

Rise magazine is written 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 14, FALL 2009

BY AND FOR  
PARENTS IN THE  
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

## Helping Your Children Succeed in School

Children who have been in foster care often face difficulties succeeding in school. Children may act out or have trouble learning due to fear or sadness. They can fall behind if they switch schools. And they are likely to be placed in special education.

Parents may not know how to access school-based services and may be intimidated by school personnel. In this issue, parents write about how they advocate for the supports their children need to succeed in school.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEANETTE VEGA



Jeanette and her son Remi soon after he returned home from foster care.

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## Another Phone Call Home

*How could I help my son behave in school?*

BY JEANETTE VEGA

My Remi is the brightest, cutest, most loving child you can meet, but he's also deceitful and vicious in his own way. Can you tell by looking at him that he gets out of control? No! Sweet face and a dear heart—but his behavior needs to change, especially at school.

Since he was a year old, Remi has been more active and mischievous than I expected. Then, when he was 2, I hit him one night when his behavior scared and overwhelmed me. He ended up in foster care for three years.

Soon after Remi came home, he started school. His behavior was serious. He would talk back, throw things (including a chair) and run wild. I got phone calls almost every other day.

### **Out of Control**

At first I thought Remi was still adjusting to being home from foster care.

But as he got older, every year there was a new issue. He cut electric wires and all the lights went out at his school. He threatened his teacher:

One day when he was in 3rd grade, the teacher called and said, "Please come get him. I just can't deal with him." I asked to talk to him and he said, "Mommy, the teacher was sitting on me and I couldn't breathe." What? As I rushed out of work, the teacher's words disappeared. I was in a rage, ready to attack.

### **What Can We Do?**

Once I arrived, the teacher explained that Remi had gotten into a fight, and when she tried to intervene, Remi attacked her and pulled her hair. She sat on him (without squashing him) to control him until he relaxed.

"Jeez, where does all this come from?" I asked myself.

When his teacher called, I talked to Remi. But I didn't know what the school expected his father and me to do about his behavior.

When he was 9, we began to feel that Remi was old enough to be punished for his school behavior. We took away his toys and gave him no outside playtime for two weeks for each event in school. Remi also lost his television and video game privileges. None of that helped.

At times his dad and I felt like kicking his butt, but I couldn't do that. I thought, "What can we really do?"

### **Dealing With the School**

I was also upset with Remi's teachers. On the first day of school, I repeatedly told Remi's teachers, "If you give him an inch, he will take the mile. Do not let Remi slide. If he does something small, please let me know."

But the teachers would tell him, "I'm going to call your parents" and not call. When he got home and I didn't talk to him about a phone call from the teacher, Remi would feel he'd gotten away with it. Then the teacher would call to complain about new events plus things that he'd done two or three weeks before.

I was aggravated that the teachers were quick to say, "Is everything all right at home?" I'd explain to the teachers, "There is no problem at home. This is just what Remi is like."

Sometimes I'd get frustrated and tell the teacher, "From 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., don't call me. You deal with him, because after 3 p.m., I do not call you and say, 'I can't deal with Remi.'"

### Looking for Help

But the truth was, I did need help controlling Remi's behavior. I was convinced that something was wrong with him. It seemed abnormal to me that he was so active and would run out of control. At home, we tried to keep Remi calm by keeping him busy with cleaning, homework, drawing or video games. If he got worked up, I yelled or sent Remi to his room to watch TV.

I sought counseling for Remi at three different agencies but I didn't feel like I got any advice I could use. What a joke! Remi went in and played and talked to the therapist. He would behave and cooperate just fine. He showed no problems until we left, when he'd start running loose.

"Stay next to me, Remi," I'd tell him. He never stayed. Getting on the train was scary. He'd be hanging on the subway bars, swinging.

When we got home, I'd put his toys in my closet to punish him for misbehaving. I even sold his Xbox. But I noticed that taking Remi's toys away usually backfired, because if there was nothing to do, then he'd really act out, either out of frustration or just because he was bored.

### 'Be Patient'

From the therapists, it seemed like I would always get the same response: "Remi is a smart boy who seems

to be a little hyper at times." One therapist said he might have ADHD, another said "slight Bipolar Disorder" or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from his foster care experiences. I couldn't understand why the doctors couldn't seem to give him a diagnosis or treat him.

I repeatedly asked for medication—the lowest dosage of something, anything. I'd bring school letters, papers from other clinics, and tell the therapist the way he behaved. None of that mattered. The therapists would say, "Let's never use medication as a way out." The only advice I got was, "Distract him with other activities and be patient."

Having teachers scream, "Remi needs help!" and therapists say, "He's a sweet boy who loses his focus" made me feel confused and trapped.

I felt furious and misunderstood. I wasn't looking for a way out. I needed a way to help Remi cope with his feelings or fears. I thought, "Maybe there is something bothering him that he doesn't want to tell me."

### Feeling Trapped

Having teachers scream, "Remi needs help!" and therapists say, "He's a sweet boy who loses his focus" made me feel confused and trapped.

It didn't help that, because of how he acted, most people I knew didn't want Remi to come over to play or hang out. Remi did better if he ran around, but I didn't like taking him to the park because, before I knew it, he'd be acting out.

I enrolled Remi in karate (that didn't last) and football so he could release his energy in a controlled environment. The football did help. He's been playing in a league for three years now.

### The Help We Needed

When Remi started 6<sup>th</sup> grade, he went to a new school and his behavior calmed down a lot. He was in an art school, so he got to do what he

loves, which is draw. His behavior was more respectful and his mouth was not going off too much.

Still, I didn't think Remi's behavior had changed as much as it needed to for Remi to succeed in school and do OK in life. So I made an appointment to try the whole therapy thing again. "Maybe the fourth time will be a charm," I told myself.

Thank God, this time Remi saw a specialist who diagnosed him with ADHD and prescribed medication. Now Remi takes the medication every morning. I've noticed such a difference. It seems to relax his mind and keeps him focused in school.

When he gets home, he cleans his room and starts his homework. By 6 p.m. the medication has worn off and his excitement definitely returns, but Remi seems able to control himself a lot better.

### Enjoying Life More

Now it's been a year that Remi's been on medication. His grades have improved and his behavior has been more controllable. Dealing with Remi is still a hassle at times. I remind myself, "Remi will always be Remi," But he's beginning to think before he acts and he is more responsible.

Recently, Remi started to travel to school on his own. I am proud that he is proving his maturity daily.

Life has changed for us all, because we can go out and stay out all day with friends and family without something going wrong. That helps us enjoy life. Remi and I are bonding more emotionally, too. I don't have to pull my hair out to get my point across to him, and that's relaxing us both. I just wish we hadn't gone through so many years of frustration together.

# Rise

ISSUE #14 // FALL 2009  
www.risemagazine.org

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# Keep Pushing

*How to communicate with your child's school.*

BY JEANETTE VEGA

As a parent advocate, Geraldine Burton has provided support to other parents of children with emotional and behavior problems for 13 years. Here she explains how parents can help their children succeed in school:

## **Q: What personal experiences do you bring to being a parent advocate?**

**A:** From a very early age, I knew something was different about my son. He was always friendly—we used to call him Mr. Friendly—but he was also constantly on the move and overly aggressive. When he was in an aggressive mode, we didn't know who that child was at all. I wished I could open his head to see what was going on inside.

Eventually, my son and I went to therapy, he went on medication and I joined a parent support group. He was diagnosed with ADHD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Basically, that meant that he was very impulsive and hard to discipline. Even just walking down the street, he would act out. He'd run down the block and hide behind cars. It made me crazy. I used to yell all the time.

The social worker who ran the support group helped me stop yelling and calm myself down. She helped me understand that my son's diagnosis meant that there were behaviors that he had no control over and I had no control over. When I really understood that my son couldn't help being impulsive, that helped us both.

## **Q: How can parents work with their children's school to deal with behavior problems?**

**A:** When your child is acting up in school and the school is hounding you, the most important thing is to communicate with your child's school. I advise parents to go to the school and introduce themselves to the teacher early in the year. Don't wait for a crisis. If you can't go to parent-teacher night, send an email, call the teacher, or even send a letter.

A lot of parents figure, "When my child is at school, it's the school's responsibility." But children's behavior in school is affected by what happens at home. If your child is going through changes at

home—maybe you've just moved into a shelter, or the child's grandma died, or his father is incarcerated—let your child's teacher know. Many of us don't want to share information like that. We want our family lives to be private. But a teacher will have an easier time with your child if she understands what your child is going through.

If you're being called to the school because of a child's behavior prob-

lems, ask for a meeting with all of the school staff that can work with your child—the teacher, social worker and administrator—and ask questions. What specifically is your child doing? How has the school tried to resolve

the problem so far? Ask, "What would you like me to do? Are there any services available?" If they put your child in counseling, come in to meet the school psychologist and ask your child how it's going.

Parents are very stressed out when they're being called to pick up their child from school or attend school meetings day after day. Some fear they will lose their jobs. It's fine to ask the school to accommodate you. You can say, "I can't come during work time. Can we meet before school? Can we communicate by email or phone?" But find a way to keep communication open.

## **Q: How can parents prepare for meetings at the school?**

**A:** At school meetings, you'll need to know what services the school could be offering your child or ask a lot of questions to find out your rights. Before a meeting, talk with the parent coordinator at the school or look for help from a parent support organization in your neighborhood.



You can succeed in meetings by writing down what you want to discuss and bringing someone that you trust—an advocate or someone who knows you and your family. If the staff are using a bunch of terms you don't understand,

don't be afraid to ask them, "Can you break that down for me?"

During meetings, be straight with school personnel and stay positive. Sometimes parents feel judged or talked down to in meetings. That can be especially hard for parents of children with mental health issues. We are already getting so much negative feedback because our children act out and we feel isolated and helpless. But coming in with negativity or an attitude will not help you.

At the end of a meeting, be sure that you understand exactly what the school is going to do for your child. If your child is going to get tested for learning disabilities, or get extra time on tests, or have weekly visits with the school counselor, write down the agreement.

If your child is supposed to get special services but you never hear from the school about it, you want a paper trail. Write a letter to say, "I have some concerns about the testing we agreed on. I would appreciate it if you'd get back to me within five days." Keep copies of all letters and keep a log of phone calls.

It can be difficult to push the school to follow through. Many times teachers don't understand what a mental health diagnosis means or the difficulties families are going through. Schools are also overwhelmed. They may have 1,500 kids and one social worker. But if you keep communication open, you can help your child succeed.

ILLUSTRATION BY TERENCE TAYLOR

**At school meetings, you'll need to know what services the school could be offering your child or ask a lot of questions to find out your rights.**

# Education Starts at Home

*My children need my support to succeed in school.*

BY MARIBEL MARTINEZ

*Translated from Spanish*

When I was growing up in Mexico, my mother always paid attention to my education. She worked in a store that we had in the house. If we had a problem at school, my mother simply closed the store without regard to whether she would lose money and went to the school to talk with our teacher.

My mother never said to us, "I had to close the store and I lost money," or, "Today I can't go speak to your teacher." My mother told us that school was the most important thing for us, and that what we learned, nobody could take from our hands.

## My Broken Dreams

I had dreams for my own education. I thought I'd graduate high school, even though that would be difficult because of our economic situation. Despite having to pay for school fees, uniforms and books, I finished secondary school (8<sup>th</sup> grade here).

I took my exam to apply to high school and found a part-time job as a receptionist so I'd be able to cover my high school expenses. But then my mother decided that we should move to the United States to improve our financial situation.

I was 14 when we arrived here. Living in New York was much more difficult than my mother had expect-

I could return to school. But nothing went as we had hoped. Eventually, I had my children and I never went back home.

Now, as a mother of three students, I worry about how they are doing in school. I hope that my children can complete their education and achieve a career that they really feel a passion for and enjoy.

My children are good students because I study alongside them and I show them that their education is worth my time.

ed. In Mexico, we didn't pay rent because we owned a home. Here, we had to pay rent. Food, telephone, gas, and lights were all so expensive. I had to go straight to work.

## Investing in My Children

We thought we'd save money so that when we went back to Mexico,

Before my children started school, I taught them the numbers, colors and the alphabet, as well as songs, animal sounds and the names of many things. It was funny, because when they were learning numbers, we'd go outside and count the trees, cars, houses, birds, planes, everything!

## An Educational Schedule

I am lucky to have a schedule at my job that allows me to remain very involved in my children's education. I work 8:30 to 2:30, and that allows me to pick up my children or wait for them at home. Since they don't like the school food, I cook something quickly and at 3:30 we eat together.

We talk about how their day went and if they had any difficulties in class. We listen to each other, although at times we all want to talk at the same time. In these conversations, I find out their favorite subjects and those they don't enjoy.

## Homework Help

My daughter Gabriela doesn't like science. She'll say, "Mami, today I had science," and make a face. Liliana doesn't enjoy math. She tells me, "I need help, Mami. I need the whole world to help me." Fernando always says that he's fine, just that at times his teacher gives him a detention—he says it's because some kids made noise and the whole class got

# Afraid of the Schools' Power

I have always been involved in my children's schools. For many years, I never missed a PTA or parent-teacher meeting, and I attended my children's activities, helped them with their homework and pushed them to excel.

Even so, I had a bad experience with my daughter's school that could have been avoided. One day, my daughter went to school with a bruise near her eye. We'd had a family gathering at my house. My daughter was running around and banged her head, which caused the bruise.

Of course I sent her to school, because that was where she was

supposed to be. Little did I know that her teacher would call child protective services. No one from the school called to ask me any questions. They just assumed I was abusing my child.

I was taken off-guard, confused and scared that my children would be taken from me. As a teenager, I had been removed from home because I was defiant, and I was placed in a group care facility. My experience in the system was damaging and did not help my family relationships. I had vowed never to put my children through

that pain.

I am shocked that no one from the school called to find out the circumstances of my daughter's injury. From my point of view, strange people just came to my home out of nowhere, threatening to take my children.

Child protective services and the school system say that their primary concern is for children. Well, children have parents, and I feel that children are best protected when parents are treated with understanding and respect.

If the school system did a better job working with parents, then parents would not have to feel scared and confused. Parents could feel more empowered to support their children's education.



ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

—Teresa Bachiller



punished.

We have a schedule. At 4:30 we start homework. Sometimes Fernando puts on his headphones and reads, and that allows the rest of us to work quietly. I clean up the kitchen and check with them to see if they need my help.

Even though I don't speak much English, I am very involved in my children's homework. I help them find words in the dictionary, organize their papers and notebooks, and read alongside them.

We've found ways for me to help them with school and for them to get the help I can't give them. Often my children translate assignments or questions that they're confused by, and I help them in Spanish.

### ***I Wish I Spoke English***

Recently Gabriela was having trouble in math and her siblings weren't able to help her. Fernando translated the problem for me, and I explained it, and he translated back to English, but Gabriela said, "You don't know anything! I'm going to call the hotline number."

She'd seen on TV that New York City has a homework help line that children and families can call. When she got off the phone, she said, "They said the same thing you said. . . I only wanted to be sure!" But now, we are always calling that phone number.

Fernando, who is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, often stays after school and asks a teacher to help him with his homework. Liliana, who is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, often helps her younger siblings learn.

When my children are doing homework in English and I don't understand anything, I sometimes feel bad. I know I should speak better English and I worry that I have to go back to school if I want to help my children succeed.

Four years ago I took a class and earned my GED in Spanish. I also answered 100 questions in English and received a diploma in English, too. Step by step, I hope I will find opportunities to further my studies, and I study English a little at home now.

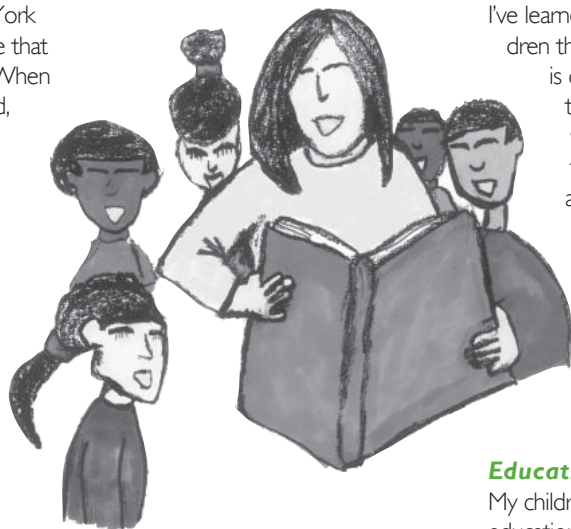


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN JONES

I've learned from supporting my children that the way they teach now is completely different from the way I was taught when I was little. They're expected to speak up in class and to ask questions, while I was expected to memorize what I was told. I can help them better when I understand more about what their teachers expect of them.

### ***Education Starts at Home***

My children understand that their education is important to me and will give them a brilliant future. They see that they can have a job that they enjoy. They see that their teachers can own a car and a house and can go out and travel. This fascinates them. Those aren't options for our family.

My children are good students not only because I talk to them about the importance of school, but because I study alongside them and I show them that their education is worth my time.

### ***Involved at School***

I think it's so important that parents help and support our children with their schoolwork. Discipline and education start at home.

Whenever I can, I help at my children's school. When the school year starts, I go to the school to meet my children's new teachers and to find out their daily routines, how much homework they assign, what tests they give, and what they expect in terms of class participation.

## Supporting Parents Helps Children

I am a mother of two children, ages 11 and 8. My son has ADHD and behavioral issues. He is delayed two years in school, but he is doing well now.

The principal at my son's school does not like me. I go to the school to check on my son and she does not want me to do this. Also, I pass out flyers to the parents about supports for parents with child welfare cases. I grew up in the foster care system, and I was also trained as a parent

leader through the Child Welfare Organizing Project, a parent peer support and advocacy organization in New York City. I want parents in my community in the Bronx to know they have rights and there are people who can help them. The principal gets angry when I pass out flyers.

My son's school recently sent home a letter saying that the school would call in a neglect report for attendance or hygiene issues, and if kids don't have uniforms. This is abuse of the



ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

State Central Register. Even when there seems to be a good reason to call, the school staff should go talk to parents and see what is going on

before calling in a report.

I believe that we need family support caseworkers in the schools who will help parents. Some parents are struggling and need help finding public benefits, food pantries, anger management classes, parenting skills classes, money management classes, drug programs, and part time jobs. The schools can help children by supporting their parents.

—Yesenia Mercado

# 'He Needs More Than We Can Give'

*I'm searching for a school that can work for my son.*

BY ROBIN LARIMORE

Ever since my son William was little, I've been fighting with the Department of Education to get him the help he needs.

My son has been diagnosed with learning disabilities and mental health issues. William lost his hearing in the left ear and is mildly retarded. He has ADHD and "expressive/receptive language disorder delay," which is basically a disorder that affects his speech and hearing. He misunderstands what you say and can't express himself like other children. William has been in special education since he was 5.

All together, William has a very hard time learning, handling his aggression and communicating. His behavior problems have gotten him in a lot of trouble at school. Over the years, he's also been hospitalized because of violent behavior.

## Extreme Behavior

William sometimes acts out in frustration in extreme ways. One day I gave William money for a sale at school and a kid on the bus took his money. William told the bus matron but she did not believe him. When he arrived at school, William was angry, both because his money had been taken and because he'd been called a liar. He started to throw chairs and went running through the halls. They had to call security.

The guidance counselor asked my son what was wrong, but at first she didn't believe his story either, because other kids said he wasn't telling the truth. Finally she called me and I told her that I had given him the money. I had even marked the money, so the boy from the bus gave William back his \$5 and William calmed down.

William's learning problems and behaviors also make it difficult for him to make friends. One time he was

trying to read but could not and a kid started to make fun of him. William got very angry and told the teacher, but the teacher did not intervene so William fought the child and I was called to school.

## Sad and Frustrated

One day William told me that he did not like his new school and did not want to go back. I asked him, "Why?"

"I'm angry because the kids make fun of me and it makes me feel really sad," he said. I knew he was sad, because when he came home he looked it. He told me, "Nobody likes me."

"Give it time, it will get better. This is a new school."

But he just said, "Mommy, I have no friends. Nobody wants to talk to me. Please don't make me go there."

The more that William felt sad and stupid at school, the more angry and scared he felt, and the more he acted out. Some days he would just start running through the halls yelling. He even attacked a staff and the

school had to call 911. Another time he stood up on the window sill and wouldn't come down.

When William threw things or started to fight or yell, the teacher would put him out of class. This became a regular thing, so he fell further behind in class and he felt very stupid.



Robin with her three children, including William (right).

speech problem, but he was not getting speech therapy.

Usually at these meetings I felt like I was given no choice but to agree with the school's recommendations. It got real tiring. But I told myself, "If you don't fight, nobody else will. The best advocate for your child is you."

## Support in a Crisis

I looked for help through family support organizations in my community.

When you first get to these programs, they talk a lot about what they're for and say they're really there to help, but a lot don't help. I had one preventive worker tell me that if I didn't put my son into residential treatment, the agency would call child protective services on me.

But two workers at Steinway Family Services, Karen and Glen, have my trust. They treated me nicely and showed me respect as a parent. They have earned my trust by doing their job and showing that they really do care about my child.

Karen and Glen got William set up for proper testing to check his hearing, reading, vision and learning problems. Through that doctor I got William an FM stereo unit to help with his hearing and learning, and found a speech therapist who came to our house.

Karen and Glen also searched for good schools for William and they went to interviews with William and me. When we had a crisis, they were there.

## Learning at Home

One program that really helped William was home schooling. After William was hospitalized for aggres-

## From School to School

Whenever something went wrong, the school would call me down. Eventually, William's school would tell me, "He needs more than we can give him." Then they would put him in a new school, but each school they passed him on to seemed like it was worse than the last.

I understood that William's behaviors were very difficult for school personnel to deal with, but I felt frustrated with the Board of Education. I believed that the schools saw my son as a bad child who could not be helped, instead of really looking at the disabilities that were causing his

behavior problems.

At the IEP meetings (where decisions are made about how to work with a child in special education), I felt like the social workers, teachers, doctors and counselors felt like they knew my son better than I did, and that he didn't need the help I believed he needed. For instance, my son has a

I told myself, 'If you don't fight, nobody else will. The best advocate for your child is you.'

# Advocating for Your Children

*What parents can ask the school to do to help their children succeed.*

sive behavior, I requested that he get home schooling, because he was not stable enough to go to school.

It took a while to set up. Then, I didn't like the first teacher, because she was coming to my house whenever she felt like dropping by. It made me so uncomfortable that I decided to report her. For two months, William was not enrolled in school. But the wait was worth it because I finally got two good teachers and the home schooling helped. William took to them and learned a lot.

I also got homemaking services. They helped me out with the children and that took stress off of me and William.

## Trying a New Treatment

Despite all of these programs, William recently ended up back in the hospital for a number of months. It was very sad for me to visit him there, but I also saw a lot of changes in him during those months. The teachers at the hospital school helped him so much. For the first time, William stayed in class all day. The counselors really helped him deal with his emotions.

William was still having outbursts, but he was learning to walk away when he got upset. He also tried new methods to calm himself down, like counting backwards, saying the ABCs, thinking of good things, and listening to music. William

also started calling me or talking to a staff member when he was upset. Sometimes he even gave himself a time out. I was very proud of him.

The hospital staff talked me into placing William in a residential treatment center, where he can go to school on site. I was against it at first. I wanted William home. But I changed my mind. I believe this place can truly help him. I want William to get to the point that he can stay home, not keep going in and out of the hospital.

## I See Him Smile

Looking back, I see that the public schools were right when they told me, "He needs more than we can give." But I wish they had been more respectful and willing to listen during the many years I tried to work with William's schools to help him succeed.

I am also glad that I found workers who helped me find the treatment William needs. William seems happier now. He's excited that he's come so far, and he's getting along better with other kids because he's not acting out so much.

William has been able to come home for visits. It feels good to spend time together; just watching movies and listening to music. I hope that, with help from the residential treatment center, William will get to the point where he can come home and stay home, where he is doing to be.

Erika Palmer, a lawyer at Advocates for Children, a nonprofit that guides parents of children in New York City public schools, explains how parents can get school-based services for their children:

## Q: What school services can help a child who is struggling in school?

**A:** If parents are getting called down to the school because of a child's behavior problems, parents can request a Functional Behavior Assessment. That means the school social worker or psychologist observes the child in different classes over several days to really understand the child's behaviors. Then the clinician will develop an intervention plan.



ILLUSTRATION BY JESSICA DENG

Parents need to be involved in making that plan, because they know what rewards and consequences work at home and what doesn't. For instance, at a recent meeting we were talking about a child who was getting rewards in school at the end of each week, based on a point system. But this child had a very short attention span. He needed to have rewards and consequences every 30 minutes. Parents can carry over the same techniques at home. Consistency will make discipline work much more smoothly.

Parents also can ask for specific school-based supports, like counseling or tutoring. Kids with attention difficulties might try out having a one-on-one paraprofessional work with them for part of the day. But getting services in place takes a great deal of per-

sistence. In New York City, every school has a parent coordinator, which parents can go to for information, or you can call the Advocates for Children Helpline at 1-866-427-6033.

## Q: What should parents know about special education services?

**A:** Children can be placed in special education because of academic or behavior problems. Special education does not necessarily mean your child will learn in a separate class. Special education is a range of services designed to help children with disabilities succeed in school.

If you do not want your child placed in special education, you do not have to give consent. You can also withdraw your consent and have your child removed at any time.

To enter special education, children must be evaluated and then school staff and the parents work together to create an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which is like a contract describing the services that the school is required to provide.

After a meeting to write the IEP, parents may assume that the child is getting the services the school agreed to, but the school may not be following through. Parents need to talk with their child and visit the school to make sure the child is in the correct setting and actually receiving speech therapy, counseling, small-group tutoring, or other services.

If the school recommends that your child move to a special education program in a different school, parents have the right to visit the new school and get information about the class before consenting to the placement.

The right specialists might not be on staff. But every school has a school-based support team: a special ed teacher, psychologist, social worker and often a parent outreach worker. Speak with the school support team to find out what help your child is getting through special education and what additional services might help your child.



# It's Truancy, Not Neglect

*My son's truancy is putting our family in jeopardy.*

BY YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

My son Ramel is a very smart young man, talented and creative, with a good heart. Ramel builds intricate aircrafts and spaceships with his Legos. He can fix anything and is a gaming whiz.

But Ramel also gets depressed a lot and doesn't want to be bothered. He doesn't like to talk. He doesn't like to try new foods. He doesn't like therapists or social workers or school. He has not been any easy child to bring up.

School, especially, has been a problem since Ramel was very little. His problems in school have led the child welfare system to knock on our door many times.

## **I Lost It!**

I can relate to Ramel's depression. I struggle with depression, and when Ramel was little, I became very depressed. I had left my abusive husband, found a job and childcare, and enrolled my children in a Catholic school. Yet I was not happy. I was short-tempered and angry and cried a lot. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

Then the Catholic school told me that Ramel could not continue on to 1<sup>st</sup> grade because he didn't listen and disappeared from the classroom. I switched both kids to public school, but their new school was deplorable. The teachers didn't care, and my son was often beat up by a bully with yellow eyes.

I rushed to the school from work one day only to be told by the teacher that my son was "around here somewhere." Well, I found him walking down the street, away from the school. At 6 years old! I lost it.

## **Three Long Years**

That school also had no after-school program, and I worked until 5 p.m.

So I was soon having lots of problems at work. I had to leave early to pick up my children. Finally, I asked my job to lay me off.

Once I stopped working, I became so depressed that some days I wouldn't bother taking my kids to school. I just wanted to keep them home with me where I knew they were safe and taken care of. I was overwhelmed and needed help.

I talked to a social worker at the school and told her, "I can't take it anymore." She called the abuse hotline and reported educational neglect.

Soon, my two children went into foster care. For three years they lived with my sister, until I finally found the confidence and guidance to get them back.

## **Listening to My Son**

After my children came home, I did a lot to try to repair my family. I got my son into counseling at his school and we also began family therapy at a local preventive service agency.

In therapy, I learned that Ramel was angry at me for letting him go into foster care, for having a third child, for having a man who he did not like and who did not treat me well. He was angry that we lived in a ghetto neighborhood and didn't have a house like my sister's. He was just very angry.



he doesn't. I am not big enough to drag my son out of bed and carry him to school.

Ramel says he doesn't fit in at school. He says the ghetto kids won't accept him because he sounds too white, and the good kids won't accept him because he dresses too black. He says that he felt more comfortable living the good life while in foster care at my sister's house. The school he attended there was mixed. He could be himself and not worry about fitting in.

I also learned that Ramel wanted to spend time with me. He loved to play handball and walk around Manhattan. I learned, too, that if I say I am going to do something with Ramel, I need to make sure I do it. He gets very disappointed if I change the plan.

I worked on this and tried hard to earn Ramel's trust. Even so, Ramel continued to struggle with attending school, and once he hit high school, his attendance became very poor.

Ramel's attitude bothers me. He's even asked me to pay him to go to school, which I refused to do. I do buy him his favorite PSP games when he's doing well, but I will not put him on a payroll to attend school. School is a benefit for him. It is his way to a good, productive future.

## **It's Truancy, Not Neglect**

In the last two years, Ramel's truancy has put our family at risk. I've had child protective caseworkers come to my house three times.

They've investigated not only my son's attendance problem—which I believe should be considered truancy, since he's 15—but also looked into every corner of my life. They even made me get my youngest daughter tested for psychological problems. (A psychologist found nothing wrong.)

I've been able to fight these allegations so far. The cases were closed because I was already taking Ramel to counseling and had sought family counseling. But these investigations have terrified my children and me, and I have not seen much improve-

**What can I do? I am not big enough to drag my son out of bed and carry him to school.**

## **Making Excuses**

I am proud that Ramel is not hanging on street corners, selling drugs, or drinking 40s. But he is not happy and he is not succeeding in life. Most days, he will not get out of bed and go to school. He tells me he is too tired. Or he says he'll get up but



# Low Risks, High Stakes

*New York state rethinks educational neglect.*

ment in my son's attitude toward school or attendance, even though Ramel understands that he's putting his family at risk of separation.

## Painful Criticisms

Recently, out of desperation, I found Ramel a new therapist. We go together.

At one session, Ramel told me that he thinks I'm weak. He said I cry but don't do anything about the way people treat me. He said, "All she does is repeat the same stories over and over again about her past, yet she does nothing about her current situation. She lets people walk all over her."

Dr. Gomez asked him, "Do you consider yourself to be one of those people?" That's what I was wondering! "Yeah, why not? Everyone does!" Ramel said. That really hurt me.

I understand Ramel's criticisms. But I am also angry that my son is waiting for me to fix his life instead of moving forward in life on his own. Ramel may roll his eyes at my stories, but the truth is that my father abused my mother and me horribly, and my mother died when I was young. As a teenager, I was suicidal. Despite all of this, I finished high school. I only wish I'd gone to college like my sister.

Sometimes I tell Ramel, "You are old enough now to do more for yourself. Stop waiting for Mommy to do it all!"

## Should I Give Up?

Counseling is helping Ramel and me communicate better, but it feels like a Band-aid on the sore, not healing. We made a deal recently: Ramel would attend school all week and I would get his PSP fixed. I was desperate. But it didn't work.

Now I'm finding it harder to feel compassionately toward my son, to keep rooting for him. I am considering signing my son out of school. I want him to graduate from 12th grade, not get a GED or fall off of school completely. But what can I do? I can't allow my son's truancy to put my other children and me in jeopardy.

I am very worried about Ramel and his future. I am afraid that, to protect my family, I will have to give up on my son.

*New York state's Office of Children and Family Services, which oversees child welfare systems state-wide, asked the Vera Institute of Justice to analyze the impact of "educational neglect" reports, which are called in if children repeatedly miss school. Lizzie Elston and Jessica Gunderson, planning analysts at Vera, explain their research:*

Since 2004 there's been a 34% increase in number of educational neglect allegations around the state. OCFS was concerned about this increase, and also thought that an investigation is not necessarily the best response to school absences.

We found that a majority of reports are about teenagers who are not attending school. There was no clear standard explaining the difference between truancy and educational neglect.

## Families Do Need Help

To understand the problem, we read research, looked at child welfare case files and interviewed stakeholders—child welfare and probation officials, principals, caseworkers, advocacy groups, parents.

The most important finding was that reports primarily alleging educational neglect that we reviewed were low risk. Every county uses a scoring system to say how likely they think it is that children will be harmed if they remain at home. On a scale of negative one to 19 (with 19 being high risk), the average for these cases was below 2. Half of the cases were negative one or 0.

Usually, educational neglect is seen as the tip of the iceberg. The thinking is, "If the child is not attending school, there could be something else going on in the home." We found that this was not true for older kids in the cases we reviewed.

We also found that, even though these children were not at risk, their families did want help. Some were homeless, had problems related to poverty, physical or mental health, or needed services to help the child succeed in school. These families did need to be connected to services but did not need to be investigated.

Unfortunately, an investigation can make it harder to connect families with services. The investigation can be scary and traumatic. It makes parents feel like criminals. It can make family conflicts even worse. In some states, child welfare workers don't investigate these families but do



ILLUSTRATION BY PAULINA KORRUS

offer services. Family workers found that when they don't do investigations, parents are much more honest and open. In general, parents have no problem getting help if they're approached in a civil manner.

## Recommending Change

As a result of our research, we're making a few recommendations to the state. First, we're recommending that the state clarify in the law what schools have to do before they make a call. Stakeholders told us that many times the family has already taken steps to deal with truancy but schools are not taking the time to speak with families. We'd like schools to have to document efforts they've made to reach parents.

We're also recommending that the state develop new ways to deal with teenage truancy based on the few truancy prevention models and show good results.

The biggest recommendation is that New York state change its law to end educational neglect reports about youth 13 and older. Most states—including every large state that's similar to New York—don't have educational neglect for older youth, and there's no reason to believe that these states are less safe.

However, we saw that these states don't offer good ways to handle the problems of older, truant youth, either. So it's not that we believe that New York should just stop helping families. We think we can save money by not investigating these families and spend that money on helping families.

# Not a Baby Anymore

*My daughter's tantrums in school were a sign that I needed to let her grow up.*

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

My daughter, Lydia, had some very serious problems when she started the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. School has never been too smooth for her, so on the first day this year I was encouraging her, saying, "This year is a new year for you." I had high hopes.

## A Difficult First Day

I dressed Lydia in her uniform—yellow tights with a blue jumper and a long sleeve yellow shirt. She didn't want to put on her blue tie. But we came to an agreement. As we approached the school, Lydia started crying, holding on to a metal railing and refusing to go inside. "It'll be OK," I told her. "You look so beautiful."

In the cafeteria, quite a few children were crying, so I didn't feel as bad that my baby was in tears. Her teacher, Ms. Thomas, had short black hair and looked very quiet. I knew by her gentle face that Lydia would like her.

Ms. Thomas told me that I could walk Lydia upstairs to the classroom. Lydia did not let go of my hand, but when she picked out a desk, she finally calmed down and I gave her a last kiss goodbye.

## 'I Will Behave'

But Lydia's fears did not go away as the year went on. She was having a major problem dealing with the other kids, especially two boys who she said called her "stupid" and "chicken leg." She kept crying and not respecting the teacher's rules.

The teacher began calling to say Lydia was throwing herself on the floor and not doing her work, poking kids with her pencil and threatening kids with scissors. That was very scary. My husband and I were embarrassed and upset. We took everything fun out of her room and made her write in her punishment book, "I will behave."

It didn't help. Soon the school coun-



*Sylvia and Lydia the day Sylvia got her GED.*

selor was calling me to say that Lydia was always fidgeting and not in her seat. In about three weeks the school called at least six times and we had four conferences with the school counselor, principal, parent coordinator and teacher to discuss Lydia's behavior.

ting so angry sometimes that she would kick the wall, throw her toys, tear things up, and do other destructive behaviors. She would even tell me that she wished she was dead and hated herself. She needed help.

I decided to call a mental health hotline. Because of her anger, her self-

Everyone at the school is seeing how the therapy sessions and behavior charts are helping her.

## She Needed Help

I blamed myself because, soon after Lydia was born, I relapsed. Because of my drug use, she went into foster care at 6 months old and it took me three years to bring her home. But I also felt angry at Lydia. I felt she could do better and I didn't raise her to misbehave.

In our house, everyone felt full with anger and disappointment. I felt stressed out and lost. Lydia was get-

destructive behavior and her history in foster care, they advised me to take her to the emergency room so she could get a psychiatric evaluation.

When Lydia and I got there, we were sent to the adult psychiatric ward. I felt nervous for our safety. Everybody was in pajamas and some of the men seemed drunk or were talking to themselves. When we sat down, they all stared at us, especially Lydia in her braids and pink

jacket. She started crying and said she wanted to go home. She told me she would behave in school.

"I'm sorry, but this is what we need to do because you need help. You need to see a doctor," I told Lydia.

## Earning Stars and Rewards

Finally, we met with a psychiatrist who advised us to start therapy and introduced us to a very nice therapist. The therapist said it sounded like she was having separation anxiety, probably because of her experience in foster care.

The therapist told me not to punish Lydia as much for her negative behavior but to reward her more for her positive behavior. By focusing on the positive things she does and encouraging her to do good, we can help Lydia feel better about herself and less fearful, frustrated and angry.

The therapist gave me a chart where Lydia can earn stars for the positive things she does. At the end of the week, if she has enough stars, she can earn a reward.

## 'Not a Baby Anymore'

The therapist also noticed me calling Lydia "Little Mama."

"Why are you doing that?" she asked.

"It's just something I call her," I said.

"No, Mom, do not do that," the psychologist said. "You need to call her Lydia. She's not little anymore, and she's the child."

"Ever since she was a baby I called her that. That's just how it has always been," I protested. But I said I would try.

She also told me I need to let Lydia grow up in certain ways. I have to stop getting her dressed, tying her shoes and cleaning her room. That

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYLVIA PEREZ

# A Report After Reunification

*My son's school worked against us.*

is a tremendous change for us. Treating her like a baby allows her to act like a baby, she said, and that's part of why she has tantrums.

## Playing Catch Up

That advice made me feel sad. I know Lydia's a big girl, and I don't want to hurt her development in any way. But I also fear that her growing up is coming too soon. I feel that I missed out on Lydia's early years, so treating her like she is still small is a comfort for me. When I hug and kiss her, dress her and just wipe her tears away, I feel like I'm playing catch up.

Plus, my own growing up was so terrible that I want to protect Lydia and keep her by my side always. I was only 5 years old when my mom and dad left my brothers and me alone in the streets. In my adoptive home, I was abused and beaten.

I suffered so much hoping all my life to see my mom again. I needed a mother so bad. Even today, I wish I had a mother to love me and to help me raise my daughter, and a dad to protect me and let me know everything is going to be all right.

I love holding Lydia's hand as we walk and just being with her, letting her know I will always be here. I truly feel empty from my childhood, and I don't want her to feel empty or alone.

Over the last month, Lydia and I have both been trying hard to follow the therapist's

advice. Lydia goes to therapy every week and talks about being in foster care, her fears about school, and her progress at school and at home.

We have a chart for the house activities and her teacher also has a chart with stars so we can see her progress at school. Everyone at the school is seeing how the therapy sessions and behavior charts are helping her. The teachers are giving me positive feedback

## Making Progress

In the house Lydia is doing so well. She now makes her bed and cleans her room. She usually respects Mom and Dad and does her homework with no attitude. In the morning, she gets herself dressed for school and ties her shoes. Every night she reads at bedtime with me. I am so proud of her and I always tell her that with hugs and kisses.

There are days when she doesn't do what she's supposed to, like listening to the teacher or doing her work in class. Some days I feel a constant guilt that she's having problems. I think to myself, "If I hadn't used drugs and abandoned her she would be different."

But I am beginning to see that Lydia and I can still be close as she gains more independence, and I feel proud of how much we've accomplished together. Little Mama—I mean Lydia—is growing up.



BY CARLOS BOYET

My son was removed from his mother's home and placed in foster care, and it took me several years to get the system to give me custody. When he came to live with me, my son had a difficult time in school. That was not surprising, because my son has behavior issues and learning problems, and he was reacting to his experiences in foster

**It is hard to challenge school staff's attitudes without doing more damage to my son's relationship with his school.**

care and trying to adjust to a new setting. I also felt that, while he was in foster care, not enough attention had been paid to finding the right educational setting for his needs.

## We Needed a Break

In the months after my son came home, his teacher complained about him constantly and attributed his problems to a "bad attitude." I became tired and frustrated by the constant calls and complaints. Although I very much wanted for him to attend

school regularly, and to succeed in school, I kept him at home for a few days, thinking I would give us all a break. When I did this, the same teacher who called me constantly to complain did not call me to ask if my son was OK. Instead, she called the State Central Register and made an allegation of educational neglect.

Luckily, I was able to secure legal services through Legal Services. Not only did they help defend me against these new allegations, they helped my temporary custody of my son become full custody. I was very happy.

## Struggling to Succeed

I still have issues with my son and his school. My son is challenging and difficult, but the public school system does not seem dedicated to helping him become as educated and productive a student as possible. School staff have been rejecting of him. It sometimes seems like they are trying to push him to another program or level, not because this is what is appropriate for him, but so they will no longer have to deal with him. It is hard for me to challenge this without doing more damage to his relationship with the school.

Still, my son and I are doing much better. While he is still struggling to succeed in school, he attends school regularly.



# ABOUT **Rise**

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and to guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, [www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org), help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in support groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at (718) 260-8818 or [nora@risemagazine.org](mailto:nora@risemagazine.org) for infor-

mation about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work.

Stories in this issue were written by participants in a Rise writing workshop for parents and foster parents. Other stories were written by participants in the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and self-help program. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000.

Rise supporters include: the Child Welfare Fund, New Yorkers for Children, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Van Ameringen Foundation, the Hite Foundation and Hedge Funds Care.

## Investigated, Not Supported

*The school tried to pull my family apart.*

BY BEVANJAE KELLEY

I have been raising my teenage granddaughters since they were very little because my daughter was unable to care for them. My granddaughters have emotional and behavioral problems, but they have had me as a supportive, attentive and caring grandparent.

I have always been involved in the girls' schooling. For a number of years I had them in private school, but because of financial issues, I had to move them to public school. I noticed that my oldest granddaughter's problems became much more severe in her new school. I was desperate to help her, because she even became suicidal.

### Searching for Support

I asked the school for help but did not get any. But I was persistent in my search for support. Through the Transit Workers Union (I drove a city bus for many years) I was able to get weekly therapy for my granddaughter.

Then the school called me one day to come in and talk about my granddaughters. I went over right away. When I got to school, they told me that the girls had been fighting and the staff were concerned. I agreed that their behavior was a problem and asked what I could do and where I could get additional help.

Instead of offering me advice or resources, the school called child protective services. I felt betrayed and angry. I had gone to the school because I cared about my granddaughters and wanted to find a way that we could work together to solve the problem.

### We Were Lucky

Luckily, our investigating caseworker was experienced and knowledgeable and was able to understand that the girls didn't need to be taken from

me, but that we as a family could use help, as is the case with so many families with system involvement. She enrolled our family in support services in our community. That was just what I had been asking for.

What if I hadn't been so lucky and the child protective worker was inexperienced and afraid and decided to remove my granddaughters? Why is it that I had to be investigated before I could get help, even though I had asked the school to help me several times? In theory, schools are the perfect place for families to get services or referrals, because the school staff see the children every day and have the opportunity to reach out to families in need.

Through the family support services, I was able to get my granddaughter a psychiatric evaluation and therapy in the community. She was diagnosed as bipolar and put on medication. We also got home visits. All of those services helped us.

### Pulling Us Apart

One of the side effects of the medication was that my granddaughter was tired all the time. Before, the school was complaining about her fighting and now they were constantly complaining that she was drowsy and missing classes to go to doctor's appointments, even though people at the school knew it was related to the medication. I thought, "Well, I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't."

The school needed to realize that trying to pull our family apart was not going to do my grandkids any good.

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