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Parents Too Can Evaluate Family Preservation Services - or –Involving Parents In Evaluation of Family Preservation Services*

Anthony N. Maluccio

In line with the long-standing emphasis in the human services on involving clients in program evaluation, in this essay I focus on principles and strategies for involving parents in evaluation of family preservation services. In particular, I delineate the crucial roles that parents can play as partners in the helping process within a family-centered context.

Involving families – especially parents – in program evaluation has been a central feature of family preservation services ever since their emergence years ago as a powerful movement in the human services. This movement has drawn from various theoretical perspectives – in particular, a strength-oriented view of social work practice that stresses the involvement of clients or consumers in evaluation of services that they receive.

According to such a view, clients are explicitly regarded as persons with assets and potentialities and as partners in the helping process (Cf. Vecchiato, Maluccio and Canali, 2002). For this reason, it is essential that practitioners obtain on a regular basis the clients' feedback regarding their helping efforts. By doing so, practitioners are not only tuned into their clients' perspectives but also can enhance their clients' self-esteem and autonomy and their sense of power and control over their life situations.

Parents as Partners

The emphasis on obtaining client or consumer feedback implies a view of parents (and other family members) as resources on their own behalf – and as partners in the helping process – rather than as carriers of pathology. Such a view is enhanced through attention to the following practice principles, among others.

First, in assessment as well as intervention, there is a focus on the family: in most cases the child can best be helped by regarding the family, as much as possible and appropriate, as the central unit of service and the focus of attention. Consequently, practitioners focus on providing comprehensive, community-based services that help families restructure and enrich their environment “so that it is more suited to their needs and qualities and more conducive to their positive functioning” (Maluccio, 2000: 169).

Second, there is explicit attention to the child's and family's strengths, and parents as well as children are regarded as interested in – and striving to achieve – competence in their every day functioning. Toward this end, practitioners actively seek and use opportunities to help children and parents practice and refine their skills as human beings – and as family members in particular.

Third, the primary role of social workers is defined as that of a catalyst who seeks to enable the family to identify or create and use necessary resources. Above all, practitioners

“become experts in methods of environmental modification, use of existing community resources and natural helping networks, creation of new resources that

may be needed by their clients, and mobilization of family members' own resources" (Maluccio, 2000: 171).

Finally, children and youths themselves are actively involved in the helping process, as they can have much to say about planning and implementing services on their behalf – as long as they are encouraged by practitioners to express their views.

Family-Centered Practice

As implied in the preceding section, maintaining a principal focus on the child *within a family-centered context* is essential. The family's own environment serves as "the arena in which practitioners intervene to help strengthen communication, parenting skills, and parent-child relationships" (Maluccio, Pine and Tracy, 2002: 24). As Germain and Bloom (1999) and others have emphasized, the family has the potential to provide resources throughout the life cycle, especially as its members are sustained through various services and supports. As Berry (1997: 187) has indicated, realizing such potential requires:

"an array of services extending from preventive, educational and family support services to a range of treatment and placement options for those families who need them."

Selected guidelines for implementing such a family-centered approach to practice include:

- Focusing assessment and intervention on the family's transactions with key aspects of its environment – particularly the kinship system, schools, community institutions, and social networks.
- Consistently regarding the child's and family's safety as paramount – and making a vigorous effort to provide a safe environment for the child.
- Creatively combining concrete and clinical services in order to strengthen the family and promote the competent functioning of its members. In this regard, children in out-of-home care and their families typically need extensive help, as they must cope with the impact of separation and the challenges of becoming reunited with each other (cf. Palmer, 1995).
- Using such services to address not only the child's developmental needs but also the family's survival and developmental needs.
- Being responsive to the values and requirements of families from communities of color, immigrants, gay and lesbian families, and other "socially excluded families" (cf. Hatzivarnava-Kazassi, 1996).
- Involving parents in planning responsibly for their children through family treatment services as alternatives to out-of-home placement or as a means of speeding up reunification of placed children with their families.
- Viewing foster care or residential placement of a child as part of the overall service rather than as *the* service – and complementing it with intensive family supports.
- Actively involving the family's extended kinship system as well as self-help groups in the provision of services for parents and children.

Conclusion

As they seek to provide individualized services in case after case, practitioners can also contribute to the overall improvement of family preservation services. Toward this end, they can be attuned to what they can learn directly or indirectly from the families. To do so, they can obtain client feedback during the process of service delivery as well as at its conclusion. As I found in a study nearly three decades ago, “client feedback can enhance social work practice and service delivery, contribute to theory building, and enrich the education of future practitioners” (Maluccio, 1979: 227).

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