

Families on the Fault Lines

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, April 15, 2003

When "Mary's" daughter was taken away by the Department of Social Services (DSS) she says, "part of me died to see her go." Mary's teenage daughter had been hanging out with gangs, threatening teachers, flunking classes. But Mary only made matters worse. She screamed, yelled, and hit her child. Mary herself had been emotionally and physically abused as a girl, once threatened by her own mother at knifepoint. Mary was repeating the cycle of abuse with her daughter.

In most cases like Mary's, human service providers focus treatment on the child. Counselors may recommend therapy or crisis intervention. Mary's daughter went to a therapist but soon quit. Mary tried individual therapy too, but she didn't like it either. She says she felt uncomfortable and alone sitting across the room from a person "with lots of college degrees."

There was one place where Mary and her family found help: The Family Center, a licensed mental health agency near Boston. Family therapist Anne Peretz founded the Center 20 years ago to work with low-income families whose life histories are fraught with crises and violence. Peretz's approach is fundamentally different from most other social service agencies. As far as Anne is concerned, a symptomatic child is acting out the problems of the family system. A bully at school may have parents who are splitting up; a teen drug dealer may have a father in prison. The child's behavior may be a symptom of a family on the fault lines. And poverty and social isolation exacerbate the problem.

In these cases, says Anne, the focus on just the child is not only misguided but also ineffective. "The most potent leverage point is the family itself," she says. "We have the whole family come in, and we find out the patterns. We figure out the trigger events and help families role-play a new script." The Center believes in a family's strength and resilience; families can be their own healers. Anne cites cases of alcoholic parents finding the strength to stay sober and voluntarily come to The Family Center.

These parents wrestle with their own demons. Some of the more heart breaking stories are of mothers and fathers who struggle with the knowledge that they may never get their children back; others recognize that it's best if they don't. Anne and her team of therapists do all they can to make families whole again-whether together or apart.

The Center runs various programs to complement its clinical work, including home-based services, and Girlz II Women for teen daughters and their mothers. During the Parenting Journey, children play nearby in a large, colorful room. Parents slowly begin to talk intimately-of fears, secrets, and past trauma. They learn something new: to trust and nurture each other.

"I didn't realize there were others in a similar situation," says Mary. "I didn't want people to know how bad a parent I was. I was scared. Growing up, all I knew was abuse. But here I learned it wasn't my fault. It's how I was raised, but it's not who I am." Mary's hard work paid off. Her daughter is back home.

One of the Center's new parenting programs will be run by men, for men. Many troubled men grew up without a father or a male role model. They never learned to parent. The Center's Executive Director Cheryl Vines says, "It's hard for men to be vulnerable in front of women. They can't show weakness or fear."

The Center's success with families at risk has sparked national interest. The Family Center now trains hundreds of human service providers each year in its techniques, programs and family-based approach. But the sluggish economy, lay-offs, and a 25% drop in donations are hurting their efforts. Vines says they're getting "desperate calls from a lot of families" who can't find help, who've lost their jobs and their health insurance. They've dropped fees as low as ten dollars an hour, and still people can't pay. For the first time in its history, the Center may have to turn people away. An oasis out of reach.

For the stranded family, the stress and loss of hope may destroy their chance for a new beginning. April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, and a fitting time to remember that we're all family, and we need each other, especially in these difficult times. Considering the enormous costs of hospitals and prisons, why not focus on what's right instead of what's wrong? Let's support the programs that support families-as they support children.