

Book Review
by
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Ordinary Families, Special Children: A Systems Approach to Childhood Disability

by
Milton Seligman and
Rosalyn Benjamin Darling

Many would agree that the growing number of children with disabilities is becoming astonishingly high. Children are being diagnosed with various disabilities including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Down Syndrome, various learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, disabilities with hearing and sight, emotional disturbance and many other health impairments. The presence of a child with a disability in a family has an immense impact on the way the family functions. Milton Seligman and Rosalyn Benjamin Darling, in their book *Ordinary Families, Special Children*, explains and provides a multi-systems perspective on childhood disability and its effects on family life through research, suggestions and numerous real-life scenarios that depict ways families respond to having a child with a disability.

With his chief academic interest in the area of childhood disability and the family, Milton Seligman, PhD, collaborated with Rosalyn Benjamin Darling, Professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania with an interest in disability and human services, to create this third edition series that examines the child, family, ecological, and socio-cultural variables and how they contribute to the response of families to childhood disability.

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The book consists of thirteen chapters with four main sections. The first section, which is comprised of the first three chapters, presents the conceptual framework for the remaining ten chapters of the book. The second section, which consists of chapters four through six, discusses the family experience from the prenatal period through adulthood. The third section provides an in-depth exploration of the family as a system while the last section, section four, focuses on the contributions professionals can make to the families that have children with disabilities. Because the information is grouped into four sections, it makes it much easier to highlight the main themes that are included in this book.

The first theme that is evident in the book is the way childhood disability is viewed in regards to the perspectives of both family systems and social systems. Both perspectives facilitate an understanding of the family in the context of childhood disability. Seligman and Darling define family systems as, “the family operating as an interactive unit, in which what affects one member affects all members” (Seligman & Darling, 2009, p. 17). Seligman and Darling go into great detail about the positive and negative ways a family copes with having a child with a disability. They do a great job in explaining how concepts such as resilience, stress, social support and developmental transitions can contribute to family adaptation or family challenges as well as providing advice to families to help them with each concept. Very much related to family systems, social systems refer to the expectations that the “society” has on the behaviors of people in different roles. Some determinants of these expectations include age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Seligman & Darling, 2009). Because of this, the values of the larger society shapes the ways in which parents relate to and respond to their child with a disability. Seligman and Darling bring into perspective the reality of various societies throughout the world having different meanings with the birth of a child with a disability. In order to support their idea of how social systems and societies can shape reactions to children with disabilities, Seligman and Darling went into depth with the characteristics of various ethnic groups, the importance of social economic status for each group and their attitudes toward having a child with a disability. By including this vital information, Seligman and Darling make it easier for professionals who work with culturally and socially diverse families to understand the variations that exist between ethnic groups and the differing views on children with disabilities.

The next two themes that are apparent in the book are very much related to one another. One theme broadens the reader’s understanding of the family experience by tracing it sequentially from the prenatal period through adulthood. This section of the book provides a sociological perspective by looking at how families react to the birth and rearing of a child with a disability as well as exploring the possible outcomes of family careers by considering children as future adults. Seligman and Darling supply an immense amount of information that supports this specific theme. Throughout this section, they use real-life examples of parents’ reactions when they find out their child has a disability, vital information about the early years as well as the childhood years and a significant amount of information about the various options that exists when a child enters the adolescent and adult years. The other theme that is very much related to

the theme just mentioned deals more with how the family as a whole handles the fact of having someone they love with a disability. Once again, the authors do a great job with providing a vast amount of information including aspects such as the states of mourning for parents, the different attitudes parents face when they have a child with a disability, the challenges of endless care for the child and factors that affect the family, in particular stress. Researchers have particularly focused on parents' depressive symptoms as indicators of stress in families (Singer, Ethridge, & Aldana, 2007, p. 358). Seligman and Darling describe in great detail how other family members, besides mothers, react to a loved one having a disability. They offer exceptional information in regards to the role of fathers, siblings and grandparents and their responses and coping behaviors to their loved one with a disability.

The last vital theme in the book describes the partnership between professionals and parents. Seligman and Darling clearly align this information to allow the reader to see the points of view from parents as well as from the professionals when working with children with disabilities. They do a wonderful job in identifying all the varying predispositions parents have towards professionals as well as tips on how professionals can become more aware of parental needs and expectations. "Professionals who work with families, then, should be aware that parents have preconceived notions about the nature of the professional role. The degree to which professionals are able to meet parents' expectations may determine the nature of the relationship they will have with a family" (Seligman & Darling, 2009, p. 285). The book takes the reader through various family-centered approaches that professionals use in order to meet the needs of the family as well as the child. Seligman and Darling include examples of how family service plans that are developed by professionals can be used to help the relationship between professionals and families. With several, easy to understand examples, Seligman and Darling make the reader see the importance of the way professionals should treat families. "The goal is to help parents as they create new scripts, not impose their own. Imposing their own scripts may be, in fact, what is happening when family professionals try to convince the parents that their children are cognitively impaired. Parents' new scripts may not emphasize their children's cognitive status but rather celebrate their children and their uniqueness" (Ho & Keiley, 2003, p. 245).

Seligman and Darling's clear and engaging writing style makes this book very accessible. Parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, psychologists and counselors as well as any others who want to learn or know someone who has a disability can definitely benefit from the content in this book. *Ordinary Families, Special Children* provides the most current information on the family functioning, treatment and education of people with a range of disabilities. Seligman and Darling do a wonderful job including the voices of family members themselves to explain and illustrate many of the concepts in the book. The main concept that evolved throughout this book was the importance of family relationships as well as the interrelationships between the family and professionals. If you are interested in research and theory with real-life applications about family and children with disabilities, then this book would be a wonderful choice.

References

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