

# Parent Engagement/Mentoring Models in Washington State

Prepared by Partners for Our Children for Region 1

June, 2010

Document Purpose: To provide a brief overview of four parent engagement/mentoring models currently being implemented in Washington State. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all the efforts currently underway, but more a sample of the type and scope of programs currently in existence.

## **1. Icebreaker Meeting**

### **Program Description:**

An icebreaker meeting is a facilitated, child-focused meeting held shortly after a child is placed (or replaced) in care to provide the opportunity for birth parents and foster parents (or other caregivers) to meet each other and to share information about the needs of the child. This meeting is the beginning of establishing communication and building a relationship between the child's parents and caregivers.

### **Purpose:**

- To provide an opportunity and setting for the foster parent and birth parents to meet.
- To begin to establishing communication and a relationship between the child's parent and caregivers.
- To share information that will help the foster parent or other caregivers to support the child in care.
- To reduce parents' anxiety about their child's placement and well-being.
- To reinforce the parents role(s) as "parent" and establish caregivers as part of the team working to support the child and reunify the family.
- To initiate a care team that will work together on behalf of the child(ren) and birth family.
- To reassure children that their parents and caregivers are all working together to provide for their care, giving children permission to adjust positively to their placement while maintaining their relationship with their parents.

**Who Attends:** Parent(s), foster parent(s) or other caregiver, child's social worker, child placing agency social worker and possibly the child.

### **Meeting Logistics:**

- Scheduled by the child's social worker or the Icebreaker Facilitator
- Takes place within 7 days of ongoing placement.
- For temporary/emergency placement, a supervised conference call is held within the first 72 hours.
- Takes place at a neutral location.
- Lasts about 30 minutes.
- Meeting is scheduled to be held before the placement when the placement is a planned transition.
- Alternate form of a meeting (phone, in writing) is arranged if a face to face meeting is not viable.

### **Participant Participation:**

Issues to be discussed include:

- Purpose of the meeting.
- Importance of staying child-focused.
- What the meeting is not (not a discussion of allegations or whether or not a child will return home).
- The meeting is an opportunity to share vital information about their child and for all parents to form a partnership.
- Specific information parents may want to share. Parents may wish to bring a favorite toy or book for the child.
- Short-term visitation plan.

This is a model that is being implemented in various places around the Country. In Washington State, the Everett Office in Region 3 is currently implementing these meetings.

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## **2. Parent to Parent (P2P)**

**Program Description:**

The goal of the Parent to Parent Program (P2PP) is to increase early engagement of birth parents newly entering the dependency process through education and peer support coordinated by birth parents, referred to as veteran parents, who have successfully navigated the child welfare system. The idea for the P2PP had its beginning at the 2004, Region 5 Reasonable Efforts Symposium, where child welfare system stakeholders and successful “veteran” parents were brought together. The veteran parents shared what had been helpful to them and ways the child welfare system could be more responsive to birth parents. When the opportunity to apply for a Court Improvement Program grant presented itself, stakeholders felt that a program that included the use of veteran parents would be a meaningful one. The program began in 2005 in Pierce County, WA and provided funding for veteran parent support at shelter care hearings, bi-monthly Dependency 101 classes and

for the development of an instructional video to be used during Dependency 101 classes. During this time, stakeholders and program staff realized a need for continued support for birth parents following Dependency 101. The idea to expand the program to include a Dependency 201 supportive group and mentoring was presented with the grant application for continued funding. After the initial grant funding period, the Pierce County Juvenile Court provided funding for the program and its expansion.

### **Program Components**

**Shelter Care Hearing Support.** A veteran parent is available to do outreach, to lend support and to encourage birth parents at this first hearing after their children have been removed. Birth parents are court ordered at this hearing to attend the Dependency 101 class. The veteran parent informs the parent of when the next Dependency 101 class will occur. A reminder call about the class is also made a few days in advance.

**Dependency 101.** Dependency 101 is a two hour class facilitated by veteran parents and attended by representatives of each child welfare system stakeholder group. The class is designed to educate families about the dependency system and the roles of the professionals in which they will be working. Veteran parents share their stories, hope and lessons learned during the class. Additionally, it gives parents a chance to ask questions and to start to build relationships with successful veteran parents.

**Dependency 201.** Dependency 201 is a monthly support group facilitated by veteran parents designed to strengthen relationships between the birth and veteran parents. The following five topics, felt to be instrumental in promoting healthy parenting, are covered: a healthy support system, healthy boundaries, community service involvement, and healthy alternative activities. Professionals do not take part in this group to provide a more open environment for veteran and birth parents to converse.

**Peer-to-peer mentorship.** On an as needed basis and as veteran parents are available, mentoring is available. The veteran parent mentors listen, lend support and provide constructive feedback to birth parents. Mentors and mentees are to meet on a monthly basis and have open phone contact.

P2P is currently operating in several counties in Regions 4, 5 and 6. Due to the funding available, not all counties have been able to implement all parts of the program. Most counties have made a commitment to the support/outreach at shelter care hearings and the Dependency 101 classes.

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**3. Parent Mentoring Program (PMP)**

**Program Description:**

The Parent Mentoring Program (PMP) began with a cadre of five skillful, empathic, experienced foster parent mentors and a handful of DCFS social workers willing to partner with them. Barriers to reunification among participating families were identified and mentors and parents began working together to address the issues. Families and mentors worked together for a minimum of five hours each week for what was initially a three-month intervention period and later extended to six months. The length of time was increased based on the feedback of parents and mentors who felt the program was not long enough to adequately address the needs of parents. The program currently employs 36 mentors in four public child welfare offices. It is noteworthy that two of those offices are located in rural counties where services are scarce and often at considerable distance from families.

**How Mentors are Selected**

Mentors are licensed foster parents who have demonstrated through their interactions with the families of the children placed in their care that they possess a non-judgmental and respectful approach with birth parents. Careful attention is given to recruiting a diverse group of mentors, reflecting the ethnic and gender make-up of the parents in the local child welfare system. Potential mentors are referred to the PMP by social workers who are knowledgeable about their strengths, with recommendations from foster care licensors, and another foster parent familiar with their work. Mentor candidates complete an intensive two-day training before being invited to participate in the program. This provides the PMP

an opportunity to assess the foster parent's appropriateness for the mentoring role and for the foster parent to decide whether the program is a good fit with their interests and skills..

### **How Parents are Selected to Participate**

Parents are referred to the PMP by their assigned DCFS social workers. Mentors work both with mothers and fathers although there is a higher proportion of mothers involved with the program. While it is not unusual for a family to be referred after a petition to terminate their parental rights has been filed, the social worker must represent that – should specifically identified barriers to safe reunification be addressed and removed – returning the children to their parents' care is possible. Families whose children will be returned to them with or without the intervention are not appropriate for the PMP, nor are parents who have no chance of safely parenting their children. In short, mentors function neither as an "extra set of eyes in the home" nor as a source of evidence for termination. In addition, parents must be at reasonably cooperative with their service plan and not currently active in their addiction. While relapse is not uncommon, even among mentored parents, in our experience those who are currently drug and alcohol dependent find it difficult to benefit from work with a mentor. The PMP is voluntary, consistent with our belief that parents are more likely to actively engage with a mentor when they are given a choice about program participation.

Parents struggling to parent after years of addiction make up the largest segment of program participants. Mentors have also successfully worked with families whose children come into care due to chronic neglect and parents who need assistance learning to manage the specific medical or behavioral needs of their children. Parents with developmental disabilities have done well during the time that mentors were working intensively with them but they have experienced difficulty sustaining gains once the PMP support ends. Parents who present a risk to the mentors are not appropriate referrals to the program.

### **Mentoring Process**

Once the parent has agreed to participate, the mentor, parent, and DCFS social worker sign a contract defining their relationship and each person's responsibilities. An action plan is developed identifying family needs, goals to be achieved, and specific tasks to reach identified goals. Mentors and birth parents prioritize tasks and set meetings. The team meets at least monthly throughout the program.

Mentors work with birth parents on basic care and nutrition, budgeting, discipline, decision-making, safety planning, using support systems, and child development using a proscribed parenting curriculum tailored to the birth parents' individual needs and cultural context. They also work with parents to obtain needed services such as safe housing, medical or mental health care, conduct job searches and advocate for parents. The program maintains a small budget that can be accessed by mentors to make purchases that can contribute in important ways to a family's efforts to rebuild and heal. For one family obtaining a dining room table meant sitting down to meals together, sharing meaningful time, and creating family rituals and memories.

Mentors also help parents develop an appropriate, reliable, safe support system. This may mean encouraging birth parents to repair fractured relationships with family, reconnect with a church, join a social group or make friends with healthy adults in their neighborhood. They observe parents and children in their natural environments, encourage parents to use learned skills, and document these sessions, providing feedback to both the parent and assigned DCFS social worker. The mentor and social worker remain in frequent phone contact. In addition, mentors receive supervision and support through meetings with the PMP leads and monthly meetings with the entire group of mentors. Upon completion of the PMP, a complete file is provided to the social worker and maintained by the Program Team.

### **Innovative Features of the Parent Mentoring Program**

The PMP was created to fill the need for more individual and intensive support than is typically available to child welfare involved parents. The program capitalizes on the skills of foster parents who, by virtue of their experience, are deeply knowledgeable about the child welfare system, the needs of children and families, and the resources of the community. Consequently, the program is a natural fit for the mandates and structure of the agency and the needs of the clients it serves.

Mentors are able to form supportive relationships with parents in part because the power and authority dynamics that pervade the worker/client relationship are less prominent. Thus, they are well-positioned to tailor their work with parents to meet the particular needs of the parent in a collaborative manner that is respectful of their culture and parenting goals. The program design allows for a great deal of flexibility in meeting parents' needs, encouraging mentors to think "outside the box" and assist parents in ways that are pragmatic, acceptable, timely and culturally appropriate. Social workers, pressured by the demands of child welfare work, can succumb to a standard set of services and miss opportunities to individualize service plans to best meet the needs of families.

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**4. Parent Partners Program (P3)****Program Description:**

After the Parent Mentoring Program had been working with families for about six years it became apparent that the mentors were maintaining contact with the families they had worked with and that several of these families were healthy and thriving in the community. The mentors reported that these parents were appreciative of the services that had helped their families reunify and eager to help other parents experience the same success.

One successfully reunified birth parent was particularly committed to this idea, returning to DCFS to speak at trainings, and participate as a community representative for Family Team Decision Making meetings. She remained close to the mentor she had worked with and together they began teaching a parenting class for child welfare involved parents in recovery. This now-successful parent was a familiar presence in the DCFS office and never stopped promoting birth parent engagement.

In 2007, this parent joined the DCFS staff working with the Parent Mentoring Program, mentors, and invested social workers to develop a structure that would allow successfully reunified parents to share their experiences and offer support to parents whose children were in foster care. A parent focus group was convened to solicit parent's ideas about how a parent-to-parent program might look. In addition, parent engagement programs throughout the country were contacted and studied. A meeting of community partners was held and a work group was formed with representatives from DCFS, the Attorney General's Office, the Office of Public Defense, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the foster parent community.

In addition to the work group described above, a parent advisory group, consisting of parents who had successfully reunified with their children, was formed. These parents meet monthly with DCFS social workers and a representative of each the Attorney Generals' Office, the Office of Public Defense and the

CASA and have served as a focus group for the development of the Parent Partner Program. The Parent Advisory Group continues to meet regularly and advise DCFS and other community agencies on matters related to parents' experience in the child welfare system. They have also presented at as Community Action Planning Efforts and foster parent training classes, taught a parenting class for parents in recovery and formed an alumni group for our Family Treatment Court.

Parents who wish to give back by helping other parents were originally referred to the program by their Social Worker or CASA after their children had been returned home and their case dismissed. Although this is still an avenue for entry to the program, more frequently parents are coming to the P3 and asking how they can be trained to help other parents.

### **Parent Partners Program Goals and Structure**

It was clear that many parents who had successfully reunified with their children were committed to supporting others who were going through a similar experience and to sharing their experiences with professionals in the child welfare system. DCFS, in an effort to utilize parents as a resource, developed a program structure with the goal of helping parents:

- Become more informed consumers of the child welfare system and the services available;
- Move more quickly through their anger;
- Develop a good working relationship with their social worker;
- More quickly engage in services.

The program components consist of monthly classes for parents called *Here's the Deal* and one-to-one support provided by a Parent Partner. Both are described below.

#### ***Here's the Deal***

The name, *Here's the Deal*, was selected by the Parent Advisory Group because it signaled to parents that they would get reliable information about the seriousness of their situation and the expectations of the child welfare agency. Parents at any point in their journey through the child welfare system are invited to attend and their concerned or involved relatives and supporters are also welcome. The course is comprised of six units that are offered on a sequential basis twice a year. The units address one main topic each month. The topics were identified by the Parent Advisory Group and include information about the dependency time-line, the role of the social workers, attorneys and others,

building effective relationships with foster parents and DCFS staff, accessing services and engaging in the recovery community. Each unit is presented by relevant professionals and comprises one-fourth of each class session. Each session features a panel of child welfare professionals (social workers, foster parents, attorneys, CASA volunteers and others) who introduce themselves and describe their role and responsibilities. A parent who has successfully reunified with their children, drawn from the Parent Advisory Group, shares their experience and offers encouragement to parents currently engaged with DCFS. These parents complete a training on strategic sharing. Lastly, each class affords those attending with time to share their own stories in a guided forum and to seek advice or support from others present. Participants are also provided with day planners to facilitate time-management and binders designed to help them maintain their records, document the services they participate in and keep track of important contact information.

### **Parent Partners**

The Parent Partners are a unique and critical part of P3. A Parent Partner is a parent who has successfully navigated the child welfare system, is interested in working with other parents to help them be successful, and is able to reach out to other parents while maintaining appropriate boundaries. In addition to the training offered to those parents who present at *Here's the Deal*, the Parent Partners receive training in coaching parents through recovery, building healthy relationships in recovery and caring for themselves as they mentor others. They also participate in trainings offered to DCFS social workers. The topics include engaging with families, accessing community resources, the dependency system and the effect of substance abuse on families.

Parents in the child welfare system may engage with a Parent Partner at any stage of the child welfare process from the initial pick-up of the children to the termination hearing or relinquishment. They can connect with a Parent Partner at court or be referred by their social worker, CASA worker or attorney. A Parent Partner will, at the requests of an involved professional, "cold call" a parent and offer to take them to coffee. The extent to which they then engage with the Parent Partner is a personal choice and one that may change over time. Often parents who choose not to engage early in their case connect with the Parent Partner as time goes on.

A parent partner offers education and support and helps parents to advocate appropriately for themselves. Additionally, they serve as a resource to DCFS and the community by representing the

parents' point of view and as a source of information about substance abuse treatment and community resources.

Currently there is one full-time parent partner hired as a DCFS employee, and two part-time Parent Partner volunteers. The full-time parent partner (called the Parent Partner Lead) is housed in the DCFS office and is responsible for several functions:

- attends all shelter-care hearings, and makes herself available to parents whose children have just been placed in care and invites them to attend *Here's the Deal*;
- works one-on-one with parents at any point in their journey through the system to offer guidance, support, information and advocacy;
- makes herself available to DCFS social workers and participates in team meetings and family team decision meeting (FTDM) staffing;
- supervises two "part-time Parent Partners" who also work one-on-one with parents;
- co-facilitates the *Here's the Deal* sessions.

The program serves about 85 parents per month and initial parent feedback speaks to the value of "straight talk" and accessible information and support.

### **Innovative Features of P3**

The Parent Mentoring Program had been successfully operating in the child welfare office in this region for over 6 years when the idea of a parent program was first discussed. Social workers and DCFS management had become accustomed to incorporating foster parents as part of the team and had observed, first hand, the benefits to families. The parent partner lead had also become a familiar face around the office and many of the social workers had heard her speak about her family's road to reunification. These two factors are in part responsible for the seamless way that the P3 has been implemented in this area. To further facilitate adoption of P3, roll out events were held and staff were encouraged to interact with the Parent Partners informally as well as in a case-related context.

As a result of these efforts, the P3 has enjoyed tremendous acceptance within the culture of child welfare practice. The larger child welfare community has embraced the P3 as well, in large part due to the early involvement of the Attorney General's staff, the parents' attorneys and CASA. . Parent Partners are in court when dependency cases are heard and the Court commissioner recommends that parents coming before him meet with a Parent Partner and attend *Here's the Deal*. A Memorandum of

Understanding is in place designed to protect Parent Partners from testifying against the very parents with whom they have worked hard to build a trusting relationship.

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## Parent Engagement/Mentoring Programs Overview

Program Name	Key Features	Contact Person
<b>Icebreaker Meeting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• occurs early in dependency process</li> <li>• can be completed in 30 minutes</li> <li>• requires training and facilitation</li> <li>• builds early relationship between birth and foster parents</li> <li>• should help to support parent-child visitation</li> </ul>	<b>Region 3</b>  Cindy Rust (425)339-4826 <a href="mailto:Olsc300@dshs.wa.gov">Olsc300@dshs.wa.gov</a>
<b>Parent to Parent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contact is made early in dependency process</li> <li>• utilizes veteran parents to educate birth parents about the child welfare system</li> <li>• possible to implement first two components of program only</li> <li>• can include a mentoring component</li> </ul>	<b>Regions 4, 5 and 6</b>  Corrina Burris Catalyst for Kids <a href="mailto:corrinab@chs-wa.org">corrinab@chs-wa.org</a> 206-695-3245
<b>Parent Mentoring Program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• utilizes licensed foster parents to provide mentoring</li> <li>• birth parents are referred by DCFS social worker</li> <li>• good fit for parents struggling with addiction</li> <li>• action plan is developed to guide the work with the birth parents</li> </ul>	<b>Region 6</b>  Ross Brown (360)993-7893 <a href="mailto:rosb300@dshs.wa.gov">rosb300@dshs.wa.gov</a>
<b>Parent Partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• utilizes veteran parents</li> <li>• monthly <i>Here's the Deal</i> classes</li> <li>• one-to-one support</li> <li>• parents can participate at any point in dependency process</li> </ul>	<b>Region 6</b>  Ross Brown (360)993-7893 <a href="mailto:rosb300@dshs.wa.gov">rosb300@dshs.wa.gov</a>