Transformational Service Delivery in Kinship Foster Care: Influence of Casey's Breakthrough Series

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Module Overview

Summary

Data from interviews and document analysis were collected to explore of changes and their impact on service delivery to kinship care families in a county Human Service Department that occurred as a result Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Supporting Kinship Care. BSC was a one-year demonstration project to improve serives to kinship families. Results indicated major changes in the kin search, which were merged into five interrelated themes: (a) earlier kin searches are better, (b) widening the definition of kin, (c) promotion of kinship care as important to families, (d) biological fathers from invisible to a resource, and (e) hindrances to the search process.

Relationship to Policy/Practice

The kinship search is a determining process in (a) allowing children to get the benefits of being with family members and connecting with their identity and culture, (b) making intergenerational connections, (c) assisting workers to view the strenghts of families, and reducing cost to public child welfare. During this demonstration project, workers were assisted to shift the culture of service delivery with kinship care families from pathologizing to advocating and supporting.

To improve services to kinship families, the following elements ought to be included:

- Timing: Start kin search immediately after child enters system.
- Definition of kin: Use the broadest definition possible so that children can be with someone who either has a relationship with them or has a connection to them.
- Promotion of kinship care in county agencies for its positive benefits.
- Inclusion of biological fathers in decision-making and services
- Increase awareness of the many barriers that may emerge during the kin search and work to reduce or eliminate them.

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Description of Module Content

Brief Background

Kinship care is the practice of relatives caring for vulnerable children when biological parents are unable, unwilling, or unavailable to care. It is seen as a "new" solution to older child welfare problems (Brown, Cohon, & Wheeler, 2002, p.53).

The increase in kinship caregiving situations has resulted in recommendations by researchers for public child welfare agencies to develop a service delivery system that takes into account the complexities of this caregiving situation (Burnette, 1997; Jefferson, Rudolph, & Sword, 2002; Gibson, 2003). Kinship care is defined as the caring for a dependent children by a blood relative who then becoming surrogate parents. Kinship care families must deal with public child welfare agencies (Kluger & Aprea, 1999) but experience stress when accessing services. Gibbs and Muller (2000) attribute the stress to a lack of clear policy guidelines for kinship families. These families are new to the child welfare system, which is accustomed to working with birth-parents, foster-parents, and adoptive-parents (Force, Botsford, Pisano, & Holbert, 2000). Two studies conducted in Minnesota found that workers' attitudes (Beeman & Boisen, 1999) and rules in public child welfare agencies (Gibson, 2003) resulted in barriers to service delivery for kinship care families.

Kinship care is a new service to the public child welfare system. However, the current model of service delivery fit traditional caregiving in situations in which strangers replace biological parents as primary caregivers. Recognizing the growing numbers of kinship families and the complexities introduced by working with relatives, The Annie E. Casy Foundation developed a philosphy with an accompanying service delivery model that is congruent with the complexity of the kinship caregiving situations.

Many social policies guide public child welfare to support the placement with kin including the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980), State Plan for Foster Care and Adoption Assistance of 1996, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997.

Project Description

The qualitative study was conducted as neither the county involved nor the Casey Foundation completed an evaluation of the project. For detailed information on BSC, see the Casey Foundation. It was conducted from October, 2006 to May, 2008 with a purposive sample. Participants of the demonstration project were recruited through announcement letters sent via email by the County's staff liaison to the research project. Volunteers contacted the principal investigator by telephone and were informed of the purpose, procedures, and confidential nature of the study. Those interested were screened for eligibility for the study. Two criteria for inclusion in the study were participation in the BSC

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in Child Welfare

and holding a position as a direct service worker, administrator, manager, or administrator. One-on-one interviews were conducted with volunteers in their offices.

The County's Operating Principles and Values that form the framework of service delivery to kinship families included:

1. We honor and respect the culture, experiences, history and values of the families we serve. We seek to identify and build on the families' natural supports and traditions in our work.
2. Our interactions with birth families, children youth and kin is strength based in that we seek to learn about their capacities, resources, skills and talents and build upon these strengths in very real ways to help them achieve their goals. We are solution focused in our work.
3. In our work we develop cooperative, respectful relationships with families.
4. We develop community-based partnerships that result in the building and extending of supports for families. We coordinate our work across systems and programs in order to ensure that the services are accessible, and the family receives the best services possible.
5. We are flexible and responsive to emerging systemic, family and societal issues.

The interview guide developed by the first author, contained research questions that addressed (a) rationale for involvement in the project, (b) changes made and maintained, (c) challenges encountered, (d) lessons learned, (e) benefits and cost to kinship families, and (f) project's influence on job duties. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Participants also completed a demographic sheet regarding educational level, title of position, years in position and working with kinship families.

Four participants volunteered, one from each of the positions listed above. Three had advance degrees (MSW, EDD, and MSED) and one had a Bachelors degree. They had been in their respective staff positions from 30 to 2 ½ years. All but one had previously participated in BSC on other public child welfare issues with Casey. No participant was new to kinship care. In fact, all were familiar having worked with this arrangement from 15 to 2 years. They were of European-American descent and female.

Documents included in the analysis were selected due to their content about operating procedures used in the demonstration project. They included (a) a menu of items selected by the county that was included in service delivery, (b) monthly meeting notes from the Extended Community, (c) materials developed for the project, and (d) a summary of successes in the project. Research questions guiding the analysis were:

1. What changes in service delivery to kinship care families were recommended by the BSC?
2. What changes were implemented by Ramsey County to guide Casey's service model?
3. How were changes documented?
4. What changes were maintained after the BSC?

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5. What were the barriers to implementing the changes?
6. What were the barriers to maintaining the changes?

Results Summary

Four major changes were instituted during the project in the kin search.

Process

1. Earlier searches are most effective. There was recognition that the timing of the search process was important. Documents revealed that Intake Screeners were now asking for family names when a child was initially placed into the system. Generally kin searches were being conducted but at a phase in the service delivery process where parental rights were being terminated and other permanency options were being sought. Thus the search process was moved from the end of the service delivery process to the beginning. In addition, documents attested to the impact of conducting searches earlier. One document noted that prior to the project, only 10% of the kin searches were conducted by Intake and Assessment Workers. After the project, 55% were done.

2. Widening the definition of kin. The definition of kin, a blood relative or close family friend was expanded to include others who had any type of close relationship with the biological parents, which may not have been a "close" relationship. A worker seemed astonished: "I mean ex-husbands were being looked at. The whole concept of what you would call kin was not so narrowly focused.

3. Promotion of kinship care placements. Practices with kin family changed in many ways. Documents showed that two kinship brochure, "Family Matters" and "Forever Family" were developed that provide information on resources and programs that kinship families can use. A video entitled "Beyond Foster Care: A Kinship Perspective" was also developed as an educational tool to increase awareness of kinship care for children. Negative assumptions with generalizations about intergenerational transmission needed to be dealt with if staff were to be diligent about conducting the search process. Workers varied in their level of investment in kinship care. Those that immediately invested were labeled as "earlier adapters."

   According to documents, an educational component was initiated during the project, which targeted professionals in other system with increase communication about importance of kinship care, professionals in court system and Country Attorney's Office began to understand the need to keep children with relatives as much as possible.

4. Biological fathers from invisible to resources. Biological fathers who did not have custody of their children historically have been silent in child protection issues (O'Donnell, 1999, 2001). They and their relatives were involved only at the request

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in Child Welfare

of the biological mother. This practice changed during the demonstration project. Documents showed that the increased focus on fathers included (a) identifying them earlier, (b) engaging and involving them earlier in service planning, and (c) working with them as permanency resources.

5. Hindering the search process. Four barriers emerged as hindering the search process. They are, in no particular order, (a) worker factors, (b) system factors, (c) relative factors, and (d) custodial parents' factors.   Worker factors described their status, attitudes and relationship with the biological parents that acted as barriers during the search process. Systemic barriers are evidenced in a lack of cooperation between agencies with access to data on relatives, especially fathers, time involved in searches, and the high cost of searches.

Certain circumstances in the lives of relatives acted as barriers. These factors included presence of a criminal record either by the person being considered as caregiver or another in the household and competition between families members to be selected as caregiver.

The custodial parent, usually the mother, acted in certain ways to deter the search for kin. Her actions included refusing to provide contact information on the biological father and maternal and paternal relatives

Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Reflect and your identify personal and professional values that may hinder placing with kin?
2. List three rationales for including biological fathers in placement decisions?
3. Using the strengths perspective, how would you reply to concerns about intergenerational transmission of poor parenting behavior such as "the apple does not fall far from the tree."
4. Consider and discuss ways that may eliminate system barriers to placement with kin.
5. What are some pros and cons of allowing relatives who have criminal records to become kinship caregivers?

Resource List for More Information

- [National Conference of State Legislators](#)
- [DCFS Web Resources](#)
- [Relative Search Best Practice Guide](#)
- [Family Finding 10 Step Process](#) (PDF)
- [Relative Search Best Practice Guide](#) (PDF)
- [Minnesota Department of Human Services Relative Search Guide](#) (PDF)
- [Washington State Kinship Oversight Committee Report to Legislature](#) (PDF)

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- [Family Search and Engagement A Comprehensive Practice Guide](#) (PDF)
- [Six Steps to Find a Family](#) (PDF)
- [Relative Search Best Practice Guide](#) (PDF)
- [Kinship Care in Washington State: Prevalence, Policy, and Needs](#) (PDF)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- Case Study: Mills, C.S., & Usher, D. (1996). A kinship care case management approach. Child Welfare, 125, 5, 600-618.

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Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare

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Potential Guest Speakers

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