Peer Support Groups for Child Welfare-Involved Families

Marina Lalayants, Meg Baier, Anne Benedict & Diana Mera Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, The City University of New York



Study Purpose

- Examine forms, sources, and specific examples of support which parents were able to utilize to augment their involvement with the child welfare system
- Identify perceptions of impact of these supports
- Identify benefits of CWOP Support Groups
- Identify barriers to engagement for parents

Study Site



The Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) is a communitybased non-profit organization in New York City that aims to organize and empower a parents involved with the child welfare system.

Percent

Method

Exploratory Study

Qualitative in-depth face-to-face interviews

Parent participants (N = 29)

Gender

Participants

Female	27	93.1%
Male	2	6.9%
Total	29	100
Ethnicity	N	Percent
African American	21	72.4%
Latino/a	7	24.1%
White	1	3.5%
Total	29	100
Marital Status	N	Percent
Single	14	48.3%
Married	5	17.2%
Separated	3	10.4%
Divorced	2	6.9%
Unknown	5	17.2%
Total	29	100

Parent Satisfaction with Support Groups

Sense of Involvement

Sense of Safety

Comfortable with raising individual point of views

Sense of understanding

"There's no limit to what you can express, or what you need help in. If they [peers] can do it, they're here for you, they will do it"

Sources of Support, identified by Parents

Willing to listen

Professional

- Mental Health
- Legal
- Medical
- Provide advice & encouragement

"My main support was...my attorney...she understood, she got it...she believed in me.... She took the time to encourage me...it made me feel that it was more than just a job to her."

"Whenever I need to talk to them about an issue or anything that's going on with my children or the foster care agency...they're there to...be my encouragement and be there to...help me...give me good advice and things like that."

Family & Friends

Parent Advocates

Individuals with prior experience who have received formal training

"She's there to help, she's the one that would call the workers, call the foster care agency and find out what's going on...to make sure the workers are doing their job."

Religious & Spiritual

"I had my faith...in God...that everything would turn out in my favor."

Other Groups

- Provided encouragement and reassurance
- Found new allies

Unique Environment of CWOP Support Group

Shared Experiences

Group Environment

Judgment-free Environment

Developing Interest in Child Welfare Organizing

Expand Participant's Social Network

Personal Growth/Giving Support

Types of Supports Offered in Support Groups

Informational and Educational Support

"There is a wealth of information being shared in this group. I never know when I come in here what resources and what organizations I will learn about."

"I gained knowledge ... knowing what really happens, what ACS
[Administration for Children's Services] is about, and what they do."

Instructional / Skill **Development Support**

"I took the tools I had with the knowledge that I got from CWOP, and I combined that to fight my

"I learned listening with the ability to give advice without judging because everybody has their own path and everyone goes down their own road."

Instrumental Support

The group setting afforded each parent an opportunity to discuss the specific nature of their case and seek relevant resources from other group members.

"I got my son into all the services he needed...coming here and going to all the resources that they were sending me to...all the community stuff..."

Emotional and Affirmational Support

"There is hope for me and my children seeing what and how other parents are doing about their children in trying to get them back."

"Last year I lost my 19 year old son. I was able to come right here and be comforted. And everybody was involved and came to my son's funeral."

Advocacy Support

CWOP gives you the tools to advocate for yourself and resolve any problems you have."

Parents described the support groups as a place where "you learn self-advocacy."

Support groups helped parents learn their rights and advocate for themselves by listening to others.

"I think it's putting them to be more involved in their cases not just sitting back and letting somebody else do it; they want to know what's going on."

Suggestions for Improvements

- Greater frequency of meetings
- Replication in other boroughs
- Groups for Spanish-speakers
- Inclusion of children

Implications

Social support is a vital factor in engaging and empowering parents in Child Welfare.

Reciprocal peer support fosters information sharing and skill learning.

The peer-led CWOP group presents a unique model for supporting parents.

Individuals develop confidence and resiliency skills through peer support.

Parents gain exposure, skills, and interest in advocacy which yields an impact on micro and macro levels.

Conclusion

- Parents involved in the child welfare system encounter stigma, stress and isolation.
- Peer-to-peer mentorship and group support provides opportunity for parents to learn new skills, connect to resources, and build a social network.
- As parents develop their own capacities, they are motivated to advocate for themselves and others.
- The CWOP Parent Support Group provides a model for peer-topeer programs with positive outcomes for participants.
- Engaging parents in this way is critical to creating a child welfare system that is more respectful and inclusive of parents.

References

Lalayants, M., Baier, M., Benedict, A., & Mera, D. (In Press). Peer support groups for child welfare-involved families. Journal of Family Social Work.

Gopalan, G., Acri, M., Lalayants, M., Hooley, C., & Einbinder, E. (2014). Child welfare involved caregiver perceptions of family support. Journal of Family Strengths, 14(1), Article 5.

Cohen, E., & Canan, L. (2006). Closer to home: Parent mentors in child welfare. Child Welfare, 85(5), 867-884.