Strengthening Relationships Between Children in Foster Care and Their Birth Parents: The Powerful Families Initiative: A Grant Proposal

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INTRODUCTION

- Both parents and children experience distress when separated from one another. Parents being able to see their children, know how they are doing, and know what they have to do to get them back are typically prevalent issues (Pine, Spath, & Gosteli, 2014).
- Dating back to the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Reform Act of 1980, P.L.96-272, the child welfare system is mandated to make reasonable efforts to help parents connect with their children in order to reunify (Pecora et al., 2010).
- Fanshel (1975) documented that regular contact between parents and children was the single largest indicator of family reunification and, in fact, parent-child visiting became known as the “heart of family reunification” (Pecora et al., 2010, p. 231).
- Visiting between children and parents must be used “deliberately as a therapeutic goal” to help maintain family ties, provide opportunities for family members to learn and practice new behavior and patterns of communicating with each other (Pecora et al., 2010, p. 231).
- The purpose of this project was to: (a) create a program that increases the possibility of family reunification for children in foster care by engaging the children, their birth parents, their resource (foster) parents and their child welfare workers in a strength-based process known as family time; (b) improve teamwork among the parents, resource parents, and child welfare workers; and (c) identify potential funding sources for the program.
The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) has six major principles:

- Competence
- Dignity and worth of the person
- Integrity
- Importance of relationships
- Service
- Social justice

- For children and parents who have been separated and the children are placed in family foster care the principle of importance of relationships may be the most important.
- Child welfare workers also must be competent and understand the dignity and worth of parents and children, as well.
- Family time requires integrity and considerable advocacy. Support is needed to empower the birth parents and help them become independent enough to reunify them with their children. However, many birth parents have been disempowered and unmotivated to seek help. Parents may require help and encouragement to rebuild positive relationships with their children, especially when there has been trauma related to abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, or emotional maltreatment.
Cross-cultural Relevance

- This project also has multicultural relevance for ethnic minority children and families, who are disproportionately represented in foster care.

- “Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS, 2013) reveals that as of September 30, 2012, 56% of the 399,546 children were children of color, yet only 46.9 percent of all U.S. children were children of color” (McRoy, 2014, p. 680).

- At least one study in California investigated the impact of ethnicity and immigrant status on reunification, with significant policy and practice recommendations leading with agency staff cultural competence and language fluency (Osterling & Han, n.d.).

- Relevance for sexual minority children and families and, in either circumstances, attention must be given to the dynamic of demographic diversity (Pasztor, Petras, & Rainey, 2013). This means that children, parents, resource parents, and child welfare workers are diverse in age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, socioeconomic status, and education.
Methods

Target Population:
- Children
- Birth parents
- Resource parents
- Child welfare workers from a nonprofit agency in Los Angeles County

Strategies used to identify funding
- Search engines will be used to identify potential funding sources and sites:
  - grants.gov, GrantWatch, and DailySmarts.
  - Search terms will include: “grants family visitation programs,” “grants visitation programs,”
    “grants birth parents engagement,” “grant psycho-educational support groups,” “grants
    child welfare,” “grants family reunification,” and “grants Los Angeles.” “Foster parent-
    birth parent contact” and “foster parent-visiting”

- Connecting to the Foundation Center may also help find grant opportunities. Local, state, and
  federal sources will be considered

Identify the funding source selected
- The Stuart Foundation was selected as a potential funder for this project. Founded in 1985 by the
  merger of three foundations: Elbridge Stuart Foundation (1937), Elbridge and Mary Stuart
  Foundation, and the Mary Homer Stuart Foundation (1941).
- Stuart Foundation, which is “…dedicated to the protection, education and development of
  children and youth” (Stuart Foundation, 2009, as in “About Us”).
Methods

Sources used for the needs assessment

- For this grant a needs assessment was conducted by gathering information from various resources;
  - Scholarly journals, child welfare websites, interviews from local, state, and federal government statistics, interviews with child welfare workers, birth parents, and resource parents, agencies statistics, and consultation with PRIDE Model of Practice research project staff.

Projected budget range and categories

- Costs to operate The Powerful Families Initiative as a one-year pilot program
- Budget includes:
  - Staffing for a Program Manager/Family Time Group Facilitator and a Family Time Group Facilitator (bilingual required for one position).
  - Project Assistant for administrative support (bilingual preferred)
  - Project Evaluator
  - Stipends for 1 MSW and 1 BSW student interns, honorariums for foster parents and birth parents, outreach materials, mileage, bus tokens, supplies, and refreshments during training; and in-kind supports, such as office space, equipment, insurance, and administrative leadership.
Grant Proposal

Program Summary:
- There are four distinct participants in the family time process: the child, the child’s birth parent, the child’s resource parent, and the agency child welfare worker.
- There are five distinct steps in the family time process:
  - Preparing for family time such as the logistics as well as the activities that would happen during the family time and making them appropriate for the children’s ages and stages of development.
  - Travel to the family time and attention should be given to how the person bringing the child talks with the child about where they are going and what will happen there based on the children’s ages and stages of development.
  - Family time experience which should reflect the activities that were planned in the first step.
  - Return from family time which includes child welfare assessing children, birth parents, and resource parents feelings and the quality experience of family time.
  - Debriefing process which flows from the family time experience and the return from that experience.
Grant Proposal

Program Objectives:
- 1) Provide parents with a safe opportunity to discuss the issues they experience before, during, and after Family Time (debrief/talk about it);
- 2) Provide parents with information and activities that can be used during Family Time and that are developmentally appropriate for their children;
- 3) Provide resource parents with the knowledge and skills (competencies) needed to support all phases of Family Time;
- 4) Provide child welfare workers with the knowledge and skills (competencies) needed to support the children, parents, and resource parents in all phases of Family Time;
- 5) Develop an evaluation plan that would make the Strengthening Relationships between Children in Foster Care and their Parents: The Powerful Families Initiative evidence-based or evidence-informed.

Program Evaluation
- The proposed program aims to serve six groups of approximately 60 birth parents, 60 resource parents, and 60 child welfare workers respectively within a one-year period.
- Pre and post-tests administered to the participating birth and resource parents and child welfare workers.
- Available in both English and Spanish, the tests will be a Likert scale format consisting of questions that are unique to each participant’s role and to each phase of the family time process.
Lessons Learned/Implications for Social Work

Grant Writing Progress:

• A productive, learning experience that allowed the grant writer to think creatively during the process and gain knowledge of accessible resources for the target population.
  • Narrowing the focus for the project was overwhelming, however, with consultation from the thesis advisor the ideas became focused to create and meet the goals and objectives for the Powerful Families Initiative and family time.
  • Another challenge was that the thesis advisor has a Children, Youth, & Families background, while the grant writer has an Older Adults & Families concentration. At first it took some time, but the different perspectives resulted in an intergenerational project.

Implication for Social Work

• Reunification is the required legal mandate to the fullest possible extent. Teamwork among birth parents, foster parents, and child welfare workers for the children is essential for reunification. Family time emphasizes needed communication. Rather than pushing families away, working and finding the families’ strengths and supports allows parents to be involved (Palmer, Maiter, & Manji, 2006).

• Of the children in out of home care, approximately one-third were reunified (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services [DCFS]. 2014). However, reunification rates do not identify recidivism. In fact, it was reported that DCFS has a 15% reentry rate, indicating that children and families may be reunified before they are ready or that they do not receive post-reunification services (Hughes, 2013). Immigrant status for demographics and perhaps add info how some children are moved out from their neighborhood. (deportation)


