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Family Preservation: Collaboration and Teamwork

Tis the season of the National Basketball Association finals and the beginning of the Professional Women's Basketball Association. The skills of collaboration and teamwork required to achieve the ballet of basketball is learned by players over a number of years. On school grounds everywhere, children are learning the techniques and skills necessary to play the game of basketball. Recently, I saw a coach on the sidelines screaming at a young player to make her free-throws, and if she missed, she would have to run laps. This reminded me of traditional services to families which threaten, or at best demand a certain level of performance of parents without providing any true "coaching". I often watch our college coach work from a strengths perspective with the team on minute techniques such as the match-up defense and in-bounds plays. This is the approach that family preservation must employ with families, programs, and their communities.

Since the 1930's, federal, state, and local funding have been by category of need, with most programs being means-tested. In other words, before an individual can qualify (in most cases) for services or resources, they must have a problem which can be met within a specific category. Consequently, state and local programs have built systems around individuals with certain problems and a strong interest in protecting their turf. The skills of collaboration and teamwork are presently ill-defined and rarely practiced, particularly within the categorized funding environment in which most family preservation programs exist.

It is not the purpose of this discussion to define collaboration and teamwork (we all know it if we see it), but rather to suggest that without investing in the development of these skills and the teaching of them to states and agencies, family preservation will continue as yet another categorical program. A major case in point is the "Family Preservation and Support Act" (P.L. 103-66) - funded at almost \$1 billion over five years through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

The stated goals of the Act's architects are laudable, to think big, encourage systems change, to serve as a catalyst for collaboration, through the application of family preservation principles and values (see Hooper-Briar, Broussard, Ronnau and Sallee, 1995). While there are certainly a few bright spots in some states, overall these goals have not been met as we near the end of the five-year funding period. The National Resource Centers have provided one-shot training and technical assistance on family preservation skills and outcome measurements, yet the skills and process measurements for collaboration and teamwork (not to mention a national family policy) have not been developed. In most cases, state agencies are lost. Without enthusiastic and continuous coaching, states and local agencies have failed to progress in the areas of collaboration and teamwork. So far, the only major evaluation of the Family Preservation and Support Act currently underway focuses on Intensive Family Preservation programs of the Homebuilders' variety; thus most of the goals, especially agency collaboration and teamwork, are not being addressed.

It is difficult to collaborate and build true teams. In our informal discussion with family preservation program managers in several states, we have found a lack of federal leadership and role modeling in collaboration. With the window closing rapidly on the opportunity for family preservation to become a movement (see Mannes, 1991), we may lose a new way of working with families from a strengths paradigm. The potential of the family preservation philosophy to positively protect and improve the lives of children is now well known to thousands of families and family preservation workers. The results may not always be "documented" in research studies, perhaps because evaluation methodology has not kept pace with family preservation practice. For example, how do you measure teamwork? Million dollar sports franchises have difficulty assessing teamwork other than through winning a championship. Does that mean that there is only one team (the winner) that had teamwork? Of course not. So why, in family preservation, do we conclude that if we cannot measure teamwork or collaboration by traditional methods family preservation does not work?

The tendency is to over-rely upon that which we can define and measure. Unfortunately, DHHS and their contractors have done this by defining family preservation very narrowly as an intensive child welfare program. Some of the more successful intensive models are dogmatic and narrowly defined. We live in a very messy reality. Uncertainty exists and cross-currents of change are occurring. The easiest, most secure approach is to focus on a narrow definition of family preservation and hold to it rigidly. But ultimately, is that what is best for families, and does that truly address the development of collaboration and teamwork?

It is often said that it takes a generation to effect a paradigm shift. We must be committed for the long term and clearly define where we are going with family preservation. We need a collaborative strategy for the short term (the next two years) and the long term. In the short term, DHHS could convene a team of stake holders (family members, workers, administrators and advocacy groups) and model collaboration by working for the reauthorization of the Family Preservation and Support Act. At the same time, another such team can begin to develop, test and train collaborative skills.

We have done a good job of establishing methods of working directly with families and providing services from support to intensive brief services. Not we must learn how to team and collaborate to best serve families - for if professionals and advocates cannot model collaboration and teamwork, then how can we possibly expect families in crisis, often with far less experience and resources, to work together? It is time for those with power and money to coach, not criticize, and it is a time for teamwork.

The articles in this issue address many of the concerns raised in working with programs and families. The articles include a model for case assessment, behavior outcomes for home-based services, an in-depth and multi-faceted evaluation of family preservation, and the identification of families to receive intensive family preservation services. Finally, we have a review of new current resources that will help with training in the area of family preservation practice.