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Editorial: The Role of Families

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Editorial

The Role of Families

Family Preservation is an approach based upon a set of principles and values that are integrated throughout all human systems and services. One of the key principles of Family Preservation is the family as an expert.

Several years ago at a Family Preservation Institute Conference, Sharon Sheldon confronted me, in my role as conference chair, regarding the lack of workshops for and by families at the conference. I tried to explain that this conference was designed for those doing Family Preservation work. Through Sharon's perseverance and the work of Patti Derr, Susan Rogers, and many other incredible family care givers, families slowly are being recognized as experts "doing" the work of family preservation and support.

From "case" conferences to major planning efforts, their insight and unique perspective is extremely powerful. Ray Worsham, charged with implementing the Family Preservation and Support Act in Texas in 1994, convened a panel of eight different family representatives for a day-long discussion with the planning committee consisting of leaders of 40 state and private agencies. In articulate, strong voices, these parents explained how workers, services, and programs sometimes supported them, failed them, and confused them. Their insight gave the planning committee a new focus and fostered one of the most cooperative cross-agency efforts this author has ever witnessed. We have so much to learn from families when we listen.

Family members do not always speak in the jargon of professionals or at the same rate or from the same case outline. If we ask families to participate as professional helpers, then we must invest in preparing families to speak to us. Listening to families is one small but important step toward fully recognizing and using family members' expertise.

What follows is a special message from one family, the Alexander family. Ms. Alexander presented these remarks during the keynote address at the Family Preservation Institute Conference in Corpus Christi, Texas, September of 1997. With her permission, we present her perspective here.

Alvin L. Sallee

Five Things a Case Worker Should Remember When Working with Clients

1. Even though you are a Child Advocate, you need to work with the entire family. Children have fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters that they love very much. In fact, the child(ren) probably loves them more than the child loves you. So, it does no good to mistreat the parent or be rude to the parent, especially in front of the child(ren).

The child(ren) will be angry and resentful of you. You will be working with an angry perpetrator and an angry victim. This cannot be healthy for you, the caseworker for the family.

2. You are a social agency! A government agency of the people! A service agency! Be honest, sincere and helpful. Explain the problems so the parent can understand why it is important to change. Talk about the benefits of changing an act. Don't be rude and confrontive; leave that to the investigator (unless you are the investigating; then you have to. It is expected). The problem with investigators is they sometimes go looking for problems, assuming the worst, instead of being objective and letting the evidence speak for itself. Otherwise, remember the investigation is over, and the case already has been decided as guilty or risky. So, let's get started with the services.

Give feedback on progress or problems so there are no surprises when you evaluate the family later down the line. Give the family a chance to correct any problems. Help them along the way. Don't just say these are your problems then disappear and come back at the end of the month to evaluate them. You can't just leave the family alone all month and then come judge the situation by one visit or what one person, usually the neighbor, says. That is not fair. Say things like "Good job" or "Work on this."

3. Please answer your phone or respond to messages promptly. We are calling with questions or need help. We are not an interruption of your work; we are your work.
4. Ask me what I need all the time. I may be too shy or too proud to ask for detergent. If our clothes are dirty, figure it out. If my dishes are piled up, I may need some dishwashing liquid. If I don't offer you coffee or a soft drink, I may not have any to give you. You also may ask if I have food, especially toward the end of the month.

Tell me what is available in the community for my kids and for me. Tell me about legal aid in case I need it. Tell me where to get free immunizations. Tell me where I can get medical care for free if I can't get Medicaid.

5. We don't always have to meet at your office or my home. Take us somewhere like a park. We never get to go because we don't have transportation, because I don't have family or friends to take us. Help us live like everyone else once in a while. We get tired of being cooped up at home all the time. Help us benefit a little from your intervention.

*Shawna Alexander
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