

Moving from Clients Evaluating Services to Clients Designing Services

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Introduction

Children's Aid Societies are increasingly recognizing the importance of clients evaluating the services they receive. For some time "youth in care" groups have held an important and constructive voice in shaping services at an agency level and also at a provincial level through networking and conferences. More recently, parents' voices have also been heard as a result of agencies using surveys and even focus groups to ascertain parents' opinions about the services they receive. But can parents contribute more to the improvement of services than completing surveys or taking parts in focus groups? We argue that they can and support this contention by presenting findings from a study that we undertook when working for an Ontario Children's Aid Society during the mid-1990s. That study set out to test the viability of asking parents to evaluate the services they received in an era when the viability of such evaluation was less evident than it is today. The study, however, moved beyond simple program evaluation and led to parents developing a model for intervention that they suggested agencies use when bringing children into care. We present this model here, but first we trace the theoretical thinking that led us to undertake the study. We conclude by suggesting that agencies continue current efforts to ascertain parental views of services they receive but also move beyond these measures to involve parents in agency management and planning at Board and committee levels.

Theoretical Foundations: Client Expertise

By the mid-1990s the voice of children in care was having an influence on the services they received but the voice of parents was rarely heard. Yet a thrust was underway for child protection work to become more collaborative with parents, particularly in the area of case planning (Burford & Pennell, 1995; Callahan, Field, Hubberstey, & Wharf, 1998; Callahan & Lumb, 1995; Corby, Millar, & Young, 1996). In Ontario, solution-focused approaches were the primary means of achieving collaboration. Solution-focused theory considered parents to be "experts on their own needs" and solution-focused methods gave workers the means to tap this expertise when developing and designing individual case plans. Of course workers would not allow parents to shape case plans in ways that left

children at risk, but as much as possible workers used solution-focused techniques to involve parents in case planning and they took seriously the contention that parents understood their own needs and the type of intervention that would assist their family.

Finding a good fit between solution-focused methods and the casework we were undertaking, we began to extend solution-focused logic into the area of program evaluation. We argued that if child protection clients were experts on their own needs, they must also be expert evaluators of the services designed to meet these needs. Although at that time, this link between solution-focused casework theory and the idea of clients evaluating programs was new, the idea of clients evaluating the services they receive had existed in other theoretical paradigms for some time. For instance, empowerment literature suggests that clients understand their needs and experiences better than anyone else and should be directly involved in shaping the services they receive (Lord & Hutchison, 1993; Whitmore & Kerans, 1988). Making the link between the newer solution-focused ideas and empowerment literature, it seemed important to test the viability of asking parents who received child protection intervention to evaluate and make suggestions to improve the services they receive.

Design and Methodology

We asked parents about their experiences with child protection intervention and for recommendations to improve such service. Only parents whose cases were closed were invited to participate in the research because it was thought that parents actively receiving services might worry that any negative feedback they gave to the authors may impact their case. As our study was exploratory, and because we sought in-depth qualitative data, we only interviewed eight parents. All of these parents were involved with child protection services for alleged or verified physical abuse or neglect and all had a child or children admitted into care. We purposely selected parents who had been in conflict with the agency in order to provide a stronger test of the viability of parents, who might have negative views of services, being constructive in an evaluation process.

We developed an interview guide comprised of pre-set questions and envisioned asking parents questions and noting their subsequent answers. The first parent to be interviewed, however, asked us more questions than we were able to ask her. This parent's questions were mainly personal in nature; about our home lives, children, and families. These questions came as a surprise and unmasked the assumptions with which we approached the project. We assumed that in order to develop knowledge we would ask the questions and the parents would answer them. Research was not supposed to involve the participant's asking more questions than the researchers, especially questions of a personal nature. Yet this parent's behavior caused us to wonder what gave us the right to consider our questions more important than hers. We then recalled feminist arguments that suggest interview guides are problematic because "the person being interviewed has a passive role in adapting to the definition of the situation offered by the person doing the interviewing" (Oakley, 1981, p.35) and that "the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship" (Oakley, 1981, p. 41). With this feminist perspective in mind, we began to answer the parent's questions and intuitively started to discover a way of researching with parents based on similar collaboration and co-construction ideals to our solution-focused practice. What we were intuitively discovering was "co-researching," which is a perspective in which knowledge is constructed *with*, rather than *about*, those being researched (Moureau & Whitmore, 1995). From this beginning, a non-hierarchical relationship developed with parents participating in the research and each parent was viewed as a partner who was given the opportunity to become involved in as much or as little of the research process as he or she desired.

Findings

All of the parents candidly discussed their experiences and offered constructive advice about the ways services could be more effectively delivered to clients. Parents had three suggestions for improving service: they wanted workers to listen more; they wanted to be given opportunities to

make choices and be more involved in case planning; and they wanted to be better informed by workers.

Recommendation 1: Listen to Parents More

Parents complained that they were not heard or understood by workers. An example is a couple who called child protection services several times because their son was becoming increasingly out of control. It was not until the father, reacting in frustration, threatened to harm his son that the agency responded. These parents had ideas about how their son might be helped, yet they felt that their child protection worker did not give them an opportunity to share these ideas. The parents speculated that their frustration was interpreted as hostility, which may have caused the worker to shy away from collaborating with them. As a result, plans were formulated by workers without their input after their son was taken into care.

Parents said that even when workers sought their opinions, these opinions were not always understood. One mother shared that the only way she could obtain help for her son's mental health needs was to "abandon" him at the child protection agency, thereby forcing the agency to admit him into care and eventually into a residential treatment facility. The agency had viewed this mother as callous for abandoning her son. Yet, rather than a cold and abandoning parent, this mother had acted in desperation to force the child welfare system to help her son in the only way she knew how.

Based on these and similar experiences, parents recommended that workers listen more carefully to what they were saying and also take the time to more fully grasp parents' perspectives and motives.

Recommendation 2: Allow Parents Choice and Participation

Parents also spoke of being denied opportunities to make choices in any areas of their children's lives after they were admitted into care. These included, but were not limited to, selecting their children's school courses, having contact with their children's teachers, or purchasing their children's clothing. Parents expressed a deep interest in

having these seemingly minor tasks remain their responsibility.

It was easy to understand why workers removed these opportunities from parents; child protection services often deal with hostile and volatile parents who have difficulty in being involved with their children in a constructive way. As a result, "standard operating procedure" denied a parent choice and participation unless special circumstances existed that allowed such opportunities to occur. These "special" situations, however, became exceptions to the rule because workers with high caseloads did not get the opportunity to identify these opportunities. Parents recommended, therefore, that standard operating procedure be reversed to automatically allow full parental participation with their children in care unless exceptional circumstances existed to preclude this.

Recommendation 3: Keep Parents Informed

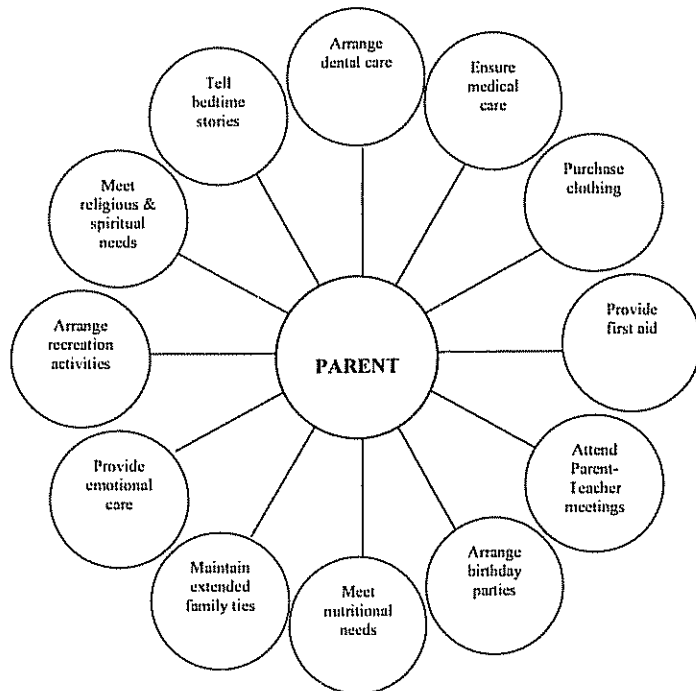
Parents felt that they were inadequately informed about issues relating to their cases. For example, a mother explained how a worker gave her copies of court papers that outlined all of the mistakes she had made, which led to her child coming into care. Left alone with this information, she read the papers over every night and cried. The mother suggested it would have been better to give her a written plan detailing how she could work to overcome these problems. This would then allow her to focus on constructive solutions, as opposed to ruminating over mistakes. At that time, while it was compulsory for workers to give parents copies of court papers, it was against agency policy to provide them with copies of the plan written in casework files. In this mother's case, such written plans did exist in her file and copies of these would have been very useful in guiding her towards improving her situation. Consequently, parents recommend that copies of all written information and plans relating to their case be given to them as a matter of course (except for any confidential information in their files regarding third parties).

A Service Model Designed by Parents

Findings revealed that despite solution-focused efforts, casework with parents was not leading to the type of

collaboration parents found useful. Because the project evolved beyond simply gathering data from parents, it was possible to include parents in considering the implications of findings and developing an intervention model that remedied the service delivery problems they identified. Parents formulated their recommendations into a model that they proposed workers use when bringing children into care. The model focuses on the functions of parenting that are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Select Tasks of Parenting



Parents wanted workers to use the above diagram when bringing children into care because it would help workers understand that despite the mistakes a parent may have made, the parent has the same feelings, hopes and worries as any other parent who juggles the tasks of caring for their child. Parents suggested that before admitting a child into care, workers create with them a diagram similar to Figure 1. Doing so would allow the parent and worker to map together the specific role the parent has been playing in their child's life. Although many of the tasks shown in the figure would be the same for any parent, each would have their own unique way of managing their responsibilities, resulting in a slightly different map for each client. Parents pointed out that

while this process is designed to help the worker understand the parent, workers might also use this diagram to illustrate to parents their concerns about tasks that have not been fulfilled by the parent.

Parents said that once the map is completed, workers should strive to ensure parents continue to undertake as many of their existing parenting tasks as possible. Indeed, unless a parent has failed in all areas of parenting, it makes sense to allow them to continue to perform those tasks they do well. In fact, doing so might actually reduce the overall stress on workers. In particular, the days immediately following an admission into care involve tasks such as taking the child to a medical exam and registering the child in her/his new school. In addition, the worker also needs to arrange access visits. In many instances, parents who do not require supervised access could perform these and similar instrumental tasks. In the process, parents could potentially have a more meaningful and productive access visit than in the traditional office setting, or worse, the traditional trips to the local McDonald's.

Parents contended that not maintaining their involvement in as many of the above tasks as possible was a counter-productive casework strategy. Indeed, it makes little sense to sever healthy connections with their children in the process of repairing unhealthy ones; a process parents contended analogous to a physician amputating a leg to set a broken femur. One mother spoke of how difficult it was for her to have parenting responsibility removed when her children came into care. The consequent lack of "parenting practice" meant that when her children returned home, she had to re-learn how to be a parent again.

The above model for admission of children into care not only makes casework sense, but also addresses the concerns parents had about child protection intervention. It ensures that workers gain a better understanding of parents, and it enables parents to be given ways to remain involved with their children in care. It logically follows that parents who are involved in these processes will also remain better informed about what is occurring with their children.

Conclusions

The above research reveals the potential of involving clients in evaluating and helping design the services they receive. Parents' recommendations were logical, well thought out, made clinical sense, and would clearly improve the way services are delivered. The benefits of parental involvement in program planning became so evident through this research that the agency where the project was conducted asked a parent who had been involved in the research to sit on a committee restructuring the agency foster care system and to become a member of the Board of Directors' Program and Services Committee. The parent also presented the above findings and model at child protection conferences in Canada and the USA.

Although this research was conducted in the mid-1990s, these findings are particularly pertinent today as increasing numbers of children enter care and as agencies are increasingly listening to parents when evaluating the services they deliver. The above research not only shows the viability of listening to parents when evaluating service, but also the potential parents have to help design services.

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