

Engaging Parents: Innovative Approaches in Child Welfare

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Meaningful engagement of parents in the child welfare process is often an elusive goal. Despite significant attention to collaborative practice approaches (Berg & Kelly, 2000; Christensen, Todahl, & Barrett, 1999; Connolly, 1999) many parents feel that neither are they authentically included in decision making (Corby, Millar, & Young, 1996; Diorio, 1992; Dumbrill, 2006; Thoburn, Lewis & Shemmings, 1995) nor are their most pressing needs for help sufficiently addressed (Altman, 2005; Yatchmenoff, 2005).

Admittedly, engaging parents is complicated by a host of individual and organizational factors (see Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009, for a comprehensive review of the parent engagement literature). The adversarial nature of child welfare involvement; prior negative experiences with services (Kerkorkian, McKay, & Bannon, 2006); parental fear, shame, and stigma (Scholte, Colton, Casas, Drakeford, Roberts, & Williams, 1999); and problems such as substance

abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence (Littell, Alexander, & Reynolds, 2001), can impede the development of the client-worker relationship. Social workers, juggling the demands of high caseloads with attendant court work, record keeping, and work with children, have little time to devote to the often time-consuming process of building a trusting relationship with parents (Smith & Donovan, 2003).

Attempts to build relationships with parents are further hindered by the power and authority inherent in the role of the child welfare worker (Reich, 2005). As Mandell (2008) points out, “Power cannot be removed from the encounter between worker and service user, no matter how kind, self-aware or careful the worker may be” (p. 245). Cognizant of workers’ ability to influence key child welfare processes such as visitation and permanency decisions, parents are likely to be guarded and wary of workers’ overtures to establish a relationship.

Finally, the usual menu of services offered to parents may not align with their most urgent needs for help. When parents are overwhelmingly poor and struggling to meet their most basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and transportation (Marcenko, Newby, Lee, Courtney, & Brennan, 2009), accessing services can compete with the time and energy necessary to assure that survival needs are met. In a recent study, Pelton (2008) found that parents were often provided a list of resources they could contact to apply for help, presumably leaving them to deal with any barriers they might encounter. Consequently, parents rarely received help meeting concrete needs, which is often essential to providing a safe and stable home for their children.

Innovative approaches that mitigate the obstacles to engaging parents in child welfare

services and more effectively address their concrete and supportive needs are called for. In this article, we describe two innovative approaches to parent engagement, the challenges and innovative features of each approach, and program efficacy data. The first model, known as the Parent Mentoring Program, is a mentoring program using specially trained foster parents to support biological parents. The second model, the Parent Partners Program is a peer-to-peer program that employs parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system.

Background and Development of the Parent Mentoring Program

The Parent Mentoring Program grew out of a challenge made to a Washington State Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) social worker by a parent’s attorney. A developmentally

delayed woman was soon to give birth to her third child. She had lost her parental rights to her first two children. As the services offered her through the first dependencies had failed to address her parenting difficulties, her attorney challenged the social worker to “find something different this time.” The social worker

contacted a seasoned foster parent and proposed that the foster parent not only care for the baby when she was born, but also build a relationship with the birth mother and mentor her so she could gain the specific skills needed to care for her child.

Though this young mother did not regain custody of her medically fragile daughter, the foster parent mentor was instrumental in supporting the mother through the process of relinquishment and developing a permanent plan for her child. She also worked closely with the maternal grandmother, who was granted custody of the infant, to help her acquire the skills to meet the child’s special needs. The intervention was

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determined to have been so helpful in supporting all parties in the case and achieving permanency for the child, that an effort was undertaken to create a structured program that would build on the expertise and empathy of licensed foster parents partnering with birth parents to achieve permanency.

The DCFS regional administrator responsible for the county supported the program's fledgling efforts and directed a small amount of money toward its development. The program staff developed a training curriculum, selection criteria for both mentors and participating families, and an action planning process to enable social workers to guide the mentors' work with their clients. A mechanism by which the mentors could be supervised and paid was also developed.

The Parent Mentoring Program began with a cadre of five skillful, empathic, and experienced foster parent mentors and a handful of DCFS social workers willing to partner with them. Barriers to reunification among participating families were identified and mentors and parents began working together to address the issues. Families and mentors worked together for a minimum of 5 hours each week, for an initial intervention period of 3 months, later extended to 6 months. The length of time was increased based on the feedback of parents and mentors who felt the program was not long enough to adequately address the parents' needs. The program currently employs 36 mentors in four public child welfare offices. It is noteworthy that two of those offices are located in rural counties where services are scarce and often at considerable distance from families.

How Mentors Are Selected

Mentors are licensed foster parents who have demonstrated through their interactions with the families of the children placed in their care that they possess a nonjudgmental and respectful approach with birth parents. Careful attention is given to recruiting a diverse group of mentors,

reflecting the ethnic and gender makeup of the parents in the local child welfare system. Potential mentors are referred to the program by social workers who are knowledgeable about the candidates' strengths, with recommendations from foster care licensors and other foster parents familiar with the candidates' work. Mentor candidates complete an intensive 2-day training before being invited to participate in the program. This provides the DCFS the opportunity to assess a foster parent's appropriateness for the mentoring role and a foster parent the opportunity to decide whether the program is a good fit with his or her interests and skills.

How Parents Are Selected to Participate

Parents are referred to the Parent Mentoring Program by their assigned DCFS social workers. Mentors work with both mothers and fathers, although there is a higher proportion of mothers involved with the program. While it is not unusual for a family to be referred after a petition to terminate parental rights has been filed, the social worker must represent that, should specifically identified barriers to safe reunification be addressed and removed, returning the children to their parents' care is possible. Families whose children will be returned to them with or without the intervention are not appropriate for the program, nor are parents who have no chance of safely parenting their children. In short, mentors function neither as an "extra set of eyes" in the home nor as a source of evidence for termination. In addition, parents must be reasonably cooperative with their service plan and not currently active in an addiction. While relapse is not uncommon, in our experience, even among mentored parents, those who are currently drug- or alcohol-dependent find it difficult to benefit from work with a mentor. The program is voluntary, consistent with our belief that parents are more likely to actively engage with a mentor when they are given a choice about program participation.

Parents struggling to parent after years of addiction make up the largest segment of program participants. Mentors have also successfully worked with families whose children come into care due to chronic neglect and parents who need assistance learning to manage the specific medical or behavioral needs of their children. Parents with developmental disabilities have done well during the time that mentors were working intensively with them, but they have experienced difficulty sustaining gains once the program support ends. Parents who present a risk to the mentors are not appropriate referrals to the program.

Mentoring Process

Once the parent has agreed to participate, the mentor, parent, and DCFS social worker sign a contract defining their relationship and each person's responsibilities. An action plan is developed, identifying family needs, goals to be achieved, and specific tasks to reach the goals. Mentors and birth parents prioritize tasks and set meetings. The team meets at least monthly throughout the program.

Mentors work with birth parents on basic care and nutrition, budgeting, discipline, decision making, safety planning, using support systems, and child development using a prescribed parenting curriculum tailored to the birth parents' individual needs and cultural context. They also work with parents to obtain needed services such as safe housing, medical care, or mental health care; conduct job searches; and advocate for parents. The program maintains a small budget that mentors can access to make purchases that can contribute in important ways to a family's efforts to rebuild and heal. For one family, obtaining a dining room table meant sitting down to meals together, sharing meaningful time, and creating family rituals and memories.

Mentors also help parents develop an appropriate, reliable, and safe support system. This may mean encouraging birth parents to repair fractured relationships with family, reconnect with a church, join a social group, or make friends with healthy adults in their neighborhood. They observe parents and children in their natural environments, encourage parents to use learned skills, and document these sessions, providing feedback to both the parent and assigned social worker. The mentor and social worker remain in frequent phone contact. In

addition, mentors receive supervision and support through meetings with the program leads and monthly meetings with the entire group of mentors. Upon completion of the program, a complete file is provided to the social worker and maintained by the program team.

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Innovative Features of the Parent Mentoring Program

The Parent Mentoring Program was created to fill the need for more individual and intensive support than is typically available to child welfare-involved parents. The program capitalizes on the skills of foster parents who, by virtue of their experience, are deeply knowledgeable about the child welfare system, the needs of children and families, and the resources of the community. Consequently, the program is a natural fit for the mandates and structure of the agency and the needs of the clients it serves.

Mentors are able to form supportive relationships with parents in part because the power and authority dynamics that pervade the worker-client relationship are less prominent. Thus, they are well-positioned to tailor their work to meet a parent's particular needs in a collaborative manner that is respectful of the parent's culture and parenting goals. The



Figure 1. Parent Mentoring Program Logic Model

Program Inputs
Child welfare workers
Foster parent volunteers who are experienced and able to work closely with birth parents
Parents with a plan to reunify with their children
Mentoring curriculum
Activities
Child welfare workers discuss program with parents and make referrals
Action plan developed with social worker and family
Mentors meet with families 6-10 hours per week for up to 24 weeks
Mentors teach skills from a defined curriculum
Mentors assist families in job search, obtaining housing, connecting with services, complying with mental health care, accessing resources, resolving legal matters, building a healthy support network
Mentors meet with social workers and families monthly
Mentors complete assessment of families before and after services
Mentors provide contact/assessment documentation to social workers weekly
Outputs
Mentors develop a supportive relationship with parents
Families comply with the mandated service plan
Families are better able to care for and protect their children
Bonds with the child's family are maintained
Standard of reasonable efforts met
Increased teamwork among social workers, families, and foster parents
Increased community-based formal and informal support for birth families
Outcomes
Families more frequently reunify
Children's length of stay in foster care is reduced
Fewer children return to care after reunification



program is fortunate to include a cadre of mentors diverse in gender, race, and languages spoken. As a result, mentors benefit from the multiple perspectives and life experiences of their peers and parents benefit from being able to work with mentors who share at least some common cultural elements with them.

The program design also allows for a great deal of flexibility in meeting parents' needs, encouraging mentors to think "outside the box" and assist parents in ways that are pragmatic, acceptable, timely, and culturally appropriate. Social workers, pressured by the demands of child welfare work, can succumb to recommending a standard set of services and miss opportunities to individualize service plans to best meet families' needs.

A great deal of success in child welfare practice occurs by focusing on the nuances of family life that can support change while instilling hope and confidence. A mentor who provides a compliment for responding sensitively to a child's distress or exercises the kindness of a call after a visit with children in care communicates that the parent is competent and worthy.

The agency and social workers have embraced the flexibility of this intervention and the mentors' abilities to help parents address the barriers that prevent them from succeeding, and more critically, addressing the needs of their children. Mentors, in their role as foster parents, have cared for children with special needs and as a result, can help parents understand the special needs of their children. This in turn facilitates connections with services to ensure the children's needs are met.

The intervention has become integrated into the fabric of social work practice in this administrative region. By design, the program requires very little additional work from referring social workers. This minimizes their workload burden and maximizes the likelihood that they will refer families. In the 9 years since its inception, the program has survived very

serious budgetary cuts and is supported because parents are safely reunifying with their children sooner than they were before. The program was developed and maintained by social work staff members closest to the field and the needs of the families they serve. As a result, the intervention is congruent with the structure and process of child welfare practice and more likely to be broadly applicable to other child welfare settings.

Evaluation Results

A quasi-experimental evaluation with a comparison group of families similar on demographic variables and child welfare factors found that parents in the Parent Mentoring Program were more likely to reunify with their children than were parents not in the program, and their children spent fewer days in foster care than did children of parents not in the program. Parents reported that mentors were supportive and nonjudgmental and provided highly valued assistance with parenting, organization, and practical help (Marcenko & Grossman, 2008).

Background and Development of the Parent Partners Program

After the Parent Mentoring Program had been working with families for about 6 years, it became apparent that the mentors were maintaining contact with the families they had worked with and that several of these families were healthy and thriving in the community. The mentors reported that these parents were appreciative of the services that had helped their families reunify and were eager to help other parents experience the same success.

One successfully reunified birth parent and one of the authors of this article was particularly committed to this idea, returning to DCFS to speak at trainings and participate as a community representative in family team decision making meetings. She remained close to the mentor she had worked with and together they began teaching a parenting class for child welfare-involved parents in recovery. This now-successful



parent was a familiar presence in the DCFS office and never stopped promoting birth parent engagement.

In 2007, this parent joined the DCFS staff, working with the Parent Mentoring Program, mentors, and invested social workers to develop a structure that would allow successfully reunified parents to share their experiences and offer support to parents whose children were in foster care. A parent focus group was convened to solicit parents' ideas about how a parent-to-parent program might look. In addition, parent engagement programs throughout the country were contacted and studied. A meeting of community partners was held and a work group was formed with representatives from DCFS, the Attorney General's Office, the Office of Public Defense, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), and the foster parent community.

In addition to the work group described above, a parent advisory group, consisting of parents who had successfully reunified with their children, was formed. These parents meet monthly with DCFS social workers and a representative of the Attorney General's Office, the Office of Public Defense, and CASA. The group has served as a focus group for the development of the Parent Partner Program. The parent advisory group continues to meet regularly and advise DCFS and other community agencies on matters related to parents' experiences in the child welfare system. They have also presented at community action planning efforts and foster parent training classes, taught a parenting class for parents in recovery, and formed a family treatment court alumni group.

Parents who wish to give back by helping other parents were originally referred to the program by their social worker or CASA after their children had been returned home and their case dismissed. Although this is still an avenue for entry to the program, more frequently, parents are coming to the program and asking how they can be trained to help other parents.

Parent Partners Program Goals and Structure

It was clear that many parents who had successfully reunified with their children were committed to supporting others who were going through a similar experience and to sharing their experiences with professionals in the child welfare system. DCFS, in an effort to utilize parents as a resource, developed a program structure with the goal of helping parents:

- become more informed consumers of the child welfare system and the services available;
- move more quickly through their anger;
- develop a good working relationship with their social worker; and
- more quickly engage in services.

The program components consist of monthly classes for parents called Here's the Deal and one-to-one support provided by a parent partner.

Here's the Deal

The parent advisory group selected the name Here's the Deal because it signaled to parents that they would get reliable information about the seriousness of their situation and the expectations of the child welfare agency. Parents at any point in their journey through the child welfare system are invited to attend and their concerned or involved relatives and supporters are also welcome. The course is composed of six units offered on a sequential basis twice a year. The units address one main topic each month. The topics were identified by the parent advisory group and include information about the dependency timeline; the role of social workers, attorneys, and others; building effective relationships with foster parents and DCFS staff; accessing services; and engaging in the recovery community.

Each unit is presented by relevant professionals and makes up one fourth of each class session.



Each session features a panel of child welfare professionals (social workers, foster parents, attorneys, CASA volunteers, and others) who introduce themselves and describe their roles and responsibilities. A parent drawn from the parent advisory group and who has successfully reunified with his or her children, shares his or her experience and offers encouragement to parents currently engaged with DCFS. These parents complete a training on strategic sharing.

Lastly, each class affords those attending the time to share their own stories in a guided forum and to seek advice or support from others present. Participants are also provided with day planners to facilitate time management and binders designed to help them maintain their records, document the services they participate in, and keep track of important contact information.

Parent Partners

The parent partners are a unique and critical part of the Parent Partners Program. A parent partner is a parent who has successfully navigated the child welfare system, is interested in working with other parents to help them be successful, and is able to reach out to other parents while maintaining appropriate boundaries. In addition to the training offered to those parents who present at *Here's the Deal*, the parent partners receive training in coaching parents through recovery, building healthy relationships in recovery, and caring for themselves as they mentor others. They also participate in trainings offered to DCFS social workers. The topics include engaging with families, accessing community resources, the dependency system, and the effect of substance abuse on families.

Parent partners offer education and support and help parents advocate appropriately for themselves.

Parents in the child welfare system may engage with a parent partner at any stage of the child welfare process, from the initial pick-up of the children to the termination hearing or relinquishment. They can connect with a parent partner at court or be referred by their social workers, CASA volunteers, or attorneys. A parent partner will, at the requests of an involved professional, "cold call" a parent and offer to take him or her out for coffee. The extent to which a parent then engages with the parent partner is a personal choice and one that may change over time. Often parents who choose not to engage early in their cases connect with a parent partner later.

Parent partners offer education and support and help parents advocate appropriately for themselves. Additionally, they serve as a resource to DCFS and the community by representing the parents' point of view and as a source of information about substance abuse treatment and community resources.

Currently there are two part-time parent partner volunteers and one full-time parent partner hired as a DCFS employee (coauthor of this article). The full-time parent partner (called the parent partner lead) is housed in the DCFS office and is responsible for several functions. She:

- attends all shelter-care hearings, makes herself available to parents whose children have just been placed in care, and invites them to attend *Here's the Deal*;
- works one-on-one with parents at any point in their journey through the system to offer guidance, support, information, and advocacy;



- makes herself available to DCFS social workers and participates in team meetings and family team decision meeting staffings;
- supervises two part-time parent partners, who also work one-on-one with parents; and
- cofacilitates the *Here's the Deal* sessions.

The program serves about 85 parents per month and initial parent feedback speaks to the value of “straight talk” and accessible information and support.

A Parent Partners Program logic model is presented in Figure 2.

Innovative Features of the Parent Partners Program

The Parent Mentoring Program had been successfully operating in the child welfare office in this region for more than 6 years when the idea of a parent partner program was first discussed. Social workers and DCFS management had become accustomed to incorporating foster parents as part of the team and had observed, firsthand, the benefits to families. The parent partner lead had also become a familiar face around the office and many of the social workers had heard her speak about her family’s road to reunification. These two factors were in part responsible for the seamless way that the Parent Partners Program was implemented in this area. To further facilitate adoption of the Parent Partners Program, rollout events were held and staff members were encouraged to interact with the parent partners both informally and in a case-related context.

As a result of these efforts, the Parent Partners Program has enjoyed tremendous acceptance within the culture of child welfare practice. The larger child welfare community has embraced the program as well, in large part due to the early involvement of the attorney general’s staff, the parents’ attorneys and CASA. Parent partners are in court when dependency cases are heard and

the court commissioner recommends that parents coming before him meet with a parent partner and attend *Here's the Deal*. A memorandum of understanding is in place, designed to protect parent partners from testifying against the very parents with whom they have worked hard to build a trusting relationship.

The Parent Partners Program enjoys statewide support and program staff is frequently contacted to advise offices seeking to form similar programs in their communities. The parent partners have traveled to other areas to lend their support and to speak publicly in Vancouver about the success of the model.

Parent Partners Program Challenges

One systemic challenge common to efforts to employ reunified birth parents in the child welfare system is the child maltreatment and criminal histories of many of the parents seeking to be involved. In the case of some parents, this program was able to obtain waivers to the rule that prohibits volunteers with criminal histories from becoming official volunteers of the agency. These waivers permit these parent partners to drive state vehicles and to be reimbursed for their work-related mileage. These individuals are able to work one-on-one with parents seeking the support of a parent partner. Others with extensive felony histories or domestic violence convictions cannot be cleared under the state’s current guidelines. These parent partners serve the program as public speakers, at *Here's the Deal*, and by performing supportive tasks that aid the program, such as helping with non-client-related clerical work and organizing a clothing closet for children.

Conclusions and Implications

Engaging parents involved with the child welfare system and attending to their most basic needs is often a precursor to taking up services aimed at behavioral change. For instance, stable housing is considered an important adjunct to successful substance abuse (Sun, Shillington,



Figure 2. Parent Partners Program Logic Model

Program Inputs
Parents at any point in the dependency process
Referral sources: social workers, attorneys, CASA volunteers, or self
Parent partner volunteers
Parent partner employed by DCFS
Training for parent partners
DCFS program coordinator
Parent advisory group
Activities
Monthly <i>Here's The Deal</i> sessions
Education, support, and advocacy based on parent preference and need
Help accessing services and building communication skills
Attending family team decision making conferences and AA/NA meetings at request of parents
Identifying, developing, and sharing community resources with social workers and parents
Social workers gain parent perspective through trainings and individual consultation
Outputs
Parents' <i>voice</i> and perspective are evident within the child welfare system
Parents become more informed consumers of the child welfare system and the services available
Parents are able to advocate for themselves
Parents move more quickly through their anger
Parents develop good working relationships with their social workers
Parents more quickly engage in services
Parents are able to make informed decisions for themselves and their children
Social workers become more knowledgeable about the parents' experience



Hohman, & Jones, 2001) and mental health treatment (Buckner, Bassuk, & Zima, 1993), problems common among child welfare-involved families. However, child welfare workers are not able to devote the time necessary to help parents obtain resources such as housing. In the absence of reliable and knowledgeable informal systems of support, vulnerable parents are left to the difficult task of arranging all that is needed to set up a household on their own.

We have described two innovative approaches to assisting families that have been successfully implemented in a public child welfare agency. The first draws on the expertise of foster parents and the second on the unique knowledge and understanding of parents who have successfully navigated the system. Helpers in both models occupy that distinctive space between friend and professional. They have specialized knowledge about the inner workings of child welfare, but they do not have the power and authority inherent in the social work role. This affords them the opportunity to establish a relationship with parents and to provide information and tools that facilitate parent success. They also act as cultural brokers, translating the language and requirements of the bureaucracy into terms understandable to the family (Hess, Barr, & Hunt, 2009; Singh, McKay, & Singh, 1999), an especially helpful service in child welfare, which is beset by myriad legal mandates, permanency planning timelines, and organizational jargon. They also tailor support to the specific needs of a parent within a culturally appropriate framework.

Programs such as those described in this article are growing in number nationally (Cohen & Canan, 2006) but they largely remain untested. There is a need to rigorously evaluate these models if they are to be widely implemented and sustained. Nonetheless, preliminary results are promising and anecdotal feedback from parents and social workers is positive.

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