

Rise

One Step at a Time

A parent-to-parent guide to the child welfare system

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A Knock on the Door

I never stopped advocating for my children to return home.



ILLUSTRATION BY MARCINA ZANESKO

BY PHILNEIA TIMMONS

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

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

Anger in His Eyes

Before his grandfather died, my son was basically well-behaved. After, he had so many questions, like, "Where do people go when they die?" I could see the anger in his eyes and hear the fear in his voice. I believe his feelings were even stronger because losing his grandfather brought up the sad feelings he had about his father not being

around.

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

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

'We Received a Call'

When I answered the door, there was a social worker

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

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

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

'My Children Need Me'

After my children were taken, I went through terrible pressure and depression, not knowing whether my children were safe. I could not eat or sleep many days and nights.

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

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like. Just please release my children to me."

Emotions Running Wild

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

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

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

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

Starting to Cooperate

For the first couple of months, my anger kept me from doing what the system told me I needed to do. I wasn't going to counseling because I felt I didn't need it. Whenever I went to see the caseworker, I wasn't cooperative because I just wanted to smack her.

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

get proper visits with them, the harder it was going to be to get them back permanently.

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

I Was in Control

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

I wrote the information down in

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

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

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

A Person, Not a Case

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

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

Accepting My Son's Ways

Soon I realized that I had to calm down, not only with the system but with my son, too. For a while after my son went

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

Help Us at Home

Still, there were limits to how much I could do until I finally was given a caseworker who really worked with me. I've had three caseworkers during the two years my children have been in care. The first two never once made a home visit.

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

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

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

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

One day my son said to me,

Parents Helping Parents

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

BY TERESA BACHILLER

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

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

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

'You're Not Alone'

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

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

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



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

Information and Support

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

I also give out numbers. I might refer parents with new cases to the

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

Making Parents Comfortable

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

So I referred her to CFR and she

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

'Concentrate on Your Goals'

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

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

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

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

'What Can I Do?'

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

BY JACQUELYN ISRAEL

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

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

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

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

In staff meetings, I remind casework-

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

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

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

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



ILLUSTRATION BY RUDA TILLET

Winning

My visits proved

BY LYNNE MILLER

My baby's father passed away when I was pregnant. After, I felt I had to block out everything I was feeling so I wouldn't lose the baby. But I found out later that those feelings were still with me.

For three years, life was pretty uneventful for my son and me. We went to the park to feed the squirrels. We watched Sesame Street and Barney together. He would help me make dinner and we'd eat it together. We spent a lot of time just the two of us.

Black Hole Inside Me

Then my mother died and a black hole opened up inside me. All the feelings I'd held back for so long came rushing back. I didn't want to feel those feelings so I started snorting cocaine and smoking crack, too.

Soon, my son and I were spending a lot less time together. I'd send him to his room by himself to watch TV for hours. He'd even eat in front of the television by himself.

The next year, ACS took him away from me. I never thought I'd get him back. My ACS worker told me that she would make sure the foster parents he was with would adopt him right out of my life. She said there wasn't a thing I could do about it—and I believed her!

I felt like my world had ended.

'Is This My Son?'

The first time I was able to

see my son was about six weeks after they took him. When the agency sent me a letter to let me know where my son was living, I was overjoyed—and scared. I didn't know what to expect or how to act.

I was a nervous wreck on the bus ride to go see him. And when he arrived at the agency where I was impatiently waiting, I didn't recognize him. When they took him from me, he had a long tail and hair to just above his collar. Now his hair was shaved in sort of a mushroom cut.

When I was told, "There's your son," I think I went into shock, and my son and I spent nearly the whole visit crying all over each other.

Maybe it was the guilt I was feeling, but I felt I could see the mistrust in my son's eyes. I didn't know how I would be able to win back the trust I had stupidly forfeited.

He Called Someone Else 'Mom'

The worst part of the visit was when I heard him call the foster mother "mom." I flipped out. After the worker and foster mom calmed me down, they explained to me that it was to make him feel at ease, and because her other foster kids called her that too.

They tried to reassure me that I still was and would always be his mom. But here was my son calling some other lady "Mom." I felt sure this was just another proof that my ACS worker was making good her threat to

Him Back

I was worth my son's trust.

keep my child from me. Then she told me it would be two weeks before I would be able to see my son again, and that would be only for one hour. I was devastated. I left there in a daze.

But shortly after that I began coming to a focus group for biological parents to ask questions and get information. I ended up helping to organize their Birth Parent Advocates Program. That support helped me manage the hard times.

His Foster Mom Supported Me

Plus, I came to know my son's foster mother and she made our visits go easier and helped me get my son back. My agency, Seamen's Society for Children and Families, has a family to family approach—that is, we try to keep open communication between the birth and foster parents so that a friendship can develop.

This lets the children know they aren't a prize being competed for; they are loved and cared for and have just acquired an "extended family" to help take care of them while their birth parents are unable.

My son's foster mom would assure my son that he'd be going home someday soon. She even had the agency's psych department give my son therapy to help him with all the new and confusing feelings he was having.

Starting the Healing Process

Still, seeing my son for one hour every two weeks took a toll on our relationship. I felt like I was in a bad dream that I was moving through in slow motion.



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH DIEGAN

I no longer knew how to act or what to say around him. I tried to make it up by bringing "things" to every visit. But then I would wonder whether he was happy to see me or the gifts. The worst part was saying good-bye after every visit. That's when all the guilt and remorse really set in. I wanted to kick myself for being such a screw-up.

showed the agency that I was capable of being a responsible parent again.

Eventually, our visits were increased to one hour once a week, and then two hours every week. Finally, I was able to take him for an occasional overnight, then weekends.

My Son Comes Home

Having my child over night again created new tensions

My showing up consistently for our visits started the healing process. It showed my son that I could be trusted again.

I think my showing up consistently for our visits started the healing process. It helped to show my son that I could be trusted again. If I told him I would be at the agency to see him in two weeks, and then I showed up, he knew I was reliable and kept my word. It also

and stresses for both of us. He wasn't real sure how to act with me; I worried about saying the wrong thing or losing my cool. But I just took it minute by minute, and eventually we began to have a natural relationship again.

You can't know how wonderful

it is to be able to just call your child in from the backyard to eat dinner until you've experienced not having him there to call. I found most pleasure in the smallest things; wiping away a tear, kissing a booboo or just getting a hug.

The best Christmas present I've ever gotten was when I was told I could have my son for his Christmas vacation from school. That became his trial discharge home to me. After almost 18 months of hard work, I got him back!

Ups and Downs

My son has been home almost three years. We still have our ups and downs. He still occasionally acts out in school and every once in a while he has a bad nightmare, like he did after he was taken away from me.

I am in the process of trying to find a therapist for him that I can afford. I think it's important because the feelings he experienced while I was using drugs and then when he was in foster care aren't going to disappear just because we're a family again. My son and I talk to each other about what happened and how I hope he will believe me when I tell him it will never happen again.

Getting the Visits You Need

Your rights to visiting and staying in touch with your children.

State law requires that, at minimum, you and your children have visits every other week at agency. You have a right to request more visits and better visits. You should do so by speaking to your case planner or supervisor, or at Service Plan Reviews (SPR).

The agency should consider your schedule and your children's schedule when making a visiting plan. This means scheduling visits for times when you do not have to work or do other mandated services and when your children are not in school. The agency must arrange for visits to be in a private and comfortable location. You must be given financial help, transportation, or other help necessary to ensure that you can attend visits every two weeks.

Agencies may not deny you visits with your children unless they have a court order to do so. The court can only deny visits if the visits would place your children in danger. To be absolutely clear: you cannot be denied visits because you have failed to comply with services, or some other directive of the agency. You have a right to have a hearing in court about this issue.

ACS has its own written guidelines for foster care agencies to follow. Here are the basic principles of the guidelines:

- Your visits should be unsupervised unless the agency has a reason to supervise the visits. Visits should only be supervised if necessary to protect your child, to prevent your child's court testimony from being

influenced, or if a court orders the supervision. The agency can supervise some visits to assess your family interactions, but it does not have to supervise them all.

- If visits are supervised, the least amount of supervision necessary should be used. Unless your child is at serious risk of

- The agency should help you arrange other contact with your children, including phone calls and letters between visits.

- The agency also has the authority to increase your visits or change your visits from supervised to unsupervised without ACS approval. Waiting for ACS approval should NEVER

have the right to visit with each other at least once every other week. The agency should also try to arrange visits with other people who are important to your children, even if those people are not relatives. Tell the agency about people you think your children would want to visit. Your children can also tell the case planner.

- Your visits should increase as you prepare for your children to return home. Visits should progress from weekly two hour visits to more frequent and longer visits, to day-long visits, to overnight and weekend visits, then to trial discharge and lastly, final discharge of your children. If the agency does not increase your visits during a six-month period, you should ask your case planner why that is.

- Your visiting plan should be reviewed at every Service Plan Review (SPR). That's an important time to ask for more visits with your children and for an explanation if the visits are not increased.

- You have the right to visit with your children even if the agency changes your children's permanency goal to adoption. You have the right to visit with your until your parental rights are terminated. It will be very difficult, however, to have the visits increased during this time.

—From the *Survival Guide to the NYC Child Welfare System: A Workbook for Parents by Parents* available at www.cwop.org



harm, the agency should not interfere with your contact with your child, even during a supervised visit.

- You should be able to visit your children during their ordinary activities, such as at hair cuts, doctor or dentist appointments, sports games, shopping, and school plays.

be a reason to postpone either an increase in visits or a change to unsupervised visits.

- The agency cannot decrease your number of visits without a court order or your written consent.

- If your children are not placed in the same foster home, they

A Time To Bond

Making the most of your visits.

Jacquelyn Israel, whose children spent three years in foster care, is a parent advocate at Graham Windham. She helps parents at the agency understand their rights and get the help they need. Here she explains how to make the most of your visits.

1. Bring Toys and Games

When you visit at the agency, the room just isn't a home environment. I suggest that parents bring games, coloring books, activity books, crayons. Play some soft music, and bring books to read to your child. You can even bring your own visiting blanket so you and your children can sit down on the floor with Legos and blocks.

2. Make Visits a Time to Bond

During the visit, you definitely want to interact. Sometimes I see parents come and they look at the kid, sitting far apart. It's not like visiting at a hospital. It's a time to strengthen the bond you have with your child.

Some parents want to do homework with the children, and it's a good thing to care about your child's education, but if homework is troubling and causes tension in your family, I wouldn't suggest doing that during a visit. When you're getting frustrated, you're not building your bond.

Don't use your visits to complain about the situation, or dump your feelings on your child. That takes quality time away from your child.

3. Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep

One of the hardest moments is when children ask, "When am I coming home?" Be as truthful and honest as you can be, while keeping in mind the child's age.

Tell your children, "I wish I could take you home right now, but I can't. I'm working on it, and I'll take you home as soon as possible."

Don't make promises that you can't keep. If you say, "You'll be home next week," and it doesn't happen, your child won't know who to trust, or what is true and what is false.

4. Expect Your Kids to Act Up

It's normal for a child to feel angry or scared about being in foster care, and to act up as a result. When parents hear that a child is acting up, they start thinking, "Why is this happening? Is someone hurting my child." They feel powerless.

You might feel very scared if you can't help your child. You might even start acting out, becoming angry or explosive. But you can help your children by reassuring them that you're working to get them home, and letting them know that you love them and care about them even when you're not together. You also want to let your child know that there's nothing they can do to get home faster. I've seen children act out because they believe that if they act bad, the system will say, "This child is too bad, we better send the child home to their mom."

5. Build a Relationship with the Foster Mom

You can help your child and your case by being polite to the foster parent. At visits, say, "Hello. How are my kids? How are they in school? Can I meet



you for open school night?"

To get your children back, you have to be part of your child's life, and the foster mom can help you with that. It's good if the foster mom can say in court, "I met the children's mother at the children's doctor's appointment," or, "For open school night we went together to discuss the children's education."

When my kids were in care, the court could say to me, "Jacqueline, you were a bad parent for all these things you did in the past." But I could say, "I have a relationship with my children that's nurturing, structured and not damaging." And the foster mom supported me in saying that.

6. Help Your Children Say Goodbye

Parents and their children don't want visits to end. Children have a hard time because they don't understand why they can't go

home. They cry, have fits.

Don't prolong the visit. Help your children say goodbye, and let them know you'll see them soon. When it's almost time to leave, help your child get ready to go. Say, "It's time for us to go now. Please take care. I'll see you soon. Ask the foster parent if you can call me." Say goodbye and leave your child with the foster parent.

I see some parents who stay with their children as long as they can. One parent follows the foster parent's car. Don't do that. That's not a healthy thing for the children to see. If you

break the rules, your children get the idea that they can also choose whether to follow rules. That will hurt your children in school and when they come back home.

7. Keep Visiting and It Will Get Easier

Sometimes I hear parents say, "It's just too hard to visit my child at the agency." But the agency is not going to say, "Take all the time you need and your child will be there for you when you're ready." You need to prove to the agency that you care about your child.

You and your child will feel better if you spend more time together. Even a week apart can feel like an eternity to a child, because children are having new experiences every day.

Do your best to bond with your child, and the visits will get easier.

'We're Here for You'

Support and straight talk helped me trust my lawyer and her team.

BY EBONIE KING

On my first day in family court after my son was placed in foster care, I walked up to my court-appointed attorney, introduced myself and asked, "How can you help me?" He just stared me up and down. In court, he said nothing on my behalf. I was furious.

That day, I saw a woman zipping around the waiting area, talking to other women. She seemed to really care, so I asked her, "Are you a lawyer?" She said, "I'm a social worker," and breezed away.

A Wrong Turn

For a month after that court date, I did not begin any services, did not visit my son or go to court, and fell deeper into my crack addiction. I felt hopeless and trusted no one.

My mother had called in the neglect report because I was neglecting my beautiful 8-month-old baby boy. I was taking advantage of my mother's kindness by leaving my son with her for days at a time.

One day, when I returned from running in the street, my son was gone. I knew immediately that he was in foster care. My mom told me, "What I did was necessary."

I was devastated. I felt my son was my only reason to breathe.

A Glimmer of Hope

A friend convinced me to visit my son and stop feeling sorry for myself. After I saw my son, I went to the next court date.

This time, instead of the lawyer who had first represented me, I found a whole team from the Center for Family Representation (CFR) had been assigned to represent me: a litigation specialist, staff attorney, social worker and parent advocate. The social worker, Adjara, was the woman I had seen zipping around!

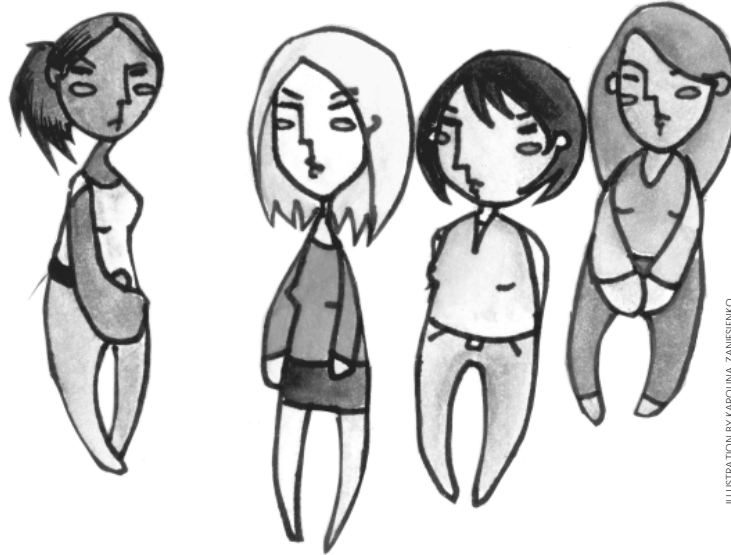


ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANESKIO

My team told me, "We're here for you." They spoke to me with respect and gave me hope.

Straight Talk

I was not ready to be clean, and I was honest about that. The CFR team was straightforward, too. They told me that if I didn't get myself together, they would not be able to help me.

Monique, the parent advocate, then took a walk with me and took me to lunch. She asked me to enter treatment and do the right thing so I could be proud of myself and my son could be proud of me.

Monique didn't judge or disrespect me. She pushed me in a good way. I knew she was right. So I promised to enter treatment, and Monique made a date to escort me to the program.

The day of our appointment, though, I stood Monique up. I went to the treatment program on my own. I was so overwhelmed by her genuine concern that it made me afraid.

My Strong Points

In the program, I found I had a bigger

problem than drugs. Even once I got clean, I was in pain and full of distrust because of past abuse, so my behavior was bad. Every time I went to court, the report from my treatment facility was negative. I felt ashamed that my personal information was being shared in court and feared I would not get my son back.

But my CFR team jumped on my strong points. They told the judge that my drug tests were clean and I did not miss visits. I also got certificates for completing a number of programs.

I was surprised that my CFR team continued to speak to me with respect even after hearing the bad things about me in court. It's hard to talk to someone in a positive way about her negative behavior, but my team didn't talk down to me. They were careful with their words and stayed positive.

Hitting Bumps

Soon I got visits supervised by my mother, but I hit more bumps in my case. First, the treatment program asked me to leave because of my behavior. Immediately, the agency dropped my visits back to once a

week, supervised at the agency, even though the court order stipulated that, as long as I was still testing clean, my mother could supervise my visits.

I called my lawyer, she reminded the Children's Services lawyer about the court order and my visits at my mother's house were reinstated the next day.

On my own, I got into outpatient treatment and started therapy and anger management. A year and a half after my son went into foster care, he came home on trial discharge.

During the trial discharge, I got a new case called in on me because my boyfriend attacked me on the street after I broke up with him. I called Monique right away and she told me, "Don't let anyone in until I get there." Monique was right there when the child protective worker arrived, and she helped me prove to the investigating caseworker that my son was safe, despite this man's actions. The case was closed, unfounded.

Proud of Me

Looking back, I don't think I showed how much CFR's help meant to me. Every time my team saw me, I was pushy and had an attitude about something that was going wrong.

But I called CFR every time I ran into trouble. I grew to trust them because, in court, they stuck to reuniting me with my son. They cared and they touched me by being themselves.

Now everyone from CFR looks at me with pride. When I got my son on trial discharge, I needed a stroller. Monique called to say, "Come and get it." I was so grateful.

Soon after, Monique came to visit me at home—the apartment she found for me. "I couldn't wait to see you with your son at home!" she told me, and I gave her a big hug.

What to Expect from Your Lawyer

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

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

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

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

Q: How does a parent get a lawyer?

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

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

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

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

A: That's a hard question to answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

advocate only for her client.

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

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

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

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

Q: What advice do you give your clients?

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

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

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



Forever Family

My daughter's foster mother is still part of our lives.

BY WANDA CHAMBERS

In 1998 I was pregnant with my daughter when I was arrested for possession of crack cocaine. I was given a conditional release to go to a drug treatment program but for a long time I could not get it right. First I ran away from that program. Then, when I was let out on bail to give birth to my daughter, I purchased some crack while I was bringing her home from the hospital and started using again.

When she was 6 months old, someone reported me and the child welfare system put her in foster care. Honestly, I felt relieved because I knew I wasn't doing right with Ebony. Once she went into care, I didn't have to worry about whether she was safe.

When I look back today, I think, "Oh my God, I can't believe that was me." It's horrible how much I lied and connived. I was just so heavily into my addiction. I was in foster care as a child and, when I was 12, got involved in drugs with my mother. It was all I knew.

Praying for Strength

Soon after my daughter was removed, I got locked up. I got out in October and was back in jail in January. By then, I wanted to stop using but did not know how. I prayed, "God, I'm too stupid to do get clean on my own."

I was sent upstate to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility and by the time I got there I was more alert because I had been clean for months. I said to myself, "I'm going to start communicating with the agency." I could relate to my daughter's struggle and, once I was clean, I was committed to getting her out of foster care.

My daughter had been in care a year and a half at that point. I asked for reports and pictures of my daughter, but I never got visits. All I knew was

that she was with a Spanish family and I was concerned that she wouldn't speak English. She was 3 years old when I saw her again.

Fighting Termination

While I was locked up, the agency filed to terminate my parental rights, and when I came home it was in progress. I told the caseworker, "I don't know what you're talking about. This is not abandonment! I wrote you letters!"

The worker said, "Wanda, if you see the process as stretching between A and Z, you're at M right now. You can still turn this around."

was my backbone through it all. She supported me when I didn't believe in myself.

Slowly Reconnecting

When I began visiting my daughter, she couldn't stand my living guts. Ebony was afraid of me and was really not nice. She wouldn't talk to me, she'd scream when I got near her. She'd sit under the desk for the whole visit, or keep running out in the hall to see her foster mother. I would keep reading, "And the bear said..." and if she looked at me I'd say, "Hello, Ebony." Of course I went home and cried.

At first, the foster mother and I did

mother fighting another mother. She would say my daughter acted out after visits and she blamed me.

Still, I went step by step—I kept working on my relationship with Ebony and went from supervised to community visits to weekends. Ebony and I got closer when I was able to take her out to the park and then, when we had weekend visits, I could do little things like wipe her face and do her hair and put on her shoes. When I could sleep with her next to me I felt really connected with her. I'm very emotional, and when her little hand would touch my leg, it would send chills through my body.

As my daughter's foster mother realized that my daughter was really on her way home, she began to be a friend to me.

'We Can All Live Together'

The day my daughter came home for good, I felt like I should give Ebony back to the foster family because they loved her so much and she loved them. We'd had overnights, but it was nothing to prepare any of us for what felt like the final goodbye.

That day, the whole foster family brought her to my door. They pulled up in a minivan with about 15 Spanish people in it, brothers and sisters, all crying—crying on the floor, crying in the street, taking all of her belongings out of the car, screaming, "My princess, my baby."

I was like, "Oh my God, they're killing me." Part of me actually felt like I was doing something wrong by getting my daughter home. Another part felt overwhelmed.

I was actually planning to end their relationship with my daughter. I wanted her home with me, period. But later on, when I was bathing my daughter, she said to me, "This is what we can do. We can put your



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC GREEN

I said, "No, you still have a chance to turn this around. What do you need me to do?"

I didn't have a struggle with the agency after that. I was compliant and had workers that worked with me. I graduated from a drug treatment program, took parenting classes, found my own apartment and found preventive services. My grandmother

not get along. I felt that the foster mother's presence during visits was making it harder for us to bond. My daughter kept going out in the hall to talk with her foster mother, and it made me crazy. I said, "I'm going to ask them to remove the foster mother from the agency during the time of my visit."

She fought me tooth and nail, one

First Impressions

An “icebreaker” meeting helps parents and foster parents connect.

house and their house together and we can all live together.” My heart went out to Ebony. I’m a woman of compassion, and I told myself, “There is no way I’m going end this relationship. I can’t do that to them or to her.”

A Loving Connection

In the months after my daughter came home, her foster family continued to show love to us both. I called her foster mother once and said, “Why isn’t this child eating?” We realized that Ebony was used to Spanish food and I cook black people food. So her foster mom would bring pans and pans of food. She taught me to cook pastelitos and peas and rice.

Today my daughter is 10 and she is an amazing little girl. I’m working as a parent advocate at the Brooklyn Family Defense Project, which represents parents in court and supports parents by assigning a lawyer, social worker and parent advocate to each case. I tell the parents my story. I pull out my dispositions and my certificates and say, “You can sit on this side of the desk if you do what you need to do.”

My daughter’s former foster mother is still part of our lives. She often babysits since I’m working and going to school, and Ebony stays with her in the summers.

We don’t always agree—she thinks I’m too strict and that I don’t feed my daughter enough, telling me, “She’s too skinny! She needs to eat.” I think she lets my daughter stay up too late eating anything. I’m big on boundaries because I didn’t get any when I was a child. Even so, I truly appreciate her love for my child. I’ll curse her out in a minute, but I love her, and I know she loves us both.

Fayette Bennett, director of family permanency and conferencing at Children’s Services, explains how agencies in New York City are beginning to work with parents and foster parents to build supportive relationships.

Children’s Services is working with the agencies to begin supporting strong relationships between parents and foster parents. Parents and foster parents have been kept apart. But child welfare practitioners across the country are realizing that children in foster care do better when parents and foster parents develop a partnership focused on the well-being of the child.

Sharing Information

To help parents and foster parents get to know each other, we’re asking agencies to begin holding Parent to Parent meetings within three to five days of a child’s placement in foster care. At these meetings, the parent, foster parent and child, if that seems appropriate, can talk together.

The parent can share information like, “My child likes a special story before bed,” or, “This is a toy that helps my child sleep easier at night.” Parents can tell the foster parent if the child has nightmares, what kind of discipline the child is used to, and what special foods the child likes. Anything that can give the foster parent insight into how to meet the child’s needs will help to make foster care placement less stressful for the child.

We are hoping that parents will feel respected and empowered. We recognize that parenting does not end when the child comes into care, and that the child will do better if we can have more shared parenting while the child is in foster care.

Positive Impact

Some private agencies in New York City have been using this approach for many years. Others are just beginning. So far, we are getting positive feedback. In a recent meeting, a foster parent described feeling overwhelmed, and the child’s father was able to help the foster parent understand the girl’s behavior. The child was acting out because she thought the foster parent might send her back home. The father offered to call weekly to reassure the child.

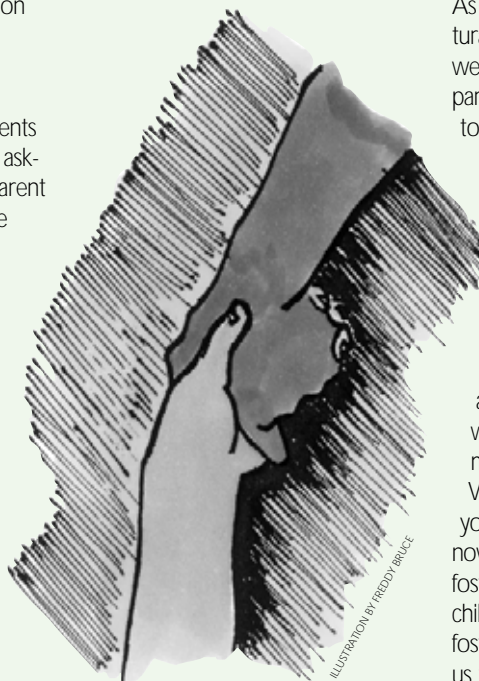


ILLUSTRATION BY FREDDY BRUCE

In another case, a little girl was African-American and the foster parent did not know how to care for her hair. The mother offered to braid the child’s hair during visits, and it turned out to be a nice way for the mother to care for her child.

These kinds of positive connections don’t happen in every case, because naturally, when someone is taking care of your child, you might feel threatened or resentful. But when those connections do happen, we see the impact on the child.

When children see parents and foster parents working together, it can reduce children’s acting out behavior. Maybe they’re acting out because they’re trying to get sent home, or maybe they’re showing that they miss their parent. Other times, children feel divided loyalty, and they believe that if they do well in the foster home, that will hurt their parent. When they see the parent and foster parent together, they understand, “I don’t have to feel this way.”

Taking Steps

As you can imagine, this is a big cultural shift. Some foster parents who were used to being kept apart from parents are asking, “Why do I have to meet the parent? I don’t feel comfortable.” But we are working with foster parent advocates and parent advocates at the agencies to ask, “What are your concerns?”

Some parents are also unsure. They are saying, “I’m angry and upset that my child was taken away. I don’t want to meet that person right now.” We’re telling them, “Look, I know you may not want to meet right now, but what do you want the foster parent to know about your child? Can you write a letter to the foster parent?” These steps can get us to the end goal of meeting and establishing a connection.

We hope that parent advocates and foster parent advocates can share their expertise, explaining, “I’m living proof that bringing us together can work and will work for the child and for you.”

Building a Bridge

Strengthening connections between parents and foster parents.

Denise Goodman, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative, works with public and private child welfare agencies nationwide to support parents and foster parents in working collaboratively.

Q: What are the benefits of positive connections between parents and foster parents?

A: I've seen that when parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly and stay home. Kids in foster care also get better care when the parent and foster parent exchange information about the child and work together to make visits positive. Kids also feel less worried about their families. Many kids are worried about loyalty—if they like the foster parent, does that mean they can't like their parent anymore? They feel better if they see the foster parent and parent getting along.

Reunification is also easier for the child if the relationship with the foster parent doesn't end, even if contact with the foster parent is just a birthday or Christmas card, a phone call, or occasional stopping by. The foster parent can become an ongoing support to the parent after reunification, someone who is an expert about their child. When things are tough and the kid is acting goofy, the parent can call and say, "What do I do?" Foster parent is able to say, "This worked for me." That can help prevent the child from re-entering foster care.

For the social worker, it can make a case easier if the parents and foster parents click. Being a social worker can be a grueling, difficult job, with everybody making demands and neither parent wanting you in their lives. Good relationships are booster shots that keep you going.

Q: What are the challenges of building positive connections?



ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY DINAN

A: Lot of times when you say to families and staff, "We want the foster parents to work with the parents," they freak out. They have a lot of fears.

The caregiving family may be concerned that they won't be able to keep the child safe. They worry that the parent will show up uninvited, or will be jealous or upset that their child is not at home. They worry that they won't get along because they don't have the same parenting style.

Parents have their own fears and stereotypes. They are worried that the foster parent will look down on them or that their child will like the foster parent better than them. Sometimes

concerns and fears. But the reality is that many caregivers and parents are already doing this behind the agency's back. They live in the same neighborhood and run into each other at Wal-Mart or at court and work through the awkwardness on their own.

Q: How can parents and foster parents build connections?

A: I talk about a concept I call "the bridge"—you can agree together about where you need to be on that bridge and move forward in baby steps to cross it. You don't have to start with face-to-face meetings. There are a lot of ways to have

Once you get past the awkwardness and everyone feels comfortable, the foster parent can take the child to the parent's home for visits, or let the parent come to her home. These steps are case-by-case, moment-to-moment decisions made in partnership with the social worker, parent and foster parent.

Q: How can the child welfare agency help?

A: The system has to value the relationship. Staff and caregivers have to be trained to understand, "This is our practice and expectation." It helps if foster parent recruitment makes the expectation clear. If you have a recruitment campaign that basically says, "Rescue children from their abusive parents," you're going to have a harder time than if it says, "Help children and their families."

It also helps if you have strong parent advocacy and parent advocates, so that parents are supported in being active participants in their lives and cases, not just told, "Here's your case plan, just do it."

You need structures in place, like an "icebreaker" meeting soon after placement where the parent and foster parent meet and talk about what the foster parent needs to know to take good care of the child. The foster parent can ask about the child's favorite foods or activities. The foster parent may say, "Johnny keeps asking me why he's in foster care. How can we handle that?"

Parents and foster parents can talk about how to have good visits. Would the parent like to bring the child a snack? Would the parent like to do the child's hair? Can they talk before the visit so that the parent can ask about the child's activities, like, "I heard you went to the zoo. Tell me about that." They can discuss how to end visits in a positive way. The more you can talk and agree up front, the smoother things will go.

When parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly.

it's even harder to get along when it's a kinship placement, because of family politics.

I find it's a harder sell for staff than for families, though. Staff are concerned that they'll have more problems to deal with. It's true that it's not always perfect dealing with real people's

contact: exchanging notes about the child, talking on the phone, or attending school meetings or doctor visits where the parent can provide useful information about the child.

When you both naturally feel ready to move to the next level, you can begin meeting in neutral territory.

Walks, Talks and Tears

I am trying new ways to get my anger under control.

BY CARMEN ORTIZ

I have been trying to find new ways to channel my anger. At times, I feel that I have my anger under control and other times I feel like I am going to lose control.

Typical ways that I used to handle my anger? Blowing up, throwing things and saying things that I later wished I could take back.

Just Hurting Myself

One typical moment: years ago, my kids' father and I got into an argument over our dog, Max. My boyfriend was working the graveyard shift so he was tired. I was pregnant with our first son, so I was also tired.

"Can you please take Max out? I'm not feeling too good today," I asked politely.

"I don't feel like it. You've been home. Why don't you do it?" he answered in a nasty way.

"Our agreement was that we would take turns, and today is your turn," I answered, already feeling totally pissed off. He just turned around and walked out.

At that point, I was so angry that I knocked everything off my dresser. Perfumes, lotions and figurines went flying and most of it broke.

"Oh, that was very mature," my boyfriend said. "Guess what? Now you just have to clean up that mess."

My boyfriend was being rude. He didn't care if I was pregnant and feeling bad. His mocking didn't help me feel any better, either. But it was true that my angry actions had only hurt me, and I was ashamed that I lost

control

From Fearful to Feared

Growing up in a home where there was domestic violence played a huge part in how I learned to handle my anger. When my father got angry at my mother, he would beat her. When things weren't done right, he would throw things around or flip furniture upside down.

Everyone in my family would argue and sometimes get into physical alter-



ILLUSTRATION BY OLESYA STRAUB

cations. They also said hurtful words, destroying relationships and breaking bonds. They say that time heals all wounds. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't.

When people around me fought, I felt very afraid and nervous. I would start to cry, hide in the closet, or even urinate on myself.

But when I got older, I would react to situations angrily myself. I didn't know how else to deal with my anger. I thought that was the only way to react.

Afraid of Myself

I knew that I had to do something about my anger. I did not like who I was becoming and was afraid of what I could do to someone when I was angry. When I got upset, I was nasty and disrespectful to people around me, especially to people who had nothing to do with my situation. I would say things that I didn't mean. I learned that words hurt more than a slap in the face.

My mother helped me see that my

anger was affecting my children. When I got angry at someone else, I would take it out on my children. I would get upset about the dumbest thing, and when my kids wanted to play with me, I would tell them, "You know what, I don't feel like playing right now."

One day my mother gave me a little wake-up call. She said, "You know what? The kids are not the reason you are upset, so don't take it out on them."

'What Did I Do?'

A turning point for me came the day I got so angry at my son that I hit him. It happened when my son was 6 and I had allowed him to visit his half brother for a week.

When he came back, I asked, "So, how was your week?" I was excited to see him again.

"Oh, it was OK," he said.

"What do you mean, OK?" I asked. "You must have done something

exciting." But he didn't answer, and I could tell something was wrong by the look on his face.

Later, my son told me that his half-brother's mother had told him that I was the reason his father was in jail. I felt betrayed and hurt. It was hard for me to calmly explain to my son that his father was in jail through no one's fault but his own. I told him, "When you do things you shouldn't, there are consequences."

After that, my son seemed to calm down. But when I told my son to get ready to take a bath, he said, "No" and called me a b-tch. I was hurt and enraged. I slapped him across his mouth. I slapped him so hard I made his mouth bleed.

I Began to Cry

After I slapped my son, he cried, and then I began to cry. I felt really, really bad. I saw the blood coming out of his mouth and I thought to myself, "Oh my gosh, what did I just do?"

Looking back at that moment, I realize now that I was upset at his father's family, not at my son. It hurt me to know that they blamed me for his father's mistakes. In the past, I had tried to shrug off their attitude, telling myself, "Carmen, it's not your fault."

Underneath, though, I was still hurt. I was also upset that I couldn't control what my son heard about me. But at the time, I didn't realize how angry I had become until I slapped my son.

How Do I Change?

At that point, I promised myself that I would never lift my hands to my kids again. But I did not know where to go for help. Sometimes I would cry at night because I felt like I was out of control. I was afraid that I would hurt myself or the people around me. I didn't feel like there was any hope for

(Continued on next page)

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me until I ended up taking a parenting class that taught me how to calm down.

In the parenting class, I learned that being angry is like a flight of stairs: you can either go down or up. If you don't pay attention to how you feel, you will probably go up and up. But you can learn to come down.

The teacher told us that if we figured out what made us angry, we'd have an easier time controlling our anger. That made sense to me. I had almost never paid attention to what made me angry. By the time I figured out why I was upset, the damage was done.

New Ways to Calm Down

In that class, I asked myself, "Why do I get so angry? What and who makes me feel that way? How do I know that I'm getting mad?" I learned to recognize my trigger points—the situations that tend to get me mad.

I also noticed that when I start getting angry, my heart starts racing and my palms sweat. I learned to react to my body by asking myself, "Is this really worth getting upset about? Can you let this go?" I found that, by paying attention to my reaction early on, I can sometimes nip my anger in the bud.

It hasn't been easy for me to change the way I react to situations that upset me. But I'm doing a lot better handling everyday situations that used to get me very angry—and apologizing if I lose my cool. I am getting better at shutting my mouth until I calm down.

I've also learned that when I'm feeling really aggravated, it helps if I take myself for a walk, or pick up the phone and call everybody I know until someone picks up. Other times, I just cry and tell God how I feel and keep crying until I don't feel angry anymore.

Teaching My Children

I've also had to help my children unlearn negative ways of responding to anger that they learned from me.

For many years, I did not realize that my children were watching my every move and learning from my example. Recently I noticed that when my kids get angry, they hit each other and throw things. Slowly, I am helping my children learn how to calm themselves down.

Once I was watching my son play his PSP. I could see that he was frustrated.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't beat this stupid level," he said.

"Haven't you played that game like 100 times?" I asked.

"Yeah, but it just won't do what I want and I'm getting mad," he told me.

"Well, you need to calm down. Take a deep breath before you try again," I said. He turned the game off and put it in his pocket.

Proud of Myself and My Son

A couple hours later, I saw my son playing the game again.

"Mom, remember that level that I couldn't beat?" he said.

"What about it?"

"I beat it!" he said.

"See what happens when you take a second to calm down?"

"Yeah, it was a lot easier."

I was proud when I saw that my son was trying to find a new way to deal with his anger.

I am also proud of myself. Dealing with my anger is a process. I still have moments when I feel out of control, and I have to remind myself to take things one step at a time. I know I'm not going to fix all of my issues with anger in one day. I am just glad that I have my reactions a little more under control and that I'm trying my hardest to keep myself calm.

'Walls Start

A group where parents

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. 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 her first conference with child welfare staff prepared with proof of the services she'd been getting to support her family before her kids entered care.

Alone and Afraid

I went to Sandy's first family visit and noticed she was sitting on the far side of the room. I asked Sandy, "How are you? What

to Fall'

learn from each other.

time were you told the children would arrive?"

"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 lessons 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

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



ILLUSTRATION BY HANDEL MORENCY

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.

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

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

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.

Learning to Listen

My children needed me to try new ways to parent.

BY LATONYA BASKERVILLE

When my children first came home from foster care, life was different for all of us. I was clean and sober, thrown into a new apartment with three little strangers. My children were 10 years, 5 years and 2 weeks old when they were removed and 12, 7 and 18 months when they were returned.

Boy did my children let me know they were mad that they had been in foster care. My son was like, "F-you" about everything. They'd say to me, "You a crackhead." I had to stay calm. I just kept telling them, "I'm not giving up on you."

Old-School Techniques

I was very confused about how to parent my children at first. The fact is, during my children's early years I used the parenting style I learned from family members. You know the model: beat your children if they disobey you, beat them if they talk back, beat them if they get in trouble, steal, have sex at a young age, act disrespectful. Beat them!

Don't get me wrong, some of the old school techniques are good and important. For example: have manners, be polite, respect your elders—that's a must. My children and grandchildren abide by these rules. But techniques like, "Children should be seen and not heard" and beating or controlling your children had to go.

Beating your child doesn't really work. It creates silent and enraged children. These children grow up to be abusive adults, rigid and insensitive to their own children's feelings and needs.

I Needed to Change

Once I took parenting classes, I realized that the model I mimicked was not legal. If I wanted to keep my children out of foster care, I needed to change my style.

But when my teenage son started running wild, I didn't know how to respond. My son was having many problems at school, at home and in our neighborhood. He started getting high and gang banging. I thought I was going to bury my son before he was 18 years old.

I was so afraid of disciplining him the old way, but all I knew how to do was yell at him. We were arguing and cursing all the time. Our relationship was crazy.

'What Can I Do?'

Then came a knock on the door: A detective from the local precinct came at 2 a.m., holding a manila folder as thick as a cinder block. The detective had evidence that my son had been committing robberies dating back two years. My son and I sat at the kitchen table with this detective. That was the first time I saw my son smoke a cigarette. He was tight.

I looked in his face and asked him, "Did you do these robberies?"

He said, "Yes, Mommy."

"Well, then you must take ownership," I told him. We wrote a full confession and the judge sentenced him to 15 months in a group home.

I started thinking, "Really, what can I do to parent this kid?" I thought back on the parenting and anger management classes I took when my kids were in care. I decided to create a parenting style for my son that I called, "Firm as a father, soft like a mother."

Keeping My Distance

When he got locked up, I let him do his time. I didn't run up to every visit or send packages and money. I didn't write letters or accept phone calls all the time. I was not in court for every

Soon my son dropped his gang activities, went back to school and got his GED. At 20, he is now a responsible father and is exploring starting his own business.

Trying Straight Talk

I faced similar challenges when my daughter was around 14 years old. My daughter was suddenly a whole new child. She began hanging with sexually experienced girls and started asking a lot of questions about boys.

I did my best to detour her from sex, but my best was not good enough. Soon I found out that my daughter was having sex with a 17-year-old boy. I was shocked, but I knew that if I overreacted, she would not open up to me, so I tried to play it cool.

We sat down in the living room and I asked her, "Why are you dealing with older boys and having sex right now? It seems like you're too young." We didn't flip out on each other, but straight talk did not help my daughter.

Learning to Listen

She started cutting school and running away from home. It was so serious that I went to the child welfare system for help before they came to me, charging me for educational neglect because she was truant. The caseworker told me to put her in therapy and I reconnected her to our former foster care agency for therapy. But she went to three sessions and refused to go back.

Once again, I had to dig into my bag of parenting skills and find a way to reach her. I realized that my daughter didn't need tough love, she needed nurturing, compassion, connection.

I started having girl talk with my daughter. I didn't do much talking; I just listened openly. We even invited her runaway partners over to our house to have real heart-to-hearts.



'Your History Is Not Destiny'

Most parents who were abused do not harm their kids.

The other parents thanked me and tried the same thing.

My daughter is doing much better now. She stayed with my grandmother for two years and recently moved home again. She went back to school and her GPA went from a 40 to an 87. She applied to a college program in her high school and was accepted. She also got a job and is now working at our local supermarket.

No Child Is Alike

As teenagers, my children needed two different parenting styles. My son needed me to let him experience the consequences of his own mistakes. My daughter needed me to come closer. Both needed me to listen. My youngest child is 10 years old. I can't wait to see what style will help him thrive as he grows older.

I try to use patience, open-mindedness, understanding, empathy, nurturing, respect, kindness, honesty, courage, security and discipline. To be honest, these skills came from the many classes I completed while my children were in foster care. I'm thankful that I learned these skills. I needed more tools to deal with my children.

I believe parents should surrender the punitive parenting styles that they suffered as children. Children need to feel safe. They need support to get ready to be responsible.

I understand that that learning new parenting skills takes diligence and practice. But I like the new model and use it. My children are not perfect, but they're doing better than they were.

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:

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.

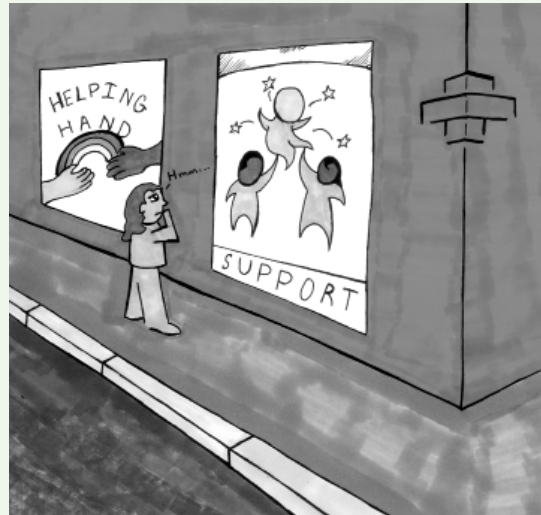
But studies that have been going on for 20 years have looked at parents who were physically abused and how they care for their children, and most find that only 20-30 percent of people who were physically abused as children go on to be abusive. That means that at least 70 percent don't go on to be abusive.

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.

Burden of Proof

Fathers must take responsibility to earn their rights.

Lauren Elfant, an attorney with Bronx Defenders, explains fathers' legal rights and responsibilities.

Q: How can fathers protect their relationships with their children?

A: When your child is born, you want the mom to put your name on the birth certificate and you want to stay involved. Regular contact with your children is very important.

If you're not on your child's birth certificate, then you should start by establishing that you're the biological father of your child. You can file an affiliation petition, which says that both you and the mother agree that the child is yours, or a paternity petition to get a paternity test.

Ideally, you want to resolve issues out of court. But if the mother is not letting you visit, file a visitation petition. There's a petition room in the court and they explain how to do it.

Finally, keep track of your involvement. If you have a custody or visit battle down the road, it helps if you can say, "Every time I gave mother money or visited my child, I wrote it down this in a book. Maybe it's not enough, but I tried."

Q: What do fathers face when their children go into care?

A: The first issue that has to be addressed is whether the father can prove he's the father. A mother doesn't have to prove her relationship, but it's a process to prove you're the father.

Another issue is that there's a real lack of services available to fathers. There are mother-child drug treatment programs, but very few drug treatment programs are designed for fathers to live with their children. Housing can be an issue for fathers, because there tends to be more ser-



vices and subsidies for mothers and their children or fathers with full-time custody.

The biggest issue here in New York is that there's few services for fathers who are alleged to have perpetrated violence within a family. Most states offer many services for these fathers—programs that take into account what the parents want, what the children want, the degree of severity of the allegation. But here, there's only one service for these fathers—a batterers program, and these cost money. Medicaid will not cover batterers programs, so fathers have to pay. It's very punitive, and in my experience, it stops clients from participating. This one size fits all approach to family violence really prohibits families from reunifying in a healthy, safe way.

Q: If children are removed from their mother, what is the father's role in the case?

A: If your child enters foster care, then by law, they have to serve you with a petition and inform you of court dates. But if you're not on the birth certificate, and the mother says she doesn't know who the father is, many times the father doesn't find out that his child is in care.

If the father is not named in the case—meaning that he hasn't been accused of anything—then in theory, the court should grant custody. But in reality, the court often will ask the

father to prove that he's a fit parent.

The court can demand that a father seeking custody participate in services, have supervised visits and even take a drug test. That may seem fundamentally unfair, but the court has jurisdiction over the child and often makes it very difficult to get the kid.

Unfortunately, the "non-respondent" parent doesn't have a right to an attorney, either, so many fathers in this situation don't know their rights. But the father's right is to come to court saying, "Why is my child not immediately coming home to me? What can I do?"

Q: What puts fathers at risk of losing the right to see their children?

A: Many times my clients don't consider themselves a batterer and don't want to do the program, or they don't have the money. We see fathers who let years and years go by without getting services so they can legally spend time with their children.

The court also will take out a full stay-away order of protection against the father, so if the mothers let them see their kids, they're putting the children at risk of removal. The mothers say, "My children want to see their father." We have to tell them, "You don't have that option." If a father won't do the program or supervised visits, he has to win at trial, and that's very rare.

Fathers are also at risk of having their rights permanently terminated if their children are in care and the mother's rights are terminated. If the court can't find you, or you haven't taken the steps to gain custody of your children, your rights can be terminated even if there is no allegation against you.

—Interview by Bevanjae Kelley

Standing

I had to fight

BY CARLOS BOYET

I was only 15 when my girlfriend of six months came out pregnant. Soon I found out that she was playing me. I was young and didn't know what to do, so I left her with the belly.

When the baby was born, my mother took me to the hospital. We both took a good look at the baby and said the same thing, "That's not my kid!"

The baby's mother did not allow a blood test, nor did she let me be a part of Jeremy's life. It hurt me inside to think, "If he is mine, what type of example am I setting?" But she was picking fights with my new girl and acting crazy. It was like a reality show. Then she fled with the baby.

I had no contact with her for more than two years. Then I received a petition from the court stating that I had to appear for a child support hearing. The court date was for my son's third birthday.

'You Are the Father'

In court, I got to see them both, mother and son. I still didn't know if Jeremy was my son, but I was concerned when I saw him. He looked very small for his age and was not walking or talking at the right level.

The judge asked, "What brings you here today?" I asked for a blood test.

Three weeks later came the big day. The judge said, "Carlos R. Boyet, you are the father of Jeremy Rodriguez." I felt terrible that I had not made an E for effort to see him.

I realize now that I could have asked the judge for visits, but I was unaware of my rights. When we

Up for My Son

to get my son out of the system.

left court, I tried to talk with my son's mother. "No, stay away from us," she said. I thought there was nothing I could do.

'Your Son Is in Care'

One cold October night my cell phone rang with alarming news. A caseworker said, "I am calling you to inform you that your child, Jeremy, will be placed in foster care."

I took a deep breath in disbelief. Then I asked for my son to be placed in my care. With an attitude, she replied, "You would have to go to family court to be recognized as the child's father."

When I hung up I was so upset that I took a long walk to calm down.

Not Getting Anywhere

I was determined to get my son out of foster care, but I did not know my rights. For two years I did not have contact with my son. His caseworker kept changing, and I wasn't getting anywhere. I was caught up in a world I did not understand.

Finally, I went to court. Instead of being given credit for my persistence in finding my son, or being seen as a potential resource for him, I was investigated.

I submitted to drug tests even though I was not using drugs. I took parenting classes that did nothing to educate me about the special needs of my son, who is developmentally disabled. I was compliant and polite. All through this, I did not have an attorney, because the case was not against me.



ILLUSTRATION BY RUDÁ TILLET

could visit me on weekends, because visits at the agency were not helping us bond. It was very difficult to get Jeremy engaged in playing games with me. He would just run around the whole place and pay me no mind.

Challenging Visits

Without court approval, Jeremy began to stay with me each weekend. I'm not going to lie—at first, it was very difficult. Jeremy was bugged out. He would scratch himself, bite himself, scream at the top of his lungs. There was never a day that Jeremy was having a good day. If I got a peaceful couple of hours, I was grateful for it.

I tried taking Jeremy to the beach; he didn't like it. I tried Great Adventure; he didn't like it. I kept asking myself, "What would be nice for Jeremy?" I found out that Jeremy liked video-

Twist of Fate

Despite our growing bond—and the intrusive investigations and meaningless requirements imposed in court—I was no closer to getting my son home.

Then one summer day Jeremy's foster parent called to inform me that my son was in the hospital. Jeremy had taken Valium and was sick for a week. I was furious.

In court, I was told that the agency would conduct an investigation. I asked if Jeremy could come home with me. They said no, but five weeks later he was temporarily discharged to my care. I was relieved to have him home but felt like the system was saying, "Here, just take him and be quiet about this."

The Father He Needs

Now I am a parent organizer at CWOP and I work in partnership with Children's Services to improve how the system treats parents in my community. However, I have to say that there was nothing good about my own experience.

I was stereotyped as a drug user, a deadbeat, a thug. I had to go through obstacles that had nothing to do with my skills as a parent. For instance, I was told to get a higher-paying job, but was not offered any kind of support in doing this. The caseworkers could have taken the time to understand me as an individual. They could have been more resourceful, worked with me and shown me some respect.

These days, Jeremy and I are doing well. At 11, Jeremy is still challenging and difficult. He has not had an easy life. He has behavior issues and learning problems. He struggles in school. But he's my son, and I'm committed to being the father he needs.

I was stereotyped as a drug user, a deadbeat, a thug. The caseworkers could have worked with me and shown me some respect.

Learning My Rights

Finally, I enrolled in a six-month training at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, where I learned my rights. At CWOP, parents learn how to advocate for themselves and for changes in the child welfare system.

I also made progress by working with Jeremy's foster parent. She gave me her phone number to call her any time. Eventually, I asked if Jeremy

games, and we played together. He also liked to hang out on the block, listening to music. That's not my idea of fun, but I was good with it.

What got us through was my commitment. I said to myself, "This is my son. I care about him." And, "Carlos, this is your job. You have to do this, no matter what."

My Little Angel

I beat my crack addiction to bring my daughter home.

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

When I got pregnant in January, 1999, my husband, Hector, told me I needed to stop smoking crack if I wanted this baby. Four months later, I finally stopped.

I'd had four children before Lydia, and lost them all to foster care. I was determined to do right by my daughter. Before I went to the hospital to give birth, I even changed my last name so that when the hospital social worker cleared me for discharge, my past ACS cases wouldn't come up.

My Little Angel

When Lydia was born on Sept. 22, I was so happy. She was 7 lbs. 7 oz. and born clean.

That day I made a promise to Little Mama (that's what I call her) and to myself that I would always take care of her. I knew it would be hard because my craving for crack was always in the back of my head.

It turned out to be a lot harder than I'd thought to keep that promise. But I still think of Lydia as my little angel. I've been able to make my life much better since she was born.

When I was 5 years old I was abandoned by my birth parents and adopted by a couple who changed my name to Lori Anderson and physically, sexually and emotionally abused my sister and me. I had no memory of my birth family. But when I was 10, my sister told me my real name was Sylvia Perez.

Alone and Ashamed

I started using drugs when I was 11 years old. First it was alcohol and

cigarettes. By the time I was 14 I was sniffing cocaine, smoking marijuana and drinking. I was thinking a lot about why my real mom left me. Soon I ran away to look for my mom.

Over the next few years, I ended up in a shelter, different foster homes and girls' homes, and locked up for

because we could leave Lydia with his sister and have a fun night that didn't put her in danger.

So we took the train to Harlem to buy the drugs. It was dark and on the way to the building I was nervous, with my stomach twisted in knots. I spent \$150 in one shot. Then we jumped in a cab to go to a hotel.

next to her and cry. I knew I wasn't being a mother.

When ACS came to get Lydia and put her in foster care, I was not surprised. Still, it was a wake-up call that we needed to get ourselves together.

Never Again

I will never forget her little face on the day of our first visit. I could see that she was tremendously hurt. All I could do was grab her and cry with her. I was so sad that my selfishness hurt her so much. That day I made a new promise that I've been working hard to keep: that I would never again be selfish in a way that would hurt her or my family.

After Lydia got taken, Hector and I were desperate to find out what we had to do to get her back. We went to a conference at the foster care agency. Hector and I had asked my sons' adoptive mother, Tamara, to come with us. I hoped that Lydia could be placed with Tamara instead

of with strangers.

The caseworker asked Tamara if she could take Lydia that day. "Yes, as long as Sylvia and Hector do what they have to do to get her back," Tamara said. I was so relieved.

Treated Like a Criminal

After that we discussed the case plan. We had to complete a drug treatment program, do domestic violence counseling and Hector had to go to anger management.

I felt angry at the conference. It felt like ACS treated me like a criminal. The caseworkers never looked at me directly. They were hard on me



Little Mama frosts cupcakes she baked with her mom.

nine months because I stole \$2 from a social worker's purse. By the time I was 17, I'd come to New York City with an abusive boyfriend. We started smoking crack and dealing it as well. I used because I never felt loved.

Every year on my birthday I feel so alone, without a mom or dad to call and say, "Happy birthday, Sylvia. I love you."

My birthday came when Lydia was about a month old. I felt anxious and depressed. Hector and I thought it would be OK to use just that once,

Weak With Temptation

I regret that night 'til this day. Now I see that I was weak with the temptation, and that all that money went to waste. I could have spent it on the baby, buying her clothes or little toys. But I let my selfishness and addiction take over.

After that, I started smoking again. I put myself first. I didn't really take care of my daughter anymore. I sold her WVIC checks (for buying milk) and changed my food stamps for money. All I wanted to do was go to the streets and sell myself for drugs. I always felt like garbage when I finished smoking the crack. I would lie

about my drug abuse, and they made Hector and me sign a contract saying that we would meet their demands.

I was very angry at myself, too. It was just unbelievable that I had put myself through this ordeal again.

I Am a Good Person

After that meeting, Hector and I went to Lincoln Recovery Center (an outpatient program) in the Bronx. We were required to do a urine test every day for one year, five times a week.

In the beginning of rehab I was totally uncomfortable being with other addicted women and their attitudes. But I learned a lot in recovery. I learned that my addiction was a disease and that my focus in treatment was to learn more about myself.

I learned that I am a good person

couldn't wait for Fridays.

I got anxious by Wednesday. All I could think of was kissing and hugging her. I loved talking with her on the way home, planning what we would do together for the weekend.

On Saturday we went to Bible study. I loved being there with her, letting her know that God loves us. For the two hours that we were there, I felt that everything was OK.

Some afternoons, Hector and Little Mama would color together, and she made sure he stayed in the lines. They watched Nickelodeon together and talked, little conversations about what was going on with each other. He's a very protective dad with her.

By Sunday it was time to say goodbye. Then I just waited for Fridays again.

we both ended up in tears. Our arguments scared me. I didn't want every little thing to turn into a fight.

Luckily, ACS required us to go to family therapy every week for a year after Lydia came home. So I discussed it with the therapist. He told us to make little steps with her. He reminded me that Hector and Little Mama and I are all going through changes.

The therapist said it would take time for Lydia to adjust to our home and our different rules and schedules. He was right—it took a long time for Little Mama to settle down. But there has been so much to celebrate, too.

A Second Home

I love getting Little Mama ready for school every day, especially doing her hair: putting the gel in, pulling it into ponytails and then braiding them. When I was on crack, I honestly didn't care about Little Mama's hygiene or how she looked. I also wasn't loving her like a real mother should. I never took her out—not to the park, or shopping.

Being a sober mom is 100 percent better. I make sure she eats well and that I have food in the house, and that she takes baths and washes her hair. I take her to the park. We play together—hide and seek and follow the leader—and then we get an icee and sit in the grass watching soccer or baseball games.

I feel grateful that the judge finally gave my husband and me a second chance to be parents, and proud of myself for going through drug treatment, therapy and parenting classes so I could bring her home.

Giving and Caring

My parenting has gotten a lot better in the months since Lydia first came home. We eat dinner every night

now, sitting together at the table to discuss our plans for the next day.

We bake cakes, make arts and crafts projects and talk about little things she's thinking about. I love her personality. She's very giving and caring.

When she acted up, I had to realize that Lydia's not a perfect angel, but she is a good kid. We still have difficult moments, but I'm getting better at staying calm.

Lydia's bedtime is the best time of the day for me. At about 8:30 p.m., she and I go to her room and read fairy tales. We hug and kiss and she says her prayers. After she lies down, she always calls to her daddy for a cold cup of water.

We are all together as a family when we put her to bed. She looks like an angel, protected by God, when she sleeps.

I will never forget her little face on the day of our first visit. I could see that she was tremendously hurt. It was a wake-up call that we needed to get ourselves together.

and can be responsible. I realized I could stop prostituting and lying all the time, and that Hector and I could begin to trust each other. I felt good about myself for the first time.

Showing My Love

In parenting classes I learned that I could become a real parent to my daughter and have family activities with her and my husband. I learned about unconditional love and how to show Little Mama my love, so she knows that I do love her.

In May 2001 we got unsupervised weekend visits. For those two years, I

Finally Home

After two years and 11 months of fighting to turn our lives around, Hector and I got Little Mama home.

I thought that once Lydia was home for good, our family would feel perfect. But for the first couple weeks she gave me a really hard time. She didn't want to brush her teeth or wash her hair. She totally refused to pick up her toys. I had to tell her, "Go to your room." This little angel had a bad side I'd never seen.

Sometimes we had arguments and

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.

"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."



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.

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

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

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.

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.

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."

Slowing Down in Life

Drugs got between me and my son.

BY PRINCE ARIAS

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 by 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.

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.

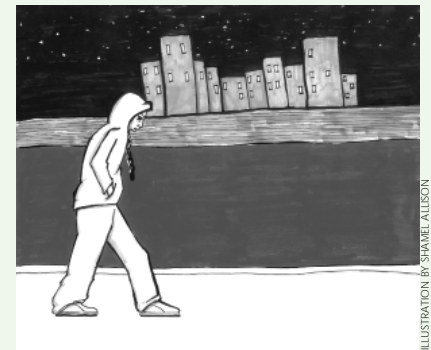
But a few weeks ago, we had a setback. I was caught with drugs in my system. I was smoking because I didn't expect that the next day I would have to give urine.

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.



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."

Your Rights in Rehab

Jessica Marcus, a staff attorney at the Brooklyn Family Defence Project, 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: If I have an ACS case, can I choose the kind of treatment I get?

A: Whether you get inpatient or outpatient treatment should be decided between the parent and ACS and the agency. If you know of a good program that you'd like to attend, you should definitely discuss that with your lawyer or caseworker.

There are two types of treatment programs that allow you to get help while living with your children. Mother-child programs allow you and a child to live together in a treatment facility. Family Rehabilitation Programs (FRP) allow you to get outpatient treatment and other services while living at home with your children. FRP and mother-child programs are proven, effective forms of treatment,

but many people working in child welfare do not know about them. If you want those treatment options, speak up.

Q: If I attend in-patient rehab, will I lose my housing?

A: Parents who go to residential treatment very often lose their housing. Unless you can pay for treatment, the program is probably going to require you to be on public assistance, and public assistance will pay the rent allowance portion of your

If you know of a good program that you'd like to attend, you should definitely discuss that with your lawyer or caseworker.

budget directly to the program. If you can, talk to a housing lawyer to find out how to retain your housing.

If you think residential treatment is the only thing that will help you, getting help should be your primary focus, but if there's any way to retain your housing and get effective treatment, you should try that.

Q: Can I switch to a different treatment program if I don't like mine?

A: I can never say that ACS won't use something against a parent, but if a parent has a good reason why another program will be better, she should say so. If you keep switching over and over again, it might look like you're avoiding something, though.

Q: Do I get visits with my kids even if I'm in a residential treatment program?

A: Yes, you should have visits with your kids no matter what. The foster care agency has a responsibility to arrange visits that work.

Q: Once I complete rehab, will I get my kids back right away?

A: Not always. Sometimes there's

just administrative delays—a parent has done everything but can't get ACS and the agency to pay attention. Housing can cause a delay. Sometimes there are other steps in your service plan, like therapy or parenting programs.

Sometimes programs don't consider you finished unless you have a job and an apartment, and it's not always easy to fit in a job with the other requirements of a case, like service plan reviews, visits and court dates.

If a program says you're not officially graduated, you should argue that you finished the treatment portion and are working on finding a job, but in the meantime, your children should come 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.



ILLUSTRATION BY ROSA PERIN

'I Am Free Now'

The city stepped in to protect my kids and me.

BY ALICIA GABRIEL

Translated from Spanish.

Until a few years ago, I was living with a man who terrified me and our children with his jealousy and violence. I met him a few months after I came to the United States from Mexico, in May, 1992. The day after I arrived in this country I began to work in a clothing factory in New York City. There I met a man who I never imagined would become abusive.

I Felt So Helpless

Soon after meeting him I went to live with him. He prohibited me from everything. I couldn't have friendships with anyone. I couldn't linger at the store. I knew it wasn't a good situation, but by then I was pregnant.

When three months had passed, he began to beat me. I felt so helpless. At that time, my ignorance was so deep that I believed that I loved him and had to protect him. Now I look back and feel guilty for having permitted the beatings by not leaving. I blame myself for being ignorant, for believing that he would change, for accepting him as my partner although he treated me badly. But in truth, it was not my fault he hit me.

Many times we argued over our finances, because he didn't like to work, although we soon had two children to support. When I worked, that bothered him a lot. On two occasions he grabbed me by the hair as I was leaving for work, and once he got in my face and told me, "I dare you to leave this house. If you do it, I am going to break your face."

"And why don't you get out of bed and go find yourself a job?" I said. "It's your responsibility as a father to go out and work."

"Who are you to tell me what to do? Why do you want me out of here—so you can go out with other

guys?"

When I went to the check cashing place, he took the money right out of my hands. I'd say, "This money isn't yours!" But he hit me when I tried to keep it from him.

'My love, we can't return,' I told my son.
'We're going to start a new life in this place where we're treated well.'

He'd say, "Shut your mouth. All you want to do is argue and argue about everything."

Hurting Our Children

Soon the abuse escalated, so that he wasn't hitting only me, he was also hitting our children. He was impatient with them, and when he was upset, he lashed out.

During the times when we weren't fighting, I talked with him about why he was like that. I told him, "Look, Pedro, you have to change if you want to be happy. You have to be loving with the children. You have to worry about them and their future.

Why don't you think about how this affects the little ones?"

He'd agree, but the next day he would return to the same behavior.

Taking the Punches

Once I called the police, even though I was afraid to because I'm an illegal immigrant and I thought I could get sent back to Mexico. But when they

came to my house they didn't believe anything I said. My boyfriend's sisters were there and they defended him.

Domestic violence makes your strength turn to weakness. I felt there was nothing I could do. So I decided that life was unjust with me and I needed to live only for my children. I needed to be strong and take the punches. I felt that God was with me all the time and that no matter how difficult my life was I would survive.

Then one day a social worker from the foster care system arrived at my house to investigate what was happening to my children. That afternoon when I got home, I found a terrible notice—a letter that spoke about child abuse. Believe me, at that moment I wanted to die.

For a moment I stayed frozen, feeling like my life had come to an end.

(Continued on page 26)

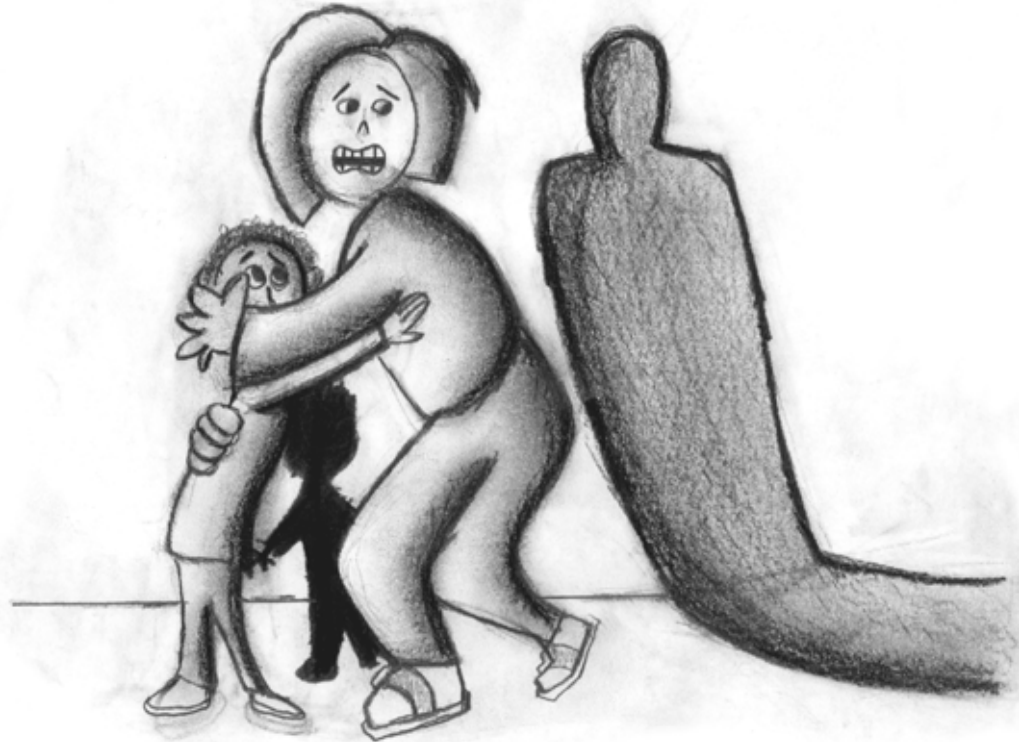


ILLUSTRATION BY TODD MILHOUSE

(Continued from page 27)

Then I said to myself, "My God, help me confront this big problem. Clearly, to protect my children, I have to do everything they ask of me so nothing worse happens."

Taken From Our Hell

I went to the agency and they asked me various questions. The worker told me, "Don't fear. We're going to help protect you and your children."

I asked them, "Where are you going to take me?"

"To a shelter that's secure," the worker told me. "If you don't want to cooperate with what we propose and you return to your husband, we'll have to bring your children to a place where they'll be safe and protected."

"What about my things?" I said.

"Forget your things," she told me. "You have to leave them. Our concern is that these children don't keep getting abused by their father."

I went with them. We got my children. They took us out of the hell that I couldn't leave.

When we arrived at the shelter, it was night. As I walked into the place I was crying silently. My son asked, "Where are we going?" He sounded like more of a man than he should've at age 7.

In the shelter the women met once a week with the counselors to talk about what it had been like living with our abusive partners. The counselors asked each of us how we felt about leaving home and living in the shelter. Did we feel protected or were we feeling fear? I felt fear and sadness, mixed with relief and hope. I cried a lot at night, and often asked myself, "Why did this happen to me?"

I was fearful about going out into the street. I feared that my ex would appear if I went out alone. But the counselor told me, "Don't fear anything. This is a good protected place." Even so, I told my worker that I couldn't get this image of him pursuing me out of my mind.

Traumatized and Shocked

After about a month the therapist sent me to a clinic to get therapy with a psychologist. She asked how I was doing emotionally.

"I feel very nervous," I told her. "In the first few weeks I felt as if life were a dark crystal ball." The trauma of what I'd been through and the shock of being moved to a new place was so much that I had a lot of difficulty talking clearly.

times I asked him, "Do you want him to keep mistreating me?"

He told me, "No, Mama. He'll change. He's not bad. He's not going to do anything to you."

I had to change the conversation. "*Mi hijo*, let's talk about our new home. It's very pretty here. They give us everything, they give us food, and I can take care of you better here."

My daughter said to me, "Yes, *Mami*, I like this house. Nobody yells at us, nobody tells us nothing."

"Yes, my love. We're going to start a new life in this place where we're treated well."

As the days passed, I began feeling more tranquil, taking things more

Now I feel free to make my own decisions and I am not under anyone's control, not my ex-boyfriend's and not the shelter's.

The therapist told me, "This is very important. Little by little you'll go on letting out all that you feel."

My Son Blamed Me

The hardest thing was that my son blamed me for separating from his father and leaving his father alone. It was hard to make him understand why we had to leave, even though he saw his father beating me. He was very small, and couldn't make sense of the situation. I told him, "As you grow up, you'll realize the separation was not my fault."

But he continued insisting that he wanted to return to his father. "My love, we can't return," I said. Other

calmly. I gave a lot of attention to my son and treated him with love, and he began to feel better, too.

The social workers and staff at the shelter treated us well, but you know something? After we'd been there for a while I began to feel as if we were locked up in a jail. The rules were strict: nobody could visit our family, and when we went somewhere we had to say where we were going and when we'd be back. Plus, none of the children could walk alone through the hallways or get wild with each other. It was hard to live under so much control.

My 'Mansion' in the Bronx

Finally, after five months they moved me to my "mansion" in the Bronx, an apartment that has become my home sweet home. Only God knows why we succeeded just at the moment when it seemed like our nightmares would never end.

I haven't forgotten the past, but I've learned a lot about fighting to keep moving forward. Now nothing and no one will deter me from ensuring that my children and I are protected and surviving. My life has changed because now I feel free to make my own decisions and I am not under anyone's control, not my ex-boyfriend's and not the shelter's.

I am taking classes to learn English, and I am involved in an organization of parents who have united to improve the schools in my neighborhood in the Bronx. I have helped the community, and I'm active in my children's education and growth.

'I Am Free Now'

I also joined a group of parents who have been involved with the foster care system and are fighting to make sure parents are treated fairly. As part of my involvement in this group, I had the opportunity to write my story. Believe me, I never could have imagined myself seated in a chair in a writing group, telling the story of my life.

Sometimes my daughter says to me, "Mama, why do you do so many things? You have us going to so many places with you!"

I tell her, "My daughter, you have to come with me. I am free now, and I want you to be free to know the world."

An Obligation to Protect

What parents need to know about 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, if the mother is offered meaningful help and decides not to take it and if 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 casework-

ers 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, if 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.

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 butter-

flies." 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

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?

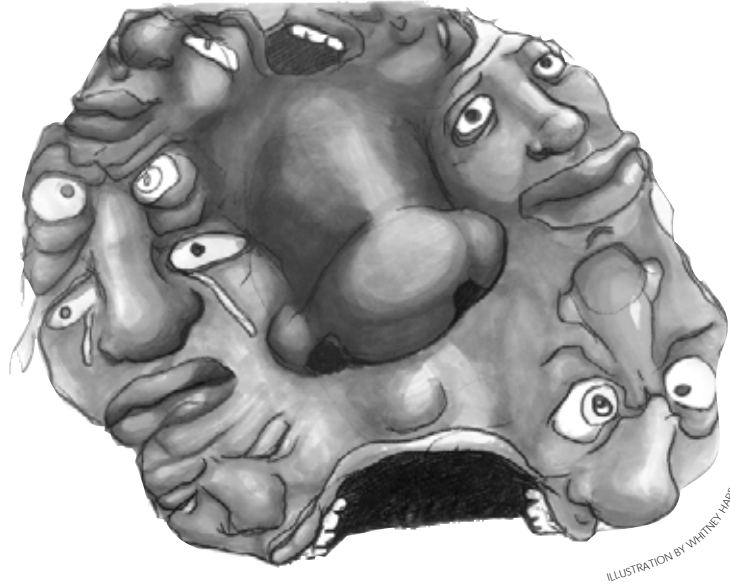
A: One thing that's controversial but important to me to clarify is that battering is not simply a pattern of violence, it's a pattern of using certain behaviors, including violence, to control your partner and a relationship. Using violence against a partner is against the law, and it's wrong, but someone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



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

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.

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.

On the Right Track

Working with your lawyer to get your children back.

Maxine Ketcher, senior staff attorney at Bronx Defenders, explains how your lawyer can help you get to reunification—and get the services you need to support your family:

Q: How do parents know they're on track to reunification?

A: If you're on track, you should be getting increased visits, especially unsupervised visits. If your visitation isn't increased over a period of six months, even though you think you're doing well, you should ask, "What's going on? What are the differences in opinion between how I see my case and how the agency sees me?"

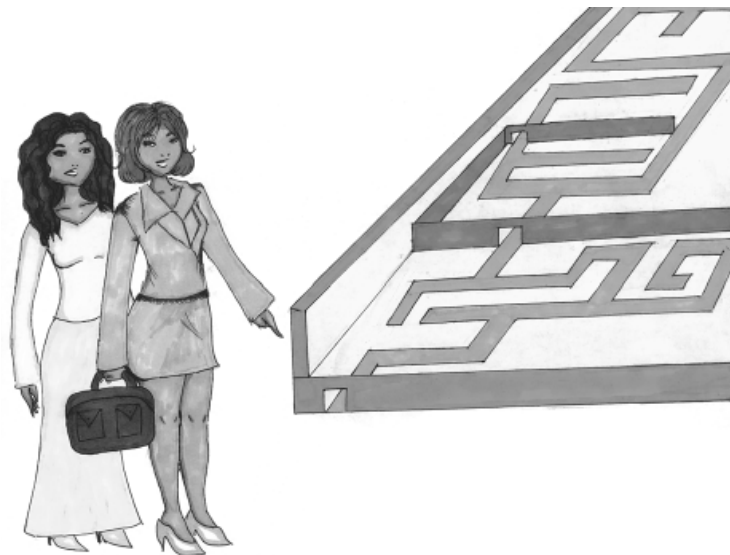
If you disagree with the service plan the agency has for you, you might want to ask someone you trust, "What services do you think I need or my family needs for us to get back together?" Work with your lawyer and the agency to come up with a plan that seems useful for everyone.

Q: What are some reasons a case might not be progressing?

A: Very often a block to reunification is that a family's service plan is not clear. Parents get caught up in this cycle of going to services without really knowing what they're supposed to achieve in order to come together as a family again.

It happens because the judge and people at the agencies start speaking in shorthand, or they don't understand the services that are available from all the different systems out there.

So the service plan might say "go to therapy," without saying what is supposed to be gained by going to therapy. If the therapist and the parent don't understand the goal, how can they work toward it?



'Parents can get caught up in a cycle of going to services without really knowing what they're supposed to achieve in order to come together as a family again.'

Or the agency says, "Take parenting skills classes." The parent says, "I went five times! Why are they still telling me to go to parenting skills?"

Lawyers can work with parents to get the agencies to give a clearer statement, like, "The reason we want you to go to parenting skills classes is because we want you to learn to take care of your child with ADHD," or some other emotional or mental health issue.

Then the lawyer or social worker can help develop a more appropriate service plan, because most parenting skills classes are not going to teach that. A parent might need a homemaker service through the Office of Mental Health, or some other support service where the parent and child learn life skills together.

Unless you have a really good advocate to sort that out, it can be hard to make sense of what you really

need to achieve to get your children home.

A parent's attorney should sort out what ACS or the agency is really concerned about, explain the holdup to their client, get their view on it, and work to solve those issues by getting the parent the right services.

Other times, the attorney tries to get the agencies to understand that certain improvements they'd like to see might not happen, but that won't necessarily mean the children will be at risk of harm.

For instance, when agencies are dealing with parents who are mentally ill, they often think, "They can't be with their children, because we can never tell when they'll decompensate [fall apart] again." But there's a lot of mentally ill people doing fine out there, and mental illness should not be a barrier to reunification if the parent is getting the right services and

has a plan for handling the situation if she starts to have problems again.

The attorney's job is to say, "Hold it, this issue not going away, so how are we realistically going to deal with it?" Just because someone is mentally ill or mentally retarded, for example, doesn't mean they can't take care of their children with appropriate supports.

Q: How can parents work with lawyers to make sure the reunification succeeds?

A: When children end up coming back into foster care it's often because there's some failure in connecting to services. The plan is for a certain support to be in place, but it doesn't get in place at the same time the children actually return home. A child might have some adjustment difficulties and the mom says, "I think my child could use more therapy, or we both could," but the first therapy appointment available is two months away. That's not going to work, but that's a reality.

The best case scenario is for the lawyer and parent to sit down before the child comes home and decide what supports are needed. You don't want to have too many services or too few. At best, we'd also make sure the providers are appropriate. Just like someone might test two or three doctors or therapists before choosing a person to see, parents should go check out the agency, school, or clinic they're expected to turn to.

Often the clients will accept whatever's suggested, and agencies often don't feel comfortable with people moving around and finding the best fit, but it's important to do that if you can.

Sometimes, you also have to say, "Is this really the right thing to do? Do we want to slow the reunification

down a bit so we can make sure the family has the supports to stay connected?" Sometimes you get resistance from the agency or the child's representative, but that might be the best thing to do.

There's also pressure sometimes not to give the parent certain services because of where the money is going to come from—whether it's foster care money, preventive, aftercare money or what. But a family is always entitled to the 20 preventive services

outlined in the state regulations, so attorneys need to say, "Sort out where the money is going to come from, but the families are entitled to these things."

Q: What should parents do if their families are having trouble after the kids come home?

A: After some time apart, it will be an adjustment for a family to be back together. Usually there's a honey-

moon period that's more positive than later on when the family starts feeling comfortable with each other again.

But it's a very difficult thing for parents or even children to say, "Hey, we need some extra help." There's just so much pressure on everyone and they fear that if something is not going right it will raise the question, "Should the children remain at home?"

I would say the best way to handle it is to go to your attorney, because your attorney can maintain confidentiality. She is still bound by attorney-client privilege. The attorney may be able to reach out to various services to see whether an agency will be helpful or harmful. Attorneys are not trained to support families in crisis, but we are trained to protect our clients and get them the help they need so they're not in a worse legal situation down the road.

Taking it Slow

I have farther to go before Barbie comes home.

BY BERTHA MARQUEZ

Unfortunately, many times when children go into foster care, the relationship between parents and children grows worse instead of better. Parents are usually stressed and angry that the system has invaded their lives. Often kids are too. They take that anger out on each other. Instead of communicating the right way, parents and children let the anger take over.

But I've made efforts to prove to my daughter that although I was using drugs and she's now in the system, no one and nothing is going to get in between our love.

When I visit Barbie at the agency, I am always on time, and Barbie and I play and color together. We talk about the things that are important to her and her growing up to be a responsible young lady. For her birthday, I bought cake, soda, candy and pizza for all the kids at the agency. Whenever I see her, I hug her a lot and I look at her with love and grace.

Until recently, I had visits with Barbie just once a week, but now I've received permission to have her for entire weekends. That means she could come home soon, but I am

not rushing to have my daughter come home with me.

I still feel like there are many issues I need to work through. I still struggle with depression and anxiety, so I would like to go to therapy. I have also suffered some episodes of domestic violence that I feel I need to deal with. All of the services I have received already have helped me, but I still have farther to go.

I want to be more confident that I am ready to care for Barbie. After all, I have never dealt with the stress of having her home while I was clean, and I fear that I could overwhelm myself and relapse. I don't want to do that to myself or to Barbie.

Even though she seems strong, I know that Barbie is affected by all that she's gone through with me. I think if she came home and had to live with the fear of being removed again, that would be a tragedy. I don't want my daughter to feel like life's so hard that she could drown in a glass of water.

When Barbie was home with me last weekend, we had a wonderful time. We cleaned her room and painted

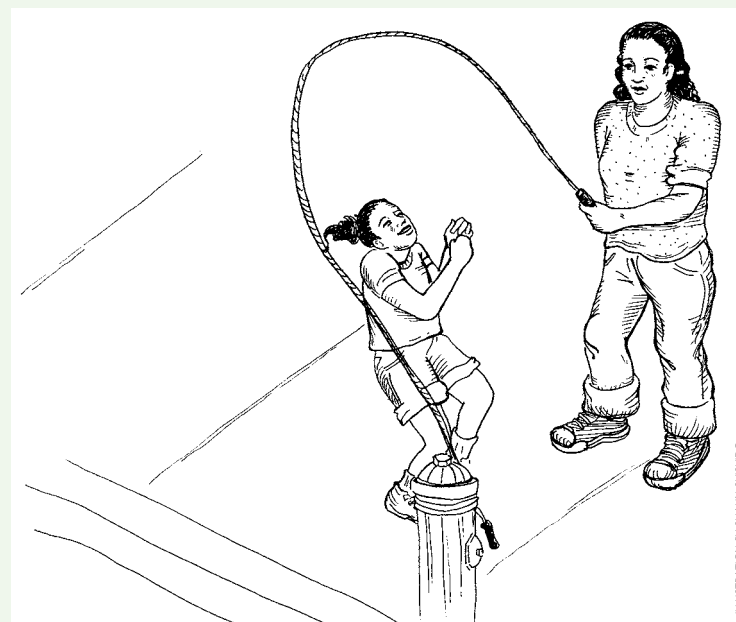


ILLUSTRATION BY SHAUN SHESHO

it two shades of light pink so she could feel comfortable and happy sleeping there. I also bought her the Power Puff sleeping accessories and I put up a poster of Mickey Mouse, because that's what I like, and she put up a poster of her favorite rap group. Then we went downstairs to jump rope.

But when Barbie and I went outside and I told her to put her jacket on because it was chilly, Barbie refused.

She gave me a little challenge. It was just a small thing, but I became nervous and distracted. I remembered when I was getting high and I would tell her to do something and she wouldn't.

At those times, it felt like more than I could deal with, but now I know that it shouldn't be. Still, I have those old feelings with me so I know I need help to learn how to deal with situations like those.

WHERE TO FIND HELP IN NYC

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.

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, Hedge Funds Care and North Star Fund.

New from Rise Workbooks to help parents strengthen their families

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.

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, too.

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. These stories help parents understand children's fear and anger and learn healthy responses that other parents have used to repair relationships with their children.

RISE MAGAZINE



RISE

Tri-annual print magazine written by and for parents affected by the child welfare system.

#CW-RISE, 12 pp.
3 issues/yr. \$3/year

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

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