

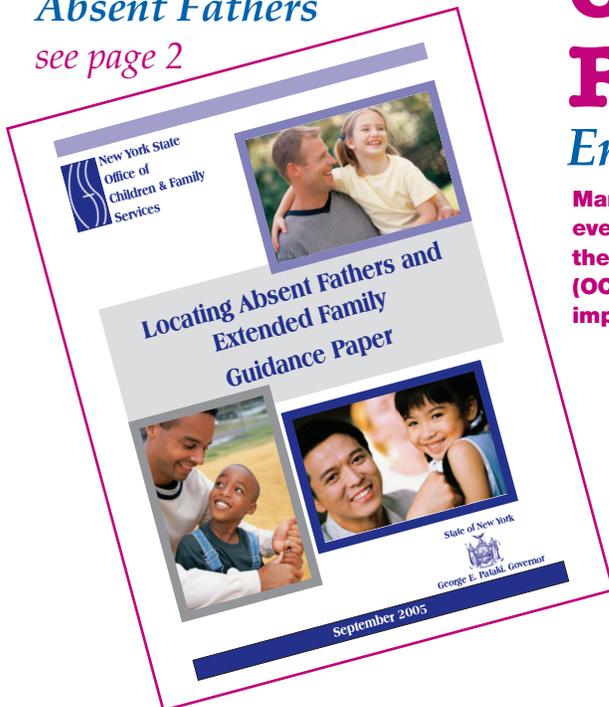
Challenges & Solutions

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STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CHILD SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL-BEING IN NYS

Guidance for Locating Absent Fathers

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Children in Residential Care Enhancing Their Safety and Well-Being

Many children in residential care have been exposed to a potentially traumatizing event or situation such as abuse, neglect, or violence. As more becomes known about the effect of trauma on children in care, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) is supporting more thoughtful approaches to treatment that both respect the impact of trauma and decrease the use of restraints in handling crises.

The workgroup for the Child and Family Services Review strategy, Safety and Well-Being of Children in Residential Care, is looking forward to working together on phase two of the strategy.* This phase involves implementing what the group initially explored, including (1) reducing the use of unnecessary restraints in residential care facilities; (2) identifying promising models

of care designed to enhance the safety of residents and staff; and (3) introducing the significance of trauma theory in relation to residential child care practice.

Charged with identifying ways to support staff development and training to improve staff/child interactions and reduce instances of crisis intervention, the workgroup has examined research comparing past approaches with new methods. The need to replace the single-person approach to a crisis and use of physical interventions that may re-traumatize children was clear given the extent of institutional abuse (IAB) reports arising from staff restraints.

“The old level system used for controlling and managing youth is being replaced by individual behavior treatment plans,” says Daniel Melnick, Ph.D., Director of Residential Support Services—Clinical, at The Children’s Village. “Slowly, the strengths-based approach is seeping into the fabric. Thanks to the Cornell TCI (Therapeutic Crisis Intervention) model, we now look at the triggers that may lead to conflict: how can we prevent the behavior and intervene

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Greetings from...

Larry Brown
Executive Deputy Commissioner

On August 10, 2005, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) was informed by the Administration for Children and Families that the State of New York had successfully completed its Program Improvement Plan (PIP) under the Federal Child and Family Services Review (CSFR).

Although this is a wonderful accomplishment, OCFS is committed to continuing our program improvement efforts. We are currently modifying our program improvement plan to include the implementation of the work that was originally developed as part of the CSFR PIP. The modifications remain focused on child-centered, family-focused child welfare practice. We will continue to collaborate with local districts, voluntary contract agencies, advocates, family resources, and the judicial system to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being for children and families. We will be sharing the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Plan with the field in the very near future and will be seeking your input and direction on the modifications.

I want to thank the local districts and voluntary contract agencies that continue to work with the children and families in New York. Together we are making a difference. As work continues, anyone interested in working on the various strategies noted on the last page of this newsletter are encouraged to contact the Strategy Coordinator or William McLaughlin, Director of Regional Operations and Practice Improvement.

* See Informational Letter 05-OCFS-INF-01, February 17, 2005, for summary information and recommendations related to the strategy in the first phase.

Locating Absent Fathers

Guidance Now Available

Caseworkers have many questions and concerns about searching for absent fathers: What if the father is a drug user or in prison? What if the mother does not feel good about the father nor want him back in her life? How do you manage if there is more than one father? What is in the child's best interest? "Finding an absent parent and any extended family members can be a challenge—one that requires values clarification, casework skills, and an understanding of family dynamics," says Linda Kurtz.

In September 2005, the Office of Children and Family Services released an Informational Letter (INF) with a Guidance Paper on Locating Absent Fathers and Extended Family—05-OCFS-INF-05. The guidance paper provides local departments of social services (LDSS) and voluntary agencies with a framework of practice for identifying and locating absent fathers and extended family of children involved in the child welfare system. With the enactment of the Governor's Permanency Bill, these efforts are required when the child is first removed from his or her home and must be recorded in the child's uniform case record.

Engaging families early in the life of a case when a child is placed in foster care is essential to planning for the child's

“There is no aspect of family engagement that causes more apprehension than finding absent fathers.”

Linda Kurtz, Director,
OCFS Rochester Regional Office,
and Strategy Coordinator
for Family Engagement

safety, well-being, and permanency. The Family Engagement Strategy emphasizes the kind of strength-based, family-focused practice that encourages engaging parents from the start. Although progress has been made in this area, there has been inconsistency in the search for absent fathers. Often, the decision to search for an absent father has not occurred until a plan is formulated to seek surrender or termination of parental rights.

To understand why absent fathers were not identified and contacted earlier in the life of a case, in 2004 OCFS conducted focus groups in Erie County, Onondaga County, and New York City, and administered a web-based online survey to caseworkers and supervisors in all local districts. The focus groups included caseworkers, supervisors, judges, law guardians, LDSS attorneys, foster parents, and fathers. Staff identified numerous barriers, such as lack of cooperation from the available parent, problems related to transfer of cases, unclear role vis-à-vis child support enforcement, and lack of available time. The findings of this research helped shape the practice recommendations in relation to absent parents.

The purpose of the newly-released guidance paper is to provide information on the need for and recommended methods of locating absent fathers so that

the child's permanency and well-being can be achieved more effectively and efficiently. Topics include the importance of locating fathers and their extended family and recommendations for local districts and voluntary agencies to improve their practices and permanency results.

The paper's primary message is that locating an absent father has the potential for enhancing a child's life. When children know who their parents are, they gain understanding of their own identity and sense of self. Their medical history becomes clearer. They may gain support, connection, and placement with extended family members. The presence of fathers in the lives of their children influences the child's overall well-being, emotional stability, sense of belonging, and cultural identity. Finally, if the permanency goal is adoption, parental rights of both birth parents will need to be addressed.

Another important message is that fathers may not be involved in their children's lives for many reasons. Although caseworkers realize that fathers who have actively participated in their child's life have a valuable influence on the child's well-being, they may have a different attitude toward fathers who have been absent from their child's upbringing. However, it is possible to engage fathers who may have left their families for a variety of reasons and, through effective casework, help them establish a meaningful relationship with their children or be considered as placement options if such a plan is needed.

The guidance paper includes a list of methods for locating absent fathers (also known as conducting a diligent search), as well as acknowledgment of paternity forms, definitions of father, information on the Putative Father Registry, and a list of databases as part of the Federal Parent Locator Services. For a copy of the INF, go to the OCFS website, www.ocfs.state.ny.us.



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John A. Johnson, Commissioner

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before conflict starts? And if conflict does erupt, what works for a particular youth to help him or her de-escalate? This is a big challenge—a change in thinking across the board from top administrators to child care staff.” As a result of implementing a strengths-based and team approach, the Children’s Village Crisis Residence has had a fifty percent reduction in the number of restraint holds used within the past three years.

To provide a forum for exchanging ideas about these issues, the workgroup helped coordinate two Leadership Symposiums, sponsored by OCFS and the Residential Child Care Project of Cornell University. Held in Auburn and Tarrytown in October 2004, the symposiums addressed the need to reduce physical interventions and restraints in residential care and the impact of trauma on youth. Well attended by voluntary contract agency and local district executives and senior staff, the symposiums featured national speakers on restraint reduction and gave participants an opportunity to share ideas about restraint in a frank and open exchange.

As a follow-up to the symposiums, OCFS held teleconferences on November 7 and 21 to present more information on trauma theory and program models. Other projects in the works include a reporting system to study the frequency and use of restraints and a pilot database to collect information on elements associated with each kind of restraint used.

William McLaughlin, Director of OCFS Regional Operations and Practice Improvement, and Patricia Sheehy from OCFS are coordinating the strategy workgroup. As such, they are “committed to improving collaboration with voluntary contract agencies and encouraging participation by youth.” Building on the original workgroup’s success, new members have joined the group, which met in June, August, and October to identify priorities. Says Linda Mappes, Executive Director of Vanderheyden Hall and member of the current workgroup, “OCFS, local districts, and voluntary contract agencies are working in partnership to improve child safety and well-being throughout the foster care system. Vanderheyden Hall is pleased to be a part of this important initiative.” For more information, contact William McLaughlin, (518) 474-9465; william.mclaughlin@dfa.state.ny.us; or Patricia Sheehy, (914) 377-2080; patricia.sheehy@dfa.state.ny.us.

Local solutions Consolidated Investigations Make Sense

Asked how staff feel about having the option to consolidate investigations of CPS reports, Denise Mongillo, CPS Supervisor, Rensselaer County Department of Social Services, says, “Everyone thinks it’s a good idea.”

Beginning in 2004, Rensselaer County DSS began using the new CONNECTIONS functionality and OCFS practice change of consolidated investigations. This is an optional procedure available to local district CPS staff, in which a subsequent child abuse and maltreatment report and corresponding investigation may be consolidated into an open ongoing investigation within the same case.

“As many as three or more mandated reporters may call in a report on the same case: for example, in a domestic violence incident, the police who respond to the call, the hospital emergency room staff, and a week later the doctor who examines the child,” says Ms. Mongillo. Considering the necessary steps that must be taken within quick time frames (24 hours for initiating an investigation, 7 days for assessing safety, 60 days for making a determination), it may make perfect sense to consolidate one or more additional investigations into one, particularly if staff are “addressing the same issues.” Specific system edits and programmatic criteria have carefully been built into the consolidated investigations process, aimed at supporting the timely and thorough investigation of all allegations of suspected child abuse and maltreatment reported to the Statewide Central Register (SCR).

As a result, caseworkers have less “paperwork” and computer work and spend less time in the field unnecessarily duplicating previous efforts. According

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Key Themes to Improving Interactions

The strategy workgroup embraced the findings of the research conducted by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). Six key themes were identified as crucial to improve staff/child interactions and reduce instances of crisis intervention in residential settings:

1. Leadership—prioritizing the effort to eliminate unnecessary incidents of restraint, taking responsibility, setting a tone, being a model to staff.
2. Organizational culture—where clients are the priority, staff are empowered, and families and youth are actively involved in every aspect of treatment and care.
3. Agency policies, procedures, and practices—clearly defined and supported.

4. Staff training and professional development—in prevention and de-escalation techniques, culturally sensitive care, trauma awareness, etc., with support, opportunities to practice, and supervision.
5. Treatment milieu—encouraging and demanding safety, while providing a routine, predictable environment in which children can develop the skills necessary to manage their own behavior.
6. Continuous quality improvement—monitoring performance, evaluating services, and documenting and examining outcomes.

The six themes were presented in *Reducing the Use of Restraint and Seclusion: Promising Practices and Successful Strategies*, published by CWLA Press in 2003.

Strategy Coordinators . . .

Who they are and how to contact them.

OCFS's Program Improvement Plan (PIP), which addresses the federal Child & Family Services Review (CFSR), contains 13 strategies to improve child safety, permanency, and well-being. The strategies – and eight specific areas under #1 – are listed here along with the OCFS coordinator for each strategy.

For general information about implementation of the CFSR PIP, contact William McLaughlin at (518) 474-9465; william.mclaughlin@dfa.state.ny.us.

1 Support for Strength-Based, Family-Focused Practice

- A.** Enhancing initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the State Central Register to reduce repeat incidents of maltreatment. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373, Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584
- B.** Family conferencing and early engagement. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- C.** Enhancing family supports. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- D.** Strengthening Case Planning and Service Plan Review processes. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373
- E.** Strengthening family visitation (with parents and siblings in care). Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- F.** Promoting placement stability and child well-being through improved assessments of children's behavioral and mental health needs. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Mimi Weber (518) 486-1106
- G.** Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being. Renee Hallock (518) 474-4726
- H.** Enhancing quality assurance and continuous improvements in practice. Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879

2 Concurrent Planning Implementation

Jack Klump (315) 423-1200; Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

3 Safety and Well-Being of Children in Residential Care

Patricia Sheehy (914) 377-2080; Shelley Murphy (518) 402-6546

4 Permanency Options: Mediation

Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

5 Adolescent Services and Outcomes

Linda Brown (716) 847-3145; Diana Fenton (518) 474-0014

6 Development and Piloting of a Differentiated Protective Services Response to Allegations of Child Maltreatment

Jamie Greenberg (518) 473-1327

7 Workforce Development: Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Development

Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879; Peter Miraglia (518) 474-9645
Margo Velez-Lemmerman (518) 474-2960

8 Workload Management Support

William McLaughlin (518) 474-9465; Fred Levitan (212) 383-1788

9 Improving the Statewide Information Systems

Lillian Denton (518) 474-6947

10 Tribal Consultation

Christine Heywood (518) 474-9465; Kim Thomas (716) 847-3123

11 Improve Relationships and Interface between the Family Court and the Child Welfare System

Gail Gordon (518) 473-8418; Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743
Kathleen DeCataldo (518) 473-9551; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

12 Improve Cross-Systems Collaboration and Increase Service Array and Access

Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Larry Pasti (518) 561-8740

13 Adoption

Lee Lounsbury (518) 474-9406; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805;
Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743

E-mail addresses for coordinators consist of the firstname.lastname@dfa.state.ny.us (as in jane.doe@dfa.state.ny.us).

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to Scott Speanburg, Director of Child Protective Services, caseworkers “now have time to focus on emergencies that may arise from new reports.” Just as important, he says, is the fact that “we can be much less intrusive into the family dynamics and system.” Preventing the need for multiple interviews concerning similar or identical allegations can only be a good thing for children and families.

The impetus for consolidating investigations derived from the Reducing Maltreatment strategy, which addressed the need to enhance initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the SCR. In the coming months, the workgroup will begin examining the state's rate of repeat maltreatment since the capability to consolidate investigations allows

for the collection of more accurate data.

The concept of consolidated investigations as a local district practice change was introduced via statewide training and implementation of CONNECTIONS Build 16. To guide staff, the 03-OCFS-ADM-01 on *Practice Changes Associated with CONNECTIONS Build 16* includes guidelines that outline system criteria, considerations for determining whether to consolidate an investigation (since not all subsequent reports will be duplicative and may, in fact, contain completely new allegations that should be investigated separately), local district policy considerations, and required activities once investigations have been consolidated. For more information about Rensselaer County DSS's implementation, contact Scott Speanburg, (518)-283-2000; scott.speanburg@dfa.state.ny.us.

What's going on...



Sharing Success III: Courts and DSS Working Together to Hard-Wire Best Practice

December 6-7, 2005
Desmond Hotel and Conference Center, Albany, NY

Sponsored by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and the New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children in partnership with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Sharing Success III, the third in a series of statewide trainings for court and local departments of social services personnel, is part of an established cooperative relationship between the courts and the social services system. Teams of two from each district and court were selected to participate; eighty percent attended.