

Shared Parenting Part Two: Families, Courts and Government

It has been said that families are the basic units upon which society is built. In fact, we find that families are the foundations upon which neighborhoods, townships, cities, states and nations are built. Therefore, it is in all of our best interest to promote, protect and strengthen family units wherever we can. This is the purpose of shared parenting. This philosophy is why we in the foster care system work so hard to achieve permanency for children and families. We are striving to give every opportunity to preserve their family unit.

While working together in the foster care system, all players need to keep the goal of permanency as the focus. It is expected that all people in one form or another want to stay in their family of origin. Whether it is biological or emotional in nature, most of us hold our families of origin most dear. This is also true of the children served in care. It is our most sacred and solemn duty to give the parents of these children all of the help, support, and guidance they need to preserve their family unit.

We all know that the worst place for children to be is in the foster care system. So we all need to strive to pull in the same direction. It is the belief of the DFCS and the Courts that the best placement for children is with blood relatives. It is in the best interest of the child to work with the family and ensure the child gets back into a true family environment as soon as humanly possible. The only way to do this is to form a true team.

Dr. W. Edwards Deming created what is known as the Joiner Seven Step Method of Teaming. Businesses use this process to improve their quality and to move their companies forward. Teams are defined as a group of people pooling their skills, talents and knowledge to accomplish a task. Teaming is a process teaching people how to deal with the issues at hand and not the personalities involved. It is important to recognize each member of the team for the strengths that they bring to the table and to help them with their weaknesses. The team only remains strong as long as its members are loyal to the team and to solving the problems at hand.

Trying to fix other team members is not constructive to the teaming process. Rather each team member should learn to listen, offer suggestions and support to each team member as they strive to solve the problem.

It is the job of the team to support and encourage each member when they take on a new task. Teaming is taking individual parts and fastening them together to form a whole. No individual part is seen as more valuable than the other. The team understands that each area is important to the overall mission of the team. The purpose of the team is the primary focus for each team member.

The concept of shared parenting is similar to this concept. It is important as we learn to work together, that we focus primarily on the task at hand which is to find the child a permanent home that is conducive to healthy growth in all developmental areas.

There are four areas the team needs to focus on in order to ensure that the goal of

permanency is met. They are: Primary Parent Support, Attending Meetings, Reporting, and Communication.

Primary Parent Support is of primary importance especially if reunification is the goal. Parents feel frightened, confused, angry and guilty about their children being cared for. The team must recognize these weaknesses and help the parents overcome them. The team's primary goal is to help the primary parent regain stability.

Attending Meetings is another highly important job of each team member. This is especially true of the Family Team Meetings. This is where case plans are developed and all team members have the opportunity to meet each other. One of the important distinctions of being on a team is knowing each of the team members. Attending meetings is also important because it is the place in which you may ask questions, answer questions and be a part of the planning process. All members also need to remember that court dates and citizen panel reviews are imperative to attend. The court bases its decisions and orders on the information given at this time. Each team member needs to give a clear explanation of the aspects of the case. Only if a DJJ official asks clarifying questions can we be assured that the judge will base his or her decision on solid information.

Reporting is also important to the process of the team. If for some reason you cannot attend a meeting, your report will be the only form of information used in your absence. Reporting is probably the most difficult of task for our teams. Paperwork is always extensive in the foster care field. However, the DFCS team leader must be informed at all times in all cases. As noted earlier the DJJ depends primarily on DFCS to have all the information available. Each team member has varying interaction with the team leader. At the very least, reporting should be done every 30-45 days regardless of whether there is change or not. This is the best way to keep all files current. Even when a team members may has only limited involvement in a case, prompt reporting is still of primary concern to the team and should be handled accordingly.

Communication is the final area. Communication is saved for last because it is often the most difficult aspect of our team's process. Without proper communication among members, the team fails. Lack of communication is deadly to the team dynamic. The real leader of this communication process is DFCS the team leader. It is imperative for case managers to know what information is acceptable to share with other team members. For instance, the Resource Parents are asked to give daily care to the child and to mentor the Primary Parents. They need access to the case plan because without it, they will not have the ability to understand the total objective for the family and therefore will be unable to do an effective job. We all know that there is always going to be information regarding our cases that we will not have access to. However, some information must be shared in order to do the job and should not be held from the team member. At the very least, team players should be aware of information that would be covered at the Family Team Meeting, a meeting they would be invited to attend.

Although the team leader has the main responsibility to ensure that communication is current and active, they can not bear the entire burden on their own. All team members must communicate with each other. As mentioned above, confidentiality is always a consideration in the work done in the system. However, too many times this is used as an excuse to maintain "turf". This kind of thinking is detrimental to the child who needs care and limits the child's progress. Open and clear communication with the team is crucial to working

children out of the system and into a family home as soon as possible.

Working together in shared parenting is about focusing on the team and the teams' mission. Proper teaming requires that each person be present and concentrate on the goal set forth for the child. We need to spend time in examination of the processes and deciding how they need to change. Each of us needs to lay down our preconceived notions and concentrate on helping each other to fulfill the task at hand.

The conclusion of these two articles shows us what shared parenting should be. Shared Parenting in the foster care system relies on the balance of each person understanding and committing to their own work while maintaining the team dynamic and supporting the other. It is focusing on the goal of establishing a permanent healthy and safe home for the children in our care. We do this by focusing on helping each other accomplish the task and not allowing personalities or personal feelings to get in the way. It is about sacrifice and team work. But, most of all shared parenting is about parenting the children in our care and making sure that we are pulling together in the same direction to do what is best for them.