Rise

‘It’s OK to Need Support’

A parent-to-parent guide to family support services

INSIDE

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

3 A Safe Place for Families
4 Calling for Help
4 ‘Can I Do This?’

PARENTING

6 ‘Walls Start to Fall’
7 Ages and Stages
8 Do Over
9 ‘Your History Is Not Destiny’
10 Child Support

EDUCATION

11 Education Starts at Home
12 Not a Baby Anymore

FATHERHOOD

14 A Hug Every Day
15 Mr. Mom
15 Stronger Together

ADDICTION & RECOVERY

16 One Step at a Time
17 Slowing Down in Life

SEXUAL ABUSE

18 A Responsibility to Report

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

19 An Obligation to Protect
20 ‘I Love You, I’m Sorry’
21 Hope in a Crisis
22 Losing Control
23 Witness Protection

Breaking the Chain

Building a calm, safe home for my son.

BY EVELYN SALAZAR

ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD CORTEZ

Translated from Spanish.

When my son Dylan was 2, his father and I separated. I had to confront the reality that we weren’t coming together as parents, but instead were arguing and screaming at each other. At times he would even shove me or grab me by the arm.

It was very hard to make a decision to leave. I knew it would be sad for Dylan not to live with his father. But I also didn’t want him to grow up watching us fight. I thought, “Is this the example I want to give him?”

Finding Support

I found a therapist, hoping she could help keep Dylan’s father and me together, or help us communicate if we split up. But he wouldn’t go.

After we split up, I decided to keep going to the therapist, Liza, at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. I knew that it would help me to get someone’s support and have a place where I could unburden myself at a time when I was feeling so alone.

At that time, Dylan spoke only a little. He was very restless and seemed frustrated, I think because he wanted to express something that he couldn’t say, or because it was hard for me to know what he wanted.

Liza suggested he go to a special school where he could get help with controlling his restlessness and anger, as well as other things he didn’t feel comfortable doing, like painting and playing with sticky things (because he didn’t like to get himself dirty or wet).

Really, I didn’t think it was a big problem, but in the few months Dylan went to the school – Wow! I noticed that he was no longer so restless and didn’t get angry over every little thing, and I could see his curiosity growing. He was maturing. It was very satisfying to see how he learned and grew.

Now Dylan is 4 years old, and he has distinguished himself as a very curious and playful child who likes to be amused and to get a lot of attention. He has a great imagination and is also very intelligent – he took that from me, ha ha ha.

Tender Moments

Sometimes Dylan is so tender, like when he comes home after being with his father. He opens the door and says, “Mami, I have a surprise for you! Close your eyes!”

When I open them he says, “I have a rose for you, the prettiest mother in the world, so you’ll never be sad.”

This fills me with tears and I throw

(Continued on page 1)

(Continued from page 1)

myself down in front of his little body. (Other times, he says that *he's* my surprise!)

Sometimes Dylan asks me questions that I don't know the answers to, and couldn't imagine existed in his little head. He asks me what he was like when he was a baby, what it was like when he was in my stomach, how he was born, what his body was like then, what he could do and what he couldn't do.

He also asks things like, "Why do the leaves fall from the trees? Why is it cloudy?" Wow! I have to turn into a meteorologist to give him a satisfying answer.

Being Playful

Dylan especially likes to play pretend. He says to me, "Mami, we're going to play that you're Dora and I'm Boots, OK?"
"OK."
"Hello, Dora."
"Hello, Boots."
"What are you doing, Dora?"
"Nothing, Boots. I am walking home. And you, Boots?"
"Me too, Dora," and we go from there.

The funniest is when he says to me, "Mami, we're going have a conversation, OK?"
"Have a conversation about what?"
"About you, about me, everything, Mommy. Everything, OK?"
"OK."
"Start, Mami."
"You start!" and then we start to chat about whatever thing.

Putting Him First

At times things aren't easy because I'm tired and he wants to play. I say, "Play by yourself and later I'll play with you," but hardly five minutes will go by before he comes back to me.

Sometimes at night I want to go directly to bed but I have to put him to bed first, reading him a story and the whole procedure before he'll go to sleep. There are times when I'm reading his story and I fall asleep and he nudges me, saying, "Mami, wake up! Mami, don't sleep!"

I try to skip pages so we can get through it more quickly, but he'll catch me and say, "Oh, no, Mami, that's not how it goes, this is how…" and make me go back.

Dealing With Tantrums

Dylan also has a very strong character, like his father and me. If he doesn't get a lot of attention, he gets angry. When things don't go his way, he can throw tremendous tantrums. He cries furiously and has a very strong voice, so over his crying you can hear him screaming and screaming, and sometimes knocking things down. It's overwhelming.

> When things don't go his way, he can throw tremendous tantrums. It's overwhelming.

I don't always know what reaction to have. It used to be that one of us would shout, and the other would shout back, and then we'd keep shouting, like a chain. I know now that I have to break that chain.

It's not easy. At times I feel a sense of desperation, but I try to keep communication going. I say, "Dylan, if you don't scream, I can understand you better. I know you're mad, but let's calmly try to resolve this situation."

When he has a tantrum in public, I just try not to feel ashamed if he makes a scene. I talk to him, or I fill myself with strength and count, "Two, three, four" minutes until he calms down.

I Try to Be Firm

I know that he needs to learn that when his mother says no, she means it. I don't want him thinking, "Oh, Mami says that but she'll change her mind." Although it's difficult to not give in to him, and to not be able to give him everything he wants, I try not to give in to his demands too much.

Sometimes when we're playing a game and I win, he gets mad and messes up the game, or he wants to play it again so he can win. If I won't play again, he cries and screams.

I try to be firm and to speak clearly, without starting to scream myself, saying, "Dylan, look at me, listen to me. I know you wanted to win, but one person can't always win. There's going to be times when it's your turn to lose. It's not a problem. You don't have to get angry."

Sometimes he keeps crying and I leave him. I say, "When you feel better, you tell me what you want." That works well. I don't give a lot of attention to his tantrum, and he calms down and talks to me.

ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD CORTEZ

A Stable Home

In the past two years, Dylan and I have learned a lot together. I pay more attention to him, and he does the same to me.

Although we don't live with his father, he sees him two days each week and every other weekend. Dylan has told me that he would like for all three of us to be together. I had to explain to him, "Papi has his house, and Mami has her own. But the important thing is that although we're separate, we're content."

Now Dylan has security and stability at home. When his father and I were together we had an unstable relationship, with one person running one way and the other running in the opposite direction. I think Dylan saw that and didn't know what to think, or just got sad seeing his parents disoriented and upset.

Dylan's father is a friend to me now. We're both striving to stay calm and do the best for our child.

My Great Satisfaction

Becoming a mother has given me more responsibility and I have matured. I've had to analyze who I am and how to get the results that I want for myself and my son.

If I get mad or frustrated, I try to understand why I'm reacting that way and to ask myself, "What's the best way I can handle this situation?" In the past I responded like a lion, or I just wanted to run away. Now I respond like a cat, and I stay and find a solution.

It's a great feeling of satisfaction to look at my son and see him growing. When he achieves something, I know that I am a big part of that. That's fantastic! I let myself heave a great sigh, a great love from very deep down in my heart.

Para leer la historia en Español, visite al sitio del internet www.risemagazine.org/pages/en-espanol.html.

A Safe Place for Families

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

BY EVELYN SALAZAR

I started to come to counseling at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, a preventive services agency because I needed to unload everything that I had 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 and attentively, who loves and accepts you as you are.

My counselor, Liza Blank, has been a support, a friend, a confidant.

For me, the Center has been a place where I get so much support. I can talk about my fears, my conflicts. Coming here has 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.

Q: What kind of support do families get here?

A: We help people improve their family relationships and economic situations. We do that through family counseling and advocacy, and by giving children and families opportunities to learn new things in afterschool 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 intervention 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. By combining practical help for the family and counseling, we learn about the client and develop a relationship.

> 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.

Q: What types of people come here?

A: 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," 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.

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.

ILLUSTRATION BY RIKOU TAKATOSHI / STEPHANIE WILSON

Calling For Help

I reached out for support to become a calmer mother.

BY MAYA NOY

Here is my shameful confession: I'm a screamer. I was worse when my daughter was first born. Mostly I screamed at my boyfriend when I was frustrated. And I was frustrated a lot.

I screamed because I was in pain, screamed because I couldn't figure out how to breastfeed. I screamed because I felt like my boyfriend wasn't there for me. I screamed because I was tired, hungry, hot, cold, and mostly because Jaiya would not stop crying (so it seemed).

Important to Nobody

I didn't think my behavior really mattered. For so long, I was just going through life thinking no one cared about me and I didn't have to care about myself. I never felt connected to my parents growing up, and when I was teenager, my mother placed me in foster care for a few years. Those experiences left me feeling unwanted and disconnected.

ILLUSTRATION BY TERRENCE TAYLOR

As an adult, I went to work and came home, and even though I lived with Jaiya's father for years, I still felt as if I existed to no one. Forcing myself to become who I really wanted to be seemed pointless.

But I wasn't aware that my daughter would grow up to mimic nearly every little thing I did! About two years ago, when Jaiya was almost 2, it started to be clear to me how much of an impact I have on her.

Just like Mommy!

Jaiya would do little things that were obviously stolen from me. I am a cleanaholic, always wiping something up. At a very young age, there she was, grabbing a baby wipe and wiping away. She did highchairs, walls, sheets, anything she could reach!

Then I started to notice that Jaiya would scream at her dad when she was frustrated. At first, it was funny because I didn't recognize that it was a fault of mine that she had learned. Then it sank in, and I felt very ashamed.

Now that I see that my daughter is a "quicker picker upper," as I think most children are, I am very aware of how I behave. I feel pressure to do the right thing even when I'm angry or upset. I realize that I'm Jaiya's role model, so I have to become the person I want my daughter to grow up to be: Confident successful, and happy with myself. What I do, say and feel affects how she acts and how she feels inside.

Trying to Adjust

Of course, I can't simply become Ms. Perfect. But I have been working hard to show my daughter love and rein in my anger.

I have trained myself to say and do all kinds of things that I don't think my mother did for me. I started with saying "I love you," then moved on to "Great job!" "That's fantastic!" and other encouraging statements that feel unfamiliar on my tongue.

At times when I've been upset with Jaiya and needed help to calm down, I have called crisis hotlines and even my mother, of all people. Normally I wouldn't have dared talk to a stranger about anything, let alone what goes on in my personal life, but I felt so out of control and desperate when I made those calls. I would cry and beg for help. I just wanted an answer to one question: "What should I do?"

Really, I wanted someone to step in and take over my life, but that wasn't

'Can I Do This?'

Support services helped me prepare for motherhood.

BY ERICA HARRIGAN

When I found out I was expecting, I didn't feel like I was mentally ready to care for a baby. I had just aged out of foster care and was only beginning to learn how to handle life without the system.

I also have a mood disorder and I wasn't taking my medication on a regular basis. I'd seen stories on the news about mentally ill mothers harming their children and I was afraid that I might end up on the news too.

Information and Skills

My boyfriend, Michael, and I both grew up in foster care. We hoped to give our baby all the things we longed for—a stable home and a loving mother and father to guide her and help her with whatever she might need. So during my pregnancy, I took many steps to set up a safe home for our child.

I got a referral to speak with a therapist who is experienced in supporting mothers. She talked with me about how to build the connection between mother and child. She said that breastfeeding is the best way to bond. I thought, "She is crazy!" I thought breastfeeding was gross until I learned that breast milk is the best milk for a baby.

I also started attending parenting classes and support groups for first-time mothers. I learned mother-to-be tools, like how to bathe a baby, create bedtime routines and set feeding times. I was glad to be armed with the knowledge.

Serious Support

As I hit the sixth month of my pregnancy, I began to catch overwhelming ups and downs. I tend to melt down when things don't go as planned. At those times, walked myself to the psych ER. I was losing my mind slowly. After about five hospital visits in a month, the doctors suggested I seek more treatment.

I talked it over with the hospital's

very realistic. It helped, though, to have sounding boards. Sometimes I just need to stop and think, "She is just a baby! What do I expect?"

Handling Our Tantrums

I'm also learning to handle Jaiya's tantrums better. I used to get flustered and frustrated, grabbing Jaiya's arm and leading her out of a store if she misbehaved. She would exaggerately yell, "Why did you do that?" Then I would be embarrassed and let go, giving her control of the situation.

As time went on, I reminded myself that I was the parent and I was in control. I also learned to talk to her before going into a store, explaining that she would need to behave or there would be consequences.

I'm not sure if my daughter's behavior changed on its own or my responses helped her calm down, but I know she has calmed down and so have I. Now, when she has a tantrum, it is usually short and not as serious. I talk to her calmly about what is going on, or I simply change the subject.

If I start getting upset, I take a "time out" instead of pushing through bad feelings and becoming angrier and nastier toward my child. Then, when I'm calmer, we start again.

> What I do, say and feel affects how my daughter acts and how she feels inside. Now I am very aware of how I behave.

'Mommy's Sorry'

Although I'm proud of what I've done to change my relationship with Jaiya, sometimes I worry that the damage is already done. I have it stuck in my head that children are most impressionable until age 3, and I feel that during her first three years of life she saw me at my worst. Is that how she will always remember me?

It's a real struggle to feel good about myself as a parent. On most days, I'm not sure if I've done my best, and on other days, I think, "This is my best," and feel sorry for both myself and my daughter.

When I do end up having outbursts, and I do something wrong or bad, I feel tremendous guilt. I tell myself, "I shouldn't have yelled or gotten angry. I could have handled things better." But at least I am trying to teach myself to apologize to Jaiya when I misbehave.

Resentful and Confused

Sometimes I am also resentful of how much I need to change and control myself. I don't like feeling that I have to watch my every move. I just want to be me, despite fearing that the real me could possibly scar my daughter for life!

I wonder how to balance the "real" me with being a "good" mom. I don't want to act out of control around Jaiya, but I do want her to know I am human and have feelings. My mother did not show us her feelings, aside from her anger. I fear that my daughter will see me as a robot, and that things between us will be smooth but we won't be connected.

There are still many days that I think to myself, "I don't want to do this anymore. I quit." But I won't turn my back on Jaiya, or give up on changing myself. I won't do what my mother did to me.

A Friend to Myself

There are rare moments when I feel confident and proud. Jaiya is bright, observant and sweet. She loves people (I have no idea where she got that from!) and she loves to read and draw and watch movies. I love spending time with Jaiya. We take walks, go to the library, go to the park, color, read books—all that fun stuff!

Parent-teacher meetings really help me see that I'm doing OK as a mother. The teachers always have fabulous things to say about Jaiya and I can't help feeling that I had a little something to do with her achievements.

I know the steps I've taken to nurture Jaiya are helping me to be a better person. I feel more protective, loving, concerned and confident. I have learned to be a mother, a teacher, a provider—an adult.

It took a helpless little baby to help me grow up. I'm proud that I've realized how much Jaiya needed me. I've learned to be two new people: A mother to Jaiya and a friend to myself.

---

social worker, and she suggested I sign up for day treatment. I had my doubts, but I agreed to take a three-day trial. I found out that I felt safe and secure there. In the morning I had 45 minutes of counseling with a therapist I came to adore, and after that I had groups. I learned more about coping when things don't go my way.

Usually I don't stick with treatment because I don't think it will work, or I find it overwhelming. My therapists are mostly interns and I get a new one just as I begin to trust the one I had. But this time, I found that my treatment program felt like a family and I love to be in a family setting.

Baby Blues

When my baby girl, Emmanuella, came into this world, I loved her from holding her the very first time. That day, Emma made me feel like the happiest person on this earth.

Still, the first few weeks after we came home from the hospital, I felt distant and overwhelmed. I was afraid of the tasks of motherhood. Bathing Emma was scary to me, and I was confused about what size diaper to put on her and how often to change her. I didn't want to hold her because I feared I'd drop her.

But I soon learned what the therapist meant by bonding with the baby through breastfeeding. Our special connection gave me a good feeling.

ILLUSTRATION BY KAITE MARTIN

A Loving Mother

Now that Emma is 7 months old, I've learned that so much about motherhood can't be taught, but I'm glad I did so much work to get myself set up to be a mother.

It's been challenging for me to care for a baby that needs so much love and attention from me. Many times I feel I need mothering because I didn't have much love or attention growing up. But I've been dealing with it by talking with my therapist. I've found that the more I show love and attention to my baby, the more I feel loved.

I worry that if I slip up, Children's Services will come knocking at my door. But I also feel more confident that Emma won't end up growing up like me, habitually feeling starved for attention. I am slowly becoming the kind of mother I longed for.

'Walls Start to Fall'

A group where parents learn from each other.

BY JACQUELYN ISRAEL

When parents attend the first meeting of the parenting group I run, most are unsure what to expect and do not think they need to be there. They say, "I have been a parent for many years. What can you teach me about raising my children?"

I tell parents that their knowledge is important, and that each person in the room has something to teach and something to learn from the group. "You are all invited to begin an ongoing journey to enhance your parenting skills," I say. "By the end of eight weeks, I always feel that I've gotten as much from facilitating this group as y'all get by attending."

A History of Trauma

I explain that I am a Parent Advocate at the foster care agency, Graham Windham Services in New York City, and am also a former client of the agency. My children spent two years in foster care because I became addicted to crack.

By attending drug treatment and parenting classes, I came to terms with the pain that led me to drugs—my traumatic, abusive childhood and my husband's death. My children returned home angry, but I was a stronger person and was able to rebuild my family.

Like me, many parents become involved with the system not only because they lack parenting skills or life skills, but also because trauma contributed to the destruction of their lives and parenting abilities. Parents involved in the system often have a past history of trauma like physical and sexual abuse, and they experience trauma again when separated from their children.

The focus of my parenting groups is to provide parents with a space where they can recognize the impact of past trauma on their parenting skills and their families' lives.

Revisiting Childhood

When I tell parents about my experience, most join the group. Some attended because receiving a certificate of completion aids them in getting their children home. However, the group process goes deeper than compliance. Walls start to fall as parents share fears and learn that they have strengths, weaknesses and concerns in common. For many parents this is the only safe place where they can explore their ideas about parenting and become open to change.

I ask parents to look at how they were parented as children, what tools worked and what tools didn't. Revisiting childhood helps parents to see how they way they were parented might be shaping how they're raising their children now.

Sandy (not her real name) was a typical parent in my group. I met her at her "72-hour Conference," the first meeting between a parent and child welfare staff after a child comes into care. My first impression was that Sandy was soft spoken and unsure of herself. Sandy was afraid and it showed.

But my second impression was that Sandy was also strong and together. Unlike many parents, she came to the conference prepared with proof of the services she'd been getting to support her family before her kids entered care.

ILLUSTRATION BY HANDEL MORENCY

Alone and Afraid

I went to Sandy's first family visit a day later and noticed she was sitting on the far side of the room. I asked Sandy, "How are you? What time were you told the children would arrive?"

> Parents should ask their children about their lives and feelings, and explain to their children what's expected of them.

"My children are over there," she said, and pointed to a foster mother standing with two young children.

"Why didn't you go start your visit?"

"I didn't know when to start," she said.

Luckily, her kids weren't waiting for an invitation. They came over and started hugging and kissing their mother.

Opening Up

I realized that Sandy would not take any action if she was not sure she was allowed to. As a domestic violence survivor, she'd been told for years: "You stay over here, do this." In a new situation, she tried to be as safe as she possibly could so she wouldn't be reprimanded in any way. She was traumatized and hadn't yet healed from the abuse.

But after joining the parenting group, Sandy started calling me to talk. She would talk about her loneliness, the battering she went through, and about raising her older son, who was 13 and was having behavior problems – he'd even gotten in trouble with the law.

Some people won't say to me, "Can I have your number? Can I call you?" They feel embarrassed or think they're showing weakness by asking that. One of Sandy's strengths was that she could say, "I don't know. Can you help me. Can I talk to you about this? I'm scared."

Teaching Your Child

In the parenting group, we talk about helping children with friendships and peer pressure. We ask the parents, "How do you talk to your child about friendships? Have you sat down and asked your child how he develops friendships and what those relationships are like?"

We also talk about behavior issues. We ask, "Do you know how to make a contract with a child around behavior?" And, "How do you teach your kids self-pride and self-esteem?"

Sandy was able to look at those les-

sons and say, "That's what I'm going through with my son. I see what you're saying." She started to have those conversations with her children.

A Parent as Guide

Because of the trauma she'd been through, Sandy's way of dealing with her son was to restrict him. She was afraid of the world and didn't want him to go outside and make friends with people. But he needed to make friends. At 13, he also really needed to make mistakes and have a safe environment to come back so he could talk with his mom about the life he was living. He needed his mom to be a guide for him, and she really learned that in the class. The way she talked with her son began to change.

Sandy didn't seem to realize she had strength and power. I told her all the time, "You're leaving behind what you know was bad for your family and for yourself."

As Sandy grew as a parent, I saw her kids grow, too. Like Sandy, her daughter was very quiet at first, very nervous. A couple weeks into the visits, when she knew she was safe, she was acting like any other kid. You had to tell her, "Shhh, use your indoor voice." I was glad to see that. It meant the family was healing.

'What Do You Think?'

When my kids were in care, my social worker suggested that I take parenting classes so I could better meet my children's needs. I looked forward to hearing all the answers on how to a better parent. I thought I would be taught to be Supermom! I was wrong.

The parenting class couldn't give me all the answers. It simply taught me that I needed to talk to my kids about school, sex, drugs and, yes, rock and roll. Parents with better parenting skills ask their children about their lives and feelings, and explain to their children what's expected of them. That helps children become healthier and happier.

Sandy often asked me questions that I wished I could answer (because I do have an ego!) but couldn't. She'd say, "My kids have a relationship with their father, who abused me. How can I handle that? How can I support their relationship with him but keep myself safe?"

"I don't know," I'd say. "What do you think? What could you try?"

Ultimately, Sandy figured out a good solution. Her sister takes the kids to meet with their father, and it works.

Empowering Each Other

One important change I've made since I started as a Parent Advocate has been to stop saying "I teach parenting classes," and to start saying "I facilitate parenting groups." I teach parents about child development and urge them to talk more with their kids. But most of all, I support them as they grow.

In the group, each parent becomes a support to the other group members. The parents take the responsibility for trying new ways to communicate with their children. They share their ups and downs and empower each other.

Ages and Stages

Developmental milestones help you know how your child is doing.

If your child is having trouble doing some of these things, you might want to contact 311 or 1-800-522-5006 for information about services to help your child. Early help makes a difference!

3 Months

At three months of age, most babies:

—turn their heads toward bright colors and lights
—move both eyes in the same direction together
—recognize bottle or breast
—respond to their mother's voice
—make cooing sounds
—bring their hands together
—wiggle and kick with arms and legs
—lift head when on stomach
—become quiet in response to sound, especially speech
—smile

6 Months

At six months of age, most babies:

—follow moving objects with their eyes
—turn toward the source of normal sound
—reach for objects and pick them up
—switch toys from one hand to the other
—play with their toes
—help hold the bottle during feeding
—recognize familiar faces
—imitate speech sounds
—respond to soft sounds, especially talking
—roll over

12 Months

At 12 months of age, most babies:

—get to a sitting position
—pull to a standing position
—stand briefly without support
—crawl
—imitate adults using a cup or telephone
—play peek-a-boo and patty cake
—wave bye-bye
—put objects in a container
—say at least one word
—make "ma-ma" or "da-da" sounds

1½ Years

At 1½ years of age, most children:

—like to push and pull objects
—say at least 6 words
—follow simple directions ("Bring the ball")
—pull off shoes, socks and mittens
—can point to a picture that you name in a book
—feed themselves
—make marks on a paper with crayons
—walk without help
—walk backwards
—point, make sounds or try to use words to ask for things
—say "no," shake their head or push away things they don't want

2 Years

At two years of age, most children:

—use two-to-three word sentences
—say about 50 words
—recognize familiar pictures
—kick a ball forward
—feed themselves with a spoon
—demand a lot of your attention
—turn 2-3 pages at a time
—like to imitate their parent
—identify hair, eyes, ears and nose by pointing
—build a tower of four blocks
—show affection

3 Years

At three years of age, most children:

—throw a ball overhand
—ride a tricycle
—put on their shoes
—open the door
—turn one page at a time
—play with other children for a few minutes
—repeat common rhymes
—use three-to-five-word sentences
—name at least one color correctly

Do Over

Changing as a parent takes courage and practice.

BY YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

Most parents like me want their children to have an easy, decent life as far removed from what we ourselves experienced as possible. We want to be good parents, but sometimes it can be very difficult to know how if you grew up in foster care or in a home where you experienced abuse or neglect.

Losing my children to the system made me realize that I had a lot to overcome from my past and a lot to change about my ways of thinking as a parent.

So, how do you become a terrific parent even if you didn't have one? That's a very good question. It's also the subtitle of The Whole Parent *by therapist Debra Wesselmann. Her book helped me think about new ways to overcome my feelings of inadequacy so that I can change my life and my children's lives for the better. Here is her advice to parents:*

It is a challenge to know how to give your child a secure nurturing environment if you grew up in the foster care system, especially if, like many children in care, you were shuttled between foster families or went back and forth between foster care and your birth home many times.

'Am I Good Enough?'

A person in that situation grows up not really having an idea what a healthy family life should look like, and often has lots of self-doubts like, "Why me? Why didn't my parents love me? Why didn't another family love me? Was I unlovable?" In truth, the system and the adults in our lives have let us down.

Experiences that lead you to doubt your self-worth can leave you feeling like you're not good enough when you start raising your own families. Sometimes the anger and pain on our children's faces during difficult moment just triggers all the shame and guilt and "I'm not good enough" feelings that parents feel inside.

One mother I worked with had a lot of traumatic experiences growing up. Her own mother died of alcoholism. Still, she has successfully raised three nice children. It's amazing what she's done, despite feeling at times that she wasn't good enough or lovable.

This mom found a good mate, a good supportive church environment, and supportive friends. She looked to other people who she admired as parents and tried to emulate them. So becoming a good parent even when you have grown up in foster care definitely can be done, but it's important to be conscious of the challenges you face and stay motivated.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAYTON TOWN

> Parents can recognize how past traumas are affecting them, and make changes so their children will grow up safe and secure.

Changing Angry Reactions

Another challenge for parents who had negative experiences as children is that early experiences are lodged in the emotional part of the brain, which creates responses that feel so automatic that your actions may not feel like something you can consciously control.

When parents respond to various things that their children do with negative responses that feel extreme and out of sync with how they want to treat their children, it's often very difficult for them to understand why they respond the way they do. But you can change those automatic responses with a lot of effort.

For example, I worked with a mom who was having strong angry reactions. In therapy, the mom realized that when her son was doing some typical teenage things, like rolling his eyes or not jumping to when she asked him to, she was getting a feeling that her son didn't love her. She was able to say, "Oh, it's the very same feeling I have when I'm around my mother. I feel rejected like I felt rejected as a child." That rejection feeling made her very angry.

Once the mom put that together, she started being able to recognize that her son's typical teen behaviors were not rejections, and she was able to deal with those feelings of hurt related to her upbringing.

Common Misperceptions

In *The Whole Parent* I talk about a number of other common parental misperceptions that relate to negative childhood experiences—like, "my child is invading me," or "my child is abusive," or "I have to have complete control for my child to be safe."

I worked with a father who was having strong rage reactions when his 7 year old would embarrass him in public. His immediate reaction was, "What are people thinking of me? They're thinking I'm a bad father and a terrible person," and he just wanted to kill his son. But as he worked through those feelings with me, he realized that growing up with an alcoholic father had left him feeling very insecure about the way people were looking at him, and this trauma was being tapped into.

That's not to say that we don't all feel embarrassed when our children act out in public, but we're being irrational if we begin to think, "I'm a bad person," or "People think I'm a bad person" and take those feelings out on the child, because every parent has had embarrassing incidents in public.

A Chance to Heal

The good news is that, when you realize the ways you're thinking and acting might be hurting you and your child, and you consciously set out to change your thoughts and behaviors, you can break those negative patterns. You can give your children much more positive feelings about themselves than you might have had.

One technique is to write out our

'Your History Is Not Destiny'

Most parents who were abused do not harm their kids.

Although people often talk about "breaking the cycle of abuse," studies show that most parents who were physically abused as children do not grow up to physically abuse their children, says Katherine Pears, a research scientist at the Oregon Social Learning Center. Here she explains the research on abuse and parenting:

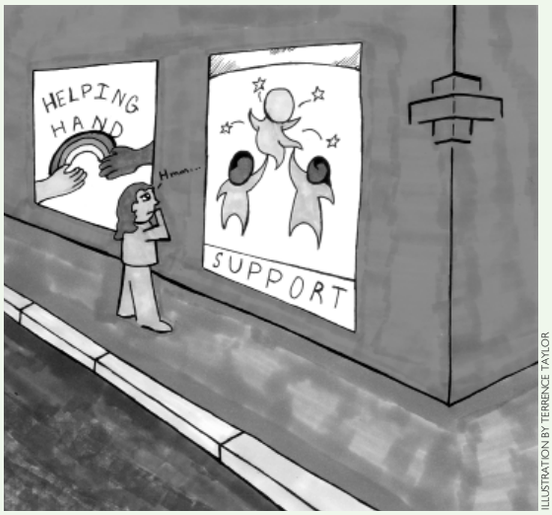

ILLUSTRATION BY TERRENCE TAYLOR

That's a notion in people's heads that if you haven't had a good model of parenting, you're unlikely to become a good parent yourself.

But studies that have been going on for 20 years have looked at parents who were physically abused and how they care for their children, and most find that only 20-30 percent of people who were physically abused as children go on to be abusive. That means that at least 70 percent don't go on to be abusive.

A history of abuse is not destiny. It doesn't mean that you will grow up to have difficulties as a parent. There's a lot of room for hope.

Make a Rule a Rule

In my research, I found that one key to whether parents were physically abusive or not had to do with whether the parent was consistent in enforcing rules. I studied boys who had parents that had been abused, and found the parents who were inconsistent were more likely to be abusive.

Many parents find it difficult to remain consistent, but it's essential to be consistent as a parent. If something is a rule on Monday, but not on Tuesday, kids learn from that that they don't really have to mind what the parent says. Then, if the kid is not listening to the parent –well, that's annoying! The parent gets irritated.

If the parent backs off, that encourages the kid to be more negative next time, and that starts a negative cycle. The parent and child begin one-upping the other, hoping the other will back off, but sometimes the parent gets very angry and responds with aggression or abuse.

Consistent parenting keeps these negative cycles from developing. If a rule is a rule, and the child has to mind what the parent says all of the time, you nip that cycle in the bud.

> Parents who are inconsistent are more likely to be abusive but all parents can learn to be effective parents.

Take Steps to Avoid Triggers

The hopeful message is that parents can learn techniques to stop the cycle. We teach the parent to be consistent and to use tools for reducing tension.

We teach parents to recognize triggers to negative interactions. If you tend to get in fights right after school, maybe you need a routine that will help you feel more positive. Can you have a snack together? Do you need a few minutes to cool off, or does your child? If you feel more positive, it's easier to be consistent about setting limits.

We also teach parents to take small steps. Say you want your child to put his backpack and lunchbox away when he comes home from school. We suggest taking small steps—first working with him on hanging up his backpack. Then, when he's doing well with his backpack, showing him how to put his lunchbox away.

Praise Your Child

We also know that one key to successful parenting is positive reinforcement. If you can catch your child doing something good, and praise your child for what he does well, then everyone feels better.

We ask parents, "What is your child doing well?" Even if it's just putting a plate on the counter without banging it, then you can say, "I noticed how you put your plate on the counter without banging!" If kids feel recognized for the things they do well, they are more willing to accept limits.

Programs that teach parents to set consistent limits, reduce triggers, and be positive with their children do help parents stop abusive patterns. Nobody is a lost cause. All parents can learn to be effective parents.

irrational thoughts and feelings and then practice having different thoughts and feelings. The mother who felt rejected by her teenage son could write herself a little reminder card with her irrational feeling at the top: "My child is rejecting me." Underneath it she might write: "This is not true. All teenagers sometimes act like they don't have respect for their parents. I'm getting him confused with my mom. He's really not my mom. I love him and he loves me." And she could carry that reminder card with her and read it over and over until it really sinks in.

I often have people do writing exercises, such as writing down their irrational beliefs on one side of the paper, like, "My child is abusive" and writing down on other side some rational, logical responses they could have when those feelings come up.

Finding Support

You can also break negative patterns by getting help from a good support network. Whether you attend a support group or speak to a therapist, religious leader, a loving mate, or a supportive group of friends, you need people who you can talk to openly and honestly.

You can also find another parent who you admire who you can really talk to, and you can read books about the effects of trauma on parenting. Whatever way you choose, it's important to sort out how your past might be affecting the way you feel as a parent and take steps to change your thinking and behavior.

Working on your own childhood issues takes tremendous courage. It's a lot easier to try not to think about what you went through. It's painful to look back on abuse or neglect you faced as a child, but if you don't, your parenting will not get better. Parents can face the traumas of the past, recognize how those experiences are affecting them as parents, and make changes so their children will grow up safe and secure.

Child Support

Early Intervention can help your baby grow

As babies grow, they develop new abilities to move, speak and relate emotionally. At each age, there are "developmental milestones"—typical behaviors or abilities that you'll want to watch for in your children. For example, at 3 months old, babies should be able to make fists with both hands, lift their head and chest, and turn their head toward sounds, bright colors and light.

If your child isn't meeting the milestones (which are listed on p. 5), consider getting your child evaluated for the Early Intervention Program, which provides special services to infants and toddlers up to 3 years old. In New York, all of the services are free.

Cara Chambers, a lawyer at the Legal Aid Society's Kathryn A. McDonald Education Advocacy Project in New York, advocates for services for children with developmental delays or disabilities who are involved in the child welfare system. Here she explains how to get the help your child might need:

ILLUSTRATION BY ASAIAH AJIBABI

You shouldn't feel that you've done something wrong if your baby's delayed in meeting those milestones. Many children need special help.

Q: How can parents know if their babies need help?

A: Parents should try to pay attention to how their babies are developing in a variety of ways. You shouldn't feel that you've done something wrong if your baby's delayed in meeting those milestones. Many children develop delays for unknown reasons and need special help. Parents simply can't be experts in all areas in development, so they should use the expertise of specialists if their babies need extra help.

It's important to get the services your child needs. When kids don't get help with developmental delays, it can be incredibly stressful for the parent and the other members of the family. If you have a 2 ½ year old who can't communicate verbally, then your child might communicate by having tantrums, biting, hitting, or scratching. A specialist can teach your child how to communicate so the whole family will have an easier time.

Q: How can parents get special services for their babies?

A: If your baby isn't meeting the milestones, you might be able to get free Early Intervention Services. Some services help parents, such as respite care, parent training, or nutrition services. Others help your baby directly. Specialists might work with your toddler on daily living skills like feeding themselves with their hands, pulling their socks up, holding their arms up to get dressed, brushing their teeth and washing their faces.

To get these services, you start by requesting an evaluation. In New York, you call 311 and ask to speak to the Early Intervention office in your borough. An Initial Service Coordinator will ask what your concerns are, so you might say, "My baby's not talking very much at 3 years old." Or, "She's a year old but not really crawling."

The coordinator will set up a meeting, usually in your home, to explain the services and your rights, and to get your consent to do the evaluation. Then the coordinator will set up a number of different evaluations and specialists will come into the home to assess how your baby is doing.

Once they're done, you'll have an Individualized Family Service Plan meeting, where a team will decide whether your child is eligible for services. You are a memeber of that team and have a right to attend the meeting. Your child will be eligible if he has a disability (a diagnosed condition like Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, etc.), or if he has one or more developmental delays.

If you don't want the recommended services you don't have to take them. But if you want to go ahead, then they'll develop a service plan to address your child's needs and specialists will begin coming to your home to help your child develop the skills he needs to catch up.

The greatest benefit of Early Intervention is that, because it's provided in your home, you have an opportunity to learn from the specialist. Parents learn different games and strategies to use with their child, and when the specialist isn't there, you can use the techniques to reinforce your child's skills.

Q: Are those services available to infants and toddlers in foster care?

A: For children in foster care, there are sometimes difficulties setting up the services or keeping them going. Often, Early Intervention doesn't know who to go to for consent. When children are in care the parent still has the right to consent to evaluations and services, unless the parent's rights are terminated or the system cannot locate the parent. In that case, Early Intervention appoints a "surrogate" parent, usually the foster parent, to make those decisions.

Children in foster care sometimes change foster homes or return home, so when they move, their services get interrupted. We step in to get those services set up again.

If your child is in care, you have a right to be part of the evaluation or to be with your child while the specialist is there. In fact, it's very important for the parent to be part of the services so they understand their child's needs.

Sometimes you have to get creative. If the parent only has supervised visits it might be possible to have the evaluations and services provided at the agency during the visits. If the parent can go to the foster home where child is living they can be part of the services there.

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 in the 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 (8th 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 thought. 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, 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.

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!

ILLUSTRATION BY GARY SMITH

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. 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 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.

Homework 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.

Recently Gabriela she 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.

I Wish I Spoke English

Fernando, who is in the 6th grade, often stays after school and asks a teacher to help him with his homework. Liliana, who is in the 7th 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.

'You're Super-Intelligent!'

In New York, children in some grades take citywide tests they must pass to pass the grade. My children get nervous about a week before the citywide tests. But I don't feel nervous because I talk with the teachers and I know my children are well prepared.

When my children feel nervous, I tell them, "You can do it. Haven't you done the homework? Haven't you gone to school?"

"Yes," they say.

"Then you're going to pass the grade! You're super-intelligent!"

At my children's schools, the teachers also tell parents how they can help their children at home, such as by listening to them read or reading to them for half an hour every day. Although many parents work long hours, we all have half an hour

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 11)

before our children go to bed when we could read.

Involved at School

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 teacher and to find out her daily routine, how much homework she assigns, what tests she gives, and what she expects in terms of class participation.

I think it's so important that parents help and support our children with their schoolwork. Discipline and education start at home. What makes me feel disappointed and angry is that very few parents seem to attend meetings with teachers or take part in school activities.

One day I received an invitation to attend a breakfast with the principal where parents could discuss their concerns. Only 10 parents out of about 800 students showed up! I know that many parents work during the day and can't attend meetings, but I had spoken to some mothers who had concerns and could've come but didn't. I was frustrated.

There was coffee and cake spread out and the principal was waiting for more people to come. "Where are the other mothers?" I thought. Finally, we just got started.

My Voice Was Heard

The principal introduced herself and asked us each to say our name and what brought us to the meeting.

When it was my turn, I said, "As you know, my daughter's teacher is pregnant. Many of the mothers are concerned about who might be replacing her and whether the new teacher will know where to begin." Our children were in the 3rd grade and had to pass the citywide exam at the end of the year. Children's third grade teachers are really important!

I continued, saying, "The children love their teacher and are used to how she teaches. We're concerned about how switching to a substitute might affect them. My suggestion is that the substitute could start at least a week before the teacher leaves, so that she's integrated into the classroom, and our children don't feel such a big change and can focus on preparing for the test."

"That sounds to me like a good idea. If the teachers work together, the children won't be as affected. Thank you for your idea and your support," the principal said.

When I left the school I felt calm. I felt that the principal had heard my concerns

Education Starts at Home

I feel that the more we're involved as parents, the better our children will be as students. Although all of us are busy, the connection we make with our children's schools is important. If we can all just do a little, our children will feel more supported in pursuing their education and secure that they can achieve in school.

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.

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 schools are worth my time.

Not a Baby Anymore

My daughter's tantrums 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 second grade. School was never 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 onto a metal railing and refusing to go inside. "It'll be OK," I told her. "You look so beautiful."

In the cafeteria where the noise was tremendous and everyone's moms and dads were looking for the new teachers, 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 I could walk her upstairs to the classroom. Lydia did not let go of my hand, but when she picked out a desk, Lydia 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." And she kept crying and not respecting the teacher's rules. Her attitude seemed to be that she runs the show. I was embarrassed when I heard about her behavior.

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 very 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 counselor was calling me to say that Lydia's attitude was not good. She 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.

I blamed myself because soon after Lydia was born I relapsed. Because of my drug use, Lydia spent three years in care. But I also felt angry at Lydia. I felt she could do better and I didn't raise her to misbehave.

She Needed Help

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

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

I decided to call a mental health hotline. Because of her anger, her self-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. Immediately, 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. I explained Lydia's behavior and the therapist said it sounds like she's 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 child psychologist 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. "Mom, 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 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.

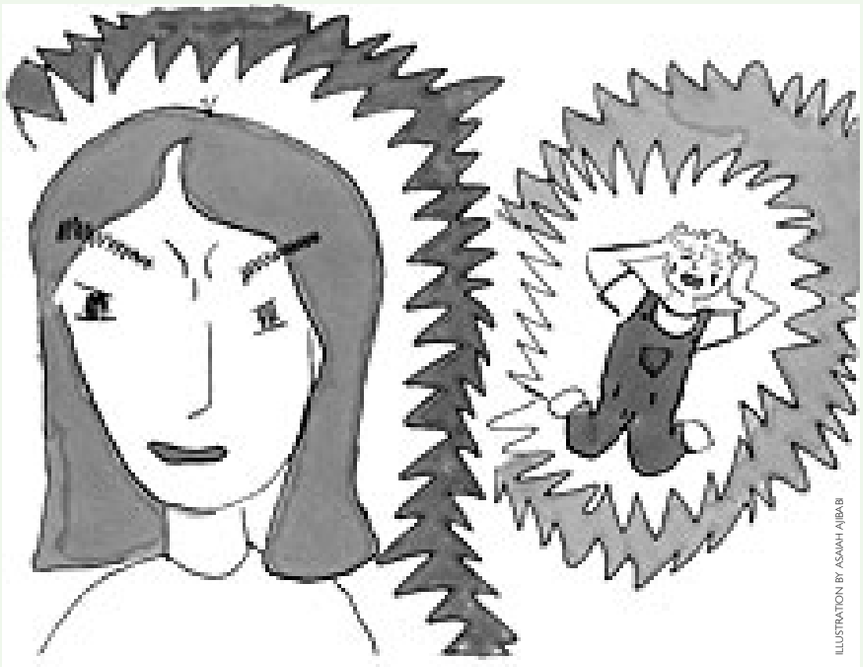

ILLUSTRATION BY ASAIAH AJIBABI

Playing Catch Up

The next morning when I took Lydia to school, I stopped by the parent coordinator's office. "Little Mama will be starting therapy," I told her.

She politely asked me to stop calling her Mama. "When you do that, you're treating her like a baby. She's a big girl!"
That advice made me feel sad. I know she'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.

I Want to Protect Her

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 never had a birthday party or person who hugged me or truly loved me.

I suffered so much hoping all my life to see my mom again. When I was a teenager, I ran away looking for her. I needed a mother so bad. Even today I still feel like I need my parents. I wish I had a mother to love me and to help me raise my daughter. I wish I had my dad to hold on to me and 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.

Making Progress

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, missing her brothers, 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 the charts are helping her. The teachers are giving me positive feedback

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 didn't use drugs and abandon 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.

A Hug Every Day

How to be the father your children need.

BY ANTWAUN GARCIA

I always knew my father wasn't much of a family man. He was in and out of prison. He would show up and then disappear for two or three years.

After I went into foster care at the age of 10, I wondered, "Why didn't he want any part of me?" I wanted him to help me answer questions like, "Can I make it in life?" and, "What is my purpose?"

Kids at Risk

I'm not alone in missing a dad. More than half of all black children don't live with their fathers; one in four Hispanic kids and one in five white kids live apart from their dads.

Research shows that kids who don't have dads are much more likely to be poor, depressed, fail in school, commit crimes, have sex early on and (for girls) get pregnant. Children of single mothers are also more likely to go into foster care.

Why would a man put his kids at such risk?

To find out, I went to a program in Harlem called POPS (Providing Opportunity for Parental Success). POPS runs a workshop to help fathers reunite and connect with their children and offers counseling, mediation with family members and legal help.

It's Personal

Robert Sanchez, the program manager, caught me off guard because he was dressed in a suit, but actually, he had a little bit of the hood in him. Sanchez didn't get to know his own father, "a dope fiend and alcoholic," until he was 15 years old.

Sanchez also fathered a daughter at 18. Soon after, he was arrested and sent to prison for 15 years. While incarcerated, he wrote to his daughter, had her visit and kept communication open with his daughter's mother. Now they see each other about twice a month.

Fatherhood and Fear

Sanchez said the main reason fathers don't stick around is fear. Having a child is scary! Guys worry that they don't know how to care for a child and they don't want to look stupid.

ILLUSTRATION BY WALTER MOORE

Lots of fathers have no idea how to be a good parent because they never had one themselves.

Some disappear because they get caught up in the streets or prison, others don't stay because of baby mama drama. "Fifty percent of our fathers have a volatile relationship with their child's mother," and almost none are married to them, he noted. Frustrated with their child's mother, men may stop seeing their kids to avoid fights and conflict. Or, the mothers may not let them visit.

Not Just a 'Roll of Bills'

Many men believe a father's only role is to provide for their children. Men with jobs are more likely to be present in their children's lives. Those without money often don't stick around because they "associate fatherhood as an extension of their pocket, and think 'I'll stay out of the child's life until I have money,"' Sanchez explained.

But even the poorest fathers can support their children in important ways, Sanchez said. A father is not just a roll of bills, but "a guiding light, a teacher, a friend, a protector, an enlightener. A father is a supporter, someone you can go to for understanding and love.

"One question I ask my fathers is, 'What is one great thing you remember about your dad?"' Sanchez said. Their answers never have to do with money. "That child is not going to remember the sneakers, but he does remember the time you took him to the park, or to a baseball game, or made him feel good about himself."

Real Fatherhood

Real fatherhood, said Sanchez, is "if you gave them a hug every day," spent time with them, and showed you really cared about their feelings. In POPS, dads learn child development and how to care for their children.

POPS teaches dads to hold a newborn, and how a baby communicates his needs by crying. Men learn how easy it is to play with their children, help them with homework, ask about their interests, or discover something new by taking kids on outings.

If the mother won't let a dad see his kids, POPS workers take the dad to family court and show him how to establish paternity, get a visitation order and enforce his legal rights to see his children.

Find a Role Model

Being a good father is about understanding your own anger, your past and your parents, and looking for role models who can help you find new ways to be a parent, Sanchez explained. "I made it my business to know what a father was, with positive fathers and role models around me," he said.

He encourages dads to search for mentors to help them. A good role model is someone who is accountable (shows up when he says he will and keeps his promises), takes responsibility when he makes mistakes (admits he's wrong, apologizes, and makes amends), and knows how to listen without criticizing. Once you find one, "tell him that you admire him and ask if he can give you guidance," Sanchez advised.

Sanchez wanted to break his own family's cycle of father absence so badly that he was willing to do things that were new and uncomfortable for him, like not using drugs or alcohol, forgiving people who wronged him, earning a master's degree and traveling all over the world. I admire that. When it is my turn, I am going to try to do the hard work to break my family's cycle as well.

Reprinted from Represent, *a magazine by and for youth in foster care. www.youthcomm.org*

Mr. Mom

My husband is more than a money maker or babymaker.

BY JEANETTE VEGA

On my block a father is usually defined as the man who got you pregnant, left and now you must go to court to get money from him. That is how I would describe my oldest son's father.

But now I see fatherhood in a new light, thanks to my husband; he has shown me that a father can be more than a baby maker or money maker. Fatherhood also includes loving, nurturing and caring for your children.

My husband was always an involved father, but in the last year, he's been more than that. He has stayed home with our children while I work.

No Time for the Kids

For many years, we both worked. Having the babies in school and child care seemed reasonable, but after we had our fourth child, it felt like neither of us was spending time with the children. We did not want a babysitter to raise our children while we worked just to pay her.

Dad decided that he would stay home. My job paid more, and I was also going to school. Plus, he works in construction and could do some jobs on the side. He told me, "You're the one who wants to go to college. My dreams are your dreams."

Adjusting to Changes

At times Dad feels it's overwhelming to be home all day. His friends also began to get into his head: "Aren't you worried that she's going to meet other guys out there?" He had to tell them, "Our way of living is working for us and we are happy."

The switch has been hard for me sometimes, too. He gets the wonders of the first word, first step, first mean look, all the things babies do that melt your heart away.

When I got that phone call from my husband to say that the baby took his first steps, oh my God, I started to cry. "Don't cry, he will try it again and you will see him," Dad told me.

As I walked into the house that night, the baby walked toward me. Wow! I was so thrilled that again tears ran down my face.

A Stronger Bond

But this arrangement has made our lives much easier. The babies are happy. All that running back and forth to the babysitter and to work has stopped. I also feel more at ease knowing that the children are safe. Dad is 100% attentive to their needs.

I see how my husband's connection and commitment to his babies has grown. There are times when Dad has to go out and my boys catch a heart attack, screaming and fighting to get into his coat.

The Right Path for Us

My husband stepped up like a real man. Being with your children, getting to know how special each baby is individually, is part of being a father. Part of being a husband is also supporting your wife's decisions. I am so glad my husband encourages me to finish school. His generosity and love for us all make me love him more.

My husband and I still go through times of stress and doubt. Are we going down the right path? Have we made the right decisions? But this situation works for us now. We'll see how things go as the children get older. Thank God we're both flexible in finding solutions and we have a strong bond.

Stronger Together

My husband and I support each other.

BY GUADALUPE COHETERO

Translated from Spanish.

When my husband and I were growing up in Mexico, we both lived apart from our parents. Our parents had to work in the city, so they left us in the countryside with our grandparents.

When I was 14, I finally got to live with my mother again, but she didn't have the personality to care for us. I promised myself that, as a mother, I would have patience and understanding.

Checking In

Now that we are parents, it's very important to my husband and me that we live together with our children and that we have a loving relationship with them.

But I have found that it's difficult for me to remain patient with my children. My husband is helping me to be a better mother. He works long hours but calls two or three times a day to find out how we are.

If our oldest, Brenda, is behaving well, we might talk about giving her a privilege for something good that she did, like doing her homework without crying or getting upset.

Her father encourages her, saying, "You're an intelligent girl. You can do it. If you want to, you can."

If Brenda gets angry or throws tantrums, I usually chat with my husband and he talks to her, saying, "This is not the right way to act. Try to behave yourself."

Encouraging Words

I don't get angry as much as I used to, or as much as my mother did. My husband's involvement has made it easier for me to be positive. When I go shopping, he stays with them, and I don't have to worry about anything. At times I play with my children, dance, watch movies with them, sing and hug them.

I also talk with my husband about my thoughts about being a mother. He tells me that, I am a good person, and that I am achieving the patience to educate our children.

As a father, he is usually very loving and tranquil, although at times he is impatient. He speaks forcefully to them, saying, "Calm down!" I tell him he's a good father. I also tell him when I notice him improving. If I hear him speaking nicely with Brenda, I'll say, "You did that very well."

One Step at a Time

How you can recover from your addiction.

BY ROSITA PAGAN

In November 1999, ACS sent me to Women Connect, an outpatient substance abuse treatment program affiliated with Lincoln Hospital to deal with my drinking problem. It turned out to be the beginning of a new life for me.

I was blessed with Ms. Angela Torres, my substance abuse counselor. Now I've been clean for five years. Last month, I was even hired as a parent advocate at Children's Village, a foster care agency. To find out how other parents get help with their addictions and get their kids home, I went back to Women Connect and spoke with Ms. Torres. She explained the steps of recovery to me.

1. Face Your Addiction

Ms. Torres said that addiction is a habit that takes over your life. Even though you're aware that a certain behavior—like drinking, using drugs or even staying in an abusive relationship—has negative consequences, you repeat the behavior anyway. You're always doing the same behavior and expecting different results.

The first step toward ending an addiction is breaking denial, Ms. Torres said. Denial is what allows the problem to take over your life. You don't keep using drugs if you're aware that it's hurting you and your family. "Once denial is broken, there are possibilities," Ms. Torres said.

Ms. Torres said it's usually easiest to break parents out of denial when their kids are in a foster home. "When the children are given to a relative, the parents say, 'I haven't lost them really,'" she said. "It's much harder for the parents if they have to say, 'I don't know where my children are.'"

When I first went to Women Connect, two of my daughters were in foster care and my son was living with my sister. Even so, I was totally in denial about my alcoholism. "In the beginning, you were not compliant at all," Ms. Torres remembered. "Many times you came in under the influence."

Ms. Torres gave me tough love. After three months, Ms. Torres told me, "Go home and pack your underwear. You've hit rock bottom and it's time for you to get up."

She sent me to inpatient detox and rehab upstate for 35 days. When I went back to Women Connect to continue outpatient treatment, facing Ms. Torres without my mask of anger was overwhelming. But she was happy for me. She said, "I knew there was a good person under all that drinking."

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY DINAN

> Once you get sober, your thinking gets clearer, your behavior gets better, and the counselors can begin to see all the strengths and skills you have.

2. Face Your Pain

One thing I didn't like about recovery was that I had to talk about my childhood. I asked Ms. Torres why treatment often brings up the past. "Because childhood issues are often the reasons why people turn to drugs," she said.

How people treated you in your household, and how they treated each other, can set you up for feeling bad about yourself. "If you don't value yourself, then you don't care what happens to you," she said.

Addiction is about using something outside of ourselves to feel complete, whether it's alcohol, a drug, a person, money, or something else, she told me. You shouldn't have to rely on something outside of yourself to feel good.

3. Discover Hope

Once denial is broken, counselors try to help you see that your life can be better. "We give people some sense of hope that they can achieve things for themselves and their children," Ms. Torres said.

It helps that, once you get sober, your thinking gets clearer, your behavior gets better, and the counselors can begin to see all the strengths and skills you have. Once I'd been sober for a month or so, I started feeling better about myself. I told myself, "I have to get my family back. I'm not worthless. I can accomplish things if I make an effort."

Ms. Torres told me about another client of hers who was resistant like me. We'll call her Brenda. Brenda was using marijuana and her mother was taking care of her.

When Brenda came to Women Connect, she was not compliant and ended up getting discharged. Then she made a complete turnaround. Ms. Torres thinks that happened because Brenda's mom got fed up. She told Brenda, "Here's your children. I'm not taking care of them."

At first, Brenda started using even more because she was stressed out. Then ACS got involved and Brenda returned to rehab. "We did an intervention kind of thing, like, 'If you have no problem, then why do your kids need to be with your mother? Why is ACS involved?'" Ms. Torres told me.

Once Brenda faced her addiction, she changed. "She was a real hard worker, a real go-getter," Ms. Torres said. Brenda stuck with rehab, got her GED, got her kids back, got her driver's license, started driving school buses and is now hoping to go to college.

4. Face Your Children's Pain

Many times parents don't believe their addiction hurt their children. "They say, 'I feed my children. I don't leave them home alone,"' Ms. Torres said. "But I don't think feeding your children is really enough."

Ms. Torres says she confronts parents first with the less severe kinds of neglect, saying things like, "If your kids are giving you so much trouble, what role are you playing in making that happen? Something's missing in your child's life when they act out. Remember how you felt as a child when you acted like that? That's how they feel."

One painful thing is that, once parents get clean, their kids (especially their teenagers), "can get really nasty," Ms. Torres said. The kids want their parents back, but they also have so much anger.

Ms. Torres told me about one client who brought her daughter to the program once a week. "Her daughter spoke to her like she was a piece of nothing," Ms Torres told me. "We had to say to her, 'Look, we know what your mother did. But you have to treat your mother like a parent while you're here."

5. Change Your Future

To start having good relationships with their children, families and partners, Ms. Torres said parents need to learn to set boundaries. Boundaries are rules that protect you and others, that make you and other people in your life feel safe.

When a parent is addicted, she doesn't set any boundaries, like curfews or chores for her children. If your kid was coming in and out of the house at any time while you were drinking, you need to start setting boundaries by saying, "I wasn't aware of that when I was drinking, but now you need to be home by 9 p.m. or you'll be facing consequences." And you don't set a boundary unless you stick to it. You'll lose face.

Parents can also connect with their children by talking frankly about the past and giving their children hope for a better future. "Saying, 'Look what I did. I don't want that for you.' Or, 'Now I know how to be different, and I'm trying to be here for you more than my parents were for me,' can show your kids that things can be different and better," she explained.

Ms. Torres told me that she believes everyone can get to recovery if they work hard. "We give people the opportunity, and they have to run with it. And it works. We do reunite a lot of families," she said.

Slowing Down in Life

Drugs got between me and my son.

BY PRINCE ARIAIS

Before my son came along, I was with different women and partied all the time. I was smoking marijuana and using cocaine once in a blue moon. I held down a good job but I also liked to have a fun and forget my responsibilities.

I knew things would change when I became a father, but I never expected that my partying might put my son in jeopardy.

Our Baby at Risk

Here's the way I got involved with Children's Services (ACS): My girl was about to give birth. The doctor asked if she ever got prenatal care. She said, "Yes, at two months." That's when she had learned that she had to stop smoking marijuana, but she didn't completely stop.

I guess the doctor saw something wrong, because when the baby was born, they ran tests on my girl and the baby. They both came out positive for marijuana. Our son was not allowed to be released until a social worker spoke with his mother.

A week later, the social workers told us what we needed to do so that our child would not to be taken away from us: take parenting classes, enter an outpatient drug program for six months and take random drug tests to prove that we were both clean. They told us that social workers would be stopping by to check on the baby.

Our Problem Got Bigger

I was stressed. I told myself, "For six months these people will be on our backs to see if we are doing the right thing." I thought we could handle it.

But a few weeks ago, we had a setback. I was caught with drugs in my system. I was smoking because I didn't expect that the next day I would have to give urine.

When the caseworkers found out I was positive for marijuana and cocaine, our problem got bigger. The social worker said my child couldn't live with me. They told my girl to break up with me.

My girl was upset. "We're together!" she said. We were both angry. How could they separate a family without giving me another chance?

Angry and Stressed

That's when I asked for a meeting. We had a big meeting with everyone involved in our case. One of the social workers explained that I had started a drug program and parenting classes. I also got a chance to speak and I said I was committed to my family.

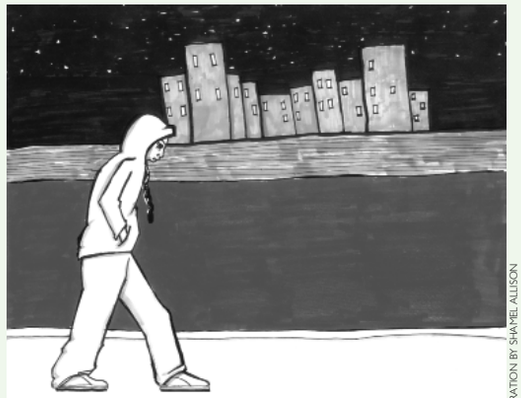

ILLUSTRATION BY SHAMEL ALLISON

Everyone decided that if I am testing negative after three months, and am still attending in the drug program and parenting classes, I can go home again.

Still, I am angry and stressed that I have to live apart from my girl and my son. I'm staying with my father until I can return to my family.

Doing Right

This won't happen again. I will be taking ACS seriously because this is a serious case. No longer will I use drugs or try to be slick.

Now, it's no more partying or seeing other women. It's just my girl, my son and me. I just hope we get through this with no more problems. I am telling myself, "All these programs will help me to slow down in life, to see what's important and what's not."

A Responsibility to Report

What to do if your child reveals sexual abuse

Stacey Platt, the associate director of the Loyola Child Law Center in Chicago, explains how a parent whose child has been sexually abused can protect the child and protect the family from a child welfare investigation:

The law doesn't offer a formula for how a parent should respond if a child says she was sexually abused by someone in the family or in the home. But there are general standards for child neglect or failure to protect a child from harm. These are suggestions for how to respond.

No Further Contact

The first step is ensuring that your child is protected from future sexual abuse by preventing the abuser from having access to your child. One way to do that is to go to the police to have the person arrested. Another is to seek an order of protection that bars that person from your home, either through the criminal system or through the civil courts.

Let's say a mother finds out that her live-in boyfriend has sexually abused her daughter. She could put him out of the house and get an order of protection against him. Some might say she should also try to have him arrested. If a caseworker is called in, the most important thing she'll look for is proof that the parent took action to prevent the abuser from being in contact with the child.

ILLUSTRATION BY ODESSA STRAUB

> A caseworker will look for proof that the parent took action to prevent the abuser from being in contact with the child.

The parent's action would definitely have to be more forceful than saying. "I don't want you to come here," or, "From now on I'll just make sure that I'm here too." That would put your child in danger of removal. If a child has been abused by someone, even letting the child see that person can be considered harmful.

Physical and Mental Health Care

The second step is taking specific steps to take care of the child's needs arising from the sexual abuse. That would include taking child to the doctor for a medical check up in case there's an STD or any physical harm. Failing to take a child for a medical examination could be seen as neglect.

You also would probably want to take your child to a mental health provider that specializes in trauma or sexual abuse and get an assessment. I don't think every child who has been molested needs to be in therapy, but if your child is telling you about the abuse, they may need help dealing with what happened, not only from you but also from a professional.

Not taking these steps could lead to an investigation or removal. When you take your child to a doctor, mental health professional, or the police, they may call the abuse hotline, since they're mandated reporters.

Even if you don't believe, you can get into difficulty if you don't believe what your child says. Whether or not the abuse happened, not believing your child can create a lot of problems. Caseworkers tend to be very judgmental about that and failing to take the follow up steps could lead to removal.

Caseworkers make good decisions and bad decisions. But if you can show that you're protecting your child from future trauma, and helping your child heal physically and mentally, that's what's reasonably required of you.

Your Rights in Rehab

Jessica Marcus, a staff attorney in the Family Law Unit at South Brooklyn Legal Services, explains the rights and responsibilities of parents seeking drug treatment.

Q: Will my kids be put in foster care if I tell someone I need treatment for a problem with drugs or alcohol?

A: If you go to a treatment program, they shouldn't open a case. If you go to a preventive services program for help with a drug addiction (or any other issue), they will open an ACS case. That doesn't mean there will be a case against you or that your children are in any danger, but it does mean that ACS will have information on your family in its files.

Parents should know that by going to any social service agency, they will come into contact with "mandated reporters"—people who have to report child maltreatment to the state central registry. But legally, simply having an addiction is not enough to remove a child. For your children to be removed, there would have to be "imminent risk," meaning that ACS believes the child is in immediate danger at home.

Q: Will my children be removed if I relapse? How should I handle a relapse?

A: If a parent relapses and needs help, she should ask for help. Getting help should be the first consideration. Call your sponsor or someone you identified during treatment as supportive. They should understand that relapse doesn't necessarily mean the children are at risk. It's part of recovery.

An Obligation to Protect

Domestic violence and child welfare law

In 1999, New York City's foster care system removed Sharwline Nicholson's children solely because she was a victim of domestic violence. One night Nicholson's ex-boyfriend showed up at her house and assaulted her when she opened the door. While she was in the hospital, the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) took her children from a neighbor's home and charged her with "engaging in domestic violence."

Nicholson became the lead plaintiff in a class action suit against the New York City foster care system aimed at stopping the practice of removing children from victims of domestic violence solely because the parent had been abused. They won the case. ACS had to change how it handles cases involving domestic violence.

Jill Zuccardy, one of Nicholson's lawyers, explains what parents need to know about domestic violence and child welfare law:

Q: How have the New York City child welfare system's policies on domestic violence changed?

A: The most important change is that ACS can't, as a matter of policy, remove children from victims of domestic violence solely because they're victims. Obviously, that doesn't mean that it never happens. Some caseworkers make threats of removal inappropriately, but now it's the exception and it's against the law. As a result of the lawsuit, a committee of experts reviewed changes in the child welfare system's policies and training, and the agency directed more staff and funding to domestic violence programs and improved training. Since the lawsuit, it seems as though there is more of an institutional commitment to work *with* victims of domestic violence and to get them the help that *they* want or need.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROSA PERIN

Children can be removed if the violence is repeated and serious, and the mother is offered meaningful help and decides not to take it, the children are clearly suffering serious emotional harm or the risk of physical harm.

Q: How do caseworkers decide whether to remove a child in a case involving domestic violence?

A: All parents have a duty to take steps to protect their children from harm. Research shows that about half of male batterers also frequently abuse their children, and women who have been hit by their husbands are twice as likely to hit a child. If, in addition to witnessing violence, your children are being neglected or physically or sexually abused, they can be removed.

In considering whether to remove children when a case involves only domestic violence, the caseworkers and courts must look at specific evidence as to whether the child is being harmed. For instance: Is that child suffering emotional harm? Is that child scared or having nightmares? And, most importantly, is there a risk that the child is going to be harmed, even just by accidentally being caught in the middle of a fight?

Children can still be removed if the violence is repeated and serious, and the children are clearly suffering serious emotional harm or the risk of physical harm, and if the mother is offered meaningful help and decides not to take it.

The batterer parent can be charged with "child neglect" meaning that he did not protect his child from violence or the threat of violence.

Q: How should an investigation proceed?

A: Caseworkers have to hold the abuser accountable, listen to the victim about what she needs, and offer services to the victim in order to reduce the danger to the victim and child.

Caseworkers and the courts can't assume the mother must take specific steps such as leaving her partner, taking out an order of protection or prosecuting, or going into a shelter as a condition of keeping her children. However, they can expect the mother to take steps to protect her children. For instance, a caseworker may suggest going to a shelter, while the mother would prefer moving to a relative's where the children will be safe, and she can do that.

Or, the mother may stay in her own home—like Sharwline Nicholson did—because she knows that the batterer is not coming back.

In cases where the children are removed, both the batterer and victim should be given case plans and offered services to help them reunify with their children.

Q: Should parents seek legal advice?

A: You should seek out legal advice if your child is at risk of removal. When I'm working with a domestic violence victim, helping her make a decision about what to do is the hardest part. I can't predict what a caseworker or judge is going to perceive. The law uses phrases like "reasonable efforts" and "minimum degree of care" and those are terms that are open to interpretation. The reality is, a lawyer can tell you your rights, but at the end of the day, if you're living with an abusive partner, you are taking a risk.

‘I Love You, I’m Sorry’

I’m better off alone than with someone who hurts me.

BY ILKA PEREZ

When I was little, I loved to watch my mom around the house: the way she folded our clothes with her gentle hands, the way her hair smelled when she was next to me. It was a smell of warmth like no other.

My mother never shared her dreams, but we knew her talents: hairdressing, making clothes, knitting, and the most beautiful, singing. As I got older, I realized how many sacrifices my mother made to keep my father happy. She wanted to work, to go to school, to better herself. My father did not let her.

Disconnected from the World

At times, my mother would sign up for classes in our local church and my father would always find a way to stop her, either by convincing her not to go or humiliating her if she did. One time he couldn’t accept that my mother was taking guitar lessons, so he went to the church and embarrassed her by yelling and saying she was having an affair with our pastor. This really upset me.

As I got older, my mother finally completed a Bible study course. My siblings and I were all excited to attend her graduation. But by the end of the night my mother’s diploma had disappeared—my father dumped it.

My father also would get upset if my mom kept in touch with family or friends. Once when my grandmother called, he took a pizza cutter and cut the phone wire while my mother was speaking.

His actions kept my mother away from wanting to be a part of the world, to interact with others. Increasingly, she did what my father wanted her to do, to keep him from humiliating her.

Stuck in the Middle

At home, whenever my parents argued, no matter whether it was about what she’d cooked for dinner or how to spend their money, my father always won the disagreement by being aggressive.

“This dinner is disgusting. What, are you feeding pigs?” he’d say.

“This is what you asked for,” my mother would answer.

I’d hear my father pushing around or even knocking over the pots and pans. I would run over because my appearance made the arguments stop. He would walk away, leaving my mother and me cleaning up his mess.

I hated watching my mom still try her hardest to make him happy. At night, she would walk down the hallway in her robe, upset, wanting to cry, carrying his late night snack.

If I asked, “Are you OK?” she would inhale all her tears and start telling me, “This is why we women need to do what we please and not let any man stop us. If a man really loves you, he’ll encourage you to accomplish any of your dreams, not appreciate you only for what you give or for what they want from you.”

I imagined having a very different marriage from my mom’s. I wanted everything equal between my husband and me.

‘I Love You, I’m Sorry’

As a teenager, I met a guy named Alex who seemed very motivated about life. We seemed to want the same things: good jobs, nice home, cars, you know, a nice family.

But as time passed he, like my father, tried to keep me away from what I wanted to do. I had to get to his house on time right after school. I couldn’t even visit my friends because he thought I had someone else. He’d say, “Why do you want to visit your friend? I know, because she has a guy for you to meet, right? Tell the truth, I know you’re lying to me.” I would even invite Alex to my friend’s house to see that I just wanted to enjoy her pool, but he wasn’t satisfied.

Whether or not I did everything he wanted, he still got upset. Here came the slaps that were followed by “I love you, I’m sorry.” I wanted to be

ILLUSTRATION BY DEMETRIS STOKES AND STEPHANIE WILSON

me. Still, since I didn’t want to get hit, I often went along with the way he planned my schedule.

I don’t understand why I stayed so long. I really hate the fact that I did all that for him, and that I really didn’t have the fun when I was young like I was supposed to.

Living My Parents’ Lives

Then, when I was 19, we found out I was pregnant. We were scared but also happy to have a child. I wanted to show my parents that we were becoming adults and setting things up for the baby, but I did all the work.

After the baby was born, Alex wanted both worlds: hanging out and being a father. I always had to push him to work and to save money. I would tell him over and over again, “Stop hanging out in the street.”

At the time, I could not understand his mix of control and care, love and abuse, and good intentions without hard work. Now that I am a bit older, I see that Alex never had that motherly love. I was his comfort, the only one that showed him love and listened to him. He thought by controlling me would keep me next to him forever.

Alex also wasn’t prepared for the kind of future we envisioned. He didn’t seem to understand that if you want to get ahead, you must finish school, get a good job and save for the future. Plus, he was accustomed to hanging out and drinking. In his family, alcohol was all around him, and his drinking led to his abusiveness at times.

In the back of my mind, I knew that I was living my parents’ lives all over again.

‘This Is Domestic Violence’

My sister helped me face what was going on. I would run to her for help and advice. She knew that I loved him and didn’t want to leave him, and that I believed I could help him by showing him that his behavior was really affecting me.

One day she gave me a book about domestic violence. I read it in one day. From that day forward, I became a different person inside. Although I didn’t have the courage to end my relationship with Alex right away, I knew it could not continue.

At around the same time, my teacher gave us an assignment to find out how domestic violence affects families. I learned so much. Reading about

the pattern of domestic violence, seeing photos of victims, and learning that domestic violence really kills had an impact on my life. As I was working on the presentation I had to admit to myself, "I am going through that."

'I Have No Time to Waste'

Finally I realized I wasted so much time with this person who I thought would change. I told myself, "This is not something that I want to affect my child. He is not going to live with fear." And, "I have no time to waste. My new life has no room for someone who I thought loved me but hurts me."

I didn't give up on my dream of one day becoming someone's wife, but I started to see that there are more important achievements in life. I split up with Alex and found a rewarding career at a nonprofit service organization.

Five years later, I found a new partner, and we talked about marriage. But I got pregnant before we married, and by the time I gave birth to my daughter, I saw that the relationship had become all about sacrifice. I was unhappy. Part of me still wanted that married family life, but I ended that relationship.

Stress and Struggle

Along with independence came stress and struggle. For the past year since I split up with my daughter's father, I have been working two jobs and the money is still not enough. Every month I pay my rent extremely late. I pray I don't see my landlord.

There were times that I kept my son home from school because I didn't have the money for his school trip or lunch. Many times I had to go to food pantries or my mother's house for food, or sell things from my house in order to do laundry or buy groceries. I ask myself, "When it will end? When will I be happy and not stressed?"

I wonder if my children understand why their mommy works a lot and has to come home late some nights. I never thought being a parent meant disappointing your kids, but I've had to disappoint them when I didn't have money or time. I have shed so many tears that I have tried my best not to let my children see.

Better Off on My Own

But even without money, I feel better off on my own. I make a good family life for my children. I love my kids and like to be around my children as much as possible. I am a mother who tries to pay attention to her kids' needs. I tell them to always tell me if something is wrong, whether or not they think I'll get mad.

When my son Alex had trouble with his behavior, I began going to family counseling with him. It makes me feel good when I hear my friends say, "Wow, you do so much to help your kids."

My independence is worth it to me. I thank my mother for showing me the importance of being a mother with her own dreams, who is not controlled by anybody. I think my kids are learning that lesson from me. I am not perfect, but I am a good example for them.

My daughter is learning from me that independence is worth more than a man who hits you, and my son is learning that if he wants someone to love him, he has to treat her with kindness and respect her dreams.

Hope in a Crisis

A nursery gives parents a break.

ILLUSTRATION BY LÉE SAMUEL

When Melanie (not her real name) started feeling like both her kids were too much to handle, she thought she would have to give up her two-year-old son. As a young single mother living in a shelter, she didn't believe that she was able to take care of him.

Melanie's shelter sent her to the New York Foundling's Crisis Nursery, a program in lower Manhattan that offers up to three weeks of free childcare to parents facing a crisis. It also gives parents emergency cash and goods, counseling, help in dealing with city agencies and a service plan that connects them to support in their own communities.

Supporting Parents

Melanie was relieved to find a safe place to leave her son for awhile and to receive guidance on parenting. The Crisis Nursery found out that Melanie was a victim of domestic violence, and that part of the reason she was thinking of giving up her son was that she feared she couldn't keep him safe. The Crisis Nursery gave her counseling on domestic violence and connected her to a support program in her own neighborhood.

Melanie is now living with both of her children and continues to stay in contact with the nursery. "She feels more capable of meeting her son's needs," said Victoria Peña, the Crisis Nursery director. "And she knows she can always count on us for support."

Facing a crisis without support can be more than even the most well-meaning parent can handle, Peña says. And too often, that's why children go into foster care. By caring for the parent as well as the child, the Crisis Nursery hopes to make the who family safer.

'The Challenge is Fear'

One of the greatest challenges the Crisis Nursery faces is convincing parents to trust it. Many parents who come to the nursery have been in care themselves or had bad experiences with city agencies.

The Crisis Nursery is working to get out the message that their goal is to help parents care for their children, without judging or separating their families. "We understand that they don't know who we are," said Peña.

Victoria Peña said parents often feel a sense of relief as soon as they walk in the doors. "Because they're in crisis, they feel like there's no one. But when they walk in here they know that there's hope."

For family support services in New York City, call 311.

Losing Control

Why men batter and how to stop.

Vicki Gorder is a co-director of Partners in Change, a domestic violence offender treatment program in Colorado Springs. Here she explains how the program helps batterers change:

Q: What is your approach to working with batterers?

A: One thing that's controversial but important to me to clarify is that battering is not simply a pattern of violence, it's a pattern of using certain behaviors, including violence, to control your partner and a relationship. Using violence against a partner is against the law, and it's wrong, but someone who has an incident of violence is not necessarily a batterer.

Treatment for batterers is still relatively new, so there's a lot of debate around what does and doesn't work. I believe that to see long-term change, I have to hold these men accountable *and* create an environment where men want to change, not because I say it's wrong, but because *they* do.

Q: What motivates men to change?

A: Most men—and I do say most, not all—truly desire to be a man of honor and integrity. I ask them, "What is your own sense of honor telling you? How do you define your personal code of integrity and live up to that?" Most men are taught not to hit women, so they're violating their own beliefs, not just mine.

A lot of my clients have never thought about it that way. They're used to being told, "You're a batterer, a bad person." All their defense mechanisms kick in and they want to minimize their behavior and shift the blame. They say, "It wasn't that wrong. It's not like we're Ike and Tina." I say, "Well, how wrong do *you* see it as being? How wrong was it *for you*?" Often they've come from a violent home, so the fact that they punched a hole in the wall doesn't seem that bad, because they didn't punch their partner. Sometimes they think they're handling their anger well.

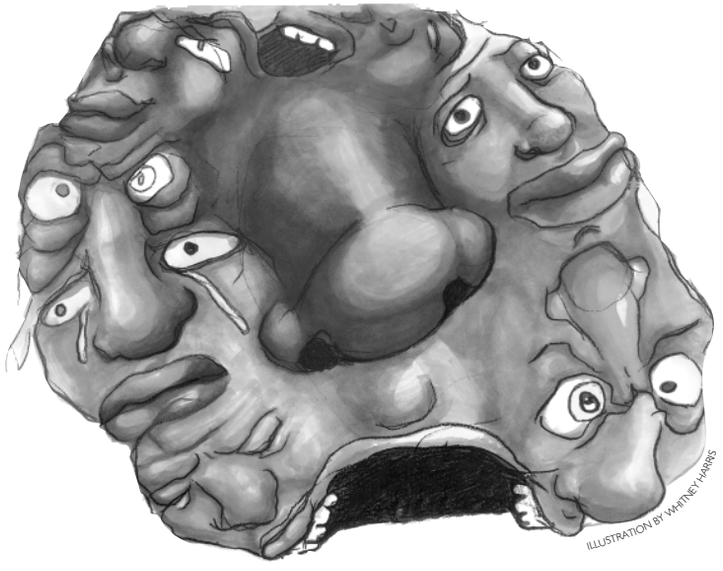

ILLUSTRATION BY WHITNEY HARRIS

Most men are taught not to hit women, so they're violating their own beliefs, not just mine.

I also tell my clients, "We all do things for a reason. You use violence because there's a payoff—it gets someone else to do what you want. But what does it cost you?" For a lot of men, when they start to look at what kind of role model they're being for their children, that's the avenue of change. They want their sons to look up to them, and they don't want their daughters to end up getting beaten.

Q: How can you change a pattern of violence?

A: A lot of our program is about building skills, especially teaching the men how to recognize cues that they're angry much earlier so they don't get to the explosive stage. Part of that is helping them realize that they're not really out of control when they get very angry. It feels like they are, but they're not. They're still making choices.

We ask them, "When did you know you were angry? How? What were you thinking? What were you doing?" A lot of people don't really think about early signs. They escalate the situation and don't try to stop until they're in that red zone and then it's too late. Those of us who don't offend, we realize we're getting angry and take steps to cool down before we act out.

We give them a lot of mandatory homework, because if they're not applying what they've learned, they're not working to change. They have to practice taking "timeouts" and talk about what worked and didn't. They have to write down their relationship histories, what patterns they've had.

Q: How can you change a pattern of control?

A: We want to help the men see that abuse is not only physical, it's also a pattern of treating their partners as children and not being able to accept who their partners really are.

We ask them, "How do you accept differences between your partner and yourself?" They might not accept that their partners' experiences and needs are different from their own. We ask, "How can you just talk with your partner, instead of trying to change her? How might you support her?"

We also ask, "Are you treating your partner like an equal or as a child? How do you feel when you're treated as a child?" Maybe a boss or another family member has treated them that way. When they think about it, they're like, "Oh, yeah, I get it. No wonder she doesn't like that."

Q: What changes do you see?

A: There are definitely men who use violence who are not going to change. They care about maintaining control more than they care about love and respect. But most men who are working to change will say they feel better about themselves and have a different type of relationship with their partners—one that's loving, warm, and nurturing. They begin to get what they really wanted.

These men want relationships, but they don't know how to get their needs met without using violence. They don't want their partners to leave, or to be looking at other men. When they learn how to earn respect, admiration and love, they realize the difference between love and fear. Love is very different from compliance they've forced out of their partner by using violence.

Witness Protection

How to help kids recover from living with violence

Carrie Epstein, senior director of child trauma programs at Safe Horizon, explains how witnessing domestic violence can affect children, and how parents and therapists can work together to help children recover.

Q: How can witnessing domestic violence affect children?

A: Children who witness domestic violence are affected in different ways. Some children exhibit aggressive behavior, and some feel anxiety and depression, which are not as easy to recognize.

Children might have abdominal pains, headaches, insomnia, or bed wetting. They might show symptoms of separation anxiety (fear of being apart from their parent), an inability to concentrate on schoolwork, or feel a lot of guilt because they were not able to protect their parent or stop the abuse.

However, not all children will display symptoms of distress. Some children are just very resilient—they have a natural ability to cope with stress or adapt well to difficult situations.

Q: How do therapists help children cope with anxiety?

A: The first task of therapy is to help children cope more effectively with overwhelming thoughts and anxiety.

We work with children around identifying how they feel. Many children of all ages don't have the verbal skills yet to say how they feel. They might say "Happy," or, "Sad," but that doesn't cover a lot of the emotions they're feeling. We help them learn other words: anxious, confused, helpless, angry. If they can convey to others how they're feeling, people can respond appropriately.

We also teach kids different stress reduction techniques like "belly breathing" or "thought stopping" so that when they notice that they feel anxious, they know some ways to calm themselves down.

"Belly breathing" is deep breathing that relaxes the body. "Thought stopping" is a way to take control if you have a thought going through your head that's stressful or upsetting. Many children and adults feel that we're at the mercy of our thoughts—that if a thought is in our head we can't do anything about it, but actually we can. I talk to kids about imagining a big stop sign and having that pop up to stop upsetting thoughts.

"Positive visualization" is another way to interrupt a thought and help a child (or adult) relax and refocus. We teach children to replace the unwanted thought with something more calming and less provoking. I might ask, "What do you want to replace it with?" Kids say, "Thinking of butterflies," Or, "A trip to Candyland," or they mention a safe place.

Therapists might also teach kids to do something called "progressive muscle relaxation" where you slowly relax your whole body. When our muscles are tense and anxious, we feel very tight and when our muscles are relaxed we feel calmer. I have children think about a piece of spaghetti that's uncooked and then cooked, and focus on turning each part of their body into cooked spaghetti.

It's always helpful to learn about these techniques because all children go through situations that are anxiety provoking or stressful, and they can use these methods into adulthood.

Q: How can parents help their children recover?

A: The ability to not get set back in the face of obstacles is called "resiliency." There's been a lot of research recently to help us understand why some children are so resilient. Researchers have asked: What are the coping mechanisms that are helping these kids out? What kinds of protections did they have in their families, schools or personalities that helped them handle the stress?

Caring, supportive relationships with family help build a child's ability to cope with stress and adapt to changes. A deep attachment to a parent is a very basic need, a vital need. But children who are growing up with domestic violence may miss out on bonding time with their moms. A mom living in fear or feeling depressed or overwhelmed by life may be unable to handle the stressful demands of a toddler or even an adolescent, and kids can usually sense that a parent isn't really available.

Setting aside time to be close to your children can help your child become more resilient. Therapists often work with parents to help them re-establish the activities of daily living that help children grow, like regular bedtimes and mealtimes. Re-starting those routines, and making time to bond with a child, can help you and your child recover.

Researchers have also found that kids become more resilient when they have opportunities to participate in activities—like music, sports or after school programs—where they can build meaningful relationships with people outside the family. Teachers, coaches, or mentors can offer strong support. Having an adult believe in you and support you can plant a seed.

Parents (and therapists) can identify someone who can give extra care and support to the child, such as a grandparent, coach, teacher or family friend. Parents can also get children involved in positive activities that give them a sense of accomplishment and relaxation.

ILLUSTRATION BY TODD MILHOUSE

WHERE TO FIND HELP

311
Call 311 to speak to an operator who can help you find family support services in your neighborhood, including family counseling, parenting classes, housing, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence support programs, domestic violence batterer intervention programs, and child and adult mental health treatment.

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)
CWOP runs a weekly support group for parents affected by the child welfare system, trains parents to become peer leaders, and advocates for child welfare reforms. You can speak to a parent leader by calling (212) 348-3000. Go to www.cwop.org for more information.

Survival Guide to the New York City Child Welfare System
This workbook for parents and by parents includes information about your legal rights and explains how the child welfare system works in New York City. Available in English, Spanish and Chinese. Parents with children in foster care should read this guide for detailed information about how to move their case forward. Download a copy at www.cwop.org.

Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT)
LIFT provides parents with information about their legal rights in family court and guides parents in representing themselves in New York City family court proceedings. Call the Family Law Hotline at (212) 343-1122 or email hotline@LIFTonline.org. LIFT also provides workshops and resources about family court law. Go to www.LIFTonline.org for more information.

ACS Office of Advocacy
Parent advocates and staff at the ACS Office of Advocacy can help you find services, locate your child in foster care, get support with your case, request an administrative review, obtain public benefits like housing, and understand the child welfare system in New York City. To get help, call Parents' and Children's Rights helpline: (212) 676-9421.

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, 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 nora@risemagazine.org or (718) 260-8818 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work.

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.

New from Rise
Workbooks to use in parenting classes, support groups, or one-on-one

PARENTING SKILLS

HEALING OURSELVES, HEALING OUR CHILDREN
Stories about parenting by parents affected by the child welfare system

#CW-HIST, 86 pp. $12.00
10 stories and worksheets
Parents who grew up with chaos, trauma, or family separation need guidance to build safe, nurturing homes. Parents will feel capable of setting routines, improving communication, and using positive discipline when they read these stories by their peers.

REUNIFICATION

IT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN
Stories about reunification by parents affected by the child welfare system

#CW-REUN, 82 pp. $12.00
Nine stories and worksheets
When children act out after reunification, parents often feel overwhelmed. Help parents understand children's fear and anger and learn healthy responses that other parents have used to repair relationships with their children.

PARENT-FOSTER PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

BUILDING A BRIDGE
Stories about building collaboration between parents and foster parents

#CW-BRD, 130 pp. $18.95
20 stories by parents, foster parents, and teens + 14 worksheets
Positive relationships between parents and foster parents help children feel more secure in care and adjust more easily after reunification. Ideal for staff and foster parent training.

RISE MAGAZINE

RISE
Triannual print magazine written by and for parents affected by the child welfare system.

#CW-RISE, 12 pp.
3 issues/yr. $3
Each issue of Rise magazine explores a crucial topic for parents working to strengthen their families through family support services or to reunify with children in foster care. Stories show how parents work to solve problems in their families.

To order, go to the E-store at www.risemagazine.org or call (212) 279-0708 x 115