

Rise is a magazine by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 3, SPRING 2006

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Where to Turn

The system can be a source of support or stress to families. Some parents get support from the system's "preventive services"—free programs designed to strengthen families and prevent kids from ending up in foster care. Other parents get to know the system through a knock on the door—the beginning of an investigation.

In this issue, parents write about what helped them, whether it was a preventive worker whose support kept their family together, or a lawyer who fought to get their children returned home.

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANISENKO



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True Stories by Teens

A Knock on the Door

My family needed support, not separation.

BY PHILNEIA TIMMONS

About 7 p.m. there was a knock on the door. I was afraid I already knew who it was and that my family was in trouble.

The problems started when my son was 10 years old and his grandfather died. His grandfather was more like a father to him than his own father. Many times when my son would visit their house, his father wouldn't be there, but his grandfather was, and they'd sit and talk and have fun.

Anger in his Eyes

Before his grandfather died, my son was basically well-behaved. After, he had so many questions, like, "Where do people go when they die?" I could see the anger in his eyes and hear the fear in his voice. I believe his feelings were even stronger because losing his grandfather brought up the sad feelings he had about his

father not being around. My son began to retaliate against his father, me and just life itself. He was getting in trouble just about every day in school. He wasn't working and he was being disruptive. I was running to the school so often that I had to quit my job. I felt so frustrated, I didn't know what to do.

Eventually I started to hit him, even though I don't believe in hitting kids. One night I hit him with a belt because his teacher had called to say he had cursed in class. He screamed so loud when I hit him that I stopped, but the damage was already done. The next day the school informed me that they had found bruises on my son's body. ACS came that night.

'We Received a Call'

When I answered the door, there was a social worker there

named Mrs. R., her assistant, and a police officer. They said they wanted to ask me a few questions.

Mrs. R. handed me a paper and asked to see my children. (I also have a daughter.) She said, "We received a call from your school that your son had bruises on his arm and upper thigh." Mrs. R. insisted that I lift my children's clothing. When I did not comply, Mrs. R. asked her assistant to lift them and then she took pictures of the bruises on my son's left arm and thigh. Then she told me my children were being removed.

As they left my house, I felt like a piece of my heart was being ripped out.

'My Children Need Me'

After my children were taken, I went through terrible pressure

and depression, not knowing whether my children were safe. I could not eat or sleep many days and nights.

I felt so much anger. I'd often ask myself why ACS couldn't help while my children were home. "My children need and want to be with me," I'd think. "If you're helping us, then help us together. I'll do whatever it takes, you can still make your home visits, every day if you'd like. Just please release my children to me."

Emotions Running Wild

Then there was the anger that I felt toward myself. Growing up, my mother would often hit me with belts and even extension cords. Sometimes her anger was out of control. I felt mistreated and misunderstood, and I would rarely speak to my mother even though what I was looking for was guidance, acceptance, attention and a way out from the madness and the pressures that I felt as a child.

When I gave birth to my son, I vowed that I would never hit my children the way my mother hit me.

But when my son's behavior got so bad, I was angry and desperate and I just wanted to do something to stop it. I knew how I acted after my mom hit me—I was so hurt and afraid of another beating that I'd stop doing whatever it was I just got hit for. I thought a beating would make my son stop, too.

I never imagined it would mean I would lose my kids. I was so angry at myself because my children had to suffer for what I'd done. I cried myself to sleep many nights. My emotions were really running wild because I loved my kids so much and it hurt so much to lose them.

Starting to Cooperate

For the first couple of months, my anger kept me from doing what the system told me I

needed to do. I wasn't going to counseling because I felt I didn't need it. Whenever I went to see the caseworker, I wasn't cooperative because I just wanted to smack her.

But after a few months of rebelling, I realized that I couldn't let that continue because there was too much at stake—my children. The longer it took me to get proper visits with them, the

harder it was going to be to get them back permanently.

So I prayed, I read the Bible, I told myself again and again to calm down. I forced myself to get my emotions under control. I also decided that if I was going to change my situation, I couldn't just depend on my caseworker or my lawyer. I would have to learn what I could about the system myself.

I Was in Control

I went to the library and the librarian gave me *The Family Act Book*, a very thick blue book with information about the system. It said I had the right to visit my children, the right to be a part of making decisions about their medical care and education. It said I could even attend parent-teacher conferences.

I wrote the information down in a notebook. With that knowledge, I would go to meetings at the agency or ACS and I would quote different sections of the book. I wanted them to think I had real power behind me, so when they asked me where I got my information from, I'd lie and say that I had my own lawyer. I spoke calmly but firmly

and I carried myself in a way that let them know I was in control.

Many times I had to hold back tears, anger, frustration that felt like a ball of fire. Inside I often felt hot and furious. But I thought about ice, snow and winter to calm me down. I controlled my temper, and it paid off.

Many times I had to hold back frustration that felt like a ball of fire. I thought about ice, snow and winter to calm me down. I controlled my temper, and it paid off.

A Person, Not a Case

The agency began to look at me as a person, not as a caseload and docket number. It helped, too, that I began to comply more fully with their requirements. I went to therapy and I completed two parenting skills classes. I also began working at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, where parents who have children in the system advocate to improve how the system treats parents.

Because of all that, I gained permission to take my children to school every day. I took them to doctors' appointments and therapy, too. Eventually I was allowed to spend time with them on the weekends.

Parents! We need you!

If you're in preventive services, have children in care, or have gotten your children back, we're interested in your story.

Work with an editor experienced in helping parents tell their stories. Make your voice heard.

Your experiences and insights can help others.

No experience is necessary. Se habla Español.

Call Nora McCarthy, editor of *Rise*, at (212) 279-0708 x 113 or email nmccarthy@youthcomm.org

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Accepting My Son's Ways

Soon I realized that I had to calm down, not only with the system but with my son, too. For a while after my son went into care, he had even more problems than he'd had before. His behavior in school grew worse and he didn't want to do any work at all. He was probably sad and mad that he'd been taken from me.

I was frustrated but I told myself that all I could do was talk to him. I just told him over and over how important school is and that I'd gone to school too. Maybe because I was calmer, he began to respond a little better to me. I also think his therapist helped him. Sometimes I felt uncomfortable with her—I felt like she was judging me—but my son liked her.

One day my son said to me, "Mommy, you're always telling me what to do." He said, "Ma, I would feel better if you said, 'Just try to do it.'" When he said that I realized that maybe I was too demanding and I had to accept that my son had ways of his own.

Help Us at Home

Still, there were limits to how much I could do until I finally was given a caseworker who really worked with me. I've had

three caseworkers during the two years my children have been in care. The first two never once made a home visit.

A few months ago, I was given my third caseworker and she's beautiful. I almost love her. She saw how hard I was trying, and she gave me weekend and overnight visits. I appreciate that she acts like she trusts me and cares about my children and me.

Soon my two children will be released into my care full time. I have some worries how long it will take my children to get used to being home. Sometimes my son and I still have our turbulences. But he and I have grown and our relationship has improved.

Looking back, I did need help with my son because I felt out of control and that was affecting my relationship with him. But I don't believe that my children needed to be taken from me. I wish that I had been given help while my children were still with me instead of having them thrown into the system.

Philneia's children are now home and she is working as a parent advocate with ACS.



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH SANCHEZ

'What Can I Do?'

Parent advocates at foster care agencies are there to help you.

BY JACQUELINE ISRAEL

As a parent advocate at Graham-Windham, I'm a support for the parents here. When they come in, I tell them, "I am a parent. My children were in care. I'm here to make sure your case is moving forward for you and your family. What can I do to help you?"

I'm a mediator between the family, caseworkers and foster parents. A parent might call and say, "I haven't gotten visits for a month." Then I would go to the caseworker and say, "I love you as a co-worker, but this parent needs these visits. Why is she not getting them?"

It may be that the foster mother says she's not able to bring the child. I say to the caseworker, "Have you explained to the foster mother that that's her job? Once every two weeks is not a lot."

It could be the opposite. Sometimes a caseworker tells me that a parent is always late for the visits. I tell the parents, "It's disrespectful that you're not on time, and they're not going to see you as being responsible."

In staff meetings, I remind caseworkers to think of the biological parents. I say, "What about the family? Have you asked the parents their views? Have you invited them in for that talk?"

I also help parents advocate for themselves. I explain the steps in an ACS case, and the point of each meeting. I tell them who they can bring to each meeting, and what their rights are.

I explain the chain of command so they know how to make their voices heard. And I tell them to write everything down. Many times parents say, "I spoke to so and so," but they have no proof. I tell them to put their complaint in a letter, send a copy, and save a copy for themselves. What's written on paper has more power, and you can show the judge, "I did write and ask for this."

Parents have to do their own advocacy. I can show them how, but if they don't come and knock on the caseworker's door, I can't do it for them.

Correction: An interview in the Summer 2005 issue of *Rise* misstated the number of years the Jacqueline Israel's children were in foster care. They were actually in care about 2-3 years.



ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANESKIC

Parents Helping Parents

At the Child Welfare Organizing Project, we give each other the knowledge to fight.

BY TERESA BACHILLER

I'm the parent organizer at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a citywide advocacy and self-help organization for parents involved in the child welfare and family court systems.

When a parent calls CWOP, I introduce myself and the organization. Many times they're seeking legal information because they don't understand their case, or they want to know more about their rights. They ask, "Why are they taking my children? Why are they interfering with my family?"

I let the parents speak because they just want someone to listen to what they have to say. Often they say, "Thank you for listening." Many times I let them know I've been affected by the child welfare system, too.

'You're Not Alone'

I always recommend that parents come to Support Group at our office. It's run by parents, it's from 11-1 on Wednesdays, and it's a self-help group to empower ourselves. We share our stories and information regarding the child welfare and family court systems so every parent is better prepared.

When parents come in to Support Group, they're feeling powerless, stressed, confused, frustrated. They come with anger. They feel that it's only happening to them, so we make them aware they're not alone.

Recently we had a parent who was very angry. She was saying, "You cannot help me. You never been there. You can't speak to me." I said, "Wait a second. You don't seem to know who we are. We walked in them shoes, we've been there." When we tell them a little of what we've gone through, their attitude totally changes.



One parent said, 'You cannot help me. You never been there.' I said, 'You don't seem to know who we are. We walked in them shoes, we've been there.'

Information and Support

I also make sure every newcomer has our Survival Guide, which some parents consider their bible. It explains ACS procedures and parents' rights, and includes other parents' experience and knowledge. I go over the Guide with parents and show them the information related to their case. Then I tell them, "Go home and read the whole thing." Usually the Survival Guide motivates parents. Parents say, "You know what? Having this book makes me feel a little bit better. I know more about my rights."

I also give out numbers. I might refer parents with new cases to the Center for Family Representation. I give some parents the number for

our Highbridge office, which has more services than we have. I also might suggest parents call the ACS Office of Advocacy to speak with someone about their case.

Making Parents Comfortable

Many times parents call because they're just confused. One woman called me because the caseworker said her case was unfounded, but her case still wasn't closed. She didn't understand why the worker wanted to visit her house again. She was anxious and didn't know what to do.

So I referred her to CFR and she spoke to the social worker there, who went with her to a conference with ACS. It turned out she was

refusing the services ACS wanted her to get because she didn't understand her service plan requirements. Having the social worker there made a difference. She speaks the language ACS speaks and was able to explain. The parent felt much better. She called and told me, "Thank you, thank you."

'Concentrate on Your Goals'

In Support Group we give advice based on what we've experienced. The biggest thing we tell parents is, "You don't need to give so much information. Whatever ACS asks is what you answer. There's no need to reveal any other information."

I also tell parents, "Represent yourself the correct way. Address people properly, dress appropriately, resist the temptation to complain, don't miss any meetings, don't miss visits regardless of how you feel, avoid escalating any situations, and always hear what they have to say before you speak on your behalf." The most important thing is that parents understand not to go through an investigation alone. Always have someone knowledgeable and trustworthy to support you.

Just the other day, a parent told me she was not going to go see her daughter because she feels uncomfortable at the visits. I reminded her, "Always keep your visits no matter how you feel. Try to concentrate on your goals."

By coming here and getting information, parents learn how to advocate for themselves. Parents find family here at CWOP. Listening and participating in Support Group gives parents the knowledge and power to fight their cases better than they could alone.

You can reach CWOP at (212) 348-3000.

What to Expect from Your Lawyer

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

When I first met my lawyer, she was just straightforward. She told me, "Stay with your rehab program, don't use any drugs, don't miss court or your visits," and that was it. But as she saw that I was working to get my daughter home, she began to fight for me. She asked that I be granted weekend visits and told the judge, "I trust my client."

The day the judge announced that my daughter could come home, I broke down crying. She rubbed my back and told me, "You will be OK. I'm very happy for you."

I was lucky; I hear a lot of parents complaining about their lawyers. So I talked with Elizabeth Fassler, a lawyer at the Center for Family Representation (CFR), to find out what a lawyer's role should be.

Q: How does a parent get a lawyer?

A: In general, if a parent is accused of abuse or neglect there's a court case in Family Court. The Family Court judge will assign a lawyer.

However, there are also lawyers who work for organizations like Bronx Defenders, Legal Services, or The Door, which works with young mothers and teens. CFR, where I work, assigns a lawyer, social worker and parent advocate to every case so parents have more support.

There is no reason to accept assigned counsel if you can get a lawyer through one of these organizations, even though some court-assigned lawyers are very good at what they do. You should contact these organizations to see if you fit their criteria. Call as soon as possible. Don't wait for your first court date.

Q: How does a parent know whether the lawyer is doing a good job?

'I always tell clients to answer only the question asked. Giving too much information might not be a good thing.'

A: That's a hard question to answer. Every case is different. But the important thing is communication. Your lawyer should talk to you about your case before your court date, not just on the day of court. Your lawyer should advocate for your wishes in court. That might mean making motions to get information from ACS, helping negotiate with ACS what kinds of services you need, or asking the court to have the children returned to you.

If your lawyer isn't communicating with you, and you think it's hurting your case, you can fire your lawyer and ask for a new lawyer. However it's not always easy or even possible to get a new lawyer and may slow your case down.

Q: What do parents need to know about their lawyers?

A: The best lawyers are the most informed. Keep all your documents in one place and bring copies of all documents with you when you see your lawyer, like school reports, birth certificates, records of drug treatment or mental health treatment, and any other services. The more you can be an advocate for yourself, the better.

If a couple is trying to get a child home from foster care, each person may have their own lawyer. That's because parents have different interests, and the lawyer's job is to advocate only for her client.

You should also know that a lawyer can't fix the problems of family court. Sometimes you get into court and one lawyer is not there and the case gets adjourned for a couple of months. That's very frustrating for parents, especially if they took the day off work. But it's not the lawyer's fault a case gets adjourned.

At those times, there's not a lot your lawyer can do, but a lawyer can ask for the next court date to be sooner, or if there's something in particular that a client needs, the lawyer can file a motion.

Finally, I think it's hard for parents when they see their lawyer and the ACS or agency lawyers talking

to each other in the hall or joking outside of court. They might think, "How are they going to be my lawyer if they're friends with them?" But the reality is that communication between lawyers is key in family court. Your lawyer should be talking to ACS and your child's law guardian about your case, because the more information everyone has, the easier it is to make informed decisions about the case.

We maintain a cordial atmosphere with other lawyers not to conspire against you, but because we see these people every day and the relationship we've fostered helps us do our jobs.

Q: What advice do you give your clients?

A: I always tell clients, "If you're on the witness stand, answer only the question asked." People always want to tell their stories, but giving too much information might not be a good thing.

You also need to realize that your child's law guardian or the ACS attorney may seem really nice, but if you tell them anything about you, it is not confidential and it will be presented to the court. The only confidential relationship you have is with your lawyer.

In court, think about the information you're sharing, the way you're sharing it, and the behavior you're exhibiting every time you talk to someone other than your lawyer. If you don't want them to know, don't tell.

You can reach CFR at (212) 691-0950.



Turning Pain into a Positive

Parents' advocacy is changing the system.

BY VIOLET RITTENHOUR

Four years ago I joined the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a group of parents that advocate for change in the foster care system. At the time, my children had just come home from a year in care, where they'd been physically and emotionally abused.

When I asked my daughter how I could make things right for her and for my son, she said, "Make sure it never happens to another kid. Help other people."

Turning Pain into a Positive

I knew about CWOP because I had been a parent advocate at a foster care agency in Brooklyn before my children were taken, and I had sent parents to CWOP's support group. This time, I was on the other side. I needed support myself. I felt like a failure. I felt it was my fault my kids were abused in care. My pain was eating me alive.

I began coming to group and telling what had happened to my family. Other parents helped me to make peace with my pain and turn it into a positive.

Now I am a parent organizer at CWOP. I am a part of the Commissioner's Parent Work Group. I am a board member for Legal Services of New York.

I was nominated to the City Council's newly formed parent board, and received the Golden Heart Award from the commissioner. I have pictures on my wall of myself with ACS commissioners Scoppetta, Bell and Mattingly.

Committed to Change

Through my work, I have seen how committed much of the ACS leadership is to improving the system for parents and kids. I have seen the

system go from treating parents like we are the problem to engaging us in policy making.

I have seen the number of children in foster care drop from about 30,000 10 years ago to just 16,000 today. I have seen the growth of "preventive services"—the supports offered to struggling families so their children don't end up in care. Now 30,000 families get support from preventive services each year.

them a good foundation. I filled out all of the correct paperwork. Even so, I was investigated for educational neglect because of paperwork mix-ups between the Department of Education and ACS.

Despite how much ACS's leadership has changed, so much of the system's power rests in the hands of individual caseworkers. And we parents still have very little power if someone from ACS knocks on our doors.

office. The next day I showed her all the paperwork: a letter from District 5 saying I was in compliance with home schooling rules, all my kids' work and the list of materials and books I use. She was so surprised.

Back Again

Then she said, "Can I ask you something?" She told me she didn't quite understand why my kids were taken in 2001. I was relieved to hear her say that.

Our conversation changed her life and mine. As I explained what happened, I helped her realize that parents are sometimes treated unfairly by the system, and I learned that not all ACS workers are out there to remove kids. Soon after, my case was declared unfounded and was closed.

But ACS came back again two more times.

An Advocate by My Side

When they heard that knock on our door at 11 p.m., my kids had a look of fright on their faces. They asked, "Is that ACS?" It's amazing how a hard bang on the door can only mean one of two things in certain neighborhoods—police or ACS. I told my children not to worry.

I've learned a lot about how to handle these cases. Instead of answering the door and letting strangers enter my home, look in my cabinets and frighten my children, I stayed silent and waited for the note to be slipped under the door.

Then I called the Center for Family Representation, which puts a lawyer and social worker on every case. Social workers can attend certain meetings that lawyers can't go to. Their presence can keep a case from escalating.



ILLUSTRATION BY SHAUN SHIBHO

Yet I have been investigated for child abuse three more times since my kids came home.

Power Is Not in Our Hands

There is no good reason that I've been investigated. I suppose it's because I am black, was a single mother living in Harlem, had kids in foster care once already and decided to home school my children when they returned from care.

I have a degree in early childhood education from Columbia University, so I felt confident that I could give

Surprising a Caseworker

The first time I was investigated, I got a letter addressed to my son's foster mother, saying he hadn't been in school in the Bronx for two years. Of course he hadn't! He was home with me, where he belonged.

I called the caseworker to correct the error. Instead of closing the case, she simply told me I'd be investigated and said she wanted to come to my home right away.

Luckily, I kept my composure and asked her if I could visit her at her

Lesson Learned

The second time ACS came knocking, I found someone who stood up for me.

BY LINFA CARRION

I know my rights as a parent, but I also know how the system really works—you often need someone powerful by your side if you want ACS to respect your rights. Otherwise, being too insistent can just get you into trouble.

Politely Refusing to Go

At one meeting, an ACS caseworker kept asking about orders of protection I had filed in family court years ago against my son's father, who was abusive. She had no right to bring that up. I told her calmly, "I will not comment on an old case, but you can ask anything you want about the current allegation."

Another time ACS wanted to refer me to domestic abuse counseling. Now I am married to a good man and haven't seen hell or high water from son's father in nine years. I need domestic abuse counseling? I wanted to walk right out that door. I can't tell you how I reached down deep in myself to make my backside stay in the seat. I politely refused to go.

I Keep on Fighting

In those meetings, I'm reminded of how far the system still needs to go if it's truly going to respect the parents it's supposed to be helping.

Even though every allegation turns up unfounded, these investigations have put fear into my family and me. I worry at night that I'll hear a knock on my door. I cry in the privacy of my bathroom.

I get fed up that the system hasn't changed as much as it needs to. But I am still fighting. I speak on panels, meet with the ACS leadership, and train other parents to speak up, too. I am speaking out for all the children like my children, the Roberts and La'Queshas of the world.

The first time ACS came into my life I had no idea how to handle my case. ACS claimed that I had abandoned my daughters by leaving them with my mother. In fact, I'd asked her to take them while I recovered from being in a car accident.

At my first meeting with ACS, they asked me if I was using drugs, even though that wasn't part of the case against me. I said, "Yes, marijuana," so they asked me to come to drug counseling and to take a drug test once a week until my system was clean.

'That's Not Enough'

I thought I was doing fine with what ACS told me to do, like parenting classes and drug counseling. But I got into trouble because I thought I could work things out my way.

At the time, I was living in New Haven. I wanted to stay there or move in with my mother. ACS told me I had to find my own apartment, though, and for a long time I didn't do that.

I also visited my daughters at my mother's house, not at the agency. Even though I saw them twice each week the first year, and once or twice a month after that, I realize now that the agency didn't see my dedication to my children.

In court, ACS said they wouldn't give my daughters back, telling me, "That's not enough for us." I tried to speak to my lawyer about what was happening, but she never called me back. The whole time my children were in care I met with my lawyer only twice.

What Went Wrong?

The last time I spoke to the social worker, she told me I would get an appointment to go back to court, but instead I received a big packet of papers telling me that my rights were terminated. I had no idea what went wrong.

When I held those papers in my hand, I felt that everyone was against me. It brought back every bad memory of my childhood and sent me straight into depression. I thought, "Is this what I was born for? To be unhappy all

the time? When are things going to get better for me?"

As bad as I felt, I just tried not to dwell on what happened and continued seeing my daughters at my mother's house as much as I could.

The Help I Needed

Then, on January 7, 2005, I thought that nightmare was going to happen to me all over again. ACS knocked on my door with the allegation that I left my 1-year-old child alone in the house and that I was allowing drug trafficking out of my apartment. But thank God, this time

I got the help I needed to prove that the allegation was unfounded.

When I told my new boyfriend what happened, he told me to call his mother, who works for an advocacy organization called the Child Welfare Organizing Project. She introduced me to a social worker and a lawyer at the Center for Family Representation, and they helped me prove my case.

Proving My Case

My social worker, Ms.

Wanjiro, went with me to talk to the ACS social worker. In the meeting, ACS said they wanted me to take drug tests again. I was willing to do it, but Ms. Wanjiro said that I didn't have to because the allegation was not about using drugs, it was about allowing my apartment to be used to sell drugs.

Ms. Wanjiro told ACS that it was against my rights to ask for a drug test, and that it was against my rights to take my children, because police had pressed no charges against me and there was no evidence that I was hurting my kids. In the end, my kids stayed home with me. I was so relieved.

My case went down differently the second time because I had someone with me who explained my rights and stood up to ACS for me. I only wish I'd had someone by my side the first time. I'm sure I wouldn't have lost my two girls to the system if someone had explained to me then what I needed to do to get them back.



ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANENKO / KETISHA RAYOS / PERCIELL SMITH / YC

'It's OK to Need Support'

I found the help I needed to fight for my dreams.

BY EVELYN SALAZAR

When I started to come to the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, a preventive services agency, my main objective was to get help talking to my son's father.

Since I was a child I had dreamed about meeting a good man who wanted to share my dreams to marry and form my own family. Unfortunately, I met the father of my child and a little while later I was pregnant. We tried to form a family, but since the beginning the relationship was always full of conflicts, fights, angry shouts and a lack of respect. I talked and talked with him many times. He always said that everything would get better, but in reality we always returned to the same thing.

When we separated, I wanted to reach an agreement with him that would benefit our son. But he refused to go with me to family counseling. Still, I had confidence that the Center could give me strength to continue fighting for my dreams.

I have a counselor named Liza Blank and in our two years together she's been more than a counselor for me. She's been a support, a friend, a confidant. I've been able to deal with my fears and sadness from the past by unloading everything that I've been carrying inside me that I wasn't able to share with anybody, either because of shame or because I didn't want to hear their reproaches. It's difficult to find someone who listens sincerely, attentively and without reproaches, who meets you where

you are and who loves and accepts you as you are.

For me, the Center has been a place where I get so much support. I can talk about my fears, my conflicts. I can cry without shame, and get ideas for improving my social, economic and moral life. Coming here has liberated me and given me the strength to build a good path in life for my son and myself.

I know that more families could benefit from the support of places like the Center, so I spoke with Liza about how preventive service agencies help families.



ILLUSTRATION BY RIKOU TAKAOTOHI / STEPHANIE WILSON

The Center has been a place where I can talk about my fears, my conflicts, and get ideas for improving my social, economic and moral life.

things in after school programs, like sports and arts. Our way of doing counseling is therapy and advocacy together. Family therapy is about working with families as a whole, helping them learn to communicate in a respectful way, to resolve conflicts and to enjoy each other and get along better.

A lot of therapy is about increasing people's abilities to be good parents. We watch them with their children and help them learn new ways to be with and discipline their children.

Parents learn a lot about spending positive time with their children. It's not that they didn't want to spend positive time with their kids before—they know to do that. But the space and experience of therapy allows parents

to reflect on their personal challenges and become more self-aware. They come to a place where they feel they can do more with and for their children.

But it's not just therapy once a week and that's it. It's pretty involved. The families we work with also may need help to manage systems. We help parents get children into early inter-

vention services, special education classes in school, or into daycare. If the kids are in daycare, the parents are able to be employed and there's less stress in their lives.

We help parents develop skills to deal with public assistance or school issues. Unfortunately, they often don't get treated the right way. So we might go with them to public assistance or help them make phone calls if there's a problem.

No one thinks you can help a child just by sitting in this office, listening. By combining practical help for the family and counseling, we learn about the client and develop a relationship. You learn a lot even by going to a public assistance meeting with a parent.

Q: What types of people come here?

A: Anybody who lives in Sunset Park. We work with anyone who lives here. You don't have to have papers or Medicaid. It's completely free. You just call and say you want to make an appointment. You go to your first appointment and tell the problem you're having and we go from there.

People come in because they hear that we have concrete services they need. They don't come in saying, "I'm depressed!" They say, "I need public assistance," and we work on both.

Some people are also sent to us by ACS—they have "indicated cases,"

Willing to Listen

My preventive worker was a real blessing.

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

meaning there was an investigation and they were told to go to preventive services. Those parents get the same services and support as everyone else.

We also have a small neighborhood foster care program, with about 25 foster families in the neighborhood. Our idea is that children should stay in Sunset Park so parents can visit the child and be reunified. It's traumatic to be sent far away.

But our entire program was created with decreasing foster care in mind. If you give families support and help, they do not get to the stress level where children get taken away.

Q: Do you have any advice for your clients?

A: To find help. Do not be afraid to find someone you can trust, someone to share with. Many people think getting help is wrong. It's OK to need support.

For a while we had a women's group, because some of the single moms seem pretty isolated. It's not that they really need therapy. They need a place to meet friends, have a distraction, feel part of a community. The women came once a week, talked, and had others to share their lives with and trust, rather than just a social worker whose life is different.

You can contact the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park by calling (718) 788-3500. Or find preventive agencies in your neighborhood by calling 311.

On March 25, 2004, after my daughter had been in care for three years, the judge released her to her father and me on a trial discharge. That meant that we'd be supervised by a preventive services agency for a year.

I found an agency right down the block from me and met my new preventive worker. His name was Rene and he was Mexican, like me. As I got to know him and found out what preventive services was, I wished I'd gone to the agency years ago, before my family fell apart.

When I met Rene I was a little nervous, but he was very quiet and nice. We talked about what was expected of me, and he asked, "Does your family need anything? How do you feel with Little Mama being home?" He told me that he would help me with anything I needed for my family.

I Needed Support

I was really surprised, because when my daughter was in foster care, my ACS caseworker seemed not to care about my feelings. When I met with her, I felt the system hanging over me. She seemed to look down on me, as if I didn't feel a mother's love for my child.

My ACS worker hurt my feelings deeply on two occasions. The first came when I'd already been clean for a year and was upset that I was getting only supervised visits. I said to my worker, "I'm tired of all this. I need my daughter home with me." My worker looked at me and said, "Well, Sylvia, you have to work very hard, due to your past..."

That really hit me hard in my chest. I wanted her to acknowledge that I'd been working hard for more than a year. I went to the gloomy bath-

room with Lydia and cried.

'You're Supposed to Keep Families Together'

Another time, in family court, the ACS worker told my husband, "You should get your own place. You'll get your daughter faster than Sylvia, because you've never had any children in the system."

That comment was so disrespectful to our marriage. I felt I had to approach her. "Why would you say something like that?" I said. "You are supposed to keep families together."



The ACS worker tried to cover herself by saying that she didn't mean any harm. But her comments made me feel she didn't support me at all.

A Worker who Listened

When I went to the preventive agency, I thought I would still feel like ACS had its chains on me. Instead, I felt released. Rene wasn't judgmental. He was very comforting and willing to truly listen to me. He didn't shut me down.

One of the first things I told him was

that I felt I didn't need to continue with a drug treatment aftercare program. After two years of rehab I felt stable in my recovery, and I didn't want to go for urine tests anymore. Rene listened and advised me on how to present my request to my ACS worker. He also talked to his supervisor. I ended up being allowed to drop that program.

Regaining My Confidence

When the winter months came I asked Rene if they had a coat drive at the agency, because my family and I couldn't afford winter coats. The next week, I was given three coats. That was a true blessing.

Another time I ran into trouble with my public assistance case. I received a letter from welfare saying that I didn't show up for an appointment and they were going to reduce my check. I was very upset. I'd been at that appointment!

I called Rene immediately. He read the letter and then he faxed over some papers asking that I get a "fair hearing" so I could fight the decision. When I went to the fair hearing, I won. I was so grateful for Rene's help. He gave me back my confidence in myself.

Reach Out for Help

When the year was over, I realized I would miss Rene. If I ever have problems in the future, I'll definitely go and seek help at that agency.

I wish I'd known about preventive services before I lost my daughter to the system. I truly believe that if such kind and gentle workers had met with us before ACS took Lydia, we might have gotten the help we needed without being so emotionally bruised.

Heart to Heart

Telling my mom how I felt changed our relationship.

BY CRISTINA ORTIZ



My mom always paid more attention to my older brother than to me. She took him places, like the movies or the store. Sometimes if I asked to go with her, she would say, "No." Then she got pregnant. When she had my little sister things really got bad. If I asked her to help me with my homework she would say, "You're not a baby. You can do it yourself." I felt like she didn't want my anymore.

I thought that if I did bad things, like smoking with my friends or not going to school, she'd at least pay attention. I wanted her to realize that I felt hurt and unloved. But all she said was, "You should know better."

Then my brother got locked up for selling drugs. I started to get really depressed. I felt like the only people who cared for me were my friends. I stayed out late with them and didn't tell my mother where I was.

Eventually I ended up in Pleasantville,

a residential treatment center. One day I acted out and two staff I liked, Jean and Lovonia, pulled me into their office. Instead of getting mad they asked me why I did the things I did. I said, "I don't know."

Jean said, "Don't give me the 'I don't know' line."

"All right," I said. "I do it because I want attention and nobody ever gives me any attention in here."

Lovonia said, "All you have to do is ask and one of us can give you the attention you need."

I started to cry. "I don't want attention from here," I admitted. "I want my mom to give me some attention."

Jean said I should call my mom and tell her how I felt. I said I didn't want to. I thought she would just ignore me.

But a little while later I decided to call her. I was kind of scared, but I also felt like I was going to explode if I didn't tell her that I thought she didn't want me.

My mother didn't understand why I felt that way. I said, "Because you never give me any attention." She stayed quiet. I told her that I felt like my staff loved me more than she did, and that I was acting like a little brat because I felt unloved and hurt. Finally she admitted that she paid "a little bit" more attention to my brother because she worried that he was going to end up dead or in jail. She said she knew, or at least thought, that I had more sense than that.

I said, "Mom, I really wish you were there for me when I needed you." She stayed quiet. I started to cry. I felt like I'd messed up again. Then she said, "Cristina, I love you, you're my daughter, and if you really felt that way, why didn't you talk to me?"

I told her I was scared. It's not easy to talk to your parents about things like that. I felt like she actually understood.

Our relationship has grown a lot since that phone call. We're talking more. It feels good not to hide things from her. My mom gives me a lot more attention now for the positive things I do.

Once, on a home visit, I heard my mother tell my social worker over the phone how proud she was that I was doing so good. My mother had never said anything that good about me before.

She used to tell me that I would never be anything in life, that I would be on the corner selling drugs with my brother. Now she was saying she was proud of me. That whole night I was the happiest person in the world.

'I Know

Focusing on the

BY KAREN ROSADO

My son was having a lot of problems. He was a little terror. A relative noticed and was like, "Why don't you try counseling?" Every day she'd tell me, "Go." Now we've been going for two years. It changed my life.

When my son was 11, he'd blow up too easily. Even if something was not aimed directly at him, he took it like it was directly at him. They would call me constantly at the school. He threw a chair at the teacher. He would hit other students. He got detentions, got suspended. I would be so tense. This kid was driving me crazy.

Getting The Family

Each year, between 2,000 and 3,000 teens end up in foster care. We talked with Mary Guerrier and Mary Richardson at the Family Assistance Program (FAP) in New York City, which helps teens and parents stop fighting, calm down and reconnect.

Q: Why do parents and teens come here?

A: Parents come in when their families are in crisis. The teens are not going to school, experimenting with drugs, or possibly involved in gangs. The parents are frustrated. They'll say, "My little angel is not my angel anymore."

When the parent and child are yelling, both feel no one is hearing them. We teach them to listen. We ask each person,

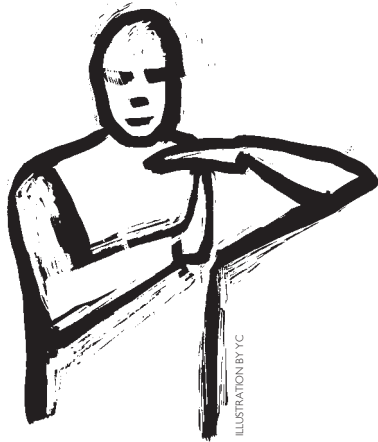
You Can Do It'

positive helped my teen and me.

'You're a Good Child'

Counseling helped because he had somebody he could talk to. If he had talked to me, my reaction would be different, because when your child is attacking you, you want to attack back. My counselor said, "Your child will live up to your expectations. You shouldn't say, 'You're a bad kid, you're always doing that.' You should say, 'You know you're a good child, you know you could do it.' Point out the good stuff, not the negative."

My counselor is white, doesn't have kids, and she's young. So when she would tell me how to react,



I would say to my husband, "She doesn't know what she's talking about." I didn't think she was right,

but what I did didn't work. So I tried it her way, and it helped.

Now he wants to give me hugs and kisses all the time. I had to learn to not push him away. He gives me so many headaches, that sometimes I want to push him away. But I read somewhere that you should hug your child every day. So I told him, "BJ, I have to hug you every day." Sometimes he'll say, "I didn't get my hug."

We've Both Changed

Now, he's doing so much better in school. On one test he got 86 and on another test he got a 100.

When he moved from the old school to a new, one of the teachers from the old school saw him do a presentation, and couldn't believe he was the same child. She kept saying, "Is that Cito?"

I've changed, too. If I wasn't in this program, I'd be at home, depressed, in bed. At first I just thought, "I'm here because my son has a behavior problem." But I have stuff inside of me, too. I always wanted to go to college, but I felt I couldn't do that. My counselor helped me to see that I could go. Now I'm in college, I've completed one year. I did not ever dream I would be in college.

Back on Track

Assistance Program reconnects parents and teens.

Often teens tell us, "No one cares about me, no one listens to me." We have to help the parent see where that child is coming from.

"What's your take on the problem? How do you think we can get through this crisis?" First we speak with the parent alone, then to the child alone.

We tell the teens, "You know what? This is not about your parents, it's about you. This is your life. What is it you want us to do to help you?" Believe me, they tell us. Then we have a family conference where they share their views and we make a decision about what could help them. It's voluntary, but 90 percent of families agree to services.

Q: What kinds of problems are they facing?

A: Sometimes it's school troubles. We find out what's really going on. We ask, "Why aren't you going to that math class?" It might be that cutting class is the only way to get a parent's attention. Maybe they're bullied. Then we go to the school and meet with the teacher and counselor.

Many times it's about grief. Kids have lost grandparents, lost fathers. They've had so many losses in their life. The parents are so grief stricken themselves. The teens don't know how to cope. They're cursing, totally

out of control, breaking things.

Some kids who come in are severely depressed. They say, 'I want to die.' They show us where they tried cutting themselves. They need a mental health evaluation immediately. Children speak to a therapist and get the care they need.

Q: How can teens and parents get back on track?

A: Often teens tell us, "No one cares about me, no one listens to me." We have to help the parent see where that child is coming from.

Teenagers need respect. If you respect teens, they will listen to you. A lot of parents are like, "You have to do this." Parents do better if they guide their children and show them the way. Their children aren't "bad." They're just on the wrong track and we have to guide them back.

Teenagers also need structure. It can be a problem when a parent is more of a friend than a parent. Parents will say, "She came in at 1 a.m." When we ask the teen, "What's your curfew time?" it'll turn out that mom never told her what time to be in. If you set the limits for teens, and reinforce the rules by rewarding positive behavior, nothing is hopeless.

We offer parents help. We let them know, "Being a parent is a complicated job." We help them turn to family or a best friend or religious institution. We connect them to parenting skills classes where they can share ideas.

If a child cannot stay at home because the family is in crisis, we try respite care for a few days. Sometimes families have to separate for a while and then come back together.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with New York City's child welfare system (ACS). Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

For more information about Rise, or to join the writing staff, please call Nora McCarthy at (212) 279-0708 x113. Or find Rise on the web at www.youthcomm.org/rise.

Most of the stories were written by participants in the writing

group run by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) and Represent magazine. CWOP is an advocacy program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000. Represent is a magazine written by and for youth in foster care nationwide. For more information about Represent, call (212) 279-0708.

Rise is published by Youth Communication, which is dedicated to publishing stories by those whose voices are rarely heard in the media. It is funded by the Child Welfare Fund.

'You Gotta Calm Down That Terror'

BY LUZ HERNANDEZ

I came to counseling at Good Shepherd Services when my son was 5 and my daughter was 7. My daughter was a terror, Louie had a learning disability and I had a problem. I was like, "You have to do what I say, and that's the way it is."

My daughter, she didn't care what anyone told her, and I was whacking her all the time, punishing her. I'd say, "I don't see nothing good for you. You gotta calm down that terror, or life won't give you nothing." And Louie was closed inside.

I feel I did them the wrong way. The counselors taught me that my kids are people too and I have to listen to them, too. You have to hear their little words. When they speak, there's something behind that. Sometimes we just don't know how to talk.

We were in counseling five or six years. At first I was coming with my daughter. But she had to come alone, too. There's a lot she'll tell the counselor that she won't tell me.

Now my son is still doing a little bad, and they sent me back with him.

The counselor became like part of the family. Everything I had inside of me, I threw it at him. Before, everything I had inside of me, I threw it at my kids. Now, we talk. And if I get angry, I say, "Forget it, I'll talk to them later." My daughter will say, "Ma, I think you did this wrong." And I think about it, and I come back and apologize.

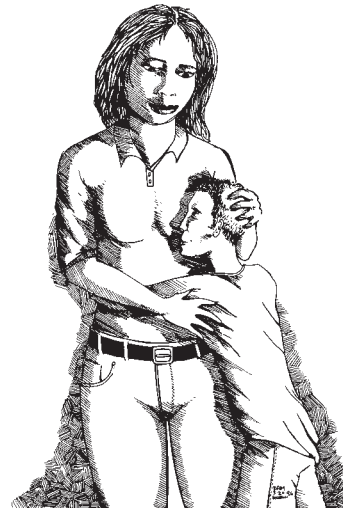
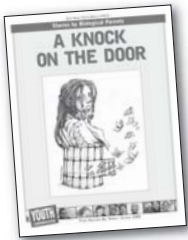


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