



## Birth Parents and the Reunification Process: Staff and Peer Support to Empower Change

3 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.

Empowerment groups, described in this briefing, are a core aspect of the birth parent support offered by the Family Center. In the "empowerment" group model, clients meet weekly to discuss progress and challenges in meeting their case goals. Two staff facilitators are on hand to provide structure and offer their own constructive advice and emotional support. In large part, however, clients take over the process. As one facilitator explained: "we might facilitate or move it a little bit but the real work is what they do together." Interventions and client changes observed in one empowerment group are described below.

### **Facilitator interventions**

The group facilitators provide a positive, supportive presence and clearly communicate their care, concern, and acceptance for each client. Acting as a team, the two facilitators appear to take different roles when necessary but to share the same overall philosophy and approach to the group process. In this context, the group facilitators make several types of interventions, including:

- Promotion of a proactive stance through encouragement of goal setting, self-awareness, and advocacy.
- Gentle confrontation about responsibility for actions.
- Expressions of concern regarding clients and their children.
- Attention to strengths and positive changes (e.g. insights and hard work) to stimulate hope.
- Emotional support and attention to emotional needs.
- Encouragement of exploration and clarification of feelings in order to promote self-reflection and insight.
- Focus on the consideration of children's needs, perspectives, and experiences.
- Clarification of the child welfare agency's stance and the rights of clients.
- Attention to concrete needs (e.g., housing, income, transportation, furniture, and diapers) and encouragement of immediate action.
- Offers of concrete assistance and advocacy (e.g., writing a letter to a housing agency, offering a list of program referrals, assisting with income and credit problems).

### **Peer interventions**

Members of the group play an essential role in facilitating the change effort with their fellow clients. While each individual brings a unique perspective, personality, and approach to the group dynamic, in general group member interventions were observed to serve two main functions:

- Assistance in the form of emotional support (e.g., expressions of concern), concrete assistance (e.g., giving of furniture), practical advice (e.g., referrals to providers) and faith-based help (e.g. prayers).
- Encouragement to take responsibility for one's actions.

### **Client change processes**

Over the course of the observed 6 sessions, group members made a variety of changes in their lives. Given that group members were at different points in their child welfare involvement, the nature of the change process differed for each individual, yet a few general themes emerged.

Observed changes fell into two categories. The first related directly to child welfare goals and included:

- Fulfillment of children's basic needs;
- Increased child safety;
- Improved relations between parents and children;
- Greater family stability;
- Greater knowledge and sensitivity to children's needs;
- Enhanced parenting skills;
- Increased visitation.

Group members also made changes that were indirectly related to child welfare goals, such as improvement in self-esteem and choices about romantic relationships.

While the majority of changes made by group members were of a positive nature, several group members experienced set-backs. Set-backs were also directly and indirectly related to child welfare case plans and included: an acknowledged substance abuse relapse; a positive drug test; child removal; a neglect allegation made to CPS; and a miscommunication with a social worker. Still, while these set-backs created temporary problems in the lives of group members, on the whole all group members (with one possible exception) appeared to be in a better place in their lives 8 weeks after the first observed empowerment session. Further, the proactive, supportive approach of the empowerment group appeared to facilitate, rather than hinder, positive change.

## **Methods**

For eight weeks, researchers observed and/or audio taped an empowerment group with 7 parent participants and 2 staff. The audio tapes were transcribed and analyzed as part of a qualitative study on the Mendocino County Family Service Center. Participants in this empowerment group were at various points in their child welfare cases and service participation at the Family Center. The group was described as “mature” by a facilitator; an observation supported by the participants’ apparent trust in one another and the facilitators, and their willingness to both accept and offer gentle confrontation. In 6 observed group sessions over an 8-week period, both group facilitators and group members conducted a variety of interventions with participants. The nature of these interventions and a description of changes observed in the group participants is the topic of this briefing.

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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