

INDIVIDUALIZING PLANS *WITH* FAMILIES

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

The Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare (which is a part of the Center for the Study of Social Policy) is assisting several states and communities to develop new approaches to preventing and addressing child abuse and/or neglect. Four cities have been implementing a community partnership approach for protecting children for the past seven years. These cities are: Jacksonville, Florida; St. Louis, Missouri; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Louisville, Kentucky.

One of the critical strategies for instituting a community partnership approach is employing an individualized course of action (or ICA) with vulnerable families ----- either to prevent or to address child abuse and the issues that accompany it. The ICA is a process used with families that is strength-based and is focused on the underlying needs of the family. It is carefully tailored to address the unique situation of the family and child and relies on assistance and participation of the family, the family's natural helping system and formal and informal community stakeholders. These contributors make up the family's very own team, which supports and assists the family in ongoing problem solving and celebration of successes. This team, which always includes the family, uses a family team meeting process to formulate the family's plan.

Families have a powerful role in the ICA process and, therefore, are active participants in each phase of the process: assessing needs, identifying team members, formulating and implementing plans of support. A key element in enlisting the family's participation in crafting their own plan is engaging the family with warmth, empathy, genuineness and respect. The ICA is more than a plan; it is the process for good practice that makes families stronger and keeps children safer.

KEY ELEMENTS OF INDIVIDUALIZING THE PLANNING PROCESS FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Engaging the family

- As a process, demonstrates genuineness, respect and empathy for the family
- Allows the time to build a trusting relationship with the family

Assessment

- Reflects the family's leading role in identifying needs and goals
- With the family, identifies (1) strengths, (2) safety issues and risks, (3) underlying causes of the family's situation, (4) needs, and (5) the family members' vision, dreams, and goals for their future
- Assesses family needs and issues in the areas of domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse and poverty (and acts on these as necessary)

Developing and implementing the course of action

- The family is present and involved in decision-making and planning, through convening a "family team" that includes people from the family's own support system as well as formal service providers
- The action plan is based on goals that the family wants to achieve
- The action plan addresses safety concerns and family's needs
- The family team meets as often as needed to modify and update planning and to ensure progress
- The action plan identifies, in writing, who will take lead responsibility for tracking the plan and what the family, informal supports, and agencies will do

Tracking progress and responding to new concerns

- A lead person from the family's team is identified for tracking whether the plan is being implemented as planned and whether progress is being made

Sustaining the change

- From the beginning, work is done to create a "web of support" that will be in place for the family and continue after agency involvement has stopped
- Involves an agreement with the family and its informal supports to reconvene the family team if new risks are observed, or if old risks reappear

Family Team Meeting

A family team meeting (also called family support team meetings, family conferences) is a gathering of family members, their friends, community

specialists, agency workers and other interested people who join together to strengthen the family and protect its children. Family team meetings evolved from the way that families form a natural helping system to meet needs and to solve problems. The meeting is lead by a facilitator, who may be the caseworker from an agency working with the family, a community leader or some other person. The person facilitating the family team has had specialized training and experience to ensure that the meeting runs smoothly. The steps of the meeting are:

- Welcome and introductions
- Discussion of the purpose and outcomes desired for the meeting
- Discussion about confidentiality and information sharing among team members
- Having the team identify ground rules for the meeting (for example, “no interrupting” and/or “talk to people, not about them”)
- The family tells its story (how did they get here/what brought them to the partnership’s attention)
- Team identifies strengths of the family
- Team identifies needs of the family (this should be underlying needs --- not services...for example, a need is not “parenting classes”; it might be “Mrs. Smith needs to learn how to prepare meals for her family.”)
- Team brainstorming how to meet needs
- Team development of the plan, and assigning specific responsibilities to team members
- Answering “what can go wrong?” and planning around this question
- Identifying next steps
- Closing

Tips for Successfully Individualizing Plans With Families

Preparing for the family team meeting:

- Help the family think through in advance what their goals are for their family team meeting.
- If the family cannot think of its own informal supports for the conference, use your skills to help them think creatively about who could be a resource for them. (Ask questions like “who do you go to if you need to borrow \$5.00?”)
- Help the family identify current service providers, as well as providers who might be useful to the family in the future.
- Review the case record and any other documents that can familiarize you with the family’s past and current situation.
- Assume that team members need reminding about treating the family with respect; prepare team members in advance to think about the family’s strengths as well as underlying needs.

During the family team meeting:

- Be strategic about seating. Do not seat the family so that they are the center of attention and surrounded by formal agency stakeholders.
- Listen and make sure that someone writes the family’s goals and steps, using the family’s own words.
- If the family becomes uncomfortable with an important issue, transition to other safer issues until it is natural to return to it.
- Think about future transitions in the family’s life when crafting the plan and encourage the family to anticipate the stresses of these future events (such as new family members or losses of support).
- As the plan is developed, ask the team and family “What could go wrong?” as a form of crisis planning.
- Encourage creativity among the team when brainstorming solutions. Think beyond the traditional services that are used.
- Ensure that a team member is selected as “lead worker” for ensuring that the plan is being followed.

- Ensure that team members are clear about their own assignments and make sure the lead worker and family knows how to contact each team member.
- Don't expect to address all of the family's needs in a single meeting. A successful meeting can be one that provides new information on which to act in future meetings. Depending upon the purpose and outcome of the first meeting, you may find it helpful to schedule the next conference at the end of the first meeting to address future and/or unresolved issues.

After the meeting:

- The lead worker contacts the family and other team members on a regular basis to make sure that the plan is being followed. The timing of these contacts should be identified during the meeting.
- Anyone on the team can request a follow-up meeting. Follow-up meetings can be used to address something that isn't working about the current plan, and/or to add to that plan; and/or to address new concerns.
- Family team meetings occur as they are needed, and not on a pre-ordained time schedule.
- In situations where a team has created a safety plan that needs close monitoring, a quick follow-up meeting will be helpful to assess progress and to identify additional supports that may be necessary.
- Be sure to include informal supports on the team. As formal agency providers complete their work with the family, these informal supports become the family's team.