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TEAM WORK IN FOSTER CARE

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Several years ago I presented a workshop called “Incorporating Family into Therapeutic Healing.” It was enthusiastically received, so I have frequently repeated the presentation always receiving the same response.

The secret of its success, I believe, is two-fold: (1) here are practical ways in which you, as parents (foster, adoptive, grand, etc) can and hopefully WILL engage in the therapeutic and educational process with your child. (2) In this workshop parents are encouraged to “use your gut. Believe in what you feel and think. YOU are your child’s expert, so use your strength and knowledge on your child’s behalf.” This assertion is usually met with stunned silence and then enthusiastic support. But as a professional in the field of attachment, trauma, foster care and adoption, I have known all along that I am definitely a team MEMBER, not the team leader.

Remember, though, that you need and deserve – and should demand – constant support for parenting a child who has come to you through foster care. When I developed and ran a mental health clinic for children and families, specializing in early attachment trauma, I emphasized that each child needed to be the center of a team. That team should be captained by the parent, if he or she is willing. If there are two parents, both parents needed to be moving in the same direction.

As mental health professionals, we became part of each child’s team; the more members of the child’s “world” on the team, the better! Depending on the child, that included parent(s) and often other children in the family, case workers, therapists, medical professionals, teachers, school counselors, members of the child’s extended family, members of their faith community, and “cheerleaders” – this could be someone from the child’s birth family; however, it was always people who were wholeheartedly rooting for the child, willing to give time and energy to support this child in a collaborative way.

So, how to lead this team? Here are some practical suggestions.

- 1) Chose your favorite books and articles, maybe one that you read in a foster parent class, and ask each member of the team to read. This raises everyone’s level of common understanding. It is critically important for you to understand that perhaps most of your

“team” does not understand all that you do about your child, your child’s situation and experiences, together with how best to help/guide/support your child.

- 2) Give your team members a few simple practices that will help your child. For example, if you know that it is helpful to your child to give a “5 minute notice” before changing activities, offer that suggestion to team members. If your child is able to participate in activities best by first taking several deep breaths, make sure that all teachers, therapists, and other members of the team know that they should take time to encourage the child to do that. Keep introducing new information about the ways your child functions best.
- 3) Be a positive role model, and ask team members to do the same. If you know that your child needs to “count to 10” in order to calm down, then you do the same and ask team to follow suit! This also means you are involved in your child’s therapy. When things are going well, parents are one of the best resources a therapist can have. If you are not included in at least some aspect of therapy on a regular basis, ask why not. Talk with your case worker about the possibility that a different therapist might help you become more involved in your foster child’s healing process.
- 4) I usually like to stop at three suggestions in any article. Because this one is important, I feel the need to highlight it here. Being a team leader does NOT mean that you do all the work, or that you have all the answers. Being a team leader means that you ask for help, accept what seems the most helpful, share information with all team members (yes, it takes time; maybe there’s a team member whose job is to help you organize and follow-up with communication), and support your team. It also means that you ask for help from the team, for yourself and your family. If your child is in need of a team, then YOU are in need of a supportive team, too. You can’t do this alone.

There is good news about the long-term benefits of team-work foster care. One study shows that foster children who were supported by therapy during placement were significantly LESS likely to be in the judicial or mental health system as young adults. Additionally, they were significantly MORE likely to have good jobs and be engaged in meaningful relationships. Good news for your child! Go TEAM!