



BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



RISE'S JEANETTE, ROBBYNE, KEYNA, NANCY AND SARA

You Don't Have to Go Through This Alone

Dear Parents,

These TIPS are written by and for parents who have dealt with an investigation, preventive services, or a foster care case. Rise is dedicated to building the power of parents affected by the child welfare system. As parents, we are here for you.

These TIPS focus on service planning. In every city or state, systems do things differently, but if child protective investigators believe a child is at risk, a parent will usually be asked to attend a meeting to develop a “service plan.”

A service plan is a set of supportive services meant to address the needs of the family. For example: parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, anger management, mental health, or domestic violence counseling.

The purpose of services is to help you make changes in your life so that your child can safely stay at home or return home from foster care.

If your child is placed in foster care, you should know that you are racing against time. Parents have only one year to show that their child can safely return home.

That means that parents should get started on services right away—and speak up to get the right support that fits your family’s needs.

Most of the time, planning for services happens in a rush, at a time when parents are under extreme stress. We hope these TIPS can help you cope with frustration, anxiety and triggers so you can think and plan.

At times, we all feel alone and powerless. Never isolate yourself when facing hardships or traumatic events. On Rise’s website (risemagazine.org) you can find stories by other parents who are going through what you’re going through. Try to reach out to a parent advocate or other affected parents. You have the power to make it through the system and build a good life for your family.

—From the Parents at Rise

I Was Scared But Stood Up For Myself

BY MARIYA KOLESNICHENKO

When CPS showed up at my door, they came in very aggressive. I had just lost my grandmother, who was my caretaker, and had gone through a break-up with my son’s father. Suddenly I was alone. My son and I ended up in a shelter, and I got a case called in for my son missing school.

I was scared, confused and very overwhelmed but I stood up for myself, which a lot of parents are afraid to do.

At the case conference, they told me I had to go to anger management, mental health treatment, a support group for mothers, and a parenting class. I immediately refused anger management. I told them, “There is nothing abuse-related in my case.” I knew my rights. Because of that, I was put under court-ordered supervision.

CPS also tried to shove us into mental health services because they felt that all the trauma I experienced affected my ability to care for my son. I fought to prove I didn’t need it.

Luckily, I had an amazing attorney who was able to document that my home was always clean, we had food and my son was on time for school every day.

I also accepted some services. I went to a group with other moms going through a rough time. That helped me open up a bit and cope more with everything I had bottled up. I also attended Parenting Journey, which provided me with a lot of knowledge and resources I needed to make a better life for my child and myself.

I am proud how I handled my case. My services helped me find my inner strength. And no matter how many times they threatened to take my son, I never gave up. When it comes to my child, I never will.

Your Legal Rights in Service Planning

Initially service plan should be based solely on the original allegations of the case. If you're not sure why specific services are recommended, ask for an explanation. Sometimes all the safety issues aren't known at first. It's not uncommon for a case to begin because of something like housing instability and then it's discovered that the parent has a drug problem. If that's the case, services will be added.

If your child is removed or you are placed under "court-ordered supervision," you will be assigned an attorney. Your attorney should challenge any services that are not connected to an allegation. Usually by the time lawyers meet with parents, parents have already agreed to certain services, but you can ask your lawyer to advocate for changes in the service plan. If new safety concerns are introduced, your lawyer can seek to require the agency to prove those new safety issues in court just like they had to do at the beginning of the case.

Attorneys should advocate for the client's wishes and rights. You and your attorney or legal team should work together to make sure that you are getting a service plan that fits your needs. Service plans are also revisited at conferences throughout the case, so every meeting is an opportunity for you to revise the plan. Keep your lawyer or legal team informed if you're worried that the agency is making inappropriate referrals or not helping to connect you to services.

A service plan is not legally mandatory until the court orders it. But you should know that a service plan is like a contract. If you agreed to do a service—even if it's not court-ordered—and you don't do it, CPS or the foster care agency has the option of escalating their actions.

You should start services right away, especially after removal. Parents have only one year to prove that it's safe for their child to return home. After that, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires agencies to file to permanently terminate parents' rights. Starting immediately gives you more time to succeed in proving yourself and shows initiative, which looks good and moves the case forward quicker.



AMBROSIA AND HEATHER

Standing Up to Shame

Interview with Ambrosia Eberhardt, Danielle Goodwin and Heather Cantamessa, "Veteran Parents" with the Washington State Parent Advocate Network

Heather: So many parents facing the child welfare system come from a place of shame. People who feel ashamed believe the problem is not with their circumstances but with who they are as people. It's not, "I *made* a mistake," but, "I *am* a 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.

Danielle: When I lost my children, my shame was overwhelming. I felt like I was destined to fail. But if you 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. I have learned new skills to care for my children, and other parents can too.

Ambrosia: Parents feel like every failure is proof that they're failures and can't make it. When I got into the system, 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 again. That's when I finally

learned that you can't let shame make you hide.

Danielle: Successful people have struggles. Struggling isn't proof that you're failing. It is your job to find the supports that can help you with those struggles.

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 alone. But if you ever want to be free of the system, you have to begin to open up and build a support network.

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, but because we had built healthy support systems, we were able to recover quickly.

One way to do it is to take little risks, reveal little things to someone who seems safe. When nothing bad happens, you begin to say, "Hey, maybe I can trust this person."

Rise TIPS

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE UNDER STRESS

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



JEANETTE WITH HER YOUNGEST SON

Everything Felt Like a Threat

BY JEANETTE VEGA

Before my son entered foster care, I was working full time and going to school full time. I was on it.

After I lost my son, it was like I lost control over my body and mind. I couldn't focus. I could not keep track of anything. It felt like my brain was not working anymore.

My anger would jump from 100 to 1,000. I was always the type to have my guard up. I was in defense mode. But when my son went into foster care, I went from defense to attack. Everything felt like a threat to me.

ACT NOW, PAY LATER

At the time, I didn't understand what was happening to me.

Now I know that serious stress can make it hard to think, plan and calm down. When people feel threatened, we get in a "fight, flight, or freeze" mode—we just want to hide, we feel stunned, or we go on the attack.

My "act now, think later" reactions did not help my son come home. No one at the agency understood what was wrong with me, or what I'd been like before.

They assumed that I was always an angry, violent person, and that kept my son in care for longer.

SEEING PAST THE STRESS

It wasn't easy for me to get myself back together. Keeping my emotions inside felt so hard that at times I thought I would explode. Still, I learned to do it for my son's sake. Here's what helped:

I let out my pain—outside of the agency: I learned to wait until I left the agency to vent, cry and scream. Then I did whatever it took to release the hate and hurt I had inside, without hurting myself or anyone else.

I found someone who listened to me, not judged me: Feeling alone with so many overwhelming feelings can make you shut down and lose faith that you can overcome obstacles.

I empowered myself with knowledge: My anger came from feeling powerless to help my son, so I empowered myself by asking the caseworker exactly what I needed to do. Then I used that knowledge to bring my son home.

How to Plan and Stay Calm Despite Stress

Interview with Kiran Malpe, clinical director of the Strong Starts Court Initiative in NYC, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

Planning is really important during your case, and there's a part of our brain that plans, organizes and carries out our tasks. But stress and depression can affect our planning. The word "stress" minimizes what court-involved families experience, which is "toxic stress." That's feeling overwhelmed and having no one to help you.

With toxic stress, parent may have difficulty maintaining routine in their life. It can be harder to get up on time, think ahead about travel times, or plan out transportation. I've gotten parents calendars and said, "Let's fill this out together." Professionals just think, "The parent is choosing not to do the right thing." It's very important that parents identify what's going wrong and what's going to help them.

Trauma is also held in our bodies. A physical response is the first reaction. You might not sleep well, have an increased heart rate, the sweats, nightmares, or negative thoughts in your head.

Parents can come in being aggressive, even threatening or hostile. You're activated by what's happening, and once you're in an activated state, it's hard to get out of it.

I help parents take a couple deep breaths and pause. "Grounding" exercises are simple things like sitting down, putting your feet on the ground, your back against a chair, and closing your eyes. Saying to yourself, "I'm planted, I'm present, I'm here right now" and feeling your body in the chair.

I've given parents laminated pictures of their child to keep in their pocket, or stress balls to hold in court, or crystals. A physical reminder can help you stay focused when you're overwhelmed.



KEYNA FRANKLIN WITH HER DAUGHTER

What Are Your Needs and Goals?

Interview with Julia Jean-Francois of the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park and Jennifer Lowe of EMPATH's Mobility Mentoring by Rise's Keyna Franklin

Julia: People need to have their basic needs met—and parents need to feel confident that their children are safe—before they can think about other changes in their family lives. We start the conversation with families by looking at whether they have a safe place to live, an income, health care.

Jennifer: The coaching relationship can help you take a step back and focus on your long-term goals, and give you support in achieving those dreams. A family might have goals around getting their child into daycare, going back to school, working more. Mentors meet weekly with families to set goals, check in and celebrate wins.

Julia: What you really need in the beginning is a coach, like: What's the game plan? What do we need to get done here? What's going to be the first play? Without support to make the plan and follow it through, many parents would feel extremely lost.

Jennifer: All of us have goals but get discouraged. Things don't go as planned. We help families set small, reasonable action steps so they don't lose momentum. We also help families strategize: What are the obstacles you might face? How can you plan to use your strengths and your support system to help you? When you work with a coach who helps you see your own strengths, and you start achieving goals, you realize you have control over your life and you have possibilities.

TIP

Let your worker know if you are having any of these problems:

- You don't feel safe with the service provider
- The neighborhood triggers you to feel or act negatively
- You don't have transportation to get there
- The time of the service conflicts with other appointments, such as visits

TIP

It's important that you feel comfortable with any service provider.

When you start, you can ask yourself:

- Was the program welcoming to me?
- Did I like the therapist or group leader?
- Did I feel good there?
- Did I feel safe?

You want to finish services quickly so you can get your child home, but if you don't think a program can help you make progress, keep looking for a place where you think you can grow.

Therapy Helped Me Take Control

BY MICARLINE LAVENTURE

When I started therapy, I felt like my past had completely destroyed me and my relationship with everyone. I was so ashamed to talk about anything. But my therapist helped me realize how good it would be to let it out, and I did.

She gave me charts to fill out so I could pay attention to when I was feeling angry or confused and learn ways to bring down the intensity. I also began to play with my children. She also gave me logs to write down whether I had played for even 5 minutes a day. I took small steps. I stopped being afraid to enjoy myself.

My daughter used to be so afraid to come to me and would lie to me all the time. But she began to really open up. It felt wonderful when my son started telling me everything about his day.

In so many ways, therapy helped me take control of my life and believe that there is always a way forward. It helped me give my children something my parents didn't give me—the safety, the trust, and most of all, the love I never received.

Learn more about Rise's information to support parents and parent advocacy:

risemagazine.org | [@readrisemag](https://twitter.com/readrisemag)



RELATIONSHIPS FOR CHANGE

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



KEYSHANA WITH HER DAUGHTER

I Didn't Feel Loved

BY KEYSHANA MIMS

For the past 11 years I've struggled to break my addiction and be a mother to my children. Crack made me feel like I was on top. When I wasn't high, I felt lonely, confused and separated from the world.

As a child, I didn't feel loved by my own family. I lived in kinship care, and I was molested. Then, as a teenager, I was forced into prostitution. I first tried crack because I'd heard it would make me feel no pain.

For five years, my life was a mess. I lost three daughters to foster care.

TRYING AGAIN

When I got pregnant again, I knew that I needed to get clean and try again with my family. I thought I would be yelled at or blamed. But it was "We missed you!" and the hugs, kisses and love I had longed for.

I was able to enter a mother-child program and I'm proud to say I've learned to cope without using drugs.

Now my daughter and I live in a shelter and I work at the Parks Department. Much of the time it feels like I'm not getting anywhere. Program to program, train to train, walking late in the cold. I'm not saying my life is supposed to get better at the snap of a finger but damn! I didn't think it would be this hard.

Sometimes I feel like a child going through a tantrum. I keep reminding myself that I was willing to do anything for drugs.

STAYING STOPPED

My focus right now is staying stopped. I visit friends and family who encourage my recovery. I feel loved, because when I tell them I can't handle something, they don't throw my past in my face.

I'm working on opening up. On taking the risk to talk to my family about what is going through my mind. What my fears are. Not lying. Because being alone is what led me to use.

From Survival Skills to Coping Skills

*Interview with Amelia Franck Meyer, CEO of ALIA,
by Rise's Keyna Franklin*

Often in child welfare, parents are asked to give up their coping skills. Your coping skills are things that help you get through the pain you carry with you every day. Getting high or other ways of numbing or soothing ourselves are how our brains and body protect us from pain that is too much for us to bear. But they can also put your child at risk.

FACING TERROR AND PAIN

If you're being asked not to use substances or not to be in relationships that brought comfort, you need another way to cope with your pain. You need a replacement behavior. You can't rip off the band-aid and stand there uncovered.

If you peel back your protection without replacement ways to cope, it can be very dangerous. You get into a fight, flight, or freeze mode, and you're flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, and it feels like, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die."

It makes perfect sense from a survival perspective. If those are the ways I kept safe, you're taking my survival away – you're taking my babies, or my ability to cope and stay alive. And the survival response is to feel: "I'll kill you before you kill me." If you have a history of experiences that made you feel that your life is at risk, you get to that more quickly.

WORTHY, RESILIENT, LOVING

Remember: That pain won't stay as strong if you deal with it. Our past never goes away, but you can be in control of it, instead of it being in control of you.

You need people who will walk this with you as you deal with the pain. Building networks of support—people on your side who believe in you—is so important.

Dealing with setbacks and sticking with it is resilience. You can get to the point where you can say: "That shouldn't have happened to me. I am worthy and capable of love." And new things can bring you joy: Seeing your children grow and develop, having a steady job where people appreciate your work, having the keys to a new apartment. Those are enormous! Those feel great.

To My Advocate, I Mattered

BY MELISSA LANDRAU



ADVOCATE TERESA BACHILLER WITH
MELISSA AND HER TWINS

Before joining a peer support group, I would walk into the foster care agency ready to raise hell. I was having real concerns about my case. I didn't feel that I was getting the information I needed. I was struggling and had no one to talk to. I wore my anger on my face and didn't think twice about lashing out.

Throughout my life, I have been used and let down and I learned not to trust people. I burned bridges and kept everyone away.

At the agency, no one saw what I was going through, they only saw my attitude. The only person I could turn to was my parent advocate, Teresa. Unlike every other person I encountered in the system and in my life, I knew that to Teresa, I mattered.

Teresa spoke to me in a calm and passionate manner. She understood how difficult it was to be a mom under child welfare's watch and reassured me that everything was going to be ok. She referred me to the right services. She even got me into a crocheting class that help me control my temperament.

Teresa also referred me to the parent support group that she ran. Being around other parents whose children were in care, I found community. I also learned skills. They encouraged me to take deep breaths. They kept it real about what I needed to change. I had to learn that I couldn't always get what I wanted, when I wanted it. Things take time.

The support I received from that group and from Teresa helped me get through the really hard days.

Checking in for Success

Interview with Dana Christensen, creator of Solutions-Based Casework, by Keyna Franklin

Planning should be about asking: How can we help parents have more good days than bad days, and not have any really bad days that make the kids unsafe? That can include a plan for services. You may need to get some services to be the parent you want to be. But completing services is not the goal. The goal is that everyday life in the family can go well most of the time and not go really bad.

Meetings with your caseworker should target what you are struggling with and help you document what you're doing to change. Every time you meet with your caseworker, your check-in should be about why you're going to the services: What did you learn? How have you used what you're learning? What's different in your family now?

We want to help families not just notice what they're doing wrong, but their small steps of change and successes. For instance, you may feel discouraged because you haven't changed a behavior yet but you can notice that you want to change. That's actually a sign of change. So try to notice even little bitty steps. Even a thought about what you might do differently is a change.

Planning for Health and Hope

Adapted from an interview with Katya Smyth, founder of the Full Frame Initiative, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

When we're in crisis and affected by trauma, we can focus more easily on immediate next-steps than on our deep and long-term needs. But some needs are hard-wired in us, so if we're forced to make trade-offs—like moving to stable housing far from the people we depend on, or entering a treatment program where we have no control—we often can't sustain the change. This checklist can help you think about what you need in your life.

- **Safety:** We all are driven to feel safe being ourselves without fear or danger, but what each of us need to feel safe is really different.
- **Basic Needs:** We need to be able to access basic needs like food and shelter without shame or stigma. Avoiding shame is a really deep drive.
- **Connection:** We need people to depend on, and we also need to feel that people depend on us. That can be family, friends, or an organization where you can contribute and you're also helped.
- **Stability:** We all need predictable patterns in our days and our weeks. "Anchors" are tiny little habits that help us function, like drinking coffee or making your bed. Part of being in crisis is that there's so little familiarity in your day, and that's stressful. Our bodies and minds try to find things that are familiar, which can lead us back to negative habits.
- **Mastery:** We all need to feel, "If I work at something, I can change it." If you have no control, and it doesn't seem to matter how hard you work, that affects us. The sense that we have some control and choice to influence what's happening helps us move forward.

Learn more about Rise's information to support parents and parent advocacy.

risemagazine.org | [@readrisemag](https://twitter.com/readrisemag)



MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Use Your Power to Choose

Interview with Digna Denis, parent advocate at Children's Aid, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

Parents have the right to choose their services. You don't need to wait on that agency referral. You have to learn how to work the system, because the system will work you over like you don't know what hit you.

In court or in doctor's offices, look for flyers. In the agency, ask, ask, ask other parents. If you hear from other parents, "This was good," go there. Find out if they take your insurance. Tell your caseworker about the service. Find out what documentation you will need to prove that you completed the service.

Try it out to see if you like it. But if you're not comfortable, it won't be productive. You won't learn anything, and it's going to tick you off. Then you'll say the wrong thing to the wrong person, and once you're labeled, forget it—you can come in a three-piece suit doing the rosary, but people are going to look for something you did wrong. Keep looking for the right place so you get the help you need.

When a service is high quality, you can feel the difference. Parents say, "That therapist really taught me how to deal with my child when she's crying." Parents are proud of themselves too. They tell me what they learned.

It can give you a sense of empowerment to take control. A lot of parents tell me, "They are not telling me everything I have to do. I'm doing something for myself. I'm trying to figure out how to solve this problem that I got myself into it." That makes a big difference.



DIGNA AND HER SONS

Words to Help You Regain Balance

"I don't mean to be rude but I don't feel like you're hearing what I'm saying."

"I'm sorry, but underneath my anger is fear. I'm terrified. I'm worried I'll never get my kids back. I'm worried they'll get hurt when they're away from me."

"Can I tell you more about my skills and strengths so you can better understand me as a parent?"

If you start to lose your balance, ask for a time out: "This means a lot to me, and it's getting really hard for me. Can we take 5 minutes so I can collect my thoughts and when I come back we can have the best possible conversation?"

Step outside, scream, talk to someone, take some deep breaths. Tell yourself, "I'm going to reset, get re-balanced. I'm not going to take the bait. My eyes are on the prize."

Self-Advocacy Checklist

- ✓ Ask as many questions as it takes to understand your case and your service plan. It's your family's future. If you are still confused, ask for a conference.
- ✓ Ask if your agency or legal agency has a parent advocate or peer support group, and request that an advocate attend your case conferences if possible.
- ✓ Get a calendar and write down all appointments. Review your calendar before you commit to anything.
- ✓ Write out transportation and other expenses for your week so you can ask for assistance if needed, and see if you can find multiple services in one place.
- ✓ Call your caseworker regularly to make sure you're not forgetting anything and that you have the right information.
- ✓ Write down all of the positive things and progress you've made throughout your case and bring them to the attention of your lawyer, caseworker and the judge.
- ✓ Be proactive about addressing the agency's safety concerns and accept help and services if you know your family needs it.

How to Negotiate

Interview with Daniel Ames, a Columbia Business School professor who specializes in negotiation, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

- 1 Be clear about your goals.** That advice might sound obvious but a lot of times people go into negotiation without being clear. Your goals might be the unity of your family and well-being of your child.
- 2 Write down your goal in a sentence or two and keep it in front of you.** That can become a guide to how you're acting or reacting. Things will happen to make us upset and draw off course from our goals. You can look at your goal and ask yourself, "Is the next thing I'm going to say going to bring me closer to my goal or put me at risk?"
- 3 Make sure you understand the process.** Ask in advance: "What's the purpose of this meeting? What comes next? What's after that?" This can help you be strategic and cope with setbacks. The short-term might be disappointing but you can say, "I'm going to put up with something I don't like for a few months to get me what I want."
- 4 Try to set aside emotion.** In child welfare, it can feel like, "I'm talking to someone who wants to destroy my family." That's terrifying. The stakes in these conversations are unbelievably high. When you view a negotiation as a battle, then the only way you win is that the other side loses. But many times, there's a way for both people to get something important. To be successful, you have to try to set aside emotion. "Be soft on the people and hard on the problem" is from the book *Getting to Yes*, and there's some wisdom in that. It can be helpful to say, "I'm not regarding you personally as the enemy. You and I can work together against this tough problem to find a solution that works for both of us."
- 5 Be ready for compromise.** Think about the possible agreement you could reach and ask yourself, "If I have to give up something, what would I give up? If I have to push hard for something, what would I push hard for?"
- 6 Practice.** Imagine the three toughest, most uncomfortable questions you could be asked and try to put the answers into words with someone you trust. Even if you just run through it 2-3 times, you'll be so much more ready.
- 7 Bring allies.** Having a team can help but it's really important to prepare. Tell them: "When you advocate for me, I want you to know this is the outcome that matters most to me. These are the things we're going to push for."
- 8 Beware of getting "goal-jacked."** That's when we let our goals get hijacked by emotion. When our buttons get pushed, we can lose sight of what really matters. It's not just in situations like child welfare that people blow up a deal or wreck a relationship because they don't keep in focus what they're trying to accomplish. The question is: Can you recognize it in the moment and remind yourself of your goal? If you wrote down your goal, you can say to yourself, "I'm looking at what I came here to achieve and that is the unification of my family. So every time I'm about to speak, I need to ask myself, 'Am I getting myself closer to that goal?'"



REBECCA WITH HER ADVOCATE, PEGGY GIBBS

My Words Had Power

BY REBECCA MOHAMMAD

In the beginning of my case, I did not like the treatment programs I was referred to. The first was dirty and disgusting. The second had a lot of active addicts and I couldn't see myself progressing there.

I felt like my caseworker would not hear that I really did need a different kind of program. I also knew that I was being too aggressive when I tried to talk to her and it was not coming across the right way.

Finally, I spoke to the parent advocate at my agency, who sent me to an all-women's program that was just what I needed.

It was a battle within a battle trying to hold on to my sanity while I opened up a Pandora's box and let everything out that I'd kept in for so long. When I thought about my past, I could not breathe. My therapist helped me be free with it. I was able to spit it all out, and cry and cry.

Still, my relationship with my worker did not improve. My advocate helped me start an investigation, and a new worker was put on my case. Within 10 months, my daughter returned home.

My parent advocate stepped in at the moments when I was stuck. What made the biggest difference was being believed. Unlike when I was a child, I could speak up, and my words finally had power.

Learn more about Rise's information to support parents and parent advocacy.

risemagazine.org | [@readrisemag](https://twitter.com/readrisemag)