



## Birth Parents and the Reunification Process: The Mendocino County Model

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This briefing was developed from a qualitative study of the Mendocino County Family Services Center's (MCFSC) innovative program to offer peer support groups to parents involved with the child welfare system. In Mendocino County, all families whose children have been removed are referred by the court to a local Family Center, where they are offered weekly peer support groups, parenting classes, and visitation services. While the program has not been formally evaluated, the MCFSC services model appears to support the change processes of birth parents and may be worth considering for replication in other counties.

This briefing describes the main components of the MCFSC services model: the intake and empowerment support groups, both of which utilize peer support.

### **Intake Support Group**

Once a decision has been made at a detention hearing to place a child in out-of-home care, parents are referred to a weekly intake support group run by staff at the MCFSC. The purpose of the group is to address issues of anger and denial, educate the client about the court process and the importance of building relationships with social workers, and to facilitate engagement in further services by focusing on the importance of change. Intake groups are run by contracted facilitators, not child welfare employees, to prevent client feelings of mistrust toward child welfare workers immediately following child removal.

The intake group is the initial phase in the MCFSC service model, and clients are required to complete 8 sessions before engaging in other services required by their case plan (with the exception of substance abuse treatment). The rationale behind this delay in initiating services is that clients are coping with a range of chaotic emotions upon child removal. Prior to engaging in the work associated with behavioral and psychological change to improve parenting, staff believe that clients first must express their feelings with peers in a similar situation. While clients postpone involvement in other services, MCFSC staff believe that parents who have completed the intake group process are better prepared to achieve success in their case plans and make important life and parenting changes.

The intake group is structured so that each client has time to describe her experience with child removal and subsequent feelings and life events. Facilitators and other clients offer suggestions or advice where necessary. Over the course of 8 weeks, intake facilitators report that clients become more honest about their role in their child welfare involvement and more open to addressing their personal problems.

### **Empowerment Support Group**

After completion of the intake group, clients enter the second phase of services at the Family Center. This next step involves developing an "Empowerment Plan," participating in weekly empowerment groups, and attending parenting skills classes. Unlike intake groups, the empowerment groups are not time-limited.

In a collaborative process, the empowerment group facilitator (a county child welfare employee), the social worker assigned to the case (also a county child welfare employee), and the client identify the actions, knowledge, and skills required to realize the case plan goals, thereby creating an empowerment plan. While the case plan is a set of goals that must be achieved in order for the child to be returned home, the empowerment plan clearly lays out specific tasks and behavioral changes that must be made in order to achieve these goals. The case plan is like the destination, with the empowerment plan as the map which will provide concrete guidance to the client. During weekly empowerment group sessions, clients report on their successes and challenges in achieving the changes outlined in the empowerment plan. Facilitators and peers support clients in their change process by helping them develop manageable, weekly “Action Plans”—baby steps toward reaching their final goals.

### **The Peer Support Model**

According to staff reports, a dynamic emerges in the intake and empowerment groups that nurtures the change process for birth parents. Clients witness others making intimate personal disclosures; they recognize that their problems are similar to others’; they experience a sense of emotional safety to share their own intense emotional experiences; they share resources and strategies for change; and they observe others’ success in the change process. A facilitator described the change process that occurs in groups: “There’s that whole ‘get on the change wagon’ because people get on it and then everyone wants to get on it.”

Child welfare clients usually attempt the change process alone, or with the support of formal systems (therapists, social workers, etc.). The Mendocino County Family Center model is unique because it creates structures so that clients may give and receive peer support.

### **Methods**

Researchers used qualitative methods of focus groups, interviews, and observation to understand the key components of the Mendocino County Family Service Center interventions, and the experience of birth parent participants with respect to their personal change process. The study sample included 14 staff and 17 adult clients of the Mendocino County Family Service Center (MCFSC). Initial phone interviews were conducted with key staff prior to visiting the Family Center. Staff was involved in four focus groups as well as several interviews. Three focus groups were held with clients. In addition, researchers observed or audio-taped six Empowerment Group sessions to better understand the group dynamics and the change process for individuals. This study was part of a larger research project on major child welfare reforms in California, including concurrent planning.

For more information see:

Frame, L., Conley, A. & Berrick, J.D. (2004). *Birth Parents and the Reunification Process: A Study of the Mendocino County Model*. Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley.

### **For more information, please contact:**

Center for Social Services Research  
School of Social Welfare  
16 Haviland Hall #7400,  
Berkeley CA 94720-7400

tel: 510.642.1899  
fax: 510.642.1895

web: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu>