



Learning Tool 9



The Other Side of the Desk

Honoring Diverse Voices and Restoring Effective Practice in Child Welfare and Family Services

Opportunity and Urgency

To date, every state in the country has implemented the first round of the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR), the U.S. Children's Bureau outcome-based performance review. The performance review was designed to build a new degree of accountability for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and their families. While the results of the reviews reflect the unique culture and circumstances of each participating state, the findings are fairly consistent. Two of the findings are especially significant:

(1) State child welfare systems need to improve the practice of effectively engaging families to participate meaningfully in ensuring good outcomes for their children.

(2) Improved outcomes for vulnerable children and their families cannot be realized in the absence of strong working relationships between child welfare agency staff and a full range of partners involved in contributing to family success and well-being.

We have long known that two factors are essential to good outcomes in child welfare: (1) engaging families in creating the terms of their success and (2) strong partnerships among community-based organizations, public systems, and neighbors that provide for support and effective services. Now, a growing body of evidence, stemming from the CFSR process, will help inform the development of new and effective child welfare strategies.

An invisible but real and intransigent barrier goes up between families who are in distress and the system mandated to help them.

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In order to achieve positive results for families and children, one has to honor the dignity and value of families and develop an appreciation of families' and workers' experience with the child welfare system. The development of trust and respect between fami-

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lies and systems will help overcome uneasy tension between child safety and intervention. The "other side of the desk" is a forum to restore relationships between and among families, communities, and child welfare and family-serving systems that work in those communities. It encourages a necessary restorative practice aimed at enhancing our efforts to improve services, reform systems, build communities, serve families, and support neighborhoods having stronger prospects for success. The "other side of the desk" provides a means to create a foundation of understanding, without which improved outcomes are not possible.

Clarity of Vision, Clarity of Purpose

Our efforts must proceed with courage, with uncommon honesty, and with a new effort to understand the experience of people who are served by the child welfare system, as well as a new understanding of those who staff the system. The effort to create a new foundation of understanding in order to improve results for children and families is the focus of the "other side of the desk" approach.

Families who become involved with the child welfare system experience a great deal of emotional pain, including fear, anger, embarrassment, shame, and remorse. The population of families who experience mandated state intervention is disproportionately poor and non-white, tends to be clustered in identifiable neighborhoods and localities, and often has a generational history of involvement. A system that evokes difficult emotions under difficult circumstances in families who often live in the same community produces serious unintended consequences: distrust, a history of unacknowledged emotional trauma, and the conviction that one has been misused by a system that is intended to help families and their children. Over time, this experience of distrust can become a part of a community's institutional history and culture. An invisible but nevertheless very real and intransigent barrier goes up between families who are in distress and the system mandated to

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help them. The deep and underlying conditions for building productive relationships with individuals and communities have not been addressed in this situation of accumulated and often hidden emotional trauma. As a result, we struggle to meet the needs of a community's most vulnerable families and children. Often, we know what must be done, but the knowledge of how to do it eludes us.

Enter the "other side of the desk"—a process focused on externalizing, publicizing, and socializing the experience families have with the child welfare system. Its explicit goal is to restore productive

relationships between families and representatives of the child welfare system and other systems serving families. The process sets a stage for a kind of transparency of experience by emphasizing dialogue, story telling, truth telling, reflection, negotiation, and reconciliation. These activities create conditions for understanding and effective actions that lead to improvement in the lives of vulnerable children and families.

The “other side” is about increasing community awareness and parental understanding of the role of the child welfare agency and other agencies in the community.

A critical component of the approach is constant reflection on the concept of the “other side.” It is not just about being heard, or about telling stories; it is about listening and hearing what is told. The “other side” is about increasing community awareness and parental understanding of the role of the child welfare agency and other agencies in the community. For example, the work of child welfare professionals is governed by legal requirements to which workers struggle to respond. A society that is indifferent to policy and funding for the developmental well-being of children in their early years tends to be adamant and presumptuous about “safety”; members of such a society see safety as the protection of innocent young children from violent parents. Such a dichotomy expresses itself as unreasonable pressure on child welfare staff members who, on the basis of limited information and within the confines of limited time frames, have to make decisions affecting intimate relationships within families.

When a child dies, the local child welfare agency bears a painful burden. Often these exceptions drive

agency policy and practice. Often painful tragedy is compounded by blame leveled by a variety of stakeholders, both outside and within the child welfare agency. Generally, with inadequate attention to the effects of this emotional distress, workers can become unaware of the everyday effects of this unacknowledged grief, which is carried to the fabric of the child welfare organization itself. Indeed, even under the best circumstances, child welfare work is one of the most difficult jobs. To do it well requires tremendous emotional and moral maturity. It requires a broad range of general and specialized knowledge. It requires cultural skill and self-awareness about one’s own values and life experiences.

No matter which side of the desk you sit on—that of the staff member or that of the family member involved in the system—the other side shapes and sometimes determines your reality. Discovering this creates a meeting ground on which we can realize the extent to which personal experience, motivation, values, constraints, requirements, and unseen realities impact our efforts to create common cause and improve the lives of children and families. Knowing this, can we begin to imagine a shared project for the well-being of children in which participants on both sides create a shared understanding and partnership.

Design and Implementation

To design an “other side” initiative, a few community partners who serve families, understand the community, and have some legitimacy with parents in the community come to the table with a facilitator and some parents with whom they have an established relationship. A representative from the child welfare agency is also invested and involved in the initial meeting. This group becomes the core planning group for the “other side of the desk” initiative, sharpening its concept, purpose, expected results, and message strategy. The conveners find a place and

time for the initial meeting—brainstorming about families and staff who would be good candidates to open the “other side” meeting. They consult, collect topics and questions for dialogue, and build sustaining partnerships. An “other side of the desk” initiative is not a one-time event—it is a process of engaging and building relationships based on mutual respect and equality.

Among the most critical aspects of the “other side” is parents’ participation. Conveners hear parents’ concerns and provide opportunities for venting frustration. These meetings can be delicate. They need to be closely facilitated, and careful attention must be paid to the safety and security of participants. This is essential to building the “other side” as a genuine restorative practice. In a parallel process, conveners solicit the stories, experience, and frustrations of child welfare staff. Here, again, conveners must exercise wisdom and judgment in order to preserve what emerges in these sessions. Including staff of family-serving public systems beyond child welfare can be very important to the process.

Many formats can be used to stimulate dialogue. Speakers, panels, or modified focus groups can help raise issues in a supportive context. Role-play is an important mechanism for understanding the view

from the other side of the desk. Usually, the first meeting is designed around the issues confronting parents, and the second one addresses the concerns and frustrations of child welfare workers. Local plan-

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ning groups can modify this framework and help determine future goals and plans for the initiative. The first meeting usually lasts approximately three hours and has 20 to 30 participants.

Much thoughtful planning and preparation is required in order to produce meaningful and productive dialogue. Like any powerful form of work with groups, the “other side of the desk” process has the potential to reconcile and heal families and communities. If the design, preparation, and implementation are not done well, the process has the potential to be damaging. It must be taken seriously and approached with mindfulness by all parties.

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