

Placing Bryan

Beverly Collier, a social worker and facilitator for team decisionmaking meetings in California, shares her story about the impact of her SPIN training

“DUE TO DIFFICULT FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES and mental health issues, 10 year old Bryan* presented a real danger to his younger siblings. He could no longer stay home. Bryan needed a safe and secure placement while services were provided to his family to enable him to ultimately return home.

Rather than the traditional “case-worker only” decisionmaking (*see sidebar*), my job was to facilitate a team decisionmaking meeting in which



ABOVE: Social worker Beverly Collier reviews a videotaped team decisionmaking meeting with SPIN trainer Jane Nestel-Patt. “The feedback sessions allow me to see what I am doing right during the meetings”.

Bryan’s placement would be decided. I knew the meeting would be very contentious. Bryan’s mom, the maternal grandparents, the great aunt, the case-worker, supervisor and a foster agency representative would be present.

Mom came to the meeting convinced that Bryan could not be placed with her parents. She favored a foster family setting. If Bryan was placed with her parents, mom felt that her parents would prevent her from ever getting her son back. Emotions on both sides were very strong. It was clear that reaching consensus with this group would be challenging.

Thanks to my SPIN training including the analysis of my previously videotaped TDM sessions, I knew what to do to guide this group. I could focus the group’s thinking on identifying the strengths and capacities within the family and the community to support Bryan rather than on the issues which divided them.

In this way, I helped the family members and professionals clearly articulate their views and concerns and explore a range of options. Ultimately, everyone was willing to actively support reunification with mom as the best long-term goal for Bryan’s well being. With this supported by all members of the team, we then set clear conditions for compliance. Only at that moment, was mom

“THE MOST REWARDING PART OF MY SPIN TRAINING IS SEEING FAMILIES STAY TOGETHER WHEN IT WAS NOT THOUGHT POSSIBLE.”

able to agree that instead of a foster home, staying with the grandparents was the best short-term placement decision for Bryan.

Without my SPIN training, Bryan might never have had the chance to return home! At the end of the meeting, the individual family members came over to thank me for helping them to reach this solution! Even mom, while deeply distressed about Bryan, had new hope for reunification with her son!

I feel very fortunate, both personally and professionally to be receiving the SPIN training. . . Thank you!”

SPIN PROVIDES THE MISSING LINK

Over the past 12 months, SPIN has worked with 12 social workers in four California counties (Stanislaus, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo and San Mateo) to provide them essential facilitation skills to successfully lead emotionally charged and often-adversarial team decisionmaking meetings (TDMs).

Team decisionmaking brings together the wider circle of family and the community to make a placement

(continued on back)

An estimated 879,000 children were victim of abuse and neglect in 2000. Of these, nearly 176,000 were removed from families by child protection agencies.

SOURCE: THE NATIONAL CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT DATA SYSTEM

*To safeguard the child’s identity, we named him Bryan.

(continued from front)

decision for a child who can no longer safely stay in his/her current situation. TDMs are a core component of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's nationwide foster care reform initiative called *Family to Family*.

It is never easy when parents learn that someone believes that they cannot care for their child on their own. In the past, decisions about finding other care for children at risk were made by child welfare workers, and the parents had no voice. Children were wrenched away from all that was familiar to them: their family, school, extended family, friends, places of worship and wider community. Team decisionmaking is a new approach, one that gives parents a voice even at this most painful point. It seeks to keep the

children connected to the positive supports in their lives, even if they cannot return home.

Including parents and the wider community in these decisions requires a *huge philosophical shift* for administrators, policymakers and caseworkers – the entire continuum of professionals involved in

child protective services.

Successfully facilitating a team decisionmaking meeting requires a sophisticated set of group process, mediation and communication skills that are new to social workers. This is where SPIN plays a vital role.

SPIN's strength-based, onsite video training is uniquely suited to assist child welfare professionals to make the philosophical shift and develop the skills necessary to be successful TDM facilitators.

SPIN helps facilitators develop the skills and competence to engage and empower participants, with widely divergent perspectives and strong emotional investments, to work collaboratively. Guided by the facilitator, each team works together to develop a consensus-based placement decision that is in the best interest of the child.

“SPIN provides for our county the missing link, connecting the vision for child welfare system reform and our capacity to fully engage staff in implementing family and community-centered initiatives. SPIN training will enhance the interactive strengths among our staff and the families we serve.”

MARISOLS

Manager, CWSS Staff Development and Redesign Initiatives, San Luis Obispo County, Department of Social Services

SPIN USA coaches parents, teachers, social workers and their managers to more effectively care for children. We use video as a strength-based tool to transform daily exchanges into nurturing, empowering and inspiring connections to create environments where children can thrive.

We are building a national institute to become the recognized resource for strength-based practice in the United States.



Watch for our website launch on January 29th, 2004: www.spinusa.org

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