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Commentary on "Partnering with Parents: Promising Approaches to Improve Reunification Outcomes for Children in Foster Care"

Jacquelyn McCroskey
University of Southern California School of Social Work, mccroske@usc.edu

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We have only to imagine how it would feel to be reported to and investigated by the local child protective services agency to sense the deep well of emotion that contact with child welfare services engenders. Now imagine that the government has already taken your children away, placed them with someone else and the time clock that will determine whether you lose them forever is ticking away. It is no wonder that the idea behind parent partnership programs, that a parent in this position would benefit from the experience of others who have been in the same position and regained their children, has strong support from parents and parent advocates.

In my locality, Los Angeles County, the Parent Partner program also has strong support from Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) administrators and Children's Services Workers in selected regions where it has been pilot-tested. Stakeholders report that Parent Partners make bureaucratic processes a little more transparent, helping parents who are working at reunifying with their children understand what could happen and what they need to do in confusing, often overwhelming situations. DCFS staff only wish there were more Parent Partners available, and more training, technical assistance and resources to support and grow the program.

In "Partnering with Parents: Promising Approaches to Improve Reunification Outcomes for Children in Foster Care," authors Jill Berrick, Edward Cohen and Elizabeth Anthony describe promising outcomes from a quasi-experimental study of reunification associated with the Parent Partner program in one western county. Evidence from their study, as well as the fact that the research design used by the authors to measure outcomes is elegant yet replicable, makes it more likely that additional support will be forthcoming. The study design relies on data regularly kept in the Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS), and compares reunification outcomes for the group of children whose parents had Parent Partners during the period from July 2005 to March 2008 with a random sample of those children removed from the care of their parents in 2004. While the research design is rigorous, the conceptual approach well-articulated, and the findings compelling, it would not be difficult or unduly expensive to duplicate in other jurisdictions.

If we believe, as most of us in the child welfare field do, that the state should not be in the business of raising children, but of protecting them from harm and finding safe, nurturing permanent homes as quickly as possible, it makes sense to even the playing field a little bit so that parents have someone in their corner during one of the most stressful and emotional experiences a parent could have. As described by the authors,

the Parent Partners program represents one strand of a more robust family strengthening fabric that child welfare agencies and their community partners across the country are trying to construct. This effort is particularly interesting because it applies family strengthening theories and concepts to families whose children had to be removed from their care to keep them safe, parents who would be seen by some as irrevocably damaged. And it does so by drawing on the strengths of those who have been in the same position and fought their way through; talk about starting where the client is! Kudos to the authors for making it clear just how meaningful such efforts can be.