



Birth Parents and the Reunification Process: Conceptual Framework of the MCFSC Service Model 2 of 3

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.

The conceptual framework of the MCFSC model, formed by staff observations of the client change process and influenced by various theories, is described in this briefing. The influence of peer support on the birth parent change process is also described. The peer group model appears to be a relatively unique service component in child welfare and was the focus of this qualitative study; however, Family Center staff emphasized that the intake and empowerment groups cannot be viewed in isolation. In the staff's view, all of the services they provide are complementary and build upon each other. The peer support groups can best be understood, according to staff, in the context of the total MCFSC services package. The services offered by the Family Center were developed based on theories related to change, then honed through observations of and experiences with clients. The key concept that ties together services is that change is developmental; clients progress through stages and build on their insights and achievements.

The importance of peer support

The implicit role of peer support in the birth parent change process is a thread that runs through the MCFSC model. Through the trusting bonds formed in intake and empowerment groups, clients are understood to support each others' change processes in a variety of ways including emotional support; understanding for shared life experiences; role models for making change; and encouragement to stay on track. Based upon the relationships clients form with one another, it is then possible for clients to confront one another in a change-promoting way. The staff view the role of peers as fundamental to the intervention model, in that clients who have worked their way through the 5 stages of change--denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance --are then able to "give back" to the program, and to other parents, by remaining involved and acting as mentors to their peers in earlier stages of change. This, in turn, helps to solidify their own changes. Forming relationships with staff and clients is itself part of the developmental process of change; the new ways of relating to others that clients learn at the Family Center give them a template for healthy interaction. These relationships breed hope, which is the engine for making positive changes. Hope is reinforced through the encouragement provided by peers and facilitators in the weekly intake and empowerment groups. One facilitator described the importance of hope: "When they see that change can happen and they can do something about themselves, that awareness allows them to have more hope in the system."

Theoretical frameworks

Family Center services were designed with inspiration from three theoretical frameworks:

- **Kubler-Ross (1969) Model of Death and Dying**--The Kubler-Ross model is the basis for the developmental sequence of services offered by the Family Center. Similar to the Kubler-Ross stages of death and dying, Family Center staff have observed a multi-stage change process related to child welfare system involvement. In a typical client change process, the first stage is denial and anger, the second is depression, and the third is awareness and responsibility.
- **Maslow (1943) Hierarchy of Needs**--Taking an approach inspired by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, staff help clients order their service plan priorities from most basic to more advanced needs. Parallel to the hierarchy, the Family Center staff help clients with the basics of housing and other concrete needs, as well as substance abuse recovery and communication skills. These basic changes theoretically lay a foundation for higher-level changes in their parenting skills.
- **Strengths Perspective (Saleebey, 1992)**--A strengths-based orientation to clients is a core aspect of the program philosophy that informs staff interventions and assessment techniques. Strengths-based assessments are reportedly a powerful method employed by staff to move clients through the change process. Often other clients take over this process (e. g., in groups) as they share with a parent the positive attributes and actions they have observed.

Main themes in birth parent change processes

Family Center staff report several main themes in the change processes experienced by clients:

- **Denial & anger**--Staff have observed that many clients arrive at the Family Center believing "all [they] have to do is show up and jump through hoops" in order to complete CPS requirements for reunification. Many initially feel victimized by the system and deny their own responsibility for their child's removal.
- **Depression**--The denial and defensiveness that lead clients to blame others often hides a lack of confidence about their ability to change themselves or their situation. With the initial recognition that major personal changes are needed, the enormity of the task can be overwhelming and can lead to feelings of depression.
- **Increased awareness & readiness for change**--According to staff, many clients gradually come to realize that there may be alternatives to their current approach to parenting and that the Family Center can be a source of help and knowledge development. This recognition can give clients a sense of hope and renewed motivation to embark on a change process.

Family Center services are designed to help new clients form trusting relationships with other clients and staff that will provide a foundation for later change efforts. Once clients are engaged and willing to make changes, the initial focus is on basic skills such as communication, and basic needs such as housing. The process of building trust and accumulating achievements generates hope, which can move clients to the "increased awareness & readiness for change" stage. The groundwork is thereby laid for more advanced changes in skills and psychological perspectives on parenting.

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.

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