Parents’ Participation in Child Protection Practice: Toward Respect and Inclusion

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In this article, we focus on parents’ opportunities for, and experiences of, participation in child protection decision making in Queensland, Australia. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of 10 interviews with parents who have children 0–8 years of age and who have been subject to child protection investigation, we examine parents’ perceptions of the process. Parents reported a range of difficulties in interactions with practitioners, including family-related and systemic factors; the most common grievances involved poor communication practices and negative worker attitudes, which created further disengagement. Conversely, interactions involving a willingness to listen, support, and provide for goal-focused plans were seen as facilitating positive outcomes. Taking into account the case complexity and interrelationships between workers’ and clients’ attitudes and behaviours, we discuss strategies for promoting parents’ participation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Specific practice skills required for child protection caseworkers can enhance the participation of parents in child protection decision making.
- It is critical that child protection service systems recognize parents as rights bearing citizens who have a right to participate in decisions affecting their families.

Parents have an ambivalent status as participants in child protection decision making due to their dual position as service users and as subjects of investigation. In Anglophone countries such as the United States and Australia, a child protection approach that focuses on protecting “children from harm in their own homes” underpins the provision of child protection services (Cameron & Freymond, 2006, p. 5). This approach contrasts markedly with the family services approach found in Scandinavia and in some European nations, where the state has a responsibility to intervene early and in a supportive manner to assist vulnerable families as well as to protect children from harm in their homes (Cameron & Freymond). The child protection approach promotes an individualistic view of children’s needs and rights, which can contribute to ambivalence about the recognition of the rights of parents to participate in child protection decision making (see also Parton, 2006; Scott & O’Neil, 1996; Thorpe, 2008).

Despite ambivalence toward parents as participants in child protection decision making, such participation is integral to contemporary governance ideals regarding citizens’ rights to participate in decisions that affect them (Wright, Turner, Clay, & Mills, 2006). Recognition of the rights of parents to participate in child protection decision making is also consistent with the autonomy and protection of the family unit upheld by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966). Further, involving parents in decisions that affect them has benefits both for the process itself, by ensuring that parents’ knowledge is included in decision making (see Thorpe, 2008), and for outcomes, such as increased compliance with case plans and enhancing options for family restoration (see Dale, 2004; Thorpe; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003). In this article we present findings from our study into parents’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion in child protection decision making, and we discuss the implications of these findings for increasing their participation in child protection decision making.

Research on Parents’ Experiences

A variety of methods have been used to investigate parents’ experiences of interaction with child protection caseworkers. Some studies have conducted interviews with practitioners (Hernandez, Robson, & Sampson, 2008), interviews with parents (Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2005; Hardy & Darlington, 2008), or focus groups with parents (Kapp & Propp, 2002). Others have been based on an analysis of assessment reports (Budd, Pindexter, Felix, & Naik-Polan, 2001), verbal exchanges in case conferences (Hall & Slemrouck, 2001), or interactions between practitioners and actors in the role of service users (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Hughes, 2008).

These varied methods have yielded a consistent body of findings regarding parents’ experiences. Despite increased awareness of the benefits of involving parents in child protection practice, research with parents has documented widespread perceptions of exclusion and powerlessness (Kapp & Propp, 2002; Thorpe, 2008). Broadly speaking, key issues running through these studies are that interactions tend to be adversarial, with parents being placed in a position of having to respond to the case that has been made (Hall & Slemrouck, 2001; Thomson & Thorpe, 2004), and practitioners tend to focus on parents’ weaknesses, paying little attention to their caregiving qualities or child-rearing competence (Budd et al., 2001). More specific themes emerged from focus groups of parents conducted in the United States (Kapp & Propp). In this study, dominant themes of parents’ experiences as consumers of services were communication problems (lack of or inconsistent communication from workers), low availability (problems related to worker turnover and worker overload), disrespect (feeling a lack of respect from workers), lack of involvement (feeling left out of decision making and planning), and lack of rights (feeling helpless, confused, and lacking knowledge of the system).

Although researchers have used different terms to describe the features of parents’ experiences, the five themes reported by Kapp and Propp (2002) are consistent with other studies. For example, problems with communication and availability of caseworkers have been noted...
References


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