



How can child protection agencies deepen partnerships with birth parents to advance systems change?

To advance effective partnerships with constituents, child protection agencies increasingly have employed strategies that provide youth, birth parents, kin, and resource parents with enhanced opportunities for leadership and decision-making at the casework, peer, and systems levels. [Moving beyond cursory involvement at meetings or on committees](#) is vital for building strong family-agency partnerships and establishing rapport with child welfare-involved families, many of whom are likely to distrust the system. [Partnering with constituents in deep and meaningful ways](#) is a process that evolves over time and reflects the unique characteristics of the constituents, agency, and community involved.

Dr. David Sanders, Casey Family Programs' executive vice president of Systems Improvement, is a national expert on strategies that child protection agencies can use to deepen partnerships with their constituents. Before joining Casey Family Programs in 2006, Dr. Sanders led the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, and prior to that, the Hennepin County (Minn.) Children, Family and Adult Services Department.

Kimberly Mays, social services worker with the Washington State Office of Public Defense, and Timothy Phipps, parent mentor with Morrison Child and Family Services in Oregon, interviewed Dr. Sanders to learn more about why engaging birth parents is so critical to child welfare operations.¹



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What was your experience engaging with birth parents when you ran child welfare in both Los Angeles and Hennepin counties?

The counties were different in a lot of ways. I was in Hennepin first and for longer than I was in L.A. I was struck by the idea that as a child protection agency, we would assign a social worker to a family and say, **“We have your child in placement and now I’m going to work with you to get your child back. I’m also going to look at alternatives to reunification. But I want you to trust that I am completely in your court.”** I felt that we weren’t really being honest, and we were placing social workers in contradictory positions.

What did you do to change that contradiction?

We completely reorganized our work and **assigned a social worker to the family whose sole job was to reunify. Those social workers weren’t there to work on alternatives — their job was to focus on reunification.** In order for this approach to be successful, families had to get services on day one. We couldn’t wait four or five months to provide reunification support services, regardless of what those services were.

We assigned a different social worker to children if the family was not going to be reunified. That meant the social worker for the family had the single goal of reunifying the family. The performance assessment for those social workers was based on their reunification efforts, and ultimately, being able to have such a singular focus made a real difference. There were no longer excuses that it took too long to get services because the **social workers knew it was their job to connect families with the right services — not after three**

months, not after six months, but within the first couple of days.

What were the outcomes for families?

The number of children being placed decreased dramatically. The time to permanency, particularly to reunification, decreased. Close to 80% of the families we worked with were reunified within six months. We structured all of our services to support timely reunifications. If the family couldn’t reunify, then we would move to focusing on other types of permanency after six months. But if that decision was made, it wasn’t because the resources weren’t there or because there wasn’t access. It was because in those situations, every effort had been made to reunify first, and early. I was proud of the agency for making this shift.

Was there support in the court system for this focus on reunification as well?

Very much so. Because there was so much support in Hennepin County courts, we had a substance abuse professional in the courtroom, assessing parents right there and providing services right away. Mental health professionals were also present in court and readily available. It was a very different experience than we had ever known, or that parents had ever had when they came to court. **My argument for this model was that the costliest intervention is actually placing children away from their families. If you are able to reunify children more quickly with their families or place fewer children, it actually costs less in the long run.** To prove it, we said we would pilot the idea over a two-year period. If we didn’t save money, we would lay off the social workers and go back to the way we were

Families need support right away. Everything possible should be done to make sure children don’t need to go into foster care. But if they do, birth parents should receive every service right away.

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doing things. We tracked it over time and found that we were able to save money. That's the argument. But you have to be willing to take the risk.

Did things play out similarly in Los Angeles?

It was different in L.A. There had been a long history of large numbers of children in out-of-home care for extended periods of time. Early on in my tenure, a reporter asked me how many kids should be in placement in Los Angeles County. When I started, there were about 31,000 children in placement. I told the reporter it should be less than half of that. I didn't realize that statement would be picked up by the Associated Press and printed all over the country. But it was true.

As an agency, we had a strong culture of intervening aggressively. We moved children for all sorts of reasons when, in fact, the parents just needed better support and services. Our agency had become so disconnected from the community that it no longer objectively looked at what it was doing. People just thought, "This is the way we do business, and we have been right for all of these years." We made some of the same changes in Los Angeles that we did in Hennepin, but L.A. was much larger and more difficult to change in a short period of time. What we needed to do, at least in part, was to create a different culture and perspective about families and the urgency of reunification.

What do you mean by "a different perspective about families"?

I think that parent engagement and partnership is the most important tool we have in keeping kids safe and

with their families. In Los Angeles County, **I required each of our 17 offices at the time to develop a [Parent Partner](#) program.** I don't think that the offices were initially very happy about this. I don't think that staff really saw the value in it. But the approach worked, and these Parent Partner programs are still in place today. And ultimately, **these programs helped to change expectations, such that families could have a different role in thinking about and contributing to the work.** We really wanted to listen to families differently and, perhaps more importantly, to treat families differently so they could make decisions about their children and we could support them in those areas where they most needed our help and resources. This approach made a significant difference, and by the time I left a few years later, we had reduced the number of children in placement by a third — and there were fewer than 20,000 kids in care.

What beliefs or values hold us back from truly partnering with families?

One challenge is the way we treat parents who come to the attention of the child protection agency. We tolerate practices that we wouldn't tolerate for ourselves and our own families. For example, if I were to become unable to care for my children, I would expect the opportunity to make a plan for how my children would be cared for in my absence. But we don't actively engage birth parents involved with the child protection agency in the same way. **Even if I am not capable of parenting them for a period of time, I can still create a plan for who might be able to care for my children during my absence, and identify what support I might still be able to offer during this period.** We are so entrenched in the ways we've been addressing these issues for

We can say whatever we want, but if we're disrupting families by taking children from parents, that's the measure of how we feel about families and how we are treating them. And that's the perspective we have to address first and foremost.

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so many years — now is the time when we need to question our fundamental approaches and practices, such as the traumatic way we remove children from their homes. Some practices are so embedded that although we would not tolerate them for ourselves or our loved ones, we say they are OK and we accept them as part of the child welfare system because that's how we've always done it.

How can parents who have a closed case be engaged in some capacity?

Parents who were formerly involved with the system have proven to be an incredible resource, in part because they are able to see services and practices for what they are rather than what's on paper and what people hope they offer. In the Parent Partner programs I've seen across the country, I've observed incredible interactions between parents who were part of the system and those who are in it now. **Parents with a closed case bring a perspective that probably no one else can, and that can be instrumental for families that are on the receiving end of a CPS investigation. Parents with previous experience in the child welfare system offer parents currently involved in the system a powerful message: Others have had the same experiences and overcame them — change is possible and your family can heal.**

We need to spend more time learning from those who've been through these processes in the past in order to better understand where there's been success and why. We as professionals may have ideas but we really don't know enough about what changes should be made. And I'm not sure we've always taken the time we need to learn from those who've been in the system about how to improve it. But we need this input if we are ever going

to get to the point where people would say things are better today than they were 20 years ago.

What would parent engagement in a 21st century child welfare system look like?

The current system has been in place for 40 years and when we talk about making the kind of improvements we need, we're often talking about making improvements to that very same system. If you look at where money is spent, there are basically five areas of service: the hotline, investigation, in-home services, out-of-home services, and case management. The questions we need to ask are: Are we satisfied with performance in those five areas? Is this the best system we can devise?

If we want to keep children in this country safe in their families, is the current hotline and investigation structure the best way to identify families who may be struggling with issues that might compromise children's safety? Currently, the public calls in an anonymous report and then we send strangers to the families' house and say, "We're here to help you." We don't do that with any other public health issue, but we do it for child protection in the name of the safety of children. Would we be better off if we had a more effective mechanism to assure that when a parent came forward and said, "I need help," that parent actually received help, instead of relying on a child protection hotline and an adversarial investigative process? The question for birth parents and the questions for us now are: How do we learn from what we've done for the last 40 years, and how do we structure something better than the hotline and investigation and placement? Those are areas that need our collective attention and input from parent partners.

Another is case management. If I'm in trouble, I would like to have someone who can be an advocate for me,

We need to rethink fundamental approaches, and parents who have experienced the system are better positioned to help us rethink strategies better than anybody else.

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who can open doors or connect me to services and supports that I might not encounter otherwise. When I first started in Los Angeles County, birth parents were handed a list of services and told, “This is what you need to do for your case plan. Let us know how it’s going in six months.” Sending them away for six months might be an exaggeration, but the list of services is not. Do we think that the referral function of case management approach is the best way to engage families struggling with substance abuse or other issues that may contribute to abuse and neglect?

How should the system respond to neglect compared to other forms of serious abuse?

If we are primarily focused on ensuring that children are safe in their own homes, does the fact that about 80% of the calls into a child protection agency pertain to neglect impact what we do next? Does that predict that the

child is at risk for harm in the same way as a child who has been sexually abused? Probably not, but we treat it almost exactly the same way. Birth parents need to be engaged in this conversation and help us answer: “Is there a better way to do this?”

If you were leading a child protection agency today, what would you do?

Unless we ask more fundamental questions and really partner differently with children and families, we will still be having these same conversations about how to fix the system in another 40 years. **It’s not OK to continue the same practices when we don’t have compelling evidence that they help or heal.** So hopefully I would be courageous enough to question and rethink everything we are doing, and in partnership with parents and communities.

1. Interview with Dr. David Sanders on March 28, 2019,

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