

A Win-Win Partnership: MRE and Child Protective Services

Striving to strengthen families and improve child outcomes

Many social service programs share common goals although they may vary widely by funding stream, service delivery strategy and/or target population. The marriage and relationship education (MRE) field and the child welfare system both strive to strengthen families and improve child outcomes. MRE practitioners may want to consider building partnerships with child protective services (CPS) to offer MRE as part of an intervention for families whose children may be at risk for abuse and/or neglect.

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Background

Child abuse and neglect may occur in families where there is a considerable amount of stress. This stress may result from a family history of violence, drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, or chronic health problems. Families who do not have nearby friends, relatives, and other social support are also at risk. The greatest proportion of children in the U.S. child welfare system (used interchangeably with “child protective services” for purposes of this Tip Sheet) are neglected. Neglect is defined as the failure of a parent/caretaker to provide food, clothing, medical care or supervision to a child that threatens their well-being. Child protective services investigations determined that 71 percent of victims in 2008 suffered from neglect while the remaining 29 percent were physically, sexually,



and/or emotionally abused. Child welfare agencies provide services to prevent future instances of child abuse and neglect or to remedy conditions that have come to the attention of child welfare agencies.

There are two categories of CPS: 1) family preservation services (FPS), which are services provided to parents whose children are at risk of abuse and/or neglect, and 2) services that require the removal of a child from the home of his or her custodial parents resulting in that child entering residential treatment, foster care/kinship care or an adoptive placement (or referred to as an “out-of-home placement”). The majority of child welfare services are family preservation services. During federal fiscal year 2008, an estimated 3.3 million children received preventive services while an estimated 269,000 children received foster care services as a result of investigations or assessments. This Tip Sheet will focus on partnerships between FPS and MRE; partnerships within the latter category are also appropriate (in different contexts) but are beyond the scope of this Tip Sheet.

MRE services for families in the child welfare system

The goal of FPS is to enable families to properly care for their children while maintaining the safety of the child in the home. Marriage and relationship education can be an excellent intervention for families receiving FPS. This can include couples (whether they are married or living together) and biological parents who are no longer romantically involved.

A child welfare caseworker provides the child's parents with a "plan" (various child welfare systems call it different things, from a "case plan" to a "service plan") that often includes referrals. Referrals are typically provided to a variety of community-based organizations/resources and can include MRE services for parents. Referral services are voluntary. However, couples/parents are held accountable to complete various activities outlined in their plan (by the family court overseeing the case), especially if these services are referred by the caseworker.

Some children involved in CPS have fathers who are disengaged from the family at the time child welfare services are required. In a system that interacts primarily with the mothers of children, MRE services can provide the tools to help fathers and mothers communicate about what is best for their child. MRE can also be effective in teaching the necessary skills to articulate emotions and help parents understand why a healthy relationship with one another is important to child well-being, even if they are not romantically involved. Couples and individuals who are co-parenting their children but who are no longer romantically involved can learn the skills to communicate, problem-solve and resolve conflict—skills that will ultimately lead to family strengthening. These skills can also help them navigate co-parenting issues, facilitate communication in employment situations, and even strengthen relationships with their CPS caseworker.

Gauging your program's ability to provide services

It is necessary to assess your program before deciding to pursue a relationship with CPS because families you will be serving will likely have highly specialized needs. Ask the following questions:

- Do you have staff members who are experienced with highly distressed families?
- Do you have a solid referral process to organizations that provide mental health services, substance abuse counseling, etc.?
- Does your domestic violence partner have experience with families engaged in CPS?
- What changes need to be made to your curriculum?
- Do you have the capacity to provide one-on-one services?

Working with families who are engaged in CPS usually requires more concentrated MRE services. Many times, one-on-one sessions may be most appropriate. Inventories that assess where the couple is in terms of their level of stress may be a useful tool. Curricula may need to be modified to include some of the special circumstances of these families. It may be helpful to consult with a mental health professional experienced in this area to adjust your curriculum.

So how do you engage CPS in providing MRE to families?

1. *Understand your local child welfare system.* Prior to establishing any relationship with child welfare administrators, supervisors, and program managers, understand how your state's child welfare system runs and who makes the decisions. For some areas, the county agency

makes these decisions; in others, it is the state agency. Still others may have part or all of their services privatized. Once you understand the system, it is important to engage child welfare managers, supervisors, and administrators and to create buy-in at their level (see NHMRC How-To Guide on Partnering with Existing Social Service Systems <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/partneringwithexistinghssystem.pdf>).

2. *Speak their language.* Communicate clearly ways in which your MRE program can help CPS workers meet their requirements and mission. The staff working in child welfare programs is often overburdened. Understand what challenges they face and where their needs are greatest. Describe how the partnership will alleviate some of their pressure and help meet their organizational goals. For example, caseworkers may be required to attend a certain number of training hours—offer to train them in a MRE curriculum. This creates a “win-win” situation for both parties.
3. *Offer services that are accessible, high quality, and relevant.* The key to engaging child welfare caseworkers is communicating the immediate benefits of MRE, both within the client-caseworker relationship and for the families within the system. If you want them to refer their clients to your MRE program, services need to be offered at an easily accessible location and on an on-going basis. Also, take all of the necessary steps to ensure that your curriculum is culturally sensitive. Your MRE facilitator should also have experience working with families in child welfare related capacities. Further, the facilitator should not maintain any gender biases.
4. *Consult with your domestic violence (DV) partner.* Additionally, it is essential to communicate to your domestic violence (DV) partner that you are working with this population. Domestic violence

may co-occur with child maltreatment cases.

5. *Make it easy.* Provide things like handouts and a list of MRE providers that caseworkers can distribute to their families when appropriate.
6. *Offer training just for CPS staff.* Schedule a short training to address the importance of healthy relationships and how they lead to family stability and better child outcomes. Your training should also have an outline of what MRE is and what skills are taught. Also, include information on the importance of the father’s role, including data that when non-abusive fathers are disengaged, kids spend more time in foster care, reunification is less likely, and overall negative outcomes for children are increased. Explain how relationship skills can benefit child outcomes and increase ease of communication and conflict resolution with the caseworker. Caseworkers have a large caseload; time spent in training means time away from their cases. Keep trainings short.

Practitioners have some important considerations to take into account when working within the child welfare system. Partnering with child welfare caseworkers can be a delicate relationship. Every effort should be made to ensure that CPS leadership as well as caseworkers understand how MRE can be an effective tool to benefit the families they work with by encouraging stability and healthy parental interaction.

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