

Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges

How to Work Effectively
with Any Family

[^]Nearly

Hugh Davis
Wisconsin Family Ties
(608) 267-6888
hugh@wifamilyties.org

Presentation Topics

- ▶ What do families experience?
- ▶ Why include families?
- ▶ How can we engage families?

Parenting Can Be A Challenge

- The vast majority of families raising children with mental health needs are **healthy families** who are experiencing a particularly stressful challenge
- “Good parenting” **skills don’t usually work** when a child has mental health needs – when they hear voices, are extremely depressed or anxious, have compulsive behaviors, or are harm themselves
- Disciplinary strategies that work with “typically-developing” children **are not effective** for “behavior problems” related to mental health

What Do Families Experience?

- ▶ The “new normal”
- ▶ Blame and shame
- ▶ Fear
- ▶ Confusion
- ▶ Loss of employment / impact to family capacity

Why Include Families?

- ▶ “Research is accumulating that family participation improves the process of delivering services and their outcomes” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999, p. 187).
- ▶ Family involvement has been linked with:
 - Increased family empowerment and parental self-efficacy (Curtis & Singh, 1996; Friedman & Duchnowski, 1990; McCannon, Spencer, & Friesen, 2001).
 - Higher satisfaction with services (Koren et al., 1997).

Impact of parental involvement on students

- ▶ Higher grades, test scores and graduation rates
- ▶ Are promoted, pass more classes, and earn more credits
- ▶ Attend school regularly
- ▶ Have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school
- ▶ Lower rates of suspension
- ▶ Decreased use of drugs and alcohol
- ▶ Fewer instances of violent behavior

Benefits of Parental Involvement

► For parents

- More confident in their parenting and decision-making skills
- Improved perceptions of the school
- Better understanding of the teacher's job and the curriculum
- Teachers they interact with have higher opinions of them as parents and higher expectations for their children

Benefits of Parental Involvement

► For schools

- Improved teacher morale
- Higher ratings of teachers by parents
- Better reputations in the community / increase in community support
- Schools that encourage and involve parents typically have higher quality programs than those that do not involve parents

Barriers to Parental Involvement

- ▶ Stigma
- ▶ Lack of public understanding
- ▶ Isolation
- ▶ Dealing with multiple, complex systems, each with their own set of rules
- ▶ Lack of system or family capacity
- ▶ Lack of trust
- ▶ Discomfort with schools
- ▶ Schools often think they can't engage families

Keys to Family Engagement

- ▶ Welcoming
- ▶ Inviting
- ▶ Perspective shift
- ▶ Listening
- ▶ Accepting
- ▶ Never giving up

Welcoming, Inviting

The experience of being wanted and welcome, not race or class, affects parent participation. (Weissberg, et al)

Perspective Shift

Focus on the “why”
rather than the “what”

Framing...Reframing

- This family is enmeshed.
 - The family life is chaotic.
 - This parent is aggressive.
 - The Johnsons are resistant.
 - This mother is domineering.
 - These parents are noncompliant.
 - These parents are never satisfied.
- ▶ This is a close family.
 - ▶ This family has a high tolerance for change and diversity.
 - ▶ This parent sticks up for herself
 - ▶ The Johnsons know what they want and have firm convictions.
 - ▶ This mother is a leader and a natural organizer.
 - ▶ These parents really want what's best for their children and they are willing to advocate for it.

Working assumptions

- ▶ Until proven otherwise we believe that all parents want to:
 - Be proud of their child
 - Have a positive influence on their child
 - Hear good news about their child and about what their child does well
 - Provide their child a good chance to succeed in life (however they define it)
 - See their child's future as better than their own
 - Have a good relationship with their child
 - Feel hopeful about their child
 - Believe they are good parents

Listening

“I never learn a thing while I am talking. I realize every morning that nothing I say will teach me anything so if I am going to learn a lot today, I’ll have to do it by listening”

- Larry King

Four Rules of Active Listening

1. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.
2. Be non judgmental
3. Give your undivided attention to the speaker
4. Use silence effectively

Listening



- ▶ You can't do two things at once if one of them is listening.
- ▶ You can't listen if you are trying to figure out what to say.
- ▶ You can't listen if you are assuming.

Accepting

► Affirming

- Accepting one's feelings and behaviors as **completely** understandable given the circumstances

► Assuming there are rational reasons

- "What happened to you?," vs. "What's wrong with you?"

► Avoiding

- Messages that contradict or dismiss feelings
- Messages that **blame** one for life's inevitable pitfalls
- The "Killer Ds" – Deficit, Dysfunction, Disability

Accepting

- ▶ Communicating Acceptance
 - “I hear what you are feeling.”
 - “I understand how you are seeing things now.”
 - “I am interested and concerned.”
 - “I have no desire to change you.”
 - “I don’t judge you.”

Things that Don't Communicate Acceptance

- ▶ Making narrow assumptions
 - about perceptions, experiences, knowledge, trust, resources and available time
- ▶ Unwillingness to try to new ideas
- ▶ Using jargon, acronyms and technical language
- ▶ Judging the other person
- ▶ Not following through on your commitments
- ▶ Suggesting that another parent training class might be useful
- ▶ Saying, "I know how you feel."

Never giving up

- ▶ **Unconditional care** means that involvement with the family is not dependent on something the child or family does or doesn't do. Rather, it's a commitment on the part of system partners to be there when the family needs them. It is a pledge on the part of the family and providers to work collaboratively to determine appropriate services, support or interventions. It is a vow by the team to not unilaterally assign or terminate services.

Checklist for Forming Partnerships with Parents

- ☐ Can I put myself in the parents' shoes and consider how I would feel and react in their situation?
- ☐ Do I see the child in multiple dimensions, looking beyond diagnosis or problem statements?
- ☐ Do I believe that parents are experts on their children?
- ☐ Do I believe that we are equals?
- ☐ Do I listen to parents, communicating that I respect and value their insights?
- ☐ Do I speak in plain language, avoiding professional jargon?
- ☐ Do I always answer parents' questions?
- ☐ Do I make appointments and set meetings at times and places that are convenient for the family?
- ☐ Do I follow through on my commitments?

Checklist for Forming Partnerships with Providers

- ☐ Am I able to see the provider as a person who is working with me for the well-being of my child & family?
- ☐ Do I clearly express the strengths and needs of my family?
- ☐ Do I state my desire to be an active participant in the decision-making process concerning my child & family?
- ☐ Do I come to appointments prepared with the information I want to give and the questions I want answered?
- ☐ Do I understand that a provider often has responsibility for working with many families, including my own?
- ☐ Do I avoid letting past negative experiences or attitudes get in the way of establishing a good working relationship?
- ☐ Do I communicate quickly with providers when there are significant changes or when notable situations occur?
- ☐ Do I regard providers with the same respect I expect them to give me?
- ☐ Do I follow through on my commitments?

Questions?