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Adapted in 2000 from Ooms, T. (1995). *Taking Families Seriously as an Essential Policy Tool*. Paper prepared for an expert meeting on Family Impact in Leuven, Belgium.

The first version of this checklist was published by Ooms, T., & Preister, S. (Eds., 1988). *A Strategy for Strengthening Families: Using Family Criteria in Policymaking and Program Evaluation*. Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar.

The checklist can be ordered from the National Council on Family Relations at cost.

Additional information is available from the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 120 Human Ecology, 1300 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706; phone: (608) 263-2353; fax: (608) 262-5335; web: <http://sohe.wisc.edu/familyimpact>.

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National Council on Family Relations

This checklist can be used to review policies or legislation; evaluate programs, services, and operating procedures of agencies or organizations; and help prepare questions, talking points, or testimony for hearings, meetings, or public forums.



## A CHECKLIST FOR ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS ON FAMILIES

The first step in developing family-friendly policies is to ask the right questions:

- What can government and community institutions do to enhance the family's capacity to help itself and others?
- What effect does (or will) this policy (or proposed program) have for families? Will it help or hurt, strengthen or weaken family life?

These questions sound simple, but they can be difficult to answer.

The Consortium of Family Organizations developed this checklist to assess the intended and unintended consequences of policies and programs on family stability, family relationships, and family responsibilities. The checklist includes six basic principles that serve as the measure of how sensitive to and supportive of families policies and programs are. Each principle is accompanied by a series of family impact questions.

The criteria and questions are not rank ordered. Sometimes these criteria conflict with each other, requiring trade-offs. Cost effectiveness also must be considered. Some questions are value-neutral and others incorporate specific values. People may not always agree on these values, so sometimes the questions will require rephrasing. This tool, however, reflects a broad nonpartisan consensus, and it can be useful to people across the political spectrum.

**Checklist: A Tool for Analysis**

Check all that apply. Record the specific impact the policy or program will have on family well-being.

1

**Principle 1. Family support and responsibilities.**

Policies and programs should aim to support and supplement family functioning and provide substitute services only as a last resort.

Does the proposal or program:

- support and supplement parents' and other family members' ability to carry out their responsibilities?
- provide for incentives for other persons to take over family functioning when doing so may not be necessary?
- strengthen adult children's ties to their elderly parents?
- enforce absent parents' obligations to provide financial support for their children?

2

**Principle 2. Family membership and stability.**

Whenever possible, policies and programs should encourage and reinforce marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, especially when children are involved. Intervention in family membership and living arrangements is usually justified only to protect family members from serious harm or at the request of the family itself.

Does the policy or program:

- provide incentives or disincentives to marry, separate, or divorce?
- provide incentives or disincentives to give birth to, foster, or adopt children?
- strengthen marital commitment or parental obligations?
- use appropriate criteria to justify removal of a child or adult from the family?
- allocate resources to help keep the marriage or family together when this is the appropriate goal?
- recognize that major changes in family relationship such as divorce or adoption are the processes that extend over time and require continuing support and attention?

3

**Principle 3. Family involvement and inter-dependence.**

Policies and programs must recognize the interdependence of family relationships, the strength and persistence of family ties and obligations, and the wealth of resources that families can mobilize to help their members.

To what extent does the policy or program:

- recognize the reciprocal influence of the family and family members on individual needs or problems, and the influence of individual needs or problems on the family and family members?
- involve immediate and extended family members in working toward a solution?
- acknowledge the power and persistence of family ties, especially when they are problematic or destructive?
- build on informal social support networks (such a community/ neighborhood organizations, churches) that are so essential to families' daily lives?
- respect family decisions about the division of labor?
- address issues of power inequity in families?
- ensure perspectives of all family members are represented?
- assess and balance the competing needs, rights, and interests of various members of a family?
- protect the rights and safety of individuals in the family while respecting parents' rights and family integrity?

4

**Principle 4. Family partnership and empowerment.**

Policies and programs must encourage individuals and their close family members to collaborate as partners with program professionals in delivery of services to an individual. In addition, parent and family representatives are an essential resource in policy development, program planning, and evaluation.

In what specific ways does the policy or program:

- provide full information and a range of choices to families?
- respect family autonomy and allow the family to make their own decisions? On what principles are family autonomy breached and program staff allowed to intervene and make decisions?
- encourage program professionals to work in collaboration with the families or their clients, patients, or students?
- take into account the family's need to coordinate the multiple services they may require and integrate well with other programs and services that they use?
- make services easily accessible to families in terms of location, operating hours, and easy-to-use application and intake forms?
- prevent participating families from being devalued, stigmatized, or subjected to humiliating circumstances?
- involve parents and family representatives in policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation?

5

**Principle 5. Family diversity.**

Families come in many colors, forms and configurations, and policies and programs must take into account their different effects on various types of families. Policies and programs must acknowledge and value the diversity of family life and not discriminate against or penalize families solely for reasons of structure, roles, cultural values or life stage.

How does the policy or program:

- affect various types of families?
- acknowledge intergenerational relationships and responsibilities among family members?
- provide good justification for targeting only certain family types, for example, only employed parents or single parents? Does it discriminate against or penalize other types of families for insufficient reason?
- identify and respect the different values, attitudes, and behavior of families from various racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and geographic backgrounds that are relevant to program effectiveness?

6

**Principle 6. Support of vulnerable families.**

Families in greatest economic and social need, as well as those determined to be most vulnerable to breakdown, should be included in government policies and programs.

Does the policy or program:

- identify and publicly support services for families in the most extreme economic or social need?
- give support to families who are most vulnerable to breakdown and have the fewest resources?
- target efforts and resources toward preventing family problems before they become serious crises or chronic situations?