

1999

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Recommended Citation

Sallee, Alvin (1999) "Editorial: Roles and Expertise," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol4/iss2/3>

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Editorial

Roles and Expertise

We all take on roles, probably several each day. Parent, worker, consumer, spouse, or shortstop, the roles we play are varied and complex. After one's own family, perhaps the roles of consumer and worker are most important to Family Preservation. How do we come to play these roles, and in what ways are they changing, or should they change? Often, neither the worker or family set out to play their roles, but through the twist and turns of life, the opportunity to serve and preserve a family presents itself. At a recent conference, a group of workers spoke of how, rather than having a career goal to do Family Preservation, Family Preservation found them. Many of the families probably say the same thing! In the fields of mental health, developmental disabilities, and adoption, families may seek Family Preservation services; rarely do families involved in juvenile justice, corrections, or child welfare systems look for Family Preservation. Family Preservation finds them. And thus the roles begin.

The traditional helping process sees the worker in the role of "expert" and the family as the "client" or consumer at best. The role of expert is defined as having, involving, or displaying special knowledge or skills derived from experience or training. Professionals and agencies at times believe they are most knowledgeable of what the problems are in a family. Workers, playing the expert role in the helping professions, have degrees, workshops, and experience, which provide them with special insight and perspective on what happens to and within families.

The starring role belongs to the family – not only in the role of consumer but more critically in the role as family expert. Who knows better the history, the pain, and the secrets than the family? Not recognizing the family as an expert greatly limits the options available and forces workers to grope for answers without the family members' insight. Furthermore, one could argue that not viewing the family as an expert is an elitist extension of the medical model. Is this effective with families? Is this ultimately fair to families? How can justice ever be achieved when families are labeled and dehumanized? Is it because workers lacking the skills, support, and training fall back on being the only expert? In what ways do agency policies and caseloads contribute to the need for workers to assume some control over their professional life by not sharing the stage in the role of expert?

Families engaged as experts empower themselves as well as workers. The family (no matter what configuration, size, or color) is the most important and influential part of our lives. The family is the basic unit of our society, the source of lessons and memories, good and bad. Who knows this better than the family members?

Together in the role of partners, the family and worker can develop new skills, discover new options, and provide alternatives. Professionals gain a great deal when they share the role of expert. Success and the satisfaction of seeing families succeed through growth and change can only be achieved through this sharing.

The insight families bring in the role of expert is not limited to their own family. Families have a unique view of how an agency, and indeed, the total service delivery system, functions. Who, other than the family, is in a better position to provide program designers, policy makers, and administrators this most critical feedback? Yet, unlike business or even politics, social service programs rarely view families as consumer experts.

While many programs explore a family-centered approach to their work, policies and practice methods serve individuals and agencies. From hours of operation, to assessment tools, families have little input as consumer experts in regard to what works for them. In the few agencies where families are in the role as policy and program experts, a different environment exists and morale seems higher. Professionals behave as professionals when families are present, not only in staffings, but in board meetings as well.

Having consumers at the table is not new (Community Action Agencies did it back in the 1960s). What is new is viewing and equipping families as experts. Simply reserving a chair for family experts at the board table is not enough. Professionals receive years of education and days, if not weeks of training, enhanced with experience before they provide input in the program design. Policy makers, as recognized leaders in communities, have facilitation skills honed over time. And so we must be prepared to support the development of families in the role of expert.

Through the leadership of committed Family-Centered administrators utilizing training, child care, and power sharing some agencies, such as the Department of Human Services in El Paso County, Colorado; and the Division of Child & Family Services, Salt Lake City, Utah, have succeeded in developing a cache of family experts. These experts are an integral part of the agency, from policy committees, to practice techniques to public relations. By valuing families as system-wide experts, administrators have streamlined and focused their services. For example, in El Paso County Colorado, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), is used with Family Preservation as a prevention program. An added benefit is the recognition that additional resources exist in the community, both formal and informal. Family Preservation workers bring expertise in the role of a professional working in collaboration with the family. The family is an expert in their experience within their family and with the service delivery system. This Family Expert paradigm may require a

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philosophical shift in how human services and indeed society at large view and treat families.

The effort agencies put into involving families as experts has been justly rewarded. And it is the right thing to do. When we as professionals, recognize the family in the role of expert, we all benefit through better practice, programs and policies.

Alvin L. Sallee