Rise INSIGHTS

SPRING 2019

POWER AND PARTNERSHIP

A GUIDE TO IMPROVING FRONTLINE PRACTICE WITH PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

INSIGHTS MAKES THE POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS OF CHILD WELFARE-AFFECTED PARENTS ACCESSIBLE TO PROFESSIONALS INVESTED IN REFORM

ABOUT RISE

Founded in 2005, Rise builds parent leadership to drive child welfare solutions that parents believe will help their families thrive. Parents who have faced the child welfare system have unique expertise to support other parents in crisis, guide professionals in improving practice and policy, and mobilize communities to demand change. Rise is committed to eliminating child welfare's punitive and disparate impact on poor families of color and to building a social support system that truly protects families in need.

Central to Rise's vision is that affected parents are leaders and powerful partners in building a new approach to protecting children and families. No solution to a complex system problem is likely to be successful unless the people it affects are involved meaningfully in change. Parent leadership can guide investment in building protective communities that buffer families from the impact of poverty and stress, reducing the need for child welfare intervention. Parents' expertise also can reduce the traumatic impact of family separation and increase the likelihood that children placed in foster care quickly and safely return home. Parent advocacy can build momentum to reduce unnecessary child protective involvement.

Rise provides information and peer support to more than 20,000 parents nationwide through our parent-written magazine, videos and handouts on navigating system involvement.

Rise parent leaders to use the same tools professionals rely on to achieve policy and practice change: Creating or participating in task forces; educating city and state legislators; publishing "white papers" on policy and practice reform; designing and leading staff trainings to improve the insight and skills of child welfare workers; developing and leading implementation of new practice models; leading cross-agency collaborations to test new approaches; informing the public about child welfare as a social justice issue to mobilize our community to re-think the current system and demand change.

Learn more: www.risemagazine.org

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper aggregates the recommendations in Rise's presentations on frontline practice developed and delivered by our parent leaders over the past four years. Drawing on the insights of hundreds of parents who have contributed to Rise, they were written by Piazadora Footman, Nancy Fortunato, Bevanjae Kelley, Robbyne Wiley and Jeanette Vega. These presentations were on:

Parents' experiences and recommendations for change in New York City's family court, developed in collaboration with the Manhattan Family Court Committee on Disproportionate Minority Representation and the NYC Court Improvement Project (CIP), and presented at Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens Family Courts, as well as at NYU School of Law Family Defense Clinic, CUNY School of Law and the American Bar Association's National Parent Attorney Conference. Special thanks to Melissa Wade at CIP; Chris Gottlieb and Marty Guggenheim; and Michele Cortese at the Center for Family Representation.

Parents' experiences with visits and tips for frontline staff on communicating with parents about visits, presented at Hunter College School of Social Work, Columbia University School of Social Work, and to frontline staff at the NYC child welfare agencies Children's Aid, Children's Village, Graham Windham, Heartshare, JCCA, Rising Ground, SCO.

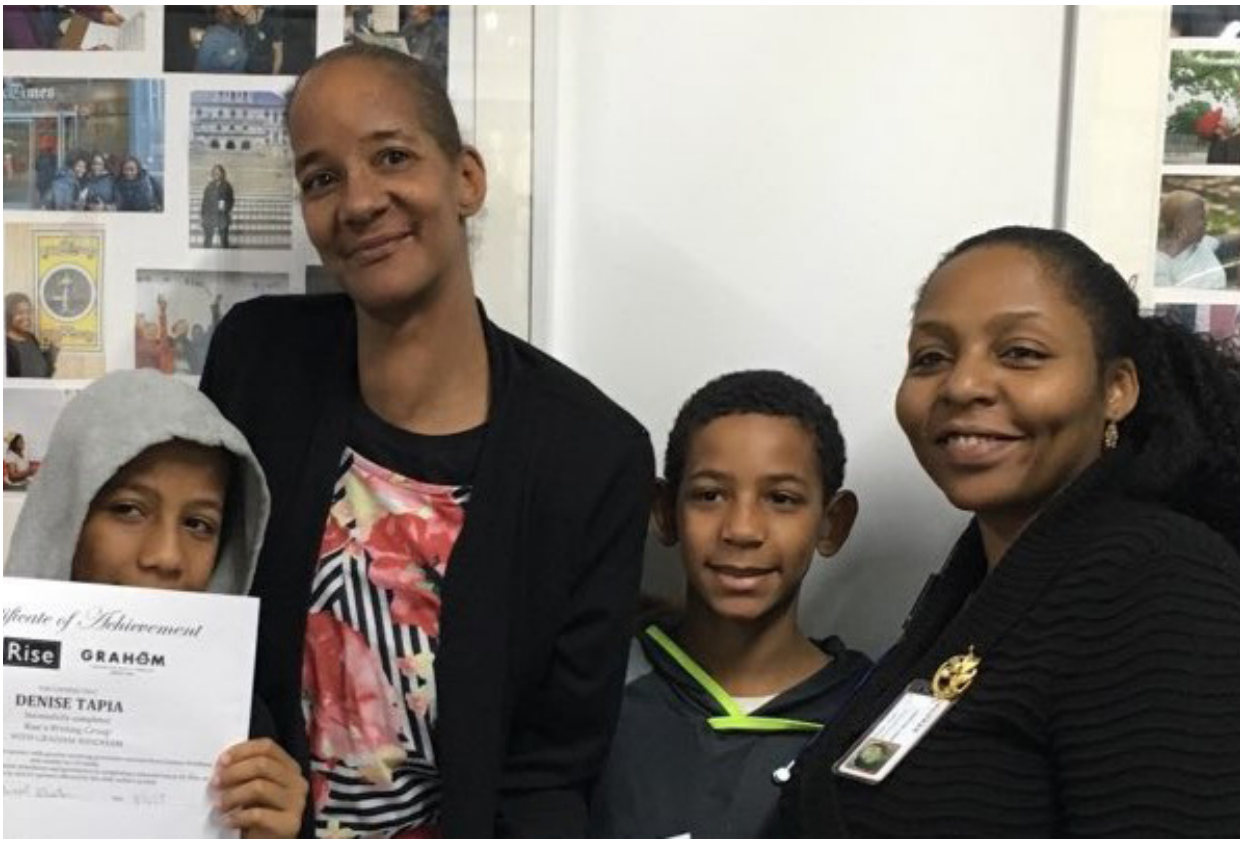
How child welfare systems can strengthen parent voice, developed and presented by Jeanette Vega at the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy's 2016 Policy Forum on Transforming Child Welfare.

Applying a toxic stress lens to frontline practice with parents, developed and presented by Jeanette Vega at the Coalition of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) 2016 annual meeting.

We thank all of our partners for your support and collaboration.

Rise is grateful for the feedback of many allies across the system on the draft, which we began sharing two years ago. Thank you, especially, to parent advocates in Rise's advisory group and involved with the Birth Parent National Network for your powerful feedback.

Thank you to the parent advocates and Rise contributors and their families pictured in this report: Teresa Marrero, parent advocate at Heartshare, and Jovonna Frieson, parent advocate at New Alternatives for Children, on the cover; Bevanjae Kelley, family coach at Graham, with her granddaughter; Piazadora Footman and her son; Melissa Landrau and her older daughters; Sara Werner and her son; and parent advocates from across New York City (plus Suzanne Sellers from Chicago) at Rise's benefit.



RISE WRITER DENISE TAPIA AND HER SONS WITH GRAHAM FAMILY COACH WANDA TYSON

"Parents come into the child welfare system feeling powerless. To regain our children, we need to find the power inside of us. We need to feel that we are powerful enough to fight these charges, or change our lives."

— Rise Parents

"The first principle of recovery is empowerment of the survivor...No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest."

—Judith Herman, Author of *Trauma and Recovery*

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INTRODUCTION

POWER AND PARTNERSHIP

This paper presents Rise's recommendations for improving frontline practice with parents in the child welfare system. It centers on strategies to increase parents' power.

Child welfare is, by its nature, a coercive system that parents enter with little power besides the power of refusal—a dangerous power to exercise. Any parent may feel powerless facing the state's power to separate families. Low-income parents of color may feel particularly vulnerable; America's long history of separating African American and Native American families and "saving" poor children from their families remain rooted in our law, psyche and child welfare practice. Parents' previous experiences with authorities and public systems—police, schools, housing—and with interpersonal violence also can prime them to feel little control over what happens to them and their children in the child welfare system. In New York City, research shows that more than half of mothers with children in foster care meet the criteria for PTSD. An estimated 25-40% grew up in foster care themselves. At Rise, the vast majority of contributors have experienced rape or sexual abuse.

For parents who have had long histories of terrified compliance and silence, dynamics inherent in child welfare can be reminders of past victimization and powerlessness. Powerlessness is enraging; powerlessness keeps your mouth shut; powerlessness tells you to stop trying and give up. Yet parents whose children enter foster care must do the opposite—quickly take control of their lives and of their cases to get their children home. As Rise's parent leaders have written: "To regain our children, we need to find the power inside of us. The child welfare process can make us feel more powerless and at the mercy of more powerful people, or it can support parents in becoming powerful enough to overcome our obstacles."

Frontline staff, attorneys and court personnel can intentionally counteract powerlessness and build parents' power so that they are more likely to quickly and safely reunify with their children.

SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF COMPLIANCE AND COERCION

For the past 15 years, Rise has worked with parents to reflect on their experiences with the child welfare system and to articulate their vision for policy and practice reform. Since 2015, especially, Rise's focus has been to communicate what we've learned from parents and to engage child welfare professionals in prioritizing the innovations that parents themselves believe can make a difference.

This paper lays out key concepts and proposed structures for strengthening frontline practice by building parents' power, especially in the first weeks after removal. These concepts are aggregated from Rise's presentations on court practice, visiting, parent voice and parent engagement delivered in the past 4 years to hundreds of professionals across New York City. To develop these concepts, Rise parent leaders drew on examples in parents' stories, discussions in our writing workshops and parent focus groups, and their own experiences facing the child welfare system and working as parent advocates. Rise also drew on our reporting on system reform; recent papers from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child on toxic stress and child welfare practice and the Center for the Study of Social Policy on relationship-building; and our collaborative work with New York City's Administration for Children's Services and organizations including Children's Aid Society, JCCA, Sheltering Arms and, particularly, Graham Windham.

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VIEWS AND TOOLS

In the following pages are specific recommendations for combating powerlessness by establishing safety; building knowledge and opportunities for choice and voice; and strengthening relationships. Personal essays by parents as well as frontline staff illuminate these concepts in practice.

Many NYC agencies already have incorporated aspects of these practices, such as: hiring parent advocates, developing a parent handbook, and creating mechanisms for leadership to hear directly from parents. Rise also has begun to develop tools that can support these recommendations. Our TIPS approach to visits, now used at 7 foster care agencies in New York City, provides training and tools to orient both frontline staff and parents to visits. It has demonstrated impact, with 85% of caseworkers reporting that parents took steps to improve their visits after a discussion based on the TIPS handouts. This spring, Rise will release a new set of TIPS handouts focused on service planning, which can be used to support a number of practices in this paper, especially preparing parents to negotiate and participate in planning.

Last fall, Rise shared a draft of this paper with child welfare agency leadership in New York City and convened a group of professionals, including a number of parent advocates, to consider how they might further the concepts and practices described here. This group mapped out the practices their agencies already have incorporated, detailing the planning, budget, staffing, supervision and evaluation processes required. They also planned out how they might implement these concepts and practices fully over two years in order to deeply reset power dynamics on the frontline. We hope this information can be a resource to parents and professionals who want to enhance practice across the country. (See below)

A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT IN FAMILIES

It's critical that child welfare leadership address powerlessness and prioritize the solutions that parents themselves believe in. Building parents' power is essential to families' long-term success. The issues parents face are not going to be completely solved when children go home. Families hit crises. Parents are going to have to use their voices to solve family problems. The more child welfare can support parents using their voices during their case, the better equipped they'll be to solve problems down the road.

Child welfare agencies understand that, to prevent maltreatment and removals, they must redraw their lines of engagement with poor communities. Addressing power dynamics in foster care cases is one place to begin. ■

Resources

PRACTICE MAPS

For information about how NYC child welfare agencies have integrated practices in this paper into their work, please visit: http://www.risemagazine.org/2019/04/resources-for-practice/.

VISITING TIPS

Rise's TIPS handouts, videos and posters on visiting offer parents clear information and peer guidance to navigate their cases, and our training provide frontline foster care professionals with tools to strengthen communication and trust with parents.

The TIPS approach is effective. When frontline staff use the TIPS handouts in problem-solving conversations with parents, 85% report that parents take steps to improve visit quality.

Visiting TIPS handouts
Video for Parents
Video for Frontline Staff
Visiting Room Do's and Don'ts Poster

SERVICE PLANNING TIPS

Our forthcoming TIPS handouts on service planning focus on the challenges and opportunities of moving from "survival skills" to coping skills.

Service Planning TIPS Handouts and Resources

TRAUMA

Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman

The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk
Rise interview with Bessel van der Kolk: Laying the Past to Rest

Trauma Systems Therapy Handbook by Glenn Saxe, B. Heidi Ellis and Adam D. Brown Rise interview with Glenn Saxe (See p. 17)

TOXIC STRESS

Applying the Science of Toxic Stress in Child Welfare Systems, paper from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child

Rise interview with Steve Cohen (See p. 16)

Videos from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child for parents and professionals:

Core Concepts in Early Development
Ready4Routine
Intergenerational Mobility Project
In Brief: Resilience Series

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Transformational Relationships for Youth Success, paper from the Center for the Study of Social Policy

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing Safety

The sudden loss of a child is an experience of grief, terror, disorientation, shame and loss of identity. Parents with past histories of victimization are especially likely to feel profoundly unsafe and to react by being frozen, enraged, or seeking to numb their pain. Reassuring parents that their children are safe and addressing parents' own psychological safety is a first condition of parents' ability to plan and to nurture their children despite separation.

COMMUNICATE POSITIVE INTENTIONS

The agency's first meeting with parents sets a lasting first impression. If reunification is the goal, tell parents from day one that your goal is to reunify families. Remind parents that, despite removal, they are still their child's parent. A Family Success Wall in the agency waiting room with photos of families the agency reunified can send a powerful message about the agency's intentions.

BEGIN WITH MATERIAL NEEDS

Parents often experience a loss of income because of child welfare involvement. Ask about stressors like unpaid bills, insufficient food, or risk of homelessness, and provide any referrals or support possible, so that parents have the stability to focus on nurturing their children and on their case.

OFFER PEER SUPPORT

Having parent advocates available every step of the way can help parents feel heard, safe, and prepared. Advocates can explain the foster care process in simple terms to help the parent feel in control and understand what's expected. Parent advocates can also run groups where parents share experiences and offer one another support, information and encouragement.

EDUCATE PARENTS ABOUT THE FEELINGS THAT THEY CAN EXPECT DURING THE CASE–THEIR CHILDREN'S FEELINGS AND THEIR OWN

Parents can be taken by surprise by their own reactions or their children's reactions to removal. Putting words to what is happening to them and their children can help parents respond with more control. Providing information about trauma and attachment can help parents understand and communicate about their needs and their children's needs. Reading peer stories can help parents find the language to express themselves.

SHOW THAT YOU CARE ABOUT JUSTICE BEING SERVED

Without signaling helplessness, acknowledge systemic injustices and educate parents about their rights. ■

Having parent advocates available every step of the way can help parents feel heard, safe, and prepared.

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

One Safe Place

In support group, I could talk honestly without hurting my chance of bringing my daughter home

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

"You're not a bad parent, Nicole," April said as we sat in the VA hospital support group. The irony of hearing that from someone who hardly knew me hit me to the heart. If she could see the good in how I raised my daughter, why couldn't my so-called friends?

I couldn't speak to my friends. I couldn't explain to them how much having child welfare come back into my life for the second time made me feel like a failure as a parent and a human being.

The worst ridicule came from my best friend, who took on the role of foster father. He scolded me, "How could you do this to your daughter? You don't think of her at all. All you think about is yourself."

My friends were all too angry that I ended up in the hospital—again. That I had tried to take my life—again. That I had let them down—again. I could never truly describe to them what being at war was like: the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of Iraq. All they had to say was, "Nicole is just being Nicole."

DEHUMANIZED

I found that invalidation again in court.

I hated being back in front of the judge, her black robe, her bench higher than every other seat in the room. The flickering fluorescent light in a corner of the courtroom going on and off, second after second. It gave off a purple glow that reminded me of just how off-center my life had become.

Like my friends, the court didn't look at my mental health as part of a lifelong journey, one with pitfalls and curved corners but also smoother roads ahead. They didn't see mental health relapse as a part of recovery. They didn't see my commitment to be well again.

Every sentence simply began with: "Well Ms. Goodwin's past history."

ONE SAFE PLACE

My support group at the VA hospital was what saved me. The group of seven veterans and two doctors focused on building skills to develop better relationships.

For a few months it was difficult for me to talk about anything except the court case and how betrayed I felt. "Teach me how to play the game without being vulnerable." That's all I wanted at first.

But even from the beginning, it felt good to be around people who were also dealing with mental illness and also struggling with relationships since being in the military.

Over time, the rules of the group helped me state my feelings without fear of retaliation. The group became one of the few places where I could talk honestly without fear of endangering my chances of bringing my daughter home.

NICOLE AND RISE STAFF

MY EMPATHY GREW

When April spoke up and said that I was a good mother I felt the tears come down on the inside. I don't like to be vulnerable. I don't like showing I am confused, lonely, broken. But April offered me understanding.

Her support helped me realize positive aspects about my character that made it easier for me to do what I had to do to bring my daughter home. Getting that understanding also helped me be more understanding and empathize more with my daughter and her foster father, which made things easier on all of us. At the same time, I learned that when I'm in need, I don't need to stay with people who don't understand me. I can find people who do.

The more I went to group the more I was able to see the person I wanted to be despite the setbacks. By seeking the compassion in others, I found I could give it to myself.

CARED FOR AND EMPOWERED

It's common for parents who come into the system to be isolated. Having a child welfare case makes many parents even more isolated, which makes it harder for them to succeed. It also means they have fewer people who they and their children can turn to when children go home.

Making sure that parents feel understood is as important to their success—maybe more important—as making sure they receive the proper medication or correct type of therapy.

I can imagine that some caseworkers are skeptical of peer support. And it's probably true that in certain settings, peer support can be a detriment, especially if those peers are prone to giving misinformation. For me, having a therapist along with peer support really helped. But peer support can also help people feel cared for and empowered enough to make choices.

If you care about parents' success, you should keep looking for every opportunity to help them break down their isolation, even when it's hard for them, like it was for me.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building Knowledge and Opportunities for Choice & Voice

Powerlessness is exacerbated in child welfare by the lack of guidance to orient and educate parents about their rights, options, common challenges, and how other parents have achieved success.

Currently, most information is provided to parents only verbally, on an ad-hoc basis. Under stress, parents might not even take in what's being said in meetings. Because of turnover, caseworkers may convey incorrect or incomplete information, increasing distrust. In addition, unwritten rules are frequently not communicated until parents break them. For instance, agencies and courts operate under a set of common beliefs about what constitutes a "good visit" but these expectations are not articulated.

Likewise, parents have some power to make choices about how they address the problems that led to removal. However, basic information about services that could give parents more equal footing in decision-making is usually not provided. The result is that power is concentrated in the hands of frontline staff; professionals enter decision-making meetings with more knowledge about the options and process.

Child welfare decision-making must support parents' self-determination in planning for their families. Parents can feel more in control and participate more effectively in critical decision-making if they know more about the child welfare process, their rights and their options.

PROVIDE A PARENT TOOLKIT IN THE FIRST MEETING

Written information and videos produced by peers can ensure that parents receive basic, accurate information about typical challenges in the clearest, most consistent and credible way possible. Rise parent leaders suggest giving parents a handbook introducing the agency, staff and services; a contact sheet for important people on their case, a copy of *Rise* magazine for peer support, and a flyer for a parent support group.

DEVELOP STRUCTURES TO PROVIDE INFORMATION TO PARENTS UP FRONT.

Structured meetings early in the case to educate parents about routine challenges (visiting, service planning, family court) can build communication and trust and prevent parents from feeling blindsided. A simple script can help caseworkers cover major points, using written information as a reference. Parent advocates also can offer orientations and information sessions on common challenges.

PROVIDE INFORMATION ON SERVICE OPTIONS

Choices give parents a sense of control.To make choices about the services that seem right to them, parents need information about options. Explain the differences between approaches and ask what parents want. For example, even if a parenting class is mandated, parents can choose the type or location. Forecast from the beginning that parents will likely be expected to continue services through trial discharge

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Parents can feel more in control and participate more effectively in critical decision-making if they know more about the child welfare process, their rights and their options.

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CREATE STRUCTURES TO REVIEW PARENTS' SCHEDULES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN DETAIL

Provide a calendar and help parents prioritize appointments. Discuss transportation time and costs for services. Work with parents to schedule as many services as possible in one place. Ask about appointments beyond child welfare and help parents communicate with other systems.

COACH PARENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES OR OTHER GROUP MEETINGS.

Meet with parents in advance to explain what the meeting is for and to support parents in developing what they want to say. This can signal that you want parents to have a voice and succeed.

PROVIDE COACHING IN NEGOTIATION SKILLS

Most parents facing child welfare have little or no experience negotiating effectively with professionals. Yet creating a service plan that matches the needs and motivations of the parents requires that parents think strategically and communicate well. Parents also will need to speak up for their families and use self-advocacy skills all their lives. Ideally, training would be regularly offered by a parent advocate.

GET PARENTS' FEEDBACK ON SERVICES TO MAKE QUALITY REFERRALS

When agencies send parents to services that don't fit their needs or are low-quality, that undermines trust. It sends a signal that the system just cares about compliance. Effective services help parents believe that the case can actually have the potential to help them. Get parents' feedback about service quality and share that feedback while referring parents to agencies that other parents recommend.

CREATE STRUCTURES FOR PARENT VOICE IN AGENCY POLICY AND PRACTICE

A quarterly parent roundtable with senior staff, parent focus groups, or even questionnaires can signal respect for parents and provide agency professionals with valuable insight. ■

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

A Family Again

My wife and I got the support we needed to recover from her addiction.

BY FRANCISCO RAMIREZ

I found out that my wife was using drugs when she went into early labor with our fifth child and the doctor did all kinds of tests. I was so shocked and hurt. I couldn't believe it.

Then Child Protective Services (CPS) told us we could not bring the baby home from the hospital. They said our four other kids might go into foster care, too.

I didn't know whether to fight the CPS worker or run out of the hospital and hide my other kids so they wouldn't be taken. The worker told me to come to a meeting at the CPS office later that day.

I WAS HEARD

When I got to the meeting, I broke down crying. I felt that my hard work in life was worth nothing.

But the workers talked to me and made me realize that there were options for my family. They said that some of Sandra's behaviors toward me were probably related to the meth, which causes users to act mad and frustrated, stay up for days and then sleep for days, and lose a lot of weight. Those were all of Sandra's symptoms.

They offered her outpatient so she could be home with the kids and me, but I insisted that she go to a treatment center with the baby. I thought that was the only way that she'd succeed.

PRACTICAL HELP

While Sandra was in treatment, I became a single father. Life really became chaotic.

I was surprised that our CPS worker helped us out. She came to my house once a week and always asked if we needed anything. She helped us with child care, clothing and transportation, and with finding a new place to live where our kids could play outside.

At the treatment program, Sandra and I both got the help we needed. Regular meetings with our counselor made me feel safe and confident. Family visits helped me start trusting Sandra again. She was so attentive to the kids, playing tag with them and taking them on the slides. One day we sat down as a family and had a picnic. It was one of the best times we had shared in a long time.

A NEW FUTURE

The day Sandra came home felt like the first day of the rest of our lives. Now Sandra has been clean for 15 months and she is a new person, wife and mom. Now Sandra is in school full-time, studying business. The CPS worker even helped Sandra get into school and paid for her books and supplies.

Things are not perfect. I would be a liar to say that this has not affected my children. Even so, we are all doing so much better. We let our children know that we are not perfect but we love them with all our hearts and that will never change. ■

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Critical Insight

Structures for candid feedback from parents can improve system functioning

INTERVIEW BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

When NYC's child welfare agency (ACS) was led by commissioners John Mattingly and Ron Richter, the Parent Advisory Workgroup (PAWG) was a group of parent advocates citywide who brought parents' perspectives and needs into focus at quarterly meetings with ACS' commissioner and top staff. Here, in this interview from 2011, PAWG members share their experiences with the workgroup, which was disbanded in 2013:

Shelley Shaw: I was a co-chair of the Workgroup and it's been a wonderful opportunity to sit down to address our concerns. We were able to communicate with the commissioner and his staff and see that the commissioner is really for parents.

Wanda Chambers: Child welfare is a really hard system for parents. I don't think people on the upper level really get that. I mean, the commissioner is not making home visits, he can't get out in the field. By taking time out to hear what we had to say, the commissioner and his staff could understand our concerns and get the ball bouncing.

Sandra Killett: I was not so delicate with the commissioner. Sometimes PAWG members would say, "We can't ask the commissioner to do that!" I was a co-chair of the Workgroup and I would say, "Yes, we can! We can challenge him. In those meetings, we're on equal footing." Yes, he's the commissioner, but he walks on two legs just like I do, and my job is to be respectful while getting my voice heard and speaking up for parents.

A RECORD OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

Shelly: One concern our group had was that we always see images of children in care but not of families reuniting. We wanted the system to recognize parents who have reunited their families. We've held three Family Fun Days where reunified parents come out and enjoy the day. The commissioner speaks, we have activities for the kids, and it's all you can eat. I think parents really appreciate being able to say, "Listen, I did it! I got my children back in my life."

Another concern we had is that foster care agencies were not allowing the foster parents and parents to have a relationship. We know that families need to have a relationship, with the child as the most important person. We've hosted annual forums to help staff, parents and foster parents understand the importance of working together. Agencies also hold Parent-to-Parent meetings to introduce families as soon as children enter foster care.

Sabra Jackson: It was important to me that the commissioner know me as a person and know my story. Did I need help? Yes. But I did not need my children taken away. When my children were in foster care, I didn't know how I would ever reach the commissioner, whether by a letter or action. Through the Workgroup, I did get to know him. He even met my daughter, who was most affected by foster care. That's personally satisfying to me—he's seen my progress and he's seen the progress of so many parents.

CONFRONTING CHALLENGES

Sabra: We've seen the system improve for families. The fact that we have been able to speak directly and candidly with the commissioner and get some honest feedback about policy has been part of that. We tell the commissioner all the time, "Ok, you've made a policy, but it's sure not practice."

For me, it's also been important to keep saying to the commissioner and his senior staff how important it is to integrate parent advocates into all of the work we do. Many parents who have reunified with their children are now working as parent advocates at foster care agencies and legal representation organizations.

I'd like to see parent advocates in ChildStat, the meetings where ACS reviews random cases in order to analyze the practice and see how the agencies could do better. Many times, a parent advocate did some of the casework but is not asked to present the case.

Shelly: We'd also like to see parent advocates as part of the training that all new foster parents must go through. We talk about how important it is for parents and foster parents to connect. Why not bring a parent perspective into their training?

SEEK INPUT BEFORE SETTING POLICY

Sandra: When I joined the workgroup, I'd have to tell you that I was not open. But when the commissioner needed to be questioned, we had no problem doing that, and he legitimately made his staff address our issues. The next step will be to have parents be sitting at the table before you set a policy in place. Parents should be there when the agency is thinking about establishing new policies, so senior staff can hear what that policy looks like to families who will be most affected.

We know there's a political realm to Children's Services. Sometimes you need to be reminded of why you are there. ■

CASEWORKER PERSPECTIVE

Making a Connection

A moment of understanding changed my relationship with an angry father

BY KENNETH CRUZ

I had been working as a case planner for about a month when I met Mr. G.Before he walked into my office, other workers and even my supervisor told me that this father was difficult. I'd also read up on the case and saw that in three prior court hearings he'd lashed out against the worker and his ex-wife. I imagined him to be a tall, strong, menacing-looking man with tattoos and a shaved head—someone who took crap from no one.

As he stood in front of me for the first time, he did not look that way at all. He looked a little like my own father.

I want to understand what you have been through. I am not going to read about it until I hear it from your point of view.

ECHOES OF MY PAST

Mr. G wasn't happy to be talking to a new case planner. He'd had eight workers before me, and he was upset that he had to retell his story to me. But he said he'd give me a chance because I was the first male caseplanner he had seen who spoke both English and Spanish and was also Puerto Rican, like him.

Still, for the first 20 minutes, he was defiant, questioning whether I was capable of doing my job, and challenging anything I asked or said. He did not want to do parenting classes, take random drug screens, or cooperate with visits. He said he had to work and could not come to the agency every week to see his kids.

His voice wasn't loud but his tone was aggressive. He would interrupt whenever I spoke. Sometimes he would pause to let me speak, but then he'd go back to controlling the conversation. He also kept getting up and saying he was leaving.

RESENTMENT AND FRUSTRATION

Inside, I had a strong reaction. I kept saying to myself, "Maybe I am in the wrong field? Maybe this isn't for me." My thoughts went deeper the more he spoke. "Oh man," I thought. "He reminds me not of my father, but of my stepfather."

"How can I help this father when he is just like the man I've struggled with since I was a preteen?" I asked myself. What I felt for him at that moment was resentment. I couldn't empathize with him because every word that came out of his mouth was to me an excuse.

I also felt powerless. I believed that I could help him if he would just stop and really talk to me. But whenever I asked a question to help me understand his case better he would tell me to read the files and do my job. That made me feel small.

I felt myself pulling away, which is a pattern I sometimes have when relationships feel overwhelming.

A MOMENT OF CONNECTION

Then, out of the blue during his angry speech, Mr. G mentioned something painful from his past that I had dealt with in my own personal life. I am going to keep what he mentioned private, but it was enough to switch the gears in my mind.

What he went through took him down the wrong path. He felt ashamed and judged by everyone. While I had gone in another direction, I didn't judge him. Instead I suddenly saw him more as an equal. I felt like I could help him because I could relate to him.

Suddenly, I could understand his anger. Yes, he was angry at the agency, the courts and the changes in his case planner. But he was also angry at old feelings of helplessness and at reliving painful moments. Those were things I understood.

So I took a deep breath. I looked at him—I wanted to reach him any way I could—and in my most empathetic tone I said, "I get it. I get why you are angry. I would be angry too. Eight case planners, three supervisors, three cases against your family and 12 court hearings, and still no movement or change in your family." His voice, while still loud, began to change. His body language began to shift. He was no longer in a hurry to leave.

"I want to understand what you have all been through," I continued. "I'm not going to read about it until I hear about it from your point of view. I want to see it from the eyes of the person who is living with the consequences and then maybe I can help you with the process."

As I spoke, he seemed to feel heard, like someone understood the pain he was experiencing.

THE POWER OF UNDERSTANDING

I would like to say that it was a smooth process after our initial meeting. That wasn't the case. But slowly he began to call more. He began to show up for his visits. He went to parenting classes and submitted to random drug screenings.

It's not to say he didn't have his days when he still raised his voice at me and threatened to not do anything. He did. But then a few days later I'd get a call with an apology and he'd done what he needed to.

Eight months after we started working together, the judge returned his children to him, after almost four years in care. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Relationships

Parents who need to make significant changes in how they cope with life stressors are likely to stumble. At times when parents feel ashamed, discouraged, or even unworthy of regaining their children, they need reminders that they matter. Trust also makes it more likely that parents will be seek help when needed (including after a case closes). Relationship-building is a skill that can be nurtured in staff. Peer support also can be particularly powerful, both during and after a case.

ASK PARENTS HOW THEY WANT TO BE ADDRESSED

Many agencies use formal names even though the work with parents is excruciatingly intimate. That can feel respectful for some but for others it may be distancing. Ask parents what is comfortable for them.

OFFER HOPE, REASSURANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Notice, acknowledge and document small successes, even when they may seem trivial. This can start at the first meeting. If a parent stays calm or participates, acknowledge the achievement ("I was impressed...It can be really hard...")

USE THE COURT REPORT AS A TOOL FOR ONGOING COMMUNICATION

Transparency builds trust. Let parents know, "I'm going to have to write X in my report but I want to be able to report Y. These are the changes I'll need to see to do that." Make an appointment to meet with parents prior to each court date to review the court report. If you are going to ask the court to reduce visiting, or make another setback in the case, tell the parent directly and in person before the court hearing.

Feeling "held in mind" and cared about is powerful and can help parents feel that they're valuable and important.

RECOGNIZE SIGNALS OF RELATIONSHIP GROWTH

Feeling "held in mind" and cared about is powerful and can help parents feel that they're valuable and important. That can motivate parents to keep going. A signal that a relationship is starting to take root may be that a caseworker wonders about a parent and wants to check in, or vice versa. Agencies can focus on relationship-building and be intentional in supervision about checking on stages, strategies, setbacks and growth.

WORK IN TEAMS

Both parents and caseworkers can feel stuck in challenging dynamics. If parents build trust with other agency staff—parent advocates, visit coaches, etc.—they can be included in decision-making or during challenging moments. Foster parents also should be trained and supported to establish positive communication and supportive relationships with parents.

CELEBRATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Child welfare involvement is often isolating and discouraging. Build a culture of encouragement through positive feedback, celebrations, and gestures of kindness, like offering meals. In particular, celebrate reunification. Too often, parents feel they reunified despite the agency, not because their worker and the agency believe in them. If staff recognize accomplishments, parents facing setbacks will be more likely to feel safe seeking help.

FORECAST A DIFFERENT FUTURE

Get to know parents' personal goals and refer parents to education and training opportunities. Although goals beyond child safety don't belong in service plans, discussions can help parents envision and plan for a different future for their family.

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

'I Made a Mistake,' Not 'I Am a Mistake'

How parents—and the child welfare system—can stand up to shame

Ambrosia Eberhardt, Danielle Goodwin and Heather Cantamessa are "Veteran Parents" with the Washington State Parent Advocate Network, a project of The Children's Home Society. Here, they explain the importance of addressing shame in child welfare.

Q: Parent advocates and child welfare administrators in Washington state have begun a series of discussions on shame. Why shame?

Heather: All of us are parent advocates who had our own children placed in foster care.

So many parents come from a place of shame. It's not, "I made a mistake," but, "I am the mistake, I am worthless, I am unable to do anything different, this is who I am." When the system comes in, so often it reaffirms everything you're afraid of because it's all about your deficiencies.

We've been diving in to Brené Brown's work on shame and reflecting on parents' experiences of shame in the child welfare system—how we spin out of control when we're experiencing shame, how that's triggered, what our behaviors look like when we're in a shame storm, and what we can do to build resiliency.

Before the child welfare system even knocked on my door I knew my family wasn't like other families. I saw in my kids' eyes that they weren't getting what they needed from me. But people who feel ashamed feel like the problem is not with their circumstances but with who they are as people. I didn't believe I could make changes to make things better.

Ambrosia: Being in the system reinforces the idea that either you're OK or you're a failure, and parents feel like every failure is proof that they're failures and can't make it.

I grew up with parents who were addicts and then I got into relationships with men who were very violent with me. I always felt like I had to be perfect to counteract everything that was wrong in my life. When I got into the system, that shame was so reinforced. I felt like if I wasn't perfect, I was never going to see my kids again. After my case was closed, when I hit bumps in the road, I hid my problems instead of reaching out for help. Because of that, I almost did lose my children. That's when I finally learned that you can't let shame make you hide.

Danielle: If you grew up in foster care, your mission when you have a baby is to never repeat that. You have this fantasy of how things are going to be. Then when you see your own children's lives unravel the way yours did, you feel so helpless.

My first daughter was the result of a rape and I entered foster care with her when I was 15. I always felt responsible for what was done to me, and I felt ashamed entering care. But I also felt like maybe somebody would finally see that I needed help. When there was no real help offered, I felt like there was nothing for me to do but numb my feelings with drugs. When I lost my children, my shame was overwhelming. I felt like I was destined to fail.

Q: As parent advocates, how do you help parents overcome shame?

Danielle: I don't talk about what's wrong with parents—I talk about what's happened to them. If you spent your whole life in foster care and never had healthy parenting role models, and now you're struggling raising your child, there is nothing wrong with you. You're just repeating what you learned. Everyone does that. But I learned new skills to care for my children, and other parents can too. I also try to lift parents' strengths for them, so they can see and begin to use them.

It can also help to change our ideas of what success looks like. When you grow up in foster care, you assume that everyone else grew up in perfect families. But successful people have struggles. I let parents know that struggling isn't proof that they're failing. It is their job to find the supports that can help them with those struggles.

So many parents come from a place of shame. When the system comes in, it reaffirms everything you're afraid of because it's all about your deficiencies.

Heather: Finding those supports can be very hard, especially when you're afraid you'll be judged rather than supported; when you don't trust yourself to pick people who are safe; or you feel like you're in it alone.

I was taught to fear the system from the time I was young. My mother ran away from horrific domestic violence and she always told us, "You cannot talk about what happened or what is going on. If they know they will take you away and we will never see each other again."

The child welfare system came into my life three times. Each time I knew I needed help, but I really believed I would be punished if anyone saw how much I was struggling.

Ambrosia: We encourage parents to have one safe person they can talk to when they're in trouble. Not one of us stayed clean after we got our kids back, and we needed to tell on ourselves to get better. Because we had built healthy support systems, we were able to recover quickly.

But it's also the system's job to make it safe for parents to ask for help. They have to make sure parents are supported, not punished or shamed, for bringing a problem forward. ■

TURNING PARENTS' PRIORITIES INTO PRACTICE

An important part of incorporating the recommendations here is ensuring that they are not simply individual, disparate activities or initiatives but are connected through a foundational understanding of power dynamics and build on one another to support agency-wide culture change. At best, implementation methods will mirror the goal of powerful engagement and voice for both parents and professionals.

In June, Rise will kick off a Stakeholders Collaborative focused on improving reunification outcomes by focusing on frontline practice with parents.

No solution to a complex system problem is likely to be successful unless the people it affects believe in it and help to shape it. That means that parents as well as frontline staff will be at the heart of the work. We hope to develop an encouraging, knowledge-building peer learning network that centers the expertise of parents and parent advocates and enables participants to share successes and challenges in implementation.

Our goal is to test promising practice elements that can become a comprehensive reunification-focused frontline practice model.

Across the system, stretched resources, high turnover and traumatic stress exposure can lead professionals to feel much like parents: powerless, unsafe, lacking in knowledge, alone. Professionals can begin to experience reform efforts much the way parents may experience services—as disconnected, unhelpful and judgmental. This paper, too, may be felt as yet another absurd demand.

Even so, Rise hopes that this paper will capture the imagination and spirit of collaboration of change leaders across our field.

As we move forward with our TIPS approach and our reunification collaborative, we will share our process of learning and promising outcomes through regular updates. We hope to hear from our allies as you incorporate the concepts and practices here to build the power of parents facing the child welfare system. ■

An important part of incorporating the recommendations here is ensuring that they are not simply individual, disparate activities or initiatives but are connected through a foundational understanding of power dynamics and build on one another to support agency-wide culture change.

SPOTLIGHT

Rise's concepts are rooted in an understanding of the effects of trauma and toxic stress. On these pages we offer introductions to applying these concepts in child welfare.

The Science of Stress and Relationships

BY JEANETTE VEGA

Two resources in our work at Rise are a 2016 paper from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child about the child welfare system and toxic stress and a 2017 paper from the Center for the Study of Social Policy on the role of transformational relationships in effective youth work, both written by Steve Cohen. Here, Cohen describes how child welfare systems can take steps to reduce parents' stress responses and build relationships so that families are more likely to reunify.

Q: What is toxic stress?
A: Everybody experiences stress in their lives. Experiencing some stress is good—challenges help us learn and grow, and even serious stress is tolerable.

Toxic stress means "prolonged, extreme activation of the stress response system." When we encounter things that challenge us, our bodies have stress reactions—our blood pressure rises, our hearts beat faster, hormones are released that prepare our bodies and brains to respond quickly. With support, your system will settle down when the stressful situation is over. That's healthy. Toxic stress means that people stay in this highly agitated state for a long period of time. When stress is a constant overload, that has a bad impact on health, learning and relationships.

Q: How does toxic stress relate to parents in child welfare?
A: Many parents will have experienced toxic stress in their own childhoods. That can put them at risk to overreact to stress in adulthood. And child welfare is stressful.

When you're stressed, it's hard to act the same as you do when you're calm and connected. When child welfare gets involved, it's hard for parents to feel safe, to use the skills they have, and to build the skills they need to get their children home. Knowing about toxic stress can help parents understand their own stress responses and how to cope. It can also help parents protect their own children and help their kids grow up in a healthy way.

A big piece of bringing down stress on families and on frontline workers is addressing how all of the systems that affect families work together. Many times families are dealing with multiple government agencies, and they are all making different demands on the family. It can be very time consuming for caseworkers to help parents with housing, economic benefits, support services, and education or training programs. It needs to be easier for parents and caseworkers to know how to get what families need.

Other changes that can make a difference may be very small. For instance, I saw a video that Rise made with ACS to train caseworkers, and in it a parent says, "I need little short sentences." This parent may be quite an intelligent person who could normally understand long, complicated sentences. But when she's talking with a caseworker, her stress level may be so high that it will be hard to take in complicated information.

Frontline staff can also understand from the science how important it is just to have someone who believes in you. It's protective against toxic stress to feel that someone is rooting for you.

Q: What did you learn about the power of relationships from studying outstanding youth organizations?
A: When we asked young people what made a difference in their lives, many talked first about a relationship with an individual or team of people.

Listening was a very powerful theme, unsurprisingly. The workers we observed talked less and *listened* more, and not just about the case but about the whole person: what that young person cared about, what their life has been like, what they want to do. Many wouldn't read the case record until they met the youth. They wanted to learn from them.

Another theme was time—how much time people put into getting to know someone, especially at the beginning. Workers and organizations defined building a relationship at the beginning as the most critical part of the job.

The workers also challenged young people. Again and again, the workers told it to them straight. That was something they couldn't do until they'd established trust, though. Young people told us, "They could've given up on me. They must have really cared about me. They wanted me to succeed."

These were all organizations that face a lot of pressure but they were unusually thoughtful in hiring workers with good relational skills, and they were really straight with people about how hard the job could be. They also tried to mirror in their own behaviors how they wanted workers to work with youth. They had supportive supervision, and flexibility that allowed worker to take care of themselves.

Q: How can insights from youth work can be applied to frontline staff working with parents?
A: First, many parents are youth. Lots of times when we meet parents in the child welfare system, we've stopped seeing them as youth, but they're still going through developmental challenges as other young people.

Secondly, the flip side of relationship is judgment and shame. When people feel judged and shamed, it's very difficult to come into relationships. So many parents in child welfare start out with that powerful sense of shame. Unless workers get in there and show parents they won't act in a shaming way with them, it's hard to even start the process.

SPOTLIGHT

Noticing Trauma

How to recognize a "survival state" and respond

INTERVIEW BY NANCY FURTUNATO, JEANETTE VEGA AND ROBBYNE WILEY

Glenn Saxe is a developer of Trauma Systems Therapy and a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU School of Medicine. Here he describes how caseworkers may notice possible signs of traumatic stress reactions in parents and take steps to assist the parent.

Q: How can you tell if a parent's actions are related to past trauma?

A: As a caseworker, you may see surprising responses, like a parent getting very withdrawn in certain moments. Over time, you may see patterns to those times when a parent gets withdrawn. Maybe when you look at exactly what was going on, the parent felt like she was being forced to do something, and it may be that "feeling forced to do something" is related to trauma for that person.

In Trauma Systems Therapy, we use the term "survival state" to describe a traumatic stress reaction. What happens in the brain for someone with a trauma history is that something their environment reminds them, even in a subtle way, of a time their survival was at stake, such as when they were sexually abused or they thought they were going to be killed. The reminder causes the brain and body shift dramatically into a survival state. You may not actually be threatened, but you're seeing everything around you as if you're about to be harmed. Everything is colored by threat.

If you're a caseworker in the room with someone who is shifting in this way, what that means is that the person suddenly perceives you as someone who is about to assault them or harm them.

If I'm sitting with someone and I think trauma might be in the mix, I'm always mindful of their emotional state. When I see a shift in their emotional state, especially if they seem to feel threatened, I'm very cautious about continuing. I don't want to make them feel even more threatened. I ask myself, "What might be going on?" It could be something small—a certain line of questioning, or even just the way I'm sitting.

Q: What can you do if you think someone has been triggered?

A: If your gut says that someone you're with is being triggered, and you have any discretion in that moment, I would step back, physically and emotionally. Caseworkers have work to do. There's news you have to deliver, there's a plan you have to enforce. But you don't want to be pushing when someone is getting overwhelmed. You may want to end a certain line of discussion, or take a break. Maybe if you have news you have to deliver, you can plan to approach it differently.

We also need to be curious about why a person reacted the way they did and ask them. It's important not to presume that we know what someone else's behavior means. What you're trying to do as a caseworker is form a relationship with someone, and what we all want in relationships is to be understood. If someone presumes to know me, I'm not going to feel terribly good about that. So forming a relationship involves wonder or curiosity. If I see an angry response, I'm going to say, "Tell me more about why you're angry and how I can help."

Beyond that moment, what's really important is that you facilitate a parent getting a full evaluation for trauma. A trauma evaluation can help a great deal. The person can get referred to treatment to get the help they need. As they come to understand their own experience, they can learn what affects them and how they can respond so they don't feel so overwhelmed all the time, like they are getting traumatized again.

'If your gut says that someone you're with is being triggered, I would step back, physically and emotionally. You don't want to be pushing when someone is getting overwhelmed.'

For caseworkers, if you understand the evaluation and treatment, you can also be more aware of the types of things that would trigger this parent. You can adjust your behavior and way approaching the person so your communications are less likely to be triggering.

If you're a caseworker who works with trauma over and over again, you are very close to the damage trauma causes, and because we're all human, it has to affect you. You're really dealing with the magnitude of the horror of what one person can do to another. It's important to be mindful of how you're managing. Do you have people to talk to about the impact your work may be having, especially at times when you feel overwhelmed? Do you have the knowledge base about trauma and traumatic stress that you need? There are lots of training programs and ways of learning about trauma that can be really helpful. ■

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