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Foreword

Last year I heard an inspiring presentation by parents who had had their children returned to them from foster care. One father commented, “I never knew anyone got their kids back.” I kept thinking, how could you go through all that work to make changes with so little hope of getting your kids back?

As I heard those parents tell their stories I had the idea of a poster. It would hang in DCFS offices and courtrooms all around the state. It would give the clear message to parents: *Most people do get their kids back! Don't give up! Don't walk away!* The kernel of that idea led to this project.

Interviewing the twelve parents who contributed to this report was a powerful experience. They willingly shared about the challenges they have faced, their insights into what led to their success, and their ideas about how we can help more families succeed.

***“You always hear,
CPS took my kids,
but you never hear,
well I got my kids
back.”***

It makes such good sense to build on what is working to bring families back together. Several areas were repeatedly noted by parents as key factors in helping them succeed, and in ways we can improve the system:

- housing: clean and sober shelters, transitional housing, and availability of Section 8 vouchers.
- assistance in accessing services and effective coordination among service providers.
- being held accountable and participating in staffings and court hearings.
- parent-child visits being scheduled right away, available more than once per week and held in a comfortable setting.

The **will** to change rests solely with the parent. The message of “having the will” comes across loud and clear in these parents’ stories and in their advice to other parents.

Every parent told of the huge impact of having someone believing in him or her, and saying, “You can do this, you can get your kids back.” The people who supported them were not putting blind faith or trust in the parent, but they did provide needed encouragement. Often it was this key person who also held the parent accountable. Among the parents we interviewed, a wide variety of people played this vital role. Sometimes it was a family member or friend. Sometimes it was the CPS worker, treatment provider or paraprofessional advocate. Sometimes it was the foster parent, and in several instances the foster family remained an



important source of support following reunification. Almost every professional role in the child welfare system – attorney, judge, visitation supervisor, CASA volunteer and others – was named as a key source of support by at least one of the parents.

These parents' stories remind me that we cannot predict who will succeed. Several of the parents we interviewed had histories of long-term drug addiction and previous termination of parental rights – circumstances that we rarely associate with success. As social workers, judges or policy-makers, we may feel discouraged about prospects for reunification, and convey that to parents. *Yet everyone is owed a chance and the encouragement to change. In every aspect of our work we need to support the belief that parents **can** change.*

It is my belief that these parents' words will inform the dialogue among child welfare professionals and policymakers. It is my hope that the wisdom they shared will guide each of us in our work to help ever more families be successful.

Marie Jamieson, MSW
September 2006



Introduction

Successful Family Reunifications: *The Power of Stories*

The usual approach to changing the Child Protective Services (CPS) system is to focus attention and study on what is not working and attempt to “fix it.” In sharing success stories, this report takes a different approach. It gives voice to parents’ ideas about what worked for them and their suggestions on how to build on individual and system strengths to improve outcomes for families.

In recent years there has been increased attention by the system on issues related to the impact of meth usage, domestic violence and chronic neglect on children. There is concern about the disparate outcomes and disproportionality of children of color in the foster care system. One ongoing concern has been the trend of reduced family reunifications of children from the foster care system. Although much of this trend is attributed to the drop in the number of short-term out-of-home placements, for those children in care with court dependency established the likelihood of return home is approximately 50 percent. *

These concerns have contributed to the recent focus on upfront CPS decisions, effective interventions and dialogue of how to better engage families in services and planning for their children. Yet little is known about what actually leads to success in family reunification.

This project was developed with the belief that we have much to learn about successful family reunification from the parents who have succeeded.

The purpose is to:

- Hear what worked for these families to be successful in reunifying and holding their families together
- Obtain advice and encouragement for other parents with children in the child welfare system
- Focus the system’s attention and energy on replicating and enhancing strengths and successes

The project involved interviewing a dozen parents from across the state who have successfully reunified with their children for over a year and are doing well. Agencies were asked to contact families they determined to be highly successful reunifications. All of the reunifications had been for at least a year and not more than five years.

* Marna Miller, *Decline in Washington’s Family Reunifications: What Influenced This Trend?* Washington Institute for Public Policy, May 2004.



There was no attempt to define or to seek “typical” CPS-involved families. Several of the agencies work with substance abusers, so most of the interviewees have drug and alcohol histories. By the parents’ self-report, many had serious long-term addictions prior to their children being removed from their home. Half of the parents had previously lost permanent custody of children via termination of parental rights in the courts or in divorce proceedings. In addition to substance abuse, CPS concerns included depression, domestic violence, out-of-control youth, and alleged sexual abuse.

All of the reunified children (16 in total) had been in out-of-home placement more than 3 months (the median was 12-15 months). At the time of the CPS removal, one-quarter of the children were less than one year old and three of the sixteen were teenagers.

For a complete description of the interviews see page 24.

Each parent was privately asked to tell his or her story. We explored four areas of inquiry:

- Getting my Children Back
- Keeping my Family Together
- Advice for Other Parents
- Parents’ Ideas for Change

When the interviews were completed and analyzed, prominent themes emerged. This report uses the parents’ own words to describe their experiences and ideas to explore each of these themes within the areas of inquiry.



Getting My Children Back

My own attitude

Many parents told of reaching a personal turning point in their lives and making the decision to change and to persevere. Sometimes that was an event as dramatic as a near-death drug overdose, sometimes it was the determination to prove the system was wrong, or to save their child from life without a father or mother. Each parent made the commitment to do whatever needed to be done and put his or her efforts into changing.

I just remember one night I left there [the CPS office] after a visit. I walked out the door and it was snowing and I realized I had nowhere to go. I had no one left to turn to. I had no friends left and I had nowhere to go. I hit my knees on the sidewalk that night and I cried and I looked up – God help me, I can't do this anymore. I'm losing everything and I have nothing left.

I overdosed. That was the breaking point for me. I was done. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to leave my kids without a mom. It's not worth it anymore. I came down and said, "okay, I'm ready."

I was more desperate than ever to get my life together so my children wouldn't experience [abuse with father]. My children meant more to me than anything in the world. I believe God works through us. You know they say you have to get clean and sober for yourself. But I believe God worked through my kids.

I didn't have a father when I grew up. So that was a big motivation for me, to be there for my child and break this chain that has been in my family for so long of fatherlessness. I realized if I wasn't there for my child the streets, drugs and everything that comes along with it would pick him up. And that would be heartbreaking for me. The hurdles I jumped through to get custody of him was I would say worth it cause I saved his life. I made some bad decisions in my life and I always say I would not have made these decisions if I would have had a father that I could have turned to.

It turned for me after knowing where my kids was, the situation in foster care. Bam! Okay what's going on! I know my boys needed me more than anything, and I needed them.



I really struggled with depression and mental health issues. It got to the point where I wasn't able to take care of my daughter – to wake up when she was crying – cause I was so depressed.

I truly believe that CPS was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. When they stepped into my life, it told me I had to change, something had to change. Actually, everything had to change. All of my thought processes had to change. It wasn't easy by any means; there were ups and downs.

It's all a state of mind. When I finally decided I was done fighting the system, that I couldn't win that way. There was no way I was going to get what I wanted by the road I was choosing to go down. So when I decided to do a turnaround, I said I need some tools to make the changes. I want to get my kids back, be a good mom and have a life. I'm tired of being a lowlife drug addict loser. I want to have something.

My attitude of just being willing to do whatever [needs to be done]. There is so much, like so many appointments you have to go to, so many things you have to do, that if the willingness isn't there, it's just almost impossible to complete.

It's all how much effort you want to put into it. That's the way it is with life in general – you get out of it what you put into it, so if you put nothin' in you're going to get nothing... It took me a long time to figure that out.

I was done. The police and the CPS social worker actually taking my baby out of my arms and putting me in handcuffs – was it. In jail, they told me I was going to get sentenced to 12-15 years in prison. So the thought of my son never knowing his mom – that was my rock bottom. I was done.

Someone believed in me

Every parent talked about one or more people who gave them support and encouragement, even if they didn't believe in themselves. Family, friends, a CPS worker, judge, attorney, providers – all were people who said that they cared and wanted the family to reunite.

Probably the biggest thing that helped was that somebody believed in me. My CPS worker believed in me, when I didn't believe in myself. He goes, "you can do this." He had no doubts in his mind that I could do this, when I did. Even when I questioned if I wanted to parent or not, he said "I believe in you." You know that was huge for me. HUGE. To have somebody outside of family – somebody that wants to put the family back together saying, "I trust that you can do this."



My attorney was very supportive. It sounds stupid but even just asking “How’s your day?” or “How’s your daughter doing?” makes a huge difference. Instead of like a lot of them, are just all business. It’s like you’re not even a person. You’re just a case, just looking at all the negative things. It’s really degrading sometimes. It’s really helpful if someone is nice in general and caring, like saying, “Have a good day.”

My last CPS worker* worked with me. She wanted my daughter to come home. I don’t know, she was just there for me. That other one thought I messed up once, I was gonna mess up again.

Being willing to go with me and sit there, I just knew that I was supported.

The Judge was easy to talk to and really nice. He got down on my level and talked to me. It helps when a judge really acknowledges the efforts. Most people on the court situation tend to elaborate on the negative.

My case manager would take me for a cup of coffee before court to help me relax. It makes such a difference to know somebody is there by your side. There is so much negative said about you that it really gets you down like a lot of times I felt like hopeless. Just ‘cause, yeah, I really have messed up and just hearing everybody elaborate. It helped to feel somebody believed in me.

The CPS worker’s way of looking at it was positive. He always reinforced the positive stuff and not the negative ones, which made it so nice. We’re all doing what we need to do. He focused on the positive and it was a lot better.

Even if just one person believes in you. If you have that inkling of hope [it makes a huge difference]. Cause I didn’t believe in myself.

Family therapist/visitation supervisor: “You’re gonna get through this.” She was encouraging to me and she helped me through it all the way.

I’m just really grateful. He (CPS worker) had a compassion for his job and you can see it and you can feel it. He would take me to pick up my son from day care. Then we would take him back. He made the effort to make it feel like this is OK for now. Granted, I may have cried every time leaving him and granted it may not have been OK to cry in front of my son. But he didn’t discredit how I felt. He was just great – I wish he could have everyone on his caseload. ‘Cause he does try to put families back together.

*CPS worker is used throughout the report to refer to the public agency social worker, which may also include the Child Welfare Services (CWS) worker.



Family and friends had no trust in me. I had shattered that, but they had hope. They stood by my side.

Being held accountable and still encouraged

Parents credited an accountability structure paired with regular encouragement as very important to their success. Several of the parents participated in drug court (two counties) or in programs that had coordinated services and held regular staffings, which included the CPS worker, the service providers and the parent. Even without this programmatic structure, other parents described a similar combination of being held accountable in a positive way by their CPS worker, judge or treatment provider.

She explained the whole process to me from beginning to end. She told me what would happen if I didn't do what I was supposed to do and she told me what would happen if I did do what I was supposed to do.

Her [caseworker] having faith in me and patience with me was what it was. They'd come by and tell me I was doing a really good job and make sure I was in compliance with all my other stuff.

...you've just got to do this, you've got to do that. He wasn't mean about it, he was just being honest, which made it ten times better.

The great thing about this place is that it is the full 'Meal Deal' type thing. It's not that you go and do drug counseling over there and mental health here and family stuff...it's all in one, and it means you can't sneak stuff by them.

Family Team Meetings helped keep things on track. Everyone could hear what's happening, 'cause I was a drug addict, who would believe me if I just told them?

The Judge gave praises every week. I saw him chew some people out that deserved it. But he goes on both sides. If you deserve a chew out, he gives it, but he always ends it with "I know you can do it; we're here to support you." He's always supportive in the end, no matter how wrong or right you've been. I like the fact that the kids were in his best interest, always number one in his book. He'd introduce himself to the kids, ask them questions and tell them about the progress I made, and it helped that they heard it from the judge's mouth. He'd tighten the reins but not rip the kids out of the home.



It was good to discuss with everybody and with me there, too. In the beginning I yelled and cussed, and it was very unproductive. I was very lucky that these guys all held on and waited for me to turn around.

For me it was scary, 'cause when I was in front of the commissioner, it was the same one I had before [and lost custody of my daughter] umpteen years before. He didn't hold that against me. He gave me a chance...They build you up, they make you feel good about yourself. They will come down on you if you're not doing what you need to do, but they congratulate you for your efforts.

For me to be a success I have to be held accountable and having to check in once a week in front of the commissioner was huge for me – having UAs 2-3 times per week, being accountable for services.

At the court hearing when I got my kids back the Judge said: I'm so proud of you. Can I just get a picture with you? That was cool. That made me feel really good that, gosh I've really accomplished something.

Services and support

Housing, the role of the community-based advocates, and visitation with their children were most highly rated as contributing to their successful reunification. Parents also spoke about the help they received from inpatient and outpatient drug treatment, counseling, psychiatric medication, parenting classes with their children, and concrete support services.

Housing is number one, 'cause you can't do anything unless you're in clean and sober housing. You just can't get nowhere if you're stuck getting high.

Support

I was kind of scared 'cause I thought I was the only dad who had this problem [how to get in contact with sons in foster care]. Seeing other fathers sitting at the table was a relief that I wasn't the only one. I kind of sat that one out and just listened.

I never had no friends. I consider them my family and friends. They'd pick me up and take me places. They supported me. They are like my big sisters.

We had a good relationship. She (Paraprofessional Advocate) took me places when I needed to go. She spoke for me when I was crying too hard. If I was so mad that I couldn't speak to these people 'cause I would cuss them up one side and down the other, she spoke for me. She knew what I needed and wanted and what was wrong 'cause we had a good relationship.



Family Treatment Court (FTC) becomes like your family. Because you're there with everybody else that's in FTC, whether they are just beginning or they're graduating, and so when you go in you're likely to see a success, someone who is graduating from the program... having their children home and getting close to having their case closed. So you have something to look forward to. You see that it is possible as long as you do what they tell you to do. If I'd been on my own with CPS I wouldn't have seen other people succeed.

Foster parents have saved me in so many ways. They would bring my daughter to treatment center visits. It would start slowly that I would start talking to the foster mom, a few minutes here and there. Now it's to the point like I'm one of their kids. My daughter goes there every other weekend. It's like a second family. They were so open and so helpful to the whole situation. They were wanting to adopt her. They were willing to take her in and take me, too. If she had been in a foster home that didn't want any contact with me, it would have been really different.

You hear the horror stories about what happens to kids in foster care. Believe me, I know I was much at ease knowing that my son was with them. I didn't have any qualms whatsoever. I knew he was safe and loved. I think that was extremely helpful to me. They are still today part of my support system.

Visits

Frequency varied hugely from one hour per week to five times per week. Parents spoke of the need for a quiet, family-friendly setting. Visits were looked forward to and helped keep the motivation to change going. It felt devastating if visits were cancelled or slow to be initiated.

My visits were at the Visitation Center, a house with six-seven rooms. Home setting, you know, with a kitchen. They are not sitting constantly watching you.

I was lucky I had visits five days a week and then the foster parents got permission for me to go to their church and so I saw him there too. It really helped me to keep going.

Concrete specific services

Parents spoke of the value of accessing services. They also mentioned the need for specific help with child care, bus passes, diapers, and help with making appointments.

Everything I did, I did on the bus. It took five buses every Wednesday.



Just the support, having a case manager there to help you with all these little things like connecting with doctors, appointments. 'Cause I was so heavy into my addiction that when I first was trying to get my life back together little things were big things.



Keeping My Family Together

Working on myself

Most of the parents interviewed are still actively involved with AA meetings, their sponsors, retreats and support groups. Many parents spoke about the role of prayer in their lives, completing school or jobs as accomplishments they are proud of and how they are now are better able to provide for their child.

Practice what I learned, living it on a daily basis. Keeping spiritually fit.

Holding myself accountable. I have no one to blame but myself.

I don't recommend dating your first year of recovery. No. You're trying to get you and your kids back to focus on your family. Focus on yourself first. How can you take care of your children if you can't take care of yourself?

I had a spiritual awakening, and that's what saved my life. I was spiritually dead. Yeah, it was a big one to help keep my family together.

Getting help

Parents spoke of the value of reunification services including in-home therapist, coaching on how to parent; and information on the developmental stages; Section 8 housing; counseling for the children and family; and paid child care. Parents also spoke of the need to have availability of ongoing professional support; and need to create an informal support network.

Learning how to keep changing – I had to keep changing. I'm still changing on a daily basis. If I stop changing I'm in trouble. Each day I'm sober, I get to grow.

The boys were angry at first when they came here. The counselor coming out to our house was really helpful in reuniting our family, going over some of the issues that happened while they were gone.

My six months came and went [after reunification], and they said now we can close your file, and I didn't want them to. Part of it was it kind of was my security, I know they were watching me so I wouldn't go out and do something stupid. I had just gotten comfortable with that backdrop so I was scared, really, to let that go away.

Open invitation, you can always come back to meetings. I knew I could come back. This is an ongoing process. If you turn your back on it you can relapse. I call and say "you need to come over and see my new house. I need help again."



My social worker – I love her! I felt she personally knew me and the kids, so I felt more comfortable to go and talk to her. It made it more relaxing. I still talk to her.

My living here, being involved in a lifestyle where people care and love is the key to healing. I truly believe that.

Recreating family

Some parents said it takes a long time to feel like a normal family, and parents described the need to keep working at it. They talked about developing structure and routines and being intentional about having family time.

It's boring sometimes, but I like it. It's good to be boring sometimes.

Establishing family routines

Having a [daily family] routine; knowing what's expected. I'm really good about getting my daughter to bed about the same time; have her regularly in day care and know that weekends are relaxing, hangout time. That seems to make things run really smoothly for us.

My main focus was to get my son into an environment with loving and caring with no drama, and we're going to get back on track.

Pretty much the same routine every day is what I have. I get up. I get ready, I go to a meeting first thing at 6:30 am. I'm at work by 8 am; my son goes to day care; we spend a few hours together in the evening.

We have a schedule, when before we didn't; it was whatever, whenever. We always have dinner together, always, always, always. It's one of my big things, even if it's we're yelling and hollering. We're all at the table doing it together; 'cause I just feel it's important.

Trusting and adjusting

When my son was in the hospital I was by his side late into the night. Finally I went to get some dinner – he called me on my cell phone: "Dad are you coming back?" That just hurt me when he said that. I said, "Boy, I'll never leave you." I can't believe he still thinks I'm not gonna be there. After three years, that's a battle I'm still fighting today with him.

Understanding the process I have to go through and understanding the process he have to go through. Because now I'm a dad, I need to know his school, his feelings, what's going on in his mind. Things that I probably took for granted and I'm faced with it every day, and that's an adjustment, not just for him, but for me.

Honesty and trust are things I've had to learn to keep my family together. My daughter still has a hard time trusting me, and that's okay.



I used to go and isolate in the bathroom (to get high), and now, if I go close the door to go to the bathroom, she like knocks, “Are you doing okay?” And I’ll open the door, even sitting on the toilet, and say “Yeah I’m okay.” It’s going to take a long time for that trust to be built 100%. I’d say it now is about 75%. It’s going to take a long time – I’ve done a lot of damage to my family.

Activities and family time together

I became a parent. Before I wasn’t really a parent. I am active in my daughter’s interests. I go outside and play with the kids. I spend time with them, which is something I never did before.

Things that keep us together: AA every day still, we keep busy, we do a lot with my kids. We go to car races every Friday, we go swimming, roller skating.

We do more family things. The river is close by and we take picnics, just to spend time together.



Advice for Other Parents

Be willing to do what it takes

Be willing to do whatever it takes. 'Cause I've been around people coming into the system, and they say, "I don't have to do what they say. I'm not going to go to these groups." Really resisting makes it harder for everybody and I see people have to end up doing more groups.

Realize how important it is not to miss a group and to call your worker. You really need to be on top of it.

If I would have cooperated, it would have gone a lot smoother.

When you're in treatment, if you're doing it just to get your child back, that's okay for now. Maybe in that time you'll learn to do it for yourself.

Even if you're just jumping through the hoops to start with, maybe it will change your life just that much that the judge will say, "I'm going to give you another chance to be a parent. Prove yourself to me now."

It is so scary when they take your kids and you almost feel like giving up. It's hard, it's not easy, you have to work your butt off and really make changes, but its possible. It's really all about you have to change.

Listen to what they got to say and really hear what they got to say. And then do what they want you to do, unconditionally.

It's not like criminal court. You're not innocent until proven guilty. In this court you're guilty until you prove that you're worthy of having your kids back. Not that you prove that UA was wrong because "I was too sick", or "How do they know? –they weren't there." It doesn't work that way. The burden of proof lies on you as a parent.

The more progress that you show, the more they work with you. That's the bottom line. If you're going to just do what they are telling you and drag your feet you're not going to get anywhere. The ball is totally in your court.

As long as you are doing what is asked of you from CPS and you have an inkling of willingness to get your children back, maybe you'll find a new way of living.

Say what you need

A lot of parents don't know that they have a right to look at these files. What's going on, what's being said. You need to look at the facts so when you do go to



court you see what they are working with, so therefore you need to know what you need to prepare. Fill out a request form to look at the complete file.

You have to choose, you have to decide are you going to choose this basically dead end road or are you going to choose your kids? And it's hard 'cause that addiction gets you and it don't want to let go. A lot of people think they don't have a problem. A lot of people give up. You really have to want it.

You have to build that trust with your caseworker and a certain bond, 'cause they can see right through. Just be honest. No matter what, be honest. The more honest you are about anything, the more the more help you're going to get, definitely.

Stay strong and fight for what you want. 'Cause if you want it bad enough and you're willing to do the services, it is possible to be reunited with your family.

Find support

There are supportive resources and services here for people. Not everybody has a negative family vibe, but I do, so I needed to adopt my own family here to have people to be supportive.

I had to build my support group from the very bottom up to where it is now. And it wasn't easy, because nobody trusted me, nobody believed in me. And I now can go anywhere, and everybody believes me or trusts me. It took me almost three years to get there.

Research resources in the community [like D.A.D.S.] that would guide you to get back custody of your child. Don't just rely on a venue like an attorney, a public defender; don't just rely on that.

Set up routines

Getting used to the mundane. Drama going on in my life – growing up that's all I knew – sitting out in the car while my parents were drinking in the bar or not knowing when they'll leave – all of that was normal. So as an adult, crisis felt normal; basically I was creating it. Of course, you don't think it at the time. So it was falling in love with boredom. Not getting caught up with crazy things in people's life – not that I don't do it!

Figure out how you're going to get there before you start your journey to see your kids. I'd think ahead and make sure I had enough gas, got a ride if I needed it, and I was always thinking ahead so my plans wouldn't fall apart.



Getting structure to be a norm. I would actually set up appointments with counselors or doctors or whatever for Fridays and Mondays, over the weekend, so I could be accountable. I wanted that accountability that structure back in my life. That was a key – having appointments – I had group, I didn't have time to use or sit there and feel sorry for myself.

For me, I realize I am my son's role model whether I want to be or not. Whatever you do, he is going to look up to you, whether you're a pimp, a lawyer, a judge, a laborer – it doesn't matter, it's the principles and foundations that you set spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. You have to lay these foundations.

Stay focused on your kids

Stay as close as possible to your kids. Stay connected with them, don't just walk away, don't lose that bond. And if you have the will to have your kids with you, just keep the bond growing.

If you really want to put your family back together, you have to focus on that. It's not about what anybody says, 'cause you know who you are inside. And you know what you want, and you want the best for your kids. So it shouldn't matter what CPS do, even though they affect you in certain ways, but you should concentrate on your kids. And I had to learn that.

He looked at me and said, "What are you here for?" For my kids. Well then you need to go through whatever they want you to go through, 'cause right now it's not about you, it's not about her, it's about your kids. So whatever they want you to do, you need to follow that. It shouldn't matter, 'cause you love your kids.

Work on your own attitude

Through prayer, staying humble, and patience. And that was some of the hardest things to do when your child is being in foster care.

Vent – to your attorney or to whoever – scream and yell and hit the wall. Do whatever you've got to do; get it done with and over with and get on with it. Be done with your madness, 'cause that will hold you back big.

Remain humble as much as possible. I have to pray to not escalate in certain situations, because there is going to be something that is said, whether it is in front of the judge, oh, especially in front of the judge – do not lose your cool. You lose your cool, you lose the game. It's hard. It's gonna hurt, but I wouldn't have my son if I had.



Shut up and listen. I'm serious! Or, "be quiet and listen" if you want to make it more nicer.

We need to take care of ourselves – that includes walking. For me, art is a big healing part and writing my story. Looking at things differently.

Healing Boxes: Creating a box that's yourself and putting things in. Like for me, put some rocks and feathers in there that are important to me, that I feel good about – I always love rocks cause of the energy. The process of creating the box that symbolizes what it means to you. You can put your AA coins in – or whatever. It's something to remind you of the positive parts. It's all part of my healing journey.

You can prove them wrong.

***There's always hope.
Some people are
hopeless, and then
something will hit.
If they don't die,
something will hit.
Cause I should
have been dead
years ago.***



Parents' Ideas for Change

Culture of support, encouragement and accountability

All professionals dealing with parents in the child welfare system have the opportunity to create and reinforce a culture of encouragement and accountability. This means promoting the attitude that the parent is capable of change, being flexible and willing to negotiate to make service requirements workable while retaining accountability. This has been done programmatically with Family Drug Courts and through programs that coordinate services and staffings. Many of these successful parents also experienced the balance of support and accountability with their individual CPS worker.

***The Courtroom Clap
– they clapped when
I got my children
back and praised me
very much.***

Bring in family and other supportive people

Parents need to know that they can bring a support person to court with them. The fathers should be contacted at the time of placement or when changes are made in placements. Other family members should be contacted and involved. However, some parents cautioned that family members need to be assessed and recommend that UAs be done prior to placement.¹

CPS should bring the family together – let them try to talk out things, what's best for their kids.

Listen to both sides. Don't just believe everything the mother says.

Work together to make the service plan effective

It works well if the CPS worker or treatment provider begins with the parent by first "doing for", then "doing with" and then cheering on."² To develop a plan that works they need to be willing to negotiate differences as the plan unfolds..

My first worker gave me a resource book. Okay, if you're homeless and don't have a phone, what good is that? I'm not gonna stick 50 cents in and call all those.

Just to really listen to the person and be willing to negotiate things and not just say – "This is it."

¹ In Iowa, UAs are required prior to placement with relatives if the case meets eligibility criteria for Drug Endangered Children's Program. (Personal correspondence, Investigator Paul Houston, Polk County Attorney General's Office, September 2006).

² Elsa Ten Broeck, "A Clinical Model for Services", training video produced by UCLA School of Social Work, 1988.



I lucked out. The workers I had were understanding, compassionate, caring, not overbearing. The further along I went, and the better I did, the less of a grip they had on me. They kind of let me grow and do my thing and stepped back and watched and let that happen instead of trying to control my every move.

When I said it makes such a difference to say, “How was your day?” That’s how this other worker was. She made things so much easier and was so much more willing to work with me about different things. Like if I was having an issue with say a group that wasn’t working out ,she’d try to work with me about how I could get that to work or what I could do in place of that. My other worker, I felt like you have to do that or you’re going to get punished, and we’re holding your daughter over you, and not willing to sit down and work things out so I could be successful.

Everyone conveys the “you can do it” attitude while holding parents accountable

Reinforce this system wide expectation through hiring, training and evaluation of staff. Parents suggested surveying clients about worker’s attitudes and how timely they return phone calls.

My CPS Worker said, I will do everything in my power to help you get reunited with your son, and he did.

My attorney told me later that after he walked out of the jail he thought, oh my gosh, she’s never going to do it, it’s never going to work, but we owe her this chance.

Some CPS workers need to communicate better. I had only two and half weeks before I had to go back to jail and I couldn’t get a hold of my CPS worker to set up a visit for two weeks.

Have a straightforward process to request change of workers

Let parents know about the process to change workers, particularly if they perceive a conflict of interest.

I wanted another case manager that I felt was going to be productive, not so much to get custody, but to resolve my situation. This could have been resolved but it just kept lingering on, we need to do this and this, and then not returning phone calls, and not corresponding to me. Very frustrating.

If you got a caseworker that you don’t like, nobody told me I could ask for another one, and you can through your attorney. If you clash with somebody, and you do in life. It works both ways.

The initial worker had a history with me, so we didn’t see eye to eye.



Reasonable caseloads for workers, attorneys and judges

I did notice it seemed like they were always overloaded, too many cases per worker. If they didn't have so many pieces to work on all at the same time they might be able to focus a little more on the family.

Timely effective services

Timely availability of services, starting with clean and sober housing. Treatment facilities where parents can enter with their children, and concrete support such as bus passes for the parents and youth. Provide upfront support and information for parents and initiate parent-child visits. Recognize the need for ongoing support and provide the availability to check back and get support when needed.

Someone to talk to right away

Immediate counseling for trauma, grief, loss and anger. From day one, have it offered, if not mandatory. One on one, or family or a support group. It's traumatic to have your kids removed from you and you're angry, scared and confused.

I just know that when I was in there [jail] that if somebody who had walked in my shoes had come in there and said, "Hey it is possible" ...'cause I had zero hope of getting my kids back. Everyone tells you, you have 1% chance, and the odds are against you.

Someone to talk to besides CPS worker or attorney. Have some way they can contact somebody when they need someone to talk to. It needs to be a veteran parent. I'd volunteer to speak with somebody, and I'm not worried if they have my phone number. I don't feel that they'd come and attack me or something. It just doesn't work like that. They just cry out for help. They don't have anybody at the beginning. They need somebody they can trust. I didn't have anyone except my druggie friends.

Now in the Dependency 101 ...It's wonderful, I wish I'd had it when I was going through, cause they tell you little things, like that every time you call, always leave your number cause they could be checking messages from out in the field and not have your number from your file.

Parent-child visits

Visits need to be set up immediately in a location and environment that is accessible and conducive to promoting the child and parent bond.

Visits in a quieter place. I didn't feel I could get bonded with him. Babies don't need that chaos. They need quiet. There was a lot of turmoil around in the room, 'cause it was visiting hours. I didn't think that was appropriate for a newborn.



Visitation more than one hour per week. It helps assuage the fears of the child, that mommy is still there. And the second reason is that if the parents aren't gonna show up for visitation it's a deciding factor about some of the services that are needed. You'll see if the parents are really trying. And for the parents who are really traumatized it will help them be less traumatized.

Meet the foster parents

This is a particularly strong suggestion from the parents who have met the foster parents (half of the foster homes). They have continued to have contact and many count the foster parents as part of their current support network.

It might be good for parents to meet the foster parents. They just need to. Sometimes it could be bad, but a majority of the time it would be good. You meet them and see their faces and know they are OK people. Meet them right early on so you can ease your mind.

The foster parents both came to the visit to meet me and introduce themselves and gave me their phone number and talked about how the kids were doing. The other foster parent didn't do that. I think it's harder on a parent not to know anything about where your kids are. It made it easier for me to concentrate on what I needed to do, because I knew who my kids were with. I knew that they were safe, and I knew that any time if I needed to call and check on them I could.

In the Drug Court, they work together. If you're in trouble with the law, they worked with the ticket, the staff, with everybody, your service providers, workers, everybody. That was a main, big thing, that's what saved me.

Address mental health and addiction

Several parents were concerned that substance abuse providers did not address or prepare the parents for mental health issues once they were sober. There is a need to support reunification by making counseling and other services available for parents or their families after the CPS case is closed.

Drugs and alcohol are a disease, too, and you wouldn't throw anyone away that had cancer. You would be willing to help them. Workers need to have drug information and understand that this a disease. You need to have compassion for those that are taking steps and have that little bit of willingness at the start, encourage them. That first CPS worker, he knocked me down and made me feel like a piece of shit. And I don't think anybody needs to feel that way.



Don't wait to address mental health. If every treatment center asked, "Have you been in trauma?" then they'd know they need to at least say, you have this history and be aware that once you're clean and sober, this stuff is going to come up. You're gonna feel crazy. Be aware of that - and then these are the steps that you can do, once it does.

After I was six months clean, I was becoming suicidal and very concerned about my present state of mind. When you're clean and sober you take away your self-medication and all those issues come back twofold. It frightened me to become suicidal. Really scary. My life is just starting to come back together.

Make ongoing support available

Support needs to be available and affordable, if and when needed.

Need long term supportive environment. I had 90 days inpatient and then clean and sober housing and transitional housing [2 years]. Not leaving people just cause they're doing good. You need to have the choice to go back to counseling when you need it.

I love 'em. They helped me, they saved my life. Without them stepping in and removing my son, I wouldn't be where I am at today. My life is good today. Positive people, positive things.



Gathering the Stories

The Families

The 12 parents interviewed as part of the Successful Family Reunifications Project were identified with the assistance of community-based agencies and DCFS staff. Agency staff were asked to contact parents determined to have highly successful reunifications of at least one year and not more than five years. The staff asked the parents if they would be interested in being contacted about participating in this project. The parents agreed to be interviewed after reviewing information about the purpose and nature of the project. Individual interviews were conducted either in the parent's home or in the offices of the agency who made the initial contact.

Interview participants

Female 10
Male 2

Race of parent

Caucasian 7
African American 3
Native American 2

Age of parent at time of child's removal

19-29 years 5 parents
30-39 years 4 parents
40-49 years 3 parents

Age of children at time of removal

> one year 4 children
1-5 years 4 children
6-12 years 5 children
13 + years 3 children

CPS concerns (as reported by parents)

Parental drug and alcohol abuse 8
History of drug and alcohol abuse 4
Out of control youth drug usage 3
Depression/PTSD 3
Domestic violence by partner 2
Sexual abuse allegations 1

Sibling groups 3



Previous history

There were prior placement episodes of three of the reunified children from three families.

Parental rights were terminated for six other children from four families.

Parental custody was lost for four children from three families. (This does not include shared custody in divorce.)

Placement type (most recent)

Foster home	8 children
Relative Home	5 children
Residential Treatment	3 children

Children's length of stay in care before reunification (median is 12-15 months)

> 1 year old	5 children
1-2 years	9 children
2-5 years	2 children

Length of time since successful family reunification

1-2 years	6 families
2-3 years	3 families
4-5 years	3 families

Geographic location of families

Region 1	1 family
Region 2	2 families
Region 3	2 families
Region 4	3 families
Region 5	2 families
Region 6	2 families



The Interviews

The protocol of questions was used in individual interviews lasting from 45 minutes to 80 minutes. With the permission of the interviewee, the sessions were audio-taped for use by the interviewer.

1. What are you doing now (with work, school, kids)?

2. Tell me about your experience with CPS?

- What happened that caused CPS to remove your children?
- How old were you when your kids were removed?
- How old were the children?
- How long were your children in foster/relative care? Was this the only time?
- What did you work on to get your kids back?
- What services did you have? (visits, mental health, substance abuse treatment, parenting classes)
- When did the children return home?
- Has CPS talked with you about any concerns regarding the care of the children since they came home?

3. What are one or two things you did that helped you succeed in getting your children back?

- that your caseworker did?
- services that made the most difference?
- that the judge did?
- your attorney did?
- foster parent did?
- that a family member or friend did?
- How? Why? What did they say?

Of all of those things that helped, pick one that was most important.

4. What has helped hold your family together?

- What services do you have now?
- What one or two things (or a person) who has helped you keep your kids at home?
- Think of three things that have changed in your family's life that has helped keep the kids with you.



5. What advice would you give to other parents?

- What do you know now that you wish you had known at the beginning?

6. If you were in charge of the CPS system, what would you do differently to help families succeed?

- If you were a caseworker, what would you do to help families get their kids back?

Issues for Further Exploration

In analyzing the individual interviews there were several issues that warrant further study with a larger cohort of families:

- 1) The impact of history, particularly previous terminations of parental rights in relation to length of placement and worker attitude toward the parent.
- 2) The relationship between race, parent characteristics and length of placement prior to reunification
- 3) How the parents' initial attitude and the timing of their change in attitude, i.e., commitment to change, relates to length of placement prior to reunification.



Evidence-Based Practices Related to Family Reunification & Stability

Child Welfare League of America prepared by National Center for Research and Data Research to Practice Initiative

Definition: Collaborative assessment and individualized service planning begins as early as possible and involves the family in the assessment process and in the development of an individualized services plan. Effective individualized planning is reflected in services that are both practical and relevant (i.e., address the issues which brought the family to the attention of the child welfare agency) and strive to create long-term (i.e., lifestyle) change.

Assumption: Family engagement, collaborative assessment, and individualized service planning promote permanency.

Evidence: Successful outcomes depend on identifying and treating parental problems and needs on an individual basis. Source: Hess, Folaron, & Jefferson (1992); Maluccio (1999; 2000); Martin, Barbee, Antle, & Sar (2002).

Evidence: Comprehensive, individualized assessment must be supported by the agency culture. Source: Martin, Peters, and Glisson (1998).

Concrete Services

Definition: The provision of monetary, transportation, or other types of direct tangible assistance.

Assumption: Concrete services are needed and valued by most families receiving reunification services.

Evidence: Most families receiving reunification services make use of concrete services.

Source: Rzepnicki, Schuerman, & Johnson (1997).

Evidence: The provision of concrete services constitutes a major portion of caseworker time in successful family reunification work. Source: Lewis, Walton, & Fraser (1995).

Constructive Visitation Practice

Definition: Constructive visitation practice uses parent-child visits as part of the ongoing assessment and treatment process directed toward family reunification, not just to satisfy court orders or to gauge parental compliance. Therapeutic visitation includes the following:



-
- Preparation of parents and children for visits
 - Structuring of visits in accordance with parents' parenting capabilities and children's ages and interests
 - Use of visits for teaching parenting and communication skills
 - Recognition and attention to issues of grief and separation which affect both parents and children during visits.
 - Inclusion of foster parent mentoring when appropriate
 - Ongoing review and modification of visits as part of the collaborative treatment planning process

Assumption: Parent-child visiting is complex but essential for maintaining continuity and connection during placement. Purposeful visitation includes learning and healing and contributes to successful placement, reunification, and reduced length of time to reunification.

Evidence: Consistent parent-child visiting while children are in foster care is associated with greater likelihood of reunification and less time in care. Source: Davis, Landsverk, Newton, & Granger (1996); Fanshel & Shinn (1978); White, Albers, & Bitonti (1996).

Evidence: Children visited more frequently had fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Source: Cantos, Gries, & Slis (1997).

Intensive Preparation and Aftercare

Definition: This approach provides greater levels of casework support immediately before and following the return of the children to the family. It is characterized by:

- Exploration and assessment of parent-child ambivalence toward reunification;
- Recognition with the family that reunification is typically accompanied by increased stressors;
- Continued assessment of safety and risk;
- Thoughtful forecasting of problems that might develop and planning of ways to address them ;
- Greater availability of caseworker and other supports;
- Tapering off of services based on family readiness rather than an arbitrary time frame;

Assumption: Reunification is a process, not an event. Careful preparation and the provision of ongoing supportive services are necessary to support safe and stable family reunification.



Evidence: Lack of resolution of parental problems; service delivery problems contributed to reentry of children into foster care. Source: Hess, Folaron, & Jefferson (1992).

Evidence: The determination of reunification readiness and possible parent or child ambivalence about reunification are essential aspects of practice. Source: Kirk (2001)

Skill Building

Definition: The use of educational and experiential techniques aimed at increasing competency in parenting, communication, problem solving, coping, and other essential areas of life.

Assumption: Improved interpersonal and functional skills support successful reunification.

Evidence: Lower levels of skills and support are associated with reentry into foster care. Source: Maluccio, Ainsworth, & Thoburn (2000).

Timeliness in the Courts

Definition: Adult participants are guided by the child's sense of time and need for permanence; hearings are held within established timelines with exceptions only in rare and unusual instances.

Assumptions: Agencies, courts, and advocates can work together to resolve permanency delays related to the legal process.

Evidence: Adoption of NCJFCJ Model Courts guidelines significantly reduced court backlogs. Source: Mentaberry (1999)

Evidence: Permanency decisions achieved within one year in 96% of cases in Michigan Agency Attorney Project. Source: Johnson & Cahn (1993).



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