

Changing the Frame

What parents need to know about Child Safety Conferences

BY BEVANJAE KELLEY

In many places, parents facing removal of their children are asked to attend a conference where a decision is made whether or not a child will be placed in foster care. In NYC, this is called a Child Safety Conference.

As a Parent Advocate, I have supported parents in hundreds of conferences and know that they are often scary and emotional experiences for parents.

In my experience, when parents come prepared, there's a greater chance that they and the agency can come up with a plan that lets the children remain in the home or community. Even if you experience the heartbreak of having your children placed, coming prepared can help you show that you are committed to resolving concerns and bringing your children home.

We hope the following information helps you come to your conference prepared.

1ST STEP: WHETHER TO GO

Some parents don't go to conferences because they're scared and angry. There are also risks to going, because conferences are not confidential. Everything you say and do is documented and may be used against you.

But there are also good reasons for going. The most important is that you show that you care enough to show up. You may think that if you don't show, CPS will drop the case or postpone the meeting. They won't. Not going makes it more likely that your children will be removed.

Being at the conference gives you a chance to tell your side. The report from the state Central

Registry cannot be changed. But anything you say is not true will be written down and given to the judge if the case goes to court.

Lastly, the conference is a place where you can show your strengths, like that you attend your child's school meetings, that you are working or going to school to improve your family's finances, that you do fun and meaningful activities with your children, or that you have safe people who support you.

At the conference, you should share all the good things about your family that you can. Sharing these positives may help you negotiate for a better outcome.

WHAT HAPPENS AT A CONFERENCE?

Conferences differ from place to place, but in general, you should be prepared to attend for at least 90 minutes.

The people in attendance include the CPS caseworker and supervisor, the facilitator, and sometimes an advocate for your child. If a preventive agency is involved, the preventive case planner and supervisor may also be there. If your child is 10 or older, you may also be asked to bring him or her to participate.

At the start, the facilitator will go over the rules, from no profane language, to no recording the conference. Next, the facilitator will state the possible outcomes, everything from dismissal of the case to removal of the children.

Next is a discussion of concerns. You will be asked to give your understanding of CPS's concerns about you. You may answer immediately, or you may ask CPS to

present their concerns first.

It can be difficult to hear the allegations against you, but it is often a good idea to listen to their concerns before you share your perspective. If you feel the allegations are inaccurate, you can say so, or, if things have changed in your family life since the allegations were made, you can share what you are doing now to keep your children safe.

Next the group discusses strengths, where you should share all the good things you can about your family. This is followed by a sessions to brainstorm ideas to keep the children safe. If everyone at the table is in agreement about what should happen, that's what will happen. If there's no agreement, Child Protective Services has the final say.

If you disagree with the plan, you should be given the opportunity to write down what you disagree with. That document will go to the judge if the case goes to court.

PREPARING EMOTIONALLY

At all conferences, the facilitator says that there will be no shaming or blaming. But it can make you feel angry and depressed to talk about your family at a conference and hear the allegations against you.

Parents often feel even angrier when they have a child welfare history, as a parent or a child. In those situations, CPS is mandated by law to speak about your past. But parents often feel like: What does the past have to do with now?

I've seen many parents storm out or shut down. But you are being judged on what you say and how you act. Hopefully, knowing this

Who and What to Bring to Your Conference

Having people at the conference who support you can make a difference.

You can't bring a lawyer but you can bring anyone else, such as family or friends, a religious leader, a therapist, or someone from a program you participate in.

People who can speak about your family's strengths are good to invite. If they can't be there in person, they can participate by speaker phone. You can also bring their names and numbers or letters of support from them.

You do have to be comfortable having them know your business, though, especially because sometimes CPS will raise information that they might not know about. And you don't want to bring someone who has a short fuse, or who tends to share too much.

Bringing immunization records, medical insurance cards, report cards, IEP evaluations, school attendance reports, and information about your child's extracurricular activities can also show that you are on top of your child's well-being.

can help you prepare emotionally so you don't act in a way that hurts your case.

You may also want to plan what you will do if you find yourself getting upset, from asking for a moment in the hall, to reminding

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yourself that there are better ways to fight for your family than getting loud.

It's also important, if you've addressed problems from your past, to find ways to show it. You should talk about programs you've benefitted from, people who support you, or changes you've made to strengthen your family.

PLANNING WHAT TO SHARE

You should plan all the good things about your family you want to share, as well as how to explain anything false about the allegations.

During conferences, parents are also asked questions like, "Did you leave your child home alone?" or, "Did you and your partner have a fight?" It can be hard to know how to answer those questions.

On the one hand, answering openly can help to show that you are working to resolve safety concerns, especially if the concerns are not too serious. For instance, a parent might say, "I know my child needs supervision after school. I would like help finding an after-school program so he will be safe until I get home from work."

HIPAA Forms

In many conferences, you will be asked to sign a blank HIPAA form, which gives CPS the right to get information from any doctor, therapist, or provider who ever worked with you or your child. You have the right not to sign the document, though CPS may believe you have something to hide.

If you choose to sign but limit access, you can ask CPS exactly what information they are looking for, then ask them to write on the form who they will get information from, and from what dates, before you sign it.

Other times, though, answering questions can make it harder to resolve the situation. For instance, often CPS will ask questions that are not about the case. Frequently, they will ask about drug use even if the initial allegation had nothing to do with drugs.

If you don't want to answer, you can say something like, "I don't see

how that question relates to the allegations," or, "I want to talk to a lawyer before answering these questions."

Most of all, all parents should know that this meeting is focused on safety. If you want your children at home, you need to show that they're safe at home.

What you don't want to do is act

like something that's clearly a big deal is not a big deal. If your child has bruising and swelling and you don't know why but you haven't taken your child to the doctor, CPS will be very concerned. You want to make clear that no one is more concerned about your children's safety than you are. ■

Prepared for Parenting

I used my conference to prove I was a fit mother

BY LINDSAY REILLY

When I became pregnant with my son, Jeremiah, I already had two daughters in foster care. When my best friend found out I was pregnant, she grabbed me by the shoulders and told me, "You're crazy for wanting to go through all this again but if you are, you need to be serious about it this time."

I listened to her.

My daughters' father was abusive. But Jeremiah's father, Shaka, is a very wonderful man. He was genuinely excited about getting ready for our baby, and he fought right alongside me to visit my daughters. I also enrolled in preventive services and began working with a case manager who helped me connect to supports, like prenatal care.

I knew from when my second daughter was born that New York City (and other places) require Child Safety Conferences if you have another baby while your child is in foster care so I collected every document from every appointment I attended so I could bring them to the conference to show how much I'd accomplished.

PREPARED FOR PARENTING

After 36 hours of labor, Jeremiah came out with one eye open. He looked like someone had woken him up from a very good nap.

When it was time for the conference, I had my fears, of course. Shaka was beside himself with anxiety. But we were also prepared!

The conference included the facilitator, my new CPS worker, her supervisor, my foster care case planner, my caseworker from GEMS, a youth advocacy group I am a part of, and my social worker from Brooklyn Defender Services, which represents me with my two daughters.

STRENGTHS, CONCERNS, SUPPORTS

On a board they wrote down three columns: Strengths, Concerns and Supports. In the strengths column, Shaka and I listed how we use our support system, how we'd taken parenting classes and how we aimed to maintain a stable environment for Jeremiah. Pretty soon our strengths filled up the whole column!

Next up were the Concerns. The concerns were that my husband and I both had a history of mental illness, and that my daughters were still in foster care.

Under Supports, we listed all the organizations that we were affiliated with. The CPS worker and her supervisor were impressed and proudly declared there wasn't a doubt Jeremiah should be going home with us. I was so happy!

STRUGGLING BUT OPTIMISTIC

Now it's almost a year later and I'm proud to say that we've kept our son safe at home. Miah, as we call him, has grown from a little guy with the silliest faces to a handsome little big man who loves screaming out "Momma" or "Dadada!" and is trying so hard to run all over.

We're still fighting to get my daughters home from foster care. I face a lot of discouragement. When I think back to how I was able to bring Miah home, though, I'm reminded of how hard I can work, and how to be a positive role model for my children, despite all the struggles I've faced. ■