the Law for the Prevention of Abuse of Minors and the Helpless was legislated, stipulating the obligation to report cases of child maltreatment in the family. Consequently, we began to establish Emergency Centers and appoint local and regional Child Protection Officers to ensure compliance with the Law for the Prevention of Abuse of Minors and the Helpless.

Ensuing from the law and the needs in the field, we established the Schusterman Emergency Center in Jerusalem, the first of its kind. At the end of a year's operation, MJB conducted an evaluation study of the center's activities. The study found that children who had completed a six-month stay at the center were then referred to residential care or returned home. However, the study also revealed that many of the children who had returned home were referred back to the Emergency Center since there were insufficient community services in Jerusalem to meet their needs.

This study underscored the need to develop more sensitive, meaningful, and significant services for these children. We established Child-Parent Centers and decided to expand the ambulatory units of Emergency Centers to enable parents to receive treatment while their children lived at home. These treatments are designed for children who had previously lived at the Emergency Centers, and/or children who required treatment due to abuse but did not have to leave home and live in Emergency Centers.

In 2008, we found ourselves in a sudden and severe crisis regarding the Law for the Prevention of Abuse of Minors and the Helpless. At a conference in Bat Yam, the Child Protection Officers (CPOs) claimed that they were being crushed under the weight of tasks imposed on them under the law. We asked MJB for a study of the work of the CPOs, and MJB responded at once with a survey in eight different cities.

The study findings focused our attention on two facts: one main reason for the overload on the CPOs was that they often did the work of general social workers with respect to their clients (in addition to

their own special responsibilities); another was that the neighborhood team supervisors were insufficiently involved in the work of the CPOs on their staff.

The findings led us to develop the Magen (Shield) Program, which included setting up local hotlines staffed by paraprofessionals to report cases of suspected child maltreatment and greatly lessen the burden on the CPOs. Moreover, new work procedures were formulated along with joint, shared responsibilities and the division of labor between CPOs, general social workers, and neighborhood team supervisors.

From a later study conducted by Dr. Szabo-Lael and M. Shevat which evaluated the Magen Program, we learned that the program had reduced the CPO workload and transferred more responsibility to the team supervisors, Social Service Department directors and general social workers. Thus, the client work was streamlined.

Other major studies – e.g., on the new Child-Parent Centers, the Community 2000 pilot, and the Towards the Community reform – enabled us to formulate clear policy on community work and subsequently served the development of the infrastructure for 360<sup>0</sup> – The National Program for Children and Youth at Risk.

Space does not permit us here to elaborate the full import of the many studies cited in this document. However, without a doubt, the partnership models that developed between the Service for Children and Youth, MOLSA, MJB and, of course, Ashalim – an important component of the service-development partnership – fundamentally impacted our work: no longer did research reports lie about gathering dust. Instead, there was a significant resource of knowledge for the formulation of child-welfare policy.

This partnership created researchers who were able to see at once the products of their applied research in the field and who, in many cases, have become partners in project planning. On the other hand, the policymakers at MOLSA receive data and study findings in real time, often amid ongoing work, enabling them to design more reliable and professional social policy and projects, which, most importantly, are better suited to client needs.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we still lack in-depth anthropological studies to enrich our knowledge and help us understand issues that we have not yet thoroughly deciphered, such as:

1. The profound processes that parents experience when children are placed out of the home
2. The special interactions and relationships that are formed between CPOs, their clients and the Juvenile Courts
3. The implications of the transfer of children to adoption – for the biological families, for the adopted children, and for the adoptive families.

No doubt, additional research tools are needed to address the complex situations that we deal with. We have made great strides and, hopefully, new, even more effective research tools will be found to help us better understand our clients' needs.

Looking forward, I suggest that we learn from Israeli agriculture, which is considered to be among the most advanced in the world. One reason for its success stems from the fact that for decades it has been accompanied by serious research conducted by the Faculty of Agriculture of the Hebrew University, and the Agricultural Research Organization (ARO) Volcani Center. Israel's social service system is also among the most advanced in the Western world. The time has come for the work of social workers to be accompanied by an applied research institute such as MJB, on a daily basis, just as farmers have been accompanied by the Volcani Center.

The social service system can only develop in the future with the help of continuous innovation of intervention technologies as required to address our complex social problems. Innovation demands constant awareness of new technologies and interventions being developed around the world, and their adaptation to local conditions. Social workers in the field have numerous ideas for innovation and development. These ideas require examination, development and evaluation. Social work must reinvent itself in every generation to adapt to changing needs. To ensure innovative and effective work, it should constantly be accompanied by research and evaluation linked to the field.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to MJB Director Prof. Jack Habib, to Talal Dolev, former Director of the Engelberg Center for Children and Youth at MJB, to Miriam Navot, the current Director of the Engelberg Center, to MOLSA Director of Planning, Research and Training Yekutiel Sabah, and to the researchers at MJB, senior and junior. Last but not least, I wish to thank my colleagues at the Division for Personal and Social Services, MOLSA, who over the years were partners to this great accomplishment.

**Moti Winter**

## Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the social services have contended with numerous issues concerning the delivery of more effective services to at-risk children and their families while making more efficient use of the limited resources at their disposal. During this period, the research team of the Engelberg Center for Children and Youth at the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) conducted more than 20 studies on various aspects of care for at-risk children through services of the Division for Personal and Social Services (DPSS) at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA). The purpose of the studies was to provide systematic, updated data as a basis for understanding the needs of the children and their families, and how the service system could better deliver appropriate, effective responses to the children's needs. The findings from these studies supported the development of new national-policy initiatives and of new service-delivery models.

This report reviews 23 studies conducted by MJB to facilitate learning about the development of social services for at-risk children during the past two decades, about the achievements of the system and the difficulties it still faces. Information regarding each of the studies reviewed in this report appears in the appendix.

### Main Achievements of the Service System

The review demonstrated that this period was characterized by considerable effort to formulate policy and introduce reforms, develop innovative services, and apply models and tools to improve work practices.

***Improved child-protection services: improving the handling of reports of suspected child abuse to Child-Protection Officers (CPOs) and the division of responsibility between CPOs and family social workers at the Social Service Departments:*** The studies reviewed showed that over the years, the reporting procedures under the Law for the Prevention of Abuse of Minors and the Helpless (hereafter: Youth Law) were improved and handled more professionally. In addition, clear definitions were formulated for the role of CPOs and procedures were defined and implemented for the division of responsibility with other Social Service Department social workers and social workers in the community from other agencies.

***Improved decision-making and intervention planning at the Treatment Planning and Assessment Committees (formerly named Decision Committees):*** The studies examining committee work in recent years showed that the process of decision-making and intervention planning is perceived as more complex, but also more rational, standardized and efficient. Deliberations are structured so as to clearly distinguish between the discussion of the needs of a child and family and the recommendation of a treatment plan, rendering them more focused and professional. The toolbox of instruments for data collection on the children and their families, and the services they previously received, helped construct a broader, more systematic picture, contributing to decision-making and better adapting the treatment program to the needs of each child and family.

***Greater parental involvement in planning intervention programs:*** The findings of the 1997 study of the Decision Committees revealed that parents were insufficiently involved in the processes of treatment planning, and their viewpoints were not sufficiently heard. Later studies that examined, among other things, parental involvement in the committees, showed greater involvement, as reflected by their presence at the discussions; by relating in the discussions to family needs (rather than only to the child's); by presenting the parents' perceptions of the needs and service required; and by involving parents in planning the treatment, including further steps after the intervention.

***Adoption of systematic, data-based processes for service planning and resource allocation at the local level:*** As part of the Community 2000 pilot and subsequently, the Towards the Community national policy, tools, methodologies and guidelines for systematic, local service planning were developed and implemented. Most Social Service Departments conducted planning processes based on systematic data collection on the needs of at-risk children and on the array of existing services. Social Service Department directors and staff developed new skills for data collection and analysis, and reported an enhanced sense of greater professionalism, competency and pride in this area. Structured, systematic processes of data collection, planning, and resource allocation at the local level expanded to inter-ministerial work, were adopted in 360<sup>0</sup> –The National Program for Children and Youth at Risk, providing, for the first time, extensive and comprehensive data on the needs of at-risk children and youth in some two-thirds of the local authorities in Israel.

***Expansion and diversification of the community service system for children and families:*** In the past two decades, the extent of community services for at-risk children was expanded and the resources available to the system for these purposes increased significantly. The Community 2000 pilot and

Towards the Community policy made it possible for some Social Service Departments to establish an array of services which were not available previously in those localities, while other departments enhanced the extent of their existing services. The service system was diversified to suit the characteristics and severity of the types of needs of the children and families, and this population was prioritized. Moreover, 360<sup>0</sup> (National Program for Children and Youth at Risk) succeeded in increasing the number of at-risk children receiving services in the community, with greater emphasis on the early-childhood group. New models of community services were developed, the goal being to enable at-risk children to grow up in their families, offering an alternative to out-of-home placement and providing care and support for children and families with diverse difficulties.

***Improved foster services:*** The research examining foster services showed growing use in 2000-12 of the foster response versus residential institutions, especially for early childhood, in correspondence with MOLSA policy. It also showed that foster arrangements in Israel are stable in comparison with other countries where children reportedly are passed from one foster home to another. As reported by professionals and policymakers, following the partial privatization process that began in 2001, foster services have become more efficient in several respects: the recruitment of foster families; the processes of placement of children with foster families; the support lent foster families; the provision of additional support by the foster care agencies; and the development of expertise and knowledge among social work professionals working in this area.

***Improved adoption services:*** Over the years, attempts were made to address the need to provide support to adoptive families. Similarly, to expand the options of permanent homes for children unable to grow up with their birth parents, two innovative adoption models were examined: "open adoption", which enables limited contact with the birth family, and adoption by foster families.

***Satisfaction of service recipients and findings on the outcomes for children and families:*** The examination of the evaluation studies showed that parents receiving services were generally highly satisfied. Studies examining change in the situation of the children and families found improvement, according to the assessment of parents and professionals. Two studies that examined intervention outcomes by comparing service recipients with non-recipients, indicated positive results. Studies examining the outcomes of support services for families in divorce disputes – the study on child-parent visitation centers, and the evaluation study on Family Court Support Services – showed that in a large portion of the cases, the services managed to achieve desired outcomes.

## **The Difficulties Facing the System of Services for Children at Risk**

***Gaps between extent of needs and of available services, and lack of funding for critical supplementary assistance.*** Various studies indicate that, alongside the increase in community services, considerable gaps remain between the extent of needs and available services. Apart from these gaps and the necessity to develop effective responses for additional needs, some studies showed that the existing budgets do not currently cover critical professional activities that are required in addition to direct client care - such as outreach, training, joint meetings with other services, and consultations with community professionals. Similarly, difficulties were identified in funding actions to promote service utilization, such as providing children with transportation to activities.

***Difficulties implementing the principle of children's involvement in decision-making affecting their lives:*** The principle of involving children in decisions affecting their lives is a basic principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In the child welfare system, it is relevant for many situations, especially the Treatment Planning and Assessment Committees and divorce procedures.

The evaluation of a pilot program to promote children's involvement in divorce procedures through Family Court Social Services revealed that it was feasible and led to positive outcomes. The findings of other studies, however, showed that the application of the principle of involvement is still in its inception and, as yet, MOLSA has not formulated uniform guidelines.

***Non-utilization of recommended services by parents:*** Different studies have revealed that some parents do not utilize the services offered, or only use them partially. These findings may indicate that alongside the progress made in raising awareness of the need to work with parents, and the greater diversity of the services offered, services need to be further adapted to parents' needs, priorities and characteristics.

***Difficulties in ensuring service availability and accessibility:*** The studies showed a need to improve service availability and accessibility both physically and culturally, especially for Arab families.

***Need to expand professional training and ongoing supervision:*** Some studies showed a need to expand the professional training of service staff prior to the start of their work with families. Others

showed a need for more ongoing supervision and support throughout the course of the intervention with the families.

***Need to expand emotional support for social workers and other professionals:*** Several studies revealed that social workers and other professionals may feel emotionally burdened at times and are interested in receiving ongoing emotional support.

***Difficulties in achieving cooperation in the provision of multiple services, and ensuring continuity of care in the transition from one service to another:*** A diverse service system demands inter-organizational cooperation in the simultaneous provision of different services. Some studies revealed difficulties in achieving cooperation between Social Service Department social workers and workers from other agencies. Difficulties arise, too, in collaborative work with professionals from outside of the welfare system, for example, from the education and health systems, especially concerning their participation in the Treatment Planning and Assessment Committees.

A diversified service system also requires continuity in the transition from one service to another. In order to safeguard the outcomes of interventions and ensure continuity of care, it is important to conclude interventions in an orderly fashion and ensure systematic follow-up of children and families transitioning between services, especially with respect to complex cases and the return home of children from out-of-home placement. Nonetheless, the findings of various studies revealed difficulties surrounding inter-agency transfer of data and follow-up of work with the families over time. Another complication derives from the shared responsibility for at-risk children and families by different units at the DPSS, mainly the Child and Youth Service, the Service for Individual and Family Welfare, and the Service for Adoption. Alongside the trend to strengthen cooperation between these units in program implementation, while sharing knowledge and resources, there appears to be a need to continue to formulate coordinated MOLSA policy regarding the many needs of children and families.

***Partial implementation of data-collection tools and documentation:*** Despite the recognition of the growing importance of systematic data collection for purposes of planning, follow-up and continuity of care, and of the development of structured data-collection tools for various treatment settings – it is still difficult to fully implement these tools. As a result, the documentation on the needs of the children and families is partial and irregular, and this often prevents efficient utilization of summary data.

***Need to expand support for children of divorced parents and their families:*** Various studies indicated the need to identify children requiring emotional care due to parental divorce; to develop available, readily accessible therapeutic interventions suited to the special needs and of children and their ages; and, especially, to expand the support for children and families in instances of strong parental conflict. The recent Silman Committee led by the General Director at MOLSA discussed this issue. One of the outcomes is a pilot program currently under way on coordination between divorced parents in severe conflict. MJB is accompanying the pilot with an evaluation study.

***Difficulties implementing the "permanent home" policy: children in long-term out-of-home placements and the lack of required work with parents that would enable reunification:*** MOLSA policy contends that the best situation for children is to grow up with their parents – on condition that the parents neither harm nor endanger them, and are able to provide a safe, nurturing environment. If parental functioning cannot be strengthened to the level that would allow the child to remain at home, or return home following emergency placement or foster care – MOLSA advocates the right of every child to a permanent family through adoption. In practice, the large majority of the children removed from their parents are not transferred to adoption but are raised in foster families or residential facilities for years, sometimes until age 18, or return to their families after several years even in the absence of the necessary intensive work with parents to improve the home situation.

A number of MJB studies revealed several possible reasons for this state of affairs. These include: a lack of clear MOLSA guidelines on carrying out the policy; a shortage of resources, knowledge, and programs for intensive work with parents whose children are in acute danger of abuse or neglect (despite the abovementioned increase in the extent of work with parents in general); the channeling of most of the efforts of the social workers in local Social Service Departments to the care of children in high-risk situations who live in the community, rather than to families whose children have been placed in an alternative arrangement; difficulties of cooperation between Social Service Department social workers in charge of caring for children and families in the community, and, on the other hand, the foster care social workers and staff at residential facilities; and, lastly, the attitudes and values of family social workers at Social Service Departments which make it difficult for them to consider the possibility of adoption (rather than more temporary, less-binding interventions).

Recently, alongside attempts to expand and diversify community services, efforts have been invested to strengthen the implementation of the "permanent home" policy through the collaboration of a

number of different MOLSA services. Since 2016, joint efforts of the Service for Children and Youth, the Service for Individual and Family Welfare, the Service for Adoption and the Unit for Community Work have led to the development and implementation of two pilot programs to further this approach. One program is for young children in high-risk situations – who are either in foster care already or under consideration for out-of-home placement – to enable them to remain with their birth parents or to be adopted; the other is the pilot of family rehabilitation, Families for Growth for school-age children – to enable them to remain at home, and for children in out-of-home placement – to enable them to return home earlier. As part of these programs, social workers are allocated far more hours than is generally available to them to work with every family; each Social Service Department in the program can purchase services for the families through special discretionary funds; and existing community services are to be expanded.

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## **Appendix: The Engelberg Center Studies on which the Review is Based (Hebrew)**

### *Structuring Social Workers' Child-Protection Roles*

- ◆ Dolev, T.; Szabo-Lael, R.; Ben-Rabi, D. 2008. **Child Protection Officers: Roles, Work Methods, and Challenges**
- ◆ Szabo-Lael, R. Shevat, M. 2012. **Magen ("Shield") – A Program to Upgrade the Child Protection System: Evaluation Study**

### *Decision-Making Processes and Resource Allocation*

- ◆ Dolev, Benbenishty, R. Timar. 2001. **Decision Committees in Israel: Their Organization, Work Processes and Outcomes – A Summary Report**
- ◆ Ben-Rabi, Szabo-Lael. 2012. **Community 2000: Upgrading the Decision Committees and the Planning of Services – Summary Evaluation Report**
- ◆ Fass, Amiel, Szabo-Lael. 2012. **Evaluation of the Implementation of the Reform of the Planning, Treatment and Assessment Committees: Interim Report**
- ◆ Dolev, Szabo-lael, Schmid, Bar Nir. 2008. *Towards the Community Policy: An Evaluation Study*
- ◆ Ben-Rabi, Hasin. 2014. **Implications of the Towards the Community Policy: Changes in Community Services and Integration of Children and Youth Returning from Out-of-Home Care, 2005-2011**
- ◆ Szabo-Lael, Ben Simon, Konstaninov. 2014. **Preschoolers in Foster Families: Characteristics and Processes of Intervention**

### *Mapping the Needs of at-Risk Children and Youth in Israel*

- ◆ Szabo-Lael, Hasin. 2011. **At-Risk Children and Youth: Results of the Identification and Mapping Conducted by the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk**
- ◆ Szabo-Lael, Manor, A. 2015. **Children and Youth at Risk – Characteristics and Needs according to 360° – Mapping the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk**

### *Responses for Children and Families in the Community*

- ◆ Ben-Rabi, Hasin. 2006. **Community-Based and Day Residential Facilities: Intervention Strategies and the Status of the Children and Their Parents, Summary of Three-Year Study**
- ◆ Rivkin, Yadgar. 2010. **Evaluation of the Families Program**
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- ◆ Rivkin, Szabo-Lael. 2009. **Jerusalem Protection Center for Children and Youth, An Innovative Service for Initial Intervention with Child Victims – Evaluation Study**
- ◆ Rivkin. 2009. **Evaluation of Child-Parent Centers**
- ◆ Sorek, Nijim-Ektelat, Ben Rabi. 2012. **Child-Parent Centers: Mobile Regional Model – Evaluation Study – Summary Report.**
- ◆ Lael, Nijim-Ektelat. 2012. **The Counseling-Treatment Units at Emergency Centers for Children and Youth**
- ◆ Szabo-Lael, Zadka. 2015. **360° – The National Program for Children and Youth at Risk: The Needs of the Participants and the Services Received**
- ◆ Yoa Sorek, Dori Rivkin. 2010. **Evaluation of a Pilot Project of Child Participation in Family Court Proceedings**
- ◆ Navot, Fass, Zadka. 2014 **Child-Parent Visitation Centers: National Evaluation Study.**
- ◆ Bayer-Topilsky, Manor, Szabo-Lael. 2015. **Family Court Social Services – National Evaluation Study**

*Adoption and Fostering*

- ◆ Rivkin, Baumgold. 2001. **Follow-up of Older Children Who Have Been Adopted**
- ◆ Sorek, Nijim-Ektelat. 2012 (a and b). **Expanding Adoption Opportunities Case Studies: Open Adoption and Fost-Adoption**
- ◆ Sorek, Szabo-Lael, Ben Simon. 2014. **Foster Care Services in Israel: National Study**