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Meaningful Family Engagement

Introduction

Engaging families is a foundational principle of good social work practice in child welfare (DePanfilis & Salus 1992). At every phase along the service continuum, child welfare professionals are expected to engage families -- from the initial investigation, to the intake/assessment, to case planning, to case management and service provision, and to permanency. A family-centered, strengths-based, partnership-driven approach to service planning and delivery reflects the ethical and philosophical assumptions consistent with social work values, such as collaboration, mutuality, and shared power (Altman 2005; Pecora, Reed-Ashcraft, & Kirk 2001).

Across child- and family-serving systems there has been increasing attention to meaningful engagement between professional service providers, agency administrators, policy makers, and the families that receive services (Hornberger, Gardner, Young, Gannon, & Osher 2005). Partnerships between agencies and families are changing the form, function, and outcomes of these systems. Moreover, the push toward collaborative and empowering practices is creating new spaces at the table for families in child- and family-serving systems (Lohrback & Sawyer 2004). As a result, families are emerging as a powerful resource in numerous service delivery systems across the human services

spectrum (Bossard 2011). These include children's mental health (Adams, Biss, Burrell Mohammed, Meyers, & Slaton 2000; Osher 2005; Osher, deFur, Nava, Spencer, & Toth-Dennis 1999); public education (Corbett & Wilson 2000; Henderson, Jacob, Kerman-Schloss, & Raimondo 2004; Weiss & Stephen 2009); behavioral health (Daniels, Grant, Filson, Powell, Fricks, & Goodale 2010); public health (Philadelphia Health Management Corporation 2003; Spencer, Gunter, & Palmisano 2010); child abuse prevention (FRIENDS National Resource Center for CBCAP 2007; Jennings 2002; Jeppson, et. al. 1997; Parents Anonymous 2005; Polinsky & Polin-Berlin 2001); and, as discussed in this chapter, child protection and child welfare (Anthony, Wilder, Cohen, & Berrick 2009; Boyd Rauber 2009, 2010; Cohen & Canan 2006; Frame, Berrick, & Knittel 2010; Frame, Conley, & Berrick 2006; Nilsen, Affronti, & Coombes 2009).

Although there have been marked improvements, engaging families remains a challenge in public child welfare systems, especially related to engaging fathers, incarcerated parents, and substance-affected families (National Conference of State Legislatures 2010). Partnerships with families beyond the case plan presents altogether different challenges for child welfare systems that are making the transition from the expert-based models of practice to collaborative ones. An important recent development within child welfare is the emergence of families, with former case histories of their own, in new roles as peer mentors and system change agents (Berrick, Cohen, Frame, Berrick, & Knittel 2010; Bossard 2011; Nilsen, Affronti, & Coombes 2009).

This chapter provides a brief overview of the shift in child welfare from the traditional professional-as-expert model to current emerging practices of collaboration and engagement as well as a working definition of meaningful family engagement and its

contribution to improved child welfare outcomes. The authors highlight three key areas critical to the success of local efforts to improve family engagement practice: (1) within the case plan; (2) as parent mentors and navigators; and (3) as systems change agents within collaborative decision making bodies (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2010: 27-36). As elaborated in this chapter, these domains of engagement provide solid footing within child welfare agencies on which to establish and build collaborative capacity for partnering with families.

The authors, three birth parent leaders and change agents, describe innovative approaches that utilize a shared power and accountability framework between families and child welfare professionals as well as practical strategies for building family-agency partnerships within child welfare agencies. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further study and exploration.

Our goal is that this chapter will help agency staff and families partner in more meaningful ways throughout the child welfare system. Once established, collaborative partnerships and meaningful engagement must be systemically, intentionally, and persistently nurtured in order for these practices to become a natural and established part of the organizational culture. Without careful attention from the frontline to the executive leadership team to the nuances of collaborative practice, the gravitational pull of doing things “the way they have always been done” will inevitably drag efforts back to the status quo. Unfortunately, as a consequence, families may then continue to be disempowered and disenfranchised by the hierarchical relationships implicit in traditional child welfare approaches (Merkel-Holguin 2003).

The changing landscape in child welfare

The traditional service model focuses on a family's deficiencies to be resolved by the social work professional with the presumed expertise and knowledge to create the case plan *for* the family. Expert-based models of practice are typically deficit-focused and thereby solidify a hierarchical relationship that imposes a similar structure on the helping process; the social work professional diagnoses the problem, prescribes a solution, and the family is to do what's expected of them (Ronnau 2001). In organizational systems where the expert model is primary, the authority and knowledge of the expert is reinforced throughout the system. Consequently, in child welfare the social worker's knowledge becomes prioritized over the family's knowledge, resulting in a process that reinforces practices of compliance and deception rather than mutuality, collaboration, and engagement. The imbalance of power in child welfare is exacerbated further by the interlocking sources of authority of the social worker over the family receiving services (Webb 2000; Jupp 2005). However, the professional-as-expert model is giving way to a more cooperative relationship between social workers and families (Berg & De Jong 2004; DePanfilis & Salus, 2003).

While there is an expanding evidence base that illustrates the value of family engagement to the achievement of safety, permanency, and well-being for children and youth in care, child welfare agencies struggle to engage families in day to day practice (Altman 2005, 2008; Dawson & Berry 2002). Increasingly, public child welfare agencies are engaging families in new partnerships to strengthen their systems reform efforts as demonstrated by reviews of State Program Improvement Plans developed after the first round of the Child and Family Service Reviews (Munson & Freundlich 2008). However, as families move into these partnerships within child welfare systems, policies and

procedures often have not caught up with the practice innovations that brought the families to these new roles (Frame, Berrick, & Knittel 2010; National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2010). Despite the growing consensus that child- and family-serving systems benefit from the authentic involvement of families as partners in reform efforts, systemic barriers such as no or minimal compensation impede long-term sustainability of agency-family partnerships (Bossard 2011; Bruner, Cohn, Gartner, Giloth, Herr, Kinney, Nittoli, Reissman, Trent, Trevino, & Wagner 1998; Horwath & Morrison 2007; Horngerger & Smith 2011).

<A>What we mean by meaningful family engagement and why it matters

INSERT SYSTEMS QUOTE TEXT BOX ABOUT HERE

“...the very term family involvement is problematic. By introducing “systems thinking” ..., a more relevant and effective framework can be established. This framework suggests that families are already critical participants in the ecosystem that raises and serves children. The task is not to bring families into an arena that they’ve not previously belonged to. The task is to fully recognize and honor the membership they already have — a membership that is absolutely central to the life of the child. Once this membership is acknowledged, the task is simplified. In short, it consists of creating linkages between all the members of the system -between the professionals and the families. Linkages, or “feedback loops,” are basic to the process of optimizing the role of every member of the system. That optimization is key to any system evolving toward its most effective

functioning, and to the strength and sustainability of that system” (Adams, et al. 2000:3).

Meaningful family engagement means seeing families, particularly birth mothers and fathers¹, as essential resources and partners, not only in their case but also throughout the child welfare system. Consequently, to meaningfully engage families provides real opportunities for collaborative and authentic inclusion of families’ voices in decision making about services, supports, systemic issues, and policy (Adams, Biss, Mohammed, Myers, & Slaton 2000).

The complexity of the child welfare system from the systems thinking paradigm recognizes that meaningful family engagement will necessarily seek different means and ends at various phases and points of connection within the system. Consequently, family engagement would look vastly different during the investigation and intake than case planning and service coordination phases of connection. Recognizing families as integral parts of the interconnected systems that care for children, even those in foster care, suggests new possibilities for how meaningful family engagement is conceptualized and implemented throughout the child welfare system. The systems thinking paradigm shifts the focus from “bringing in the families” to strengthening and improving the points of connections between members of the system. Another important reframe that the systems paradigm provides is that it directly challenges traditional notions of power and

¹ Throughout this chapter, the authors have focused specifically on engaging birth parents, mothers and fathers, as partners throughout the child welfare system. Family engagement certainly expands beyond birth parents, i.e., children, youth, foster and adoptive parents. However it has often been the case that birth parents have been considered secondarily in child welfare and often experience of level of stigma for child welfare involvement to which other service users are not subjected (Mizrahi, Lopez Humphreys, & Torres, 2009)

empowerment. Power within this framework does not originate or end with legitimized authorities, i.e., social workers, supervisors, administrators, in the system. Rather, power is distributed throughout the system and is enacted by multiple members. Empowerment, then, is a mutual process that flows multi-laterally between members, in this case, between families and social workers. When applied to the child welfare context, the systems thinking paradigm suggests that empowerment and the helping process are accessed and shared throughout the system by multiple members in any number of ways.

The National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care (2010: 27-36) has conceptualized family involvement across three primary domains of engagement: (1) case, (2) peer, and (3) system. We have used the three domains as a conceptual framework to discuss meaningful family engagement within and beyond the case plan. Meaningful engagement at the case level is actualized through the use of individualized, strengths-based, solution-focused, family-centered, and family-driven practices, e.g., Family Group Decision Making, Wraparound Services, Team Decision Making, and Child and Family Teams. Said another way, agencies utilize models of practice that implicitly and explicitly assert the equal and interdependent voice of families within the context of the case plan in ways that shift the power dynamic to a distributed, shared leadership paradigm (Merkel-Holguin 2003).

Within the peer domain, meaningful family engagement utilizes former service recipients with their own first hand experience of the child welfare system to help other families successfully navigate the service system. In child welfare, there are a number of emerging models in which birth parents, former child welfare service recipients, fulfill paraprofessional roles as mentors, advocates, navigators, and networkers (Rauber 2009).

Meaningful family engagement within the systems domain includes families as active and authentic participants in systems improvement activities. Within the systems domain, families may conduct or co-facilitate orientation training for families, train new social workers on engaging families, participate in policy reviews, or facilitate cross-system collaborative workgroups on service improvement.

A growing body of research and practice literature suggests that meaningful family engagement in the case, peer, and systems domains contributes to improved outcomes on a number of measures. Jennings (2002) has noted that when families are involved as true partners:

- 1) services are better delivered, more cost effective, and more culturally sensitive;
- 2) customer satisfaction is improved;
- 3) the likelihood of positive family outcomes is higher;
- 4) the system is more responsive;
- 5) families are better able to use services and help other families;
- 6) families build skills;
- 7) communities are healthier as their capacities to better support families are enhanced; and
- 8) parents model for children ways they can be involved and contribute.

Meaningfully engaging families contributes not only to the well-being of the child, but also to the well-being of the family and community.

We have established the practical and empirical basis for meaningful engagement with families as partners. Now, we focus on how child welfare professionals and families

can approach this new terrain of mutuality, empowerment, and collaboration throughout the child welfare system.

Partnering with families: Meaningfully engaging families in the case plan

As child welfare agencies seek to improve outcomes for families, increasing attention must be paid to the quality of the relational connection within day-to-day practice throughout the organization as a whole (Smith 2008; Hartling & Sparks 2008). The increased attention to the relational quality of the engagement practice between social workers and families has implications for what meaningful engagement looks like within the case, peer, and systems domains and how it is carried out. In this section, we have included the direct experiences of families and child welfare staff wherever possible to prioritize practical learning and application.

Meaningfully engaging families in the case plan (TEXT BOX 2)

INSERT TEXT BOX 2 ABOUT HERE

“Engagement is about motivating and empowering families to recognize their own needs, strengths, and resources and to take an active role in changing things for the better”
(Steib, 2004).

As Steib aptly points out, engagement goes beyond cursory involvement and compliance. Steib’s description of engagement also suggests that a different set of skills and values are needed to achieve engagement than those used to achieve involvement or compliance. Meaningful engagement is complicated in child welfare by the fact that

though some families are voluntarily involved, most families are not (Shireman 2003; Yatchmenoff 2005). The emotions of anger, guilt, and shame that often accompany a family's experience of child welfare involvement can greatly impede efforts toward engagement (Whipple & Zalenski 2006). The trauma inherent in the functioning of the child welfare system raises important concerns about how to engage the helping process from a systems thinking framework within the context of the case plan (Birrell & Freyd 2006).

Birth parents' recall what they needed from their social workers

Nicole: Based on your own experience and now your work with child welfare agencies across the country, what would you want prospective or new social workers to know about meaningful family engagement within the case plan?

Angela: Well, first off, they should understand that for me [in the very beginning], I was in crisis. I was broken and laying there in a million pieces. Therefore, I was pretty angry, mostly at myself not the social worker, but the only thing I way I know how to handle it at the time was to blow off and yell. I was mad at me, but I needed to be able to vent a little. I want social workers to remember to meet [the parent] where they are at, and not put us off until we cool down. Don't stop engaging because of that.

Debbie: Yeah, it is important for social workers to understand that for some of us we may not have learned any other skills yet to handle our emotions or crisis. For the social worker to be able to handle a venting period is a big help because

it can help us normalize the healing process and give an outlet for some deep pain that comes from the guilt and shame when we start to recognize the results of our choices. For some of us parents, especially when substance abuse is a factor, it isn't until our children are removed that we start to think, 'It might be me. I might be the problem.' If that parent has not found recovery yet, social workers should know that denial, lies, and manipulation are a part of the disease of addiction. And, in my work with child welfare social workers, I always tell them with numbers like sixty-five to ninety percent of child welfare cases being substance affected, they have to learn more about the disease of addiction and what recovery looks like.

Angela: The other thing I want social workers to know is that when I do cool down, don't put a case plan in front of me to sign when you haven't engaged me. That's not my case plan. That's your case plan for me, and I'm already overwhelmed and don't know how I'm going to do this. But here's the thing, most parents are not going to tell you that they are scared or overwhelmed. They will just keep noddin' and signin' because we'll do anything to get our kids back.

Debbie: Yeah, I'm happy you said that. It doesn't matter what we look like on paper, or how bad our addiction is, it's not that we don't love our kids, For some of us parents, it's not that we are trying to be non-compliant. But, sometimes where we come from, like for me if you'd asked me during my active addiction to cut off my right arm for my kids, I would have done it in a minute. But, go to

treatment?! I didn't even think I had a problem. I just want social workers to remember that no matter what's in the record it has nothing to do with how much we love our kids. Of course, the social worker has to look at safety and risk, but with the disease of addiction as we find recovery we have to learn new skills that we don't have while in the very beginning.

Nicole: Hearing both of your responses to what you want social workers to know, I am curious to hear what you would want social workers to do? What are the action steps that can promote meaningful engagement within the case plan?

Debbie: One thing I always tell social workers is that even though they are extremely busy, take the time to fully explain the expectations and responsibilities of the parent. Don't assume parents know the rules or expectations behind the court order because this is a whole new world to them, They may not know the rules of this world yet. Sometimes some of us have many generations of addiction or poverty or homelessness and what you are asking of us we don't know all the background. So I tell social workers to make sure to explain things in as much detail as possible, and ask the parents if they have questions a lot because it can take a long time to have the trust where the parent will ask something they don't know. One thing with that trust piece, be real honest and up front about what will be in the case record before you get in front of the judge. A parent can feel so betrayed when they haven't heard something from their social worker, especially something that's bad, until they are in court.

Angela: What I would say to social workers is sometimes it's the simple things. Like, you know, return a phone call from your family. When we step out of that office and try to navigate those court-ordered services, we're on our own. That social worker isn't there. Nobody is, but the parent. So, when you get a phone call from that Mom or Dad, or you said you would do something, follow through. And, when you can't, let the parent know what's happening. Basically, treat that parent how you would want to be treated if you were on the other side trying to put your life back together.

Debbie: There's one more thing I want to say about what social workers can do. You know, it's real important to remember to think about how your words can impact a family. I like to tell social workers to do random acts of affirmation and acknowledgement for parents. Those words and acts of encouragement go a long way as we move through all the services and do our healing. In my own case, my social worker attended my one-year anniversary of being clean and sober. That meant a lot to me and to her to see my progress in such a positive way.

Beyond the emotional overloads on both sides of the desk, there is another issue that requires careful attention particularly within the case level: social worker power and authority within the context of the helping relationship. There are several ways that the power of the social worker over the family receiving child welfare services is reinforced within the organizational structure of the child welfare system: (1) access to needed

services; (2) “law and legal powers pertaining to social workers,” e.g., the right to remove children at risk from their parents’ custody; (3) the respect and deference given to those in authority and to those who are educated and can speak and use language well; and (4) recognition of ‘professional’ status” (Webb 2000: paragraph 7; Juhila, Pösö, Hall, & Parton 2003). All of these socio-structural processes are sitting at the desk right along with the social worker and the parent with every phone call, face-to-face meeting, and court appearance. The socio-structural dynamics of imbalanced power and authority are present whether the case plan was created collaboratively or without the partnership of the family. No matter how skillful the social worker is and how willing the family members are to mutually engage the case planning and management process, the dynamics related to the social worker’s power and authority are embedded within the helping process and within the service delivery system; this dimension of the worker-family relationship raises important considerations for practice (Smith 2008; Conway 2011). Namely, what *do* social workers need to know as they come to the table with families? The responses of Ms. Conway and Ms. Braxton above provide several practical strategies that create and strengthen opportunities for authentic engagement.

INSERT STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT IN CASE TEXT BOX ABOUT HERE

Engagement Strategies for the Social Worker Toolkit

Learn more about grief and loss in the change process – Don’t underestimate the power of shame, grief, and hopelessness to impede or halt altogether the family’s engagement with the social worker and the case plan objectives. Likewise, expanding social worker

knowledge of the impact of substance abuse disorders is also crucial to effective engagement with substance-affected families.

The most simple things can make the greatest impact – Random acts of acknowledgement that are parent-oriented not child-oriented, that are true and authentic, can provide a needed boost of confidence or a glimmer of hope that things can get better, and that Mom or Dad are on the right track. Remember, the system is full of unknowns for most families, and knowing that she or he is moving in the right direction can be of great encouragement and reassurance.

Follow up and follow through – Do what you say or at least communicate honestly with the family when you can't. This is an important modeling behavior for families, but it also helps to equalize the helping relationship in which accountability is essential, i.e., the social worker explicitly embraces being accountable to her/his part of the case plan as much as the family is expected to do the same.

Be honest and direct without being cruel – Take the time to explain things clearly without sugar-coating to parents so that they can be informed consumers and decision makers regarding their family. For example, don't assume that families understand all the spoken and unspoken expectations of them related to court-ordered services.

The strategies above are not intended to be comprehensive as there is a robust and expansive practice literature on improving the social worker-family engagement skills (de

Boer & Coady 2007; Drake 1996; Gockel, Russell, & Harris 2008; Saint-Jacques, Drapeau, Lessard, & Beaudoin 2006; Smith 2006). Rather, we have tried to offer a short list of strategies that can be incorporated into existing program models, workflow routines, and supervisory practices. Beyond issues of feasibility and application, we also wanted to prioritize the voice of family leaders, particularly birth mothers and fathers, who have taken their own experiences within the child welfare system and strategically use them as foundational learning tools to improve practice in child welfare. This is an important distinction, as the trauma of child welfare involvement can be significant for families. Finding ways to give back that also support continued growth and healing is essential for family leaders and advocates in child welfare (Bossard 2011).

Engaging parents beyond the case plan: Parents as partners

INSERT CLARK COUNTY PARENT PARTNER PROGRAM TEXT
BOX HERE

We are parents whose children were removed from our care due to allegations of abuse or neglect. We are parents who have worked hard to regain custody of our children. We are parents who understand what it takes to get through these difficult times. We are parent partners.

- Clark County Parent Partner Program Brochure

An exciting innovation that is gaining increased attention in child welfare is the development of peer support programs that pair families with former case histories with families with a child or children placed in foster care (Child Welfare Organizing Project 2006; Casey Family Programs 2008; Nilsen, Affronti, & Coombes 2009; Rauber 2009;

Frame, Berrick, & Knittel 2010; National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2010). We will briefly focus on the following elements of peer support programs for families:

1. What do families typically do in this peer support role?
2. What are the common structural elements of peer support program models emerging in child welfare?
3. What agency supports are needed for long-term sustainability of peer support programs for families?

A review of the research and practice literature reveals an interesting lexicon surrounding family-driven, peer support programs in child welfare. Programs have included Family coaches (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2010); Parent Partners (Anthony, Berrick, Cohen, & Wilder 2009); Parent Advocates (National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections 2011; Casey Family Programs 2008); Parent Mentors (Taylor, Richart, Hall, Stolebarger, Held, Rau, Hooper, & Harding 2010); Veteran Parents (Nilsen, Affronti, & Coombes 2009); Family Leaders (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2010); and Parent Leaders (Bossard 2011). We use the designation “parent mentors” throughout this section to refer to family members in peer support roles. Within the expanding list of parent mentor programs, the core guiding principle is that “...having walked in someone else’s shoes makes a person uniquely able to connect, support, and inspire” (Taylor, Richart, Hall, Stolebarger, Held, Rau, Hooper, & Harding 2010: 20). Two key elements are embedded within this description: (1) the central focus on the helping and healing capacity of the life experience of someone “who’s been

there” (Cohen & Canan 2006); and (2) the use of one’s lived personal experience to engage families and to inspire hope and change in families (Bossard 2011).

The essential thread that connects peer support programs is that the parent mentor has had his or her own experience within the child welfare system, and related to that, has learned how to use that experience to help other families successfully navigate the complexities of the child welfare system and services required for reunification (Rauber 2009, 2010; Taylor, Richart, Hall, Stolebarger, Held, Rau, Hooper, & Harding 2010). It is worth noting that for some programs the role of parent mentor includes helping families understand and navigate the termination of their parental rights (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center 2010; Bossard 2011).

The parent mentor’s shared life experience becomes the foundation for a deep level of trust, willingness to engage the case plan and the broader system of supports, and ultimately builds the confidence of parents currently involved in the child welfare system that change is possible. Parent mentors become adept at using their “...experience, strength, and hope...” as tools to help other families navigate the system (Conway 2011: 88). Indeed, a critical role of a parent mentor is helping parents believe that they can change. Parent mentors work alongside families in the child welfare system and learn to share their life experiences as a living textbook for the process of change. Parent mentors also become a positive social support for a Mom or Dad who may have lost contact with kin long ago. The positive connection is particularly important with substance-affected families, for whom isolation can be an impetus for abusing substances (Akin & Gregoire 1997).

The goals of the parent mentor's support can be clustered around the several central aspects of the service experience in child welfare:

- increased understanding of what is happening at each stage in the process;
- developing skills in self-empowerment, communication, and advocacy;
- assistance in navigating through the system and accessing services successfully
- mentoring and guidance on integration of new knowledge and life skills;
- managing relationships with the multiple service providers, child welfare agency staff, and court professionals that families encounter as they work the case plan
- and, perhaps most importantly, the peer supports offer encouragement, hope, and inspiration to the family.

The support that parent mentors provide is also very practical. For example, parent mentors in Contra Costa County, California provide public transportation training with families (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center 2010). The public transportation training supports a family by enhancing the family's ability to engage services; but beyond that, it gives families a skill that will serve their needs more broadly, i.e., transport to work, healthy activities with their children, and accessing other needed community resources.

In addition to helping a family understand the process, parent mentors also typically work closely with social workers to provide greater insight and clarity into the ways that families sometimes experience the system as well as how family members might be inclined to handle it, i.e., not following through on case goals and objectives, relapse, ineffective coping or communication strategies, etc. Consequently, parent mentors help to establish crucial bridges of understanding between the family, the social

worker, court staff, and service providers (Bossard 2011). For example, in Vancouver, WA, parent mentors helped to create an informational program, the “Here’s The Deal” class, in which all the partnering systems that families encounter while involved with Department of Child and Family Services meet with families to explain their respective roles throughout the duration of the case (Marcenko, Brown, Davoy, & Conway 2010).

As parent mentor programs continue to grow across the country, there is a growing evidence base that is catching up, but slowly. As an emerging area of practice in child welfare, much of the early evidence is exploratory and descriptive. However researchers have begun to examine the connections between services provided by parent mentors and the impact of these services on child welfare outcomes, particularly reduction in children’s length of stay in care and rates of placement re-entry following family reunification. To illustrate, an independent evaluation of Contra Costa County’s (California) parent mentor program revealed that 62% of children whose parents were served by a peer mentor reunified with their parents within 18 months of their entry into legal custody, compared to 37% of children whose parents did not have a parent mentor (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2010). The Child Welfare Organizing Project in New York City is also demonstrating impressive preliminary results: “over 70% of participants who had children in foster care at the point of enrollment [in the CWOP Parent Leadership Curriculum] had regained custody by completion of the curriculum” (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse n.d.). Although preliminary, these early evaluative results suggest that parent mentors provide an important support that has the potential to improve child welfare outcomes.

INSERT BUILD IT TEXT BOX HERE

“With a new program like this you have to build it.”

-Valerie Earley, Director, Child and Family Services Director, Contra Costa County, CA

Parent mentor programs in child welfare are generating very encouraging results, but such results don't just happen. As the quote above indicates, agencies must thoughtfully build the necessary infrastructure and supports in order for parent mentor programs to produce the intended outcomes. As with any new program, agencies benefit from taking a comprehensive, systemic approach to planning and implementing a parent mentor program. A comprehensive approach might include, for example, engaging families to get feedback on existing services; hosting facilitated forums between families and staff to begin the trust building and collaborative team design of what a local parent mentor program should include; identifying training needs of families and agency staff; and reviewing, and where indicated, revising policies to support a parent mentor program and identifying a strategy for funding parent mentors.

In establishing a parent mentor program an agency must attend to a number of issues: securing the endorsement of agency leadership endorsement and support; identifying hiring criteria for parent mentors; developing strategies for recruitment and training of parent mentors; clarifying roles and responsibilities of parent mentors with child welfare and court staff and developing guidelines as to how the parties will work together; developing adequate staff support and supervision for the parent mentors; and establishing a resource for compensating parent mentors. In short, it is not sufficient to bring parents to the table and expect that their own family's successful reunification will prepare them to become a successful parent mentor. Child welfare administrators and program managers must be attentive to the needs of the parents who will provide parent

mentoring (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2011). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to outline in detail the steps for building parent mentor programs. However, we have assembled a list of resources at the conclusion of this chapter that agency staff can access for additional guidance.

Meaningfully engaging families in the parent mentor role represents a unique opportunity for authentic engagement between social workers and families. Expanding child welfare services to include parent mentors and integrating parent mentors into the helping process along side social workers, as equal partners, reflects the values of mutuality, empowerment, and collaborative practice. In addition, seeing parent mentors “on the floor” in this new capacity inspires and rejuvenates not only the families, but also the agency’s social work staff (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care 2011).

Despite the advantages to establishing a parent mentor program, there may be concerns among agency and court staff about working with parents in this new shared power paradigm. Social workers may have legitimate questions and concerns about having to communicate with yet another “partner” involved the lives of the families on their caseload (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center 2011). These and other concerns may emerge as agency staff and parent mentors acclimate to a new relationship; from us and them, helper and helpee, to a collaborative partnership of equals.

INSERT STRATEGIES FOR PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES AS MENTORS TEXT BOX

ABOUT HERE

Partnership Strategies for the Social Worker Toolkit

Be mindful of personal/professional biases about parents – When entering into a collaborative partnership it is helpful to be aware of any personal/professional assumptions that may negatively impact the partners' ability to work together. For example, continuing to see families with case histories based on their past involvement with the child welfare agency is likely to impede one's ability to develop an effective partnership with parent mentors.

Don't expect parent mentors to function like social workers – Parent mentors have their own expertise, skills, and knowledge base from which to draw as they work with families. A solid program will include adequate training for parent mentors on the child welfare system, maintaining healthy boundaries with families, and calendaring and time management and other professional development training. Parent mentors will be prepared for their job. However, they should not be expected to be mini-social workers. A good parent mentor is clear that she or he is not, nor does she or he want to be, the family's social worker.

Look for ways to share power – Remember that what families bring to the helping process is as valid and important as what agency staff bring. Also, it is important for agency staff to remain open to the critique families may have of the system and its policies. Though it may initially be uncomfortable, working through such discussions as a team will strengthen the effectiveness of both social workers and parent mentors.

***Give it time** – Laying the groundwork for a agency parent mentor program infrastructure can take some time. It is not useful or realistic to expect that everything will run without a hitch. It's child welfare. There are necessary learning curves associated with the implementation of any new program. However, as a social worker, if you have concerns don't hold on to them. Instead, participate in the initial brainstorming and program development phase of the parent mentor program.*

Families as systems change agents: Making space at the table

INSERT TEXT BOX 3

For families and professionals to work together as equal partners, we have to stop dividing the world into “helpers” and “helpees” as though these represented two different species. It is time to acknowledge that stressors like substance abuse, loss, illness, divorce, and mental illness occur in the lives of professionals as well as the lives of clients. They, too, can have ... problems [that place their children at risk]. We all are subject to the human condition and all have the same needs for comfort and hope when we are struggling. (Adapted from Tannen, in Adams, et al. 2000)

As public child welfare agencies continue the difficult work of systems reform and improving outcomes, families are becoming a powerful constituency for change. Like no one else at most decision making tables, families know firsthand what the service experience really is, not what the theoretical frameworks or policies and procedures say it should be. However, families that become systems change agents and leader-partners in child welfare have the unique experience of walking on both sides of the street: the helpee and the helper. Families often bring a level of passion for the system and its

improvement that is unparalleled. Families also bring the force of truth that remind all of us that we are, in fact, "...subject to the human condition..." (Tannen 2000). Families help professionals "keep it real" when they remind us where agency practice falls short or is inconsistent. Likewise, they are in the perfect position to tell us where the system and staff are doing great work. However, if there is no systemic expectation for families to participate fully at the decision-making tables, agency professionals miss the invaluable experience and insight families can bring.

INSERT WE NEED YOU AT THIS MEETIG TEXT BOX HERE

"We need you at this meeting." The statewide collaborative coordinator, Ray, has finalized the meeting agenda, secured a commitment to attend from other state and provider agencies, but there's just one final detail that's missing as he reviews the invitation list – where's the family voice? Realizing the missing link, Ray quickly scrambles through a stack of old meeting minutes looking for the name of that parent who shared her story at the last meeting. The coordinator emails the parent, Pat, informing her about all the meeting details, and follows up with a phone call since the meeting is next week. Pat receives Ray's email and is excited about participating in this follow-up meeting. However, she notices that the meeting is scheduled for 10:00 AM next Wednesday, which conflicts with her work schedule. With time so short she thinks it might still be possible to get a co-worker to switch shifts, and since the meeting is during school time she thinks she can make child care work if she can get her mother to watch her son for a couple of hours after school. As Pat continues to work out the details of her schedule with her co-workers and supervisor, she calls Ray to tell him that she's excited

about participating, and will do her best to get everything handled so that she can attend the meeting. However, with the meeting at the state office building, Pat will need to commute two hours each way. When she mentions this to Ray, and asks about help to cover gas, Pat is told that there's no budget to reimburse collaborative members for committee work. She then asks if there's a stipend that can offset the gas she'll expend traveling to and from the meeting. Again, Ray reiterates how important her voice is at these meetings, and tells Pat, "we really need you at this meeting, but that there is no budget for a stipend or mileage for community volunteers." (Excerpted from National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections 2011.

The excerpt provides a typical experience of how families are invited to participate at the systems level. Though there seems to be great enthusiasm for family participation, there is not always the planning necessary to make family engagement truly collaborative or meaningful. For example, Ray hadn't considered the layered costs of Pat's attendance. There was no mechanism for her to offset the expense of her invested time and energy. Every other professional attending at the collaborative meeting is being paid as a part of their job responsibility to be there. However, for Pat there is not even so much as a gas stipend. The cautionary note here is that as child welfare agencies continue partnering with families in innovative ways, staff must ensure that policies and procedures keep pace in ways that support mutual, collaborative partnerships, e.g., maintaining a budget line item from which to reimburse and pay for family's time when working on behalf of the agency on collaborative initiatives. Likewise, having a dedicated staff person that can field questions from the family as they prepare for the meeting is key. In some instances,

family members may not have experience attending business meetings and may need a primer so that they are adequately prepared to be full participants (NRCDFC 2011).

Publically and privately funded systems reform initiatives have expanded in recent years, and nearly all of them explicitly identify consumer involvement in decision making as an essential component (Horwarth & Morrison 2007). However, it is not sufficient to solicit feedback and input; true consumer involvement requires that families become a part of determining how the system will function. It is not enough for child welfare agencies to extend the meeting invitation. Social work professionals and families have to be willing to engage in new levels of accountability, relational accountability (Bossard 2011).

It is also important to help families feel at ease and prepared to participate. For example, the Family Engagement Supervisor of the Contra Costa County Parent Partner Program will call the meeting contact person to gather the details for a meeting that Parent Partners have been asked to attend, i.e., meeting location, available parking, advanced copy of the agenda, what is expected of the Parent Partner, will there be follow-up, what's the dress code for the meeting, etc. (NTAEC 2010). These types of questions reflect a level of respect that can support long-term engagement of families within the systems domain. The actions of the Family Engagement Supervisor also remind us of the value of the role of someone who can identify and translate the written, spoken, and unspoken expectations associated with families' participation in the agency decision making process. This is very similar to what parent mentors do between service recipients and social workers -- make evident the invisible infrastructure that creates and maintains meaningful engagement throughout the system.

*INSERT STRATEGIES FOR FAMILIES AS CHANGE AGENTS TEXT BOX ABOUT
HERE*

Partnership Strategies for the Social Worker Toolkit

Always invite more than one family member to large meetings – *Being the lone voice at the table can be intimidating for families new to this arena of participation.*

Be thoughtful about how to support the long-term engagement of families – *Take the time to make sure that families have all the information they need to be effective, but also provide the name of a person who can be contacted with additional questions. As in the other domains of engagement, it is important to establish a comfort level that encourages inquiry and participation.*

Respect the family member's time – *Devise a way to honor the contributions of families to the child welfare agency and system through compensation and reimbursement for expenses. Remember, if families are not employed by the State or local child welfare agency as employees or contractors they are not being paid to be there, and in some cases they are losing money for their participation, e.g., taking time away from work, travel expenses, and child care. In short, make it manageable for families to participate.*

Be open to family feedback – *Anticipate that by bringing families to participate at this level, agency staff may hear comments that make some uncomfortable. However, if the*

goals is to improve systems and outcomes it will be important to take the feedback from families seriously and look for ways to demonstrate that families have been heard.

In efforts to build a collaborative culture in which meaningful family engagement is the status quo, it is necessary to establish organizational spaces for direct, respectful, shared engagement with all stakeholder partners within the system, including families (Lasker & Weiss 2003; Bushe 2006). We cannot assume that extending an invitation for family members to speak or conducting focus groups with families to access their feedback and ideas will achieve meaningful or collaborative engagement of families. We would do well to make room for the presence and partnership of families as empowered, equal participants rather than perpetuate an underlying tokenism in which families are treated as an afterthought. Reframing our understanding of what “system” means helps us reconceptualize engagement in a more meaningful way for families and agency staff.

Conclusion

As agencies continue to develop partnerships with families throughout the child welfare system, there are new frontiers in practice and research that promise great benefit to the field. Among them are a comprehensive review and dissemination of practice approaches and peer mentor models; the development of mechanisms to finance parent mentors; continued research on the impact of parent mentor programs on child welfare outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being; more resources written or co-authored by parent mentors available to families receiving child welfare services and in the literature; explorations into the kinds of supports that parent mentors need to have

longevity in this work, i.e., the impact of secondary trauma on parent mentors; and, continued exploration into the impact of partnering with parent mentors on social worker job satisfaction and workload.

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