PARTNERING WITH PARENTS
PROMISING APPROACHES TO IMPROVE REUNIFICATION OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Parent Partner program is one of a number of recent innovations in child welfare that draws upon the strengths of families and engages family and community members in program planning. As a departure from previous initiatives, the Parent Partner program seeks to enlist as staff, mothers and fathers who have experienced child removal, services, and reunification. These individuals are trained and supported to provide direct services to parent clients seeking reunification with their children. The program design in Contra Costa County encourages Parent Partners to serve as mentors, guides, and advocates for current parent clients. Parent Partners can be flexible in the roles they play and in responding to a range of needs parent clients might present. The principal goal of their work, however, is to help parent clients gain awareness of their rights and responsibilities, and to assist parents toward reunification with their children. Because of their unique experience as former clients of the child welfare system, Parent Partners offer a perspective to parent clients that differs from that of social workers and other allied professionals. As one staff member indicated, "The message is the gift of hope: If I can do it, you can do it, too."

When parents are separated from their children, courts usually require evidence of significant change in parents before recommendations to reunify are offered. The path to facilitate parental change is assumed to occur via the parent's engagement in services including parenting education, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health counseling, or other supports. In fact, according to Smith (2001), parental compliance with services is one of the most important predictors of reunification. Yet little is known about the factors that help parents engage in services. Acting largely as brokers of services, social workers attempt to offer referrals to services; sometimes time permits social workers to actively assist parents in connecting to services. But there is an acknowledged social distance between the social worker and the parent client. Differences of class, education, parenting status, or prior contact with the child welfare system may contribute to parent clients' feelings of isolation and helplessness as they face a steep set of externally imposed requirements.

Parent Partners, selected because of the successes they have experienced in overcoming significant obstacles, in changing patterns of personal behavior that diminished their parenting skills, and in acknowledging the role of child welfare in motivating them to re-prioritize their family, are viewed as important allies in the Contra Costa County Child and Family Service Agency. Because of their shared experience with the child welfare system, Parent Partners may be uniquely positioned to reach out to parent clients, gain their trust, and help them access services and negotiate the complicated child welfare bureaucracy.

The purpose of this two-part research project is to: (1) describe the Parent Partner Program by identifying components of the program that are beneficial to parent clients and affiliated professionals; and (2) to understand the relationship between the Parent Partner intervention and reunification outcomes.

METHODS

Process Study

- Six 90-minute focus groups were conducted with parent clients who worked with a Parent Partner while making efforts toward reunification. In total, there were 25 parents who participated in the focus groups, including 21 women and 4 men. One focus group was conducted in Spanish with Spanish-speaking clients. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for data collection.

- Telephone interviews were conducted with 20 "key informants" with whom Parent Partners interact in their work. These included professionals such as social workers, court staff, mental health, and substance abuse professionals.

- In-person interviews were conducted with five Parent Partners to understand the nature of their experience providing services to child welfare clients.

- 96 client satisfaction surveys were received from parents who utilized the services of a Parent Partner.

Outcome Study

- The outcome study included data from two groups of children. The experimental group included 236 children whose parents were served by Contra Costa County during the time period July 2005 – March 2008, and who worked with a Parent Partner following removal of their child. The matched comparison group included 55 children whose parents were served by Contra Costa County in 2004, before the Parent Partner program was established. In the case of sibling groups, one child from each family was selected at random for inclusion in the study. The groups were matched based on ethnicity, case intervention reason, substance use, child age, and child gender. Cases were examined 12 months following case opening to determine reunification status.

FINDINGS

- The parent client survey validated that the Parent Partner program was implemented with high fidelity to its intended objectives. Responses to the surveys indicated an exceptionally high degree of satisfaction with the services received. Clients felt supported and informed about their experience with the child welfare agency, and empowered to take control of their circumstances and make needed changes in their lives. They believed that their experience with their Parent Partner gave them a voice in decision making, and helped to support their relationship with their children.

- Parent clients participating in focus groups described the services offered through the Parent Partner program as beneficial and necessary. Their responses clustered into three main areas of importance: the value of shared experiences, communication, and support.

- Shared experience: Parents participating in focus groups indicated that their Parent Partners are capable of helping, because they've "been there" and can fully understand and appreciate the parents' experiences of child removal. Parents articulated the difference between a Parent Partner and a social worker: *"The parent partner is still more … they're on your level and they've experienced what they have experienced; they went through what you went through. And the CPS workers haven't went through it; they just went through the school. Most of the CPS workers are just school smart—they're not experienced and went through it."* Parents described their Parent Partner as offering encouragement, trust, and hope, compelling them to believe in themselves and in their ultimate success.
- Communication: Parents spoke of the availability of their Parent Partner, often accessible during nights and weekends. Parent Partners were also admired for their plain talk, absent jargon and legal terminology; they were described as frequently in contact with parents, serving to encourage them in meeting their goals, and also in contact with other professionals and foster parents, acting as a kind of bridge and a role model for their own actions.
- Support: Parents indicated that the key intervention offered by Parent Partners was that of support, including emotional support, material support, support in developing self-reliance, and support regarding substance abuse.

- Interviews with Parent Partners indicated that the program not only had important effects for parent clients, but that the opportunity to serve as a Parent Partner was personally redemptive as well. All of the Parent Partners indicated that they continue to learn new strategies for parenting their own children thoughtfully, that they have grown in confidence through their work, and that their understanding of who they are and what they can achieve is regularly fortified through their role as a Parent Partner.

- Allied professionals were very positive about the value of this program, attesting to the promise of Parent Partners for inspiring behavioral change in birth parents, for reducing parents' anxiety, and increasing parents' understanding of the child welfare system.

- Results from the outcome study indicate that reunification may be more likely for children whose parents were served by Parent Partners. Specifically, approximately 60% of children with a Parent Partner reunified with their parents within 12 months of removal, compared to 26% of children whose parents were not served.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Parent clients involved with the child welfare system are often isolated in their solitary experience. Friends and family may not be available to provide support and parents are often unaware of others who may be experiencing a similar plight. Programs that encourage birth parents to share their common experiences may facilitate the process of change and inspire hope. Findings from this study suggest that the Parent Partner model may hold promise as a child welfare intervention designed to support reunification. The principles upon which it stands – partnership, family engagement, joint decision making, and empowerment to change – indicate an important paradigm shift for child welfare. Findings from the outcome study may suggest the potential for Parent Partners to assist families in their efforts to reunify with their children.

Although additional research is clearly warranted, it appears that efforts such as the Parent Partner program in Contra Costa County may be an important resource for child welfare agencies in their efforts to engage families and promote reunification.