



**GETTING
STARTED
ON SERVICE
PLANNING**

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."