

---

## Teaching Tools & Techniques

---

### Developing and Evaluating Policy Options to Promote Family Well-Being

Renee A. Oscarson

#### **Purpose**

This final integrative paper assignment has been used in a graduate family policy course.

The overall purposes of the assignment are:

- To provide students the opportunity to explore a family policy issue in depth.
- To guide students through the description and analysis of a policy issue affecting families.

#### **Objectives**

Through completion of this assignment, students will:

- Assess the impact of policy options on family well-being.
- Identify tradeoffs among policy alternatives.
- Recognize the complexity of developing / implementing a "satisfactory" policy solution.

#### **Rationale**

Many graduate students and faculty members hold strong partisan values. Although strongly held values may be an asset in political advocacy, they may preclude us from recognizing what we ultimately might consider to be valid aspects of opposing viewpoints. Similarly, our values may prevent us from recognizing bi-partisan or nonpartisan similarities in potential solutions. Further, bipartisan values tend to oversimplify policy issues.

Through the duration of a family policy course, students will become aware in a general sense of potential effects of policy on families; however, they are not likely to become familiar with the development and implementation of policy alternatives until they struggle with part of the policy analysis process themselves. In addition, carefully thinking through and writing about

a family policy issue which is of interest to them may enable students to become more articulate when advocating for families.

### **Procedure**

Because this is a final integrative paper, it is assumed that specific topics have been covered during the course. Previous topics may include values, individualism versus collectivism, individual versus family perspectives; comparative examples (e.g., US, Canada, France) of individual and family perspectives; use of family impact checklists; federal, state and local political processes; policy briefs; and library resources for tracking legislation. The syllabus or list of readings includes resources (web sites, journal articles, books, etc.) that address each of the topics. Students are asked to make use of a variety of sources, which may include research-based journal articles, census data, reports from nonprofit or private organizations, government documents, existing or pending legislation, etc.

The assigned paper is to consist of four sections. The first section includes the description of the *issue or problem*, including who is affected (e.g., age, sex, family structure, rural / urban), the magnitude of the problem (number of people impacted, whether directly or indirectly, and seriousness of the problem), and how people are affected. Students are to incorporate demographic or other research and statistical support to substantiate their claims. They also are encouraged to use the format of "talking points" or bulleted facts in order to highlight the characteristics of the issue describe the problem more succinctly. Another component of the first major section is to discuss previous legislation or attempts to solve the problem/address the issue through policy, including the political climate and values that led to policy solutions or lack thereof. Finally, at the end of the first section, students are to identify realistic goals for policy intervention (e.g., decrease teen pregnancy rate; reduce family caregiver burden).

In the second section, students are to describe and evaluate policy or programmatic *alternatives* as potential *solutions*. In order to evaluate solutions, they need to develop evaluation criteria. They are required to include criteria that help them assess the policies' effects on family well-being. To identify and select these criteria, they are referred to the Family Policy Impact Checklist, available at [http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi\\_checklist\\_aipf.pdf](http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi_checklist_aipf.pdf), the website of *The Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars*, located at University of Wisconsin-Madison Cooperative Extension Service. Other criteria might include overall cost, cost-effectiveness, public acceptability/ perceptions, feasibility, and scope of potential impact. With each criterion, students are asked to write one or two sentences explaining why they chose that criterion.

After they have identified evaluation criteria, students will propose or describe at least three solution alternatives, one of which is to do nothing or keep the policy (or lack of it) as is. Alternatives also may be drawn from existing or pending legislation or from students' own proposals. The description of each alternative includes what was/is/should be done, predicted or resulting outcomes, who will benefit, whom it will cost, primary stakeholders, and advantages/disadvantages of each alternative.

The third section consists of a *summary* and *recommendations*. Because a matrix provides a clear method of examining alternatives, students are asked to summarize the solutions by developing a matrix listing the alternatives down the side and either the most relevant evaluation criteria or advantages/disadvantages and other concerns across the top (or vice versa). At the end of the paper, students provide their own recommendations based on the results of their evaluation of alternatives. Interestingly, when completing this assignment, some students appear to make recommendations that seem inconsistent with partisan beliefs voiced earlier in the semester. Other students, however, seem unable to let go of personal experience enough to fully

explore policy alternatives. The fourth section, which appears first in the paper, is the "*executive summary*."

### **Specific Example**

The following example is taken from a paper written by South Dakota State University graduate student Gail Bultman for a spring 2003 family policy course.\* Her paper addressed the topic of co-parenting for children of divorced parents. As part of the introduction to the problem analysis section (*Section I*) of the paper, she wrote,

Joint custody, an arrangement that involves shared legal and/or physical custody of children following divorce of their parents, has increased in popularity as an option in divorce since the 1970's, with many states now having either a preference or presumption for joint legal custody (Bender, 1994). Equal shared parenting now accounts for more than 20% of post-divorce living arrangements for children. Almost unheard of in 1970, shared parenting has grown at an extraordinary rate. Nationwide, equal shared parenting is selected by divorced families in increasing numbers each year. In some states, it has become the predominant forms of child custody after divorce, accounting for nearly half of child custody awards according to the U.S. Census. The presumption of shared parenting addresses the barriers to parenting and fatherhood while enabling the continuation of the parent child relationship that was established while the family lived together.

She further defined the problem by providing both national and state statistics. These include:

National Statistics

- Nearly 24,000,000 children in the U.S., or 34% of all such children, live apart from their biological father;
- 60% of couples who divorce have at least 1 child;
- 40% of children who live in a household without a father have not seen their father in at least 1 year and 50% of such children have never visited their father's home; and
- Female headed families receiving child support of alimony = 35%

#### South Dakota Statistics

- 2,241 children in South Dakota affected by divorce each year;
- 18.5% of children in South Dakota live without their father;
- Female-headed families receiving child support of alimony = 52%. (Brown, 2002)

Prior to discussing specific bills, she wrote,

By the early 1990s, most states had introduced laws making joint custody available as an option, or even as a rebuttal presumption, in divorce cases (Bruch, 1992). However, current research suggests that judges in some areas continue to show a strong preference for maternal custody and tend to oppose joint physical custody (Stamps, Kunen & Rock-Facheux, 1997). Today, a presumption or preference for joint custody exists in at least 30 states plus the District of Columbia.

She then briefly described recently passed legislation, as well as House and Senate Bills and South Dakota legislation related to her topic. She wrote,

In January 2003, South Dakota legislators introduced S.B. 60, which would revise certain provisions, related to child custody and to provide for a shared parenting plan. The bill provided for “substantially equal parental access to any minor

child”. This legislation was an attempt to bring South Dakota legislation into sync with national custody laws regarding shared parenting.

*Section 2* of the paper included a discussion of alternative solutions, including (1) continuing to enforce current laws (i.e., nothing new), (2) implementation of South Dakota S.B. 60, and (3) implementation of "extensive shared parenting legislation requiring all divorcing parents to comply with the 'Proposed South Dakota Shared Parenting Guidelines.'" These alternatives were evaluated primarily by criteria suggested by the Family Impact Checklist. Primary stakeholders were evident, as "S.B. 60 died in committee after testimony against it by the South Dakota Department of Social Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement and the South Dakota Trial Association Lawyers." Potential outcomes were predicted based on current divorce- and custody-related research.

*Section 3* consists of the summary matrix and recommendations. Ms. Bultman's summary matrix follows:

<b>POLICY MATRIX</b>	<b>Solution #1</b>	<b>Solution #2</b>	<b>Solution #3</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	Do Nothing...enforce current SD laws for determining custody.  Laws are in existence  Recognize the best interests of the child  Establishes that neither parent should be given preference in determining custody  Targets most vulnerable families	Pass SB 60 or some similar version, which establishes the presumption of shared parenting into SD laws for determining custody of children.  Places both parents on an equal level in terms of parenting their child  Establishes opportunity for both parents to continue, maintain and develop their bonds with their child	Implement extensive shared parenting legislation requiring all divorcing parents to comply with the "Proposed South Dakota Shared Parenting Guidelines"  Truly in the best interest of the child  Recognizes the significance of both parents for the development of the child

<p><b>Implementation issues</b></p>	<p>Does not recognize bias of judges/judicial system</p> <p>Gender Bias = “tender years” philosophy</p> <p>Forces courts/system to establish “fitness” of parents</p> <p>Looks at stability of parents</p>	<p>Employment and physical distance sometimes prevent parents from exercising equal time with children</p> <p>Children’s needs for consistency-schools, bedroom, peers</p> <p>Both parents might not want joint custody</p> <p>Forces unwilling parents to interact with each other</p>	<p>Families in crisis unlikely to participate in extensive negotiation process needed to implement a true shared parenting</p> <p>Agreement cannot Legislate human behavior</p> <p>Extensive costs to court and support systems to implement mediation process for families</p>
<p><b>Implications of alternatives</b></p>	<p>Maintains current system</p> <p>No need for new laws to be written or enforces</p>	<p>Research showing two parents as important as stability and routine</p> <p>Recognizes the diversity of families –sees each family as unique</p> <p>Families working together for children</p>	<p>Places as much importance on role of parent as in role of marriage</p> <p>Working towards truly “best interests” of children</p>

**Other possibilities**

This assignment might either be expanded or made shorter and more specific. To expand the assignment, a theory-policy link might be added to the paper. However, this is difficult if some of the students have taken family theories courses and others only are familiar with what has been presented in the current course. Students also may be asked to do a presentation corresponding to their papers; however, I would provide additional guidelines for the presentation. For example, they might present "talking points" to describe the problem and the summary matrix to describe the solution alternatives. Or the student presenter might ask other students to generate and evaluate an additional solution using the selected evaluation criteria.

Rather than ask students to write an integrative paper, the teacher might develop one or more smaller assignments from portions of this larger paper. For example, students might each

develop a list of "talking points" that describe the problem and a solution to utilize with members of the media. An in-class group activity might consist of selecting evaluation criteria for a policy-based intervention, and then to evaluate policy alternatives using those criteria.

### **Assessing effectiveness**

When students enthusiastically present or describe their projects, are well-versed in background knowledge, are thorough, are articulate, and even appear to have switched from previous opinions, I consider the assignment effective. With graduate students, this is not uncommon. Although there is room for flexibility in the assignment, some students may be so "flexible" as to omit major sections and never address the objectives of the paper. Therefore, I develop a matrix using each of the sections/questions to be addressed and evaluate each section or sub-section using descriptors ranging from "not addressed" to thoroughly or clearly covered. Papers also are evaluated based on presentation or style, application of a family perspective, and integration of a variety of sources. When student presentations related to the paper are given, other students are able to see a variety of perspectives and may also recognize variations in quality.

\*Thanks are expressed to Gail Bultman for allowing quotation of several sections of her paper to illustrate this assignment.

Address correspondence to: Renee Oscarson, Ph.D., Dept. of Human Development, Consumer & Family Sciences, Box 2275-NFA 403, South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD 57007.  
Phone: (605) 688-5954; FAX: (605) 688-4888; email: renee.oscarson@sdstate.edu

References

- Bender, W. N. (1994). Joint custody: The option of choice. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 21(3-4), 115-131.
- Brown, C. (2002). Dakota Fatherhood Summit II, Pierre, SD.
- Bruch, C. S. (1992). And how are the children? The effects of ideology and mediation on child custody law and children's well being in the United States. *Family & Conciliation Courts Review*, 30, 112-134.
- Stamps, L. E., Kunen, S., & Rock-Facheux, A. (1997). Judges' beliefs dealing with child custody decisions. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 27(1/2), 105-122.
- University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension (n.d.). A checklist for assessing the impact of policies on families. Retrieved November 30, 2006, from [http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi\\_checklist\\_aipf.pdf](http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi_checklist_aipf.pdf)