

Wraparound Practice: Chapter 4b.5

A Dozen Mistakes in Using Family Partners in Wraparound

Patricia Miles, Consultant



Mistake 1

Making Family Support a Specialty Service: Wraparound was designed to be a supportive process. Supporting families, including parents/caregivers, is the responsibility of all wraparound staff. Some projects make the mistake of using family partners as the sole supporters or providers of family perspectives.

Mistake 2

Creating an Assistant Class: family partners are hired because of their personal experience. This personal experience should be recognized and equated to traditional sources of expertise, including professional and/or educational experience. If this personal experience is not recognized, family partners can wind up being seen as assistant facilitators or as assistants to other wraparound staff. While everyone can use more help, if the project evolves in this direction, the potential of family partners in creating conditions for family voice is not likely to be realized.

Mistake 3

Failing to Hire Family Members in this Role: The power of family partners is that they have direct experience from another perspective. Family partners who have “been there” help families who are experiencing loneliness by creating capacity to see themselves in others who have had similar experiences. While everyone can be supportive to families, not everyone can relate on this personal level.

Mistake 4

Confusing Agreement and Understanding: Family partners are intended to increase the capacity of project staff to understand the perspective of the family, especially as it is experienced by the parent or caregiver. Some family partners, however, find themselves in the position of advocating for team members to agree with the parent's perspective rather than ensuring that team members understand that perspective. This puts the family partner in an advocacy role and can lead to team members "taking sides" instead of participating in a collaborative process.

Mistake 5

Family Partners as Parent Correctors: A strength of family partners is that they can engage parents and caregivers in candid and realistic conversations through use of their personal stories and experiences. This engagement process seems to lead to greater engagement with the wraparound project. Some projects, however, will use this connection to put family partners in the role of correcting parents. This undermines the power of the position to build supportive peer-to-peer relationships.

Mistake 6

Family Partner as Ultimate Role Model: Family partners are hired because of their personal experience. At the time of hire, the family partner's life may be going well and their loved one's diagnosis or symptoms may be well managed. It is tempting to use that scenario as an example of what the family should expect to happen to them. This is a problem for two reasons. The first is that if the family partner has a child who is living with a mental illness, things can go out of balance quickly. Putting the family partner on a pedestal just means they are likely to fall when the mental illness requires intervention. Second, putting a family partner on a pedestal undermines the power of peer-to-peer support. Instead, projects should ensure that staff are realistic and accepting about what family partners are likely to go through in their role. Projects that do an effective job of supporting family partners will make accommodations for family partners who are going

through their own struggles, and ensure that the family partner doesn't feel like a "failure" when their loved one's challenge requires attention.

Mistake 7

Turning family partners into youth workers: Most Wraparound projects rest in the child and youth service world. This focus on young people typically encourages development of various staff roles that are effective in working with children and youth. Family partners, especially those first hired, can find themselves functioning as an "ex-



tra pair of hands" in working with young people rather than holding the perspective of other family members. This is a problem when the opportunity to understand the parent's perspective is lost as family partners stay too busy working with youth, too.

Mistake 8

Family Partners as the Values Police: Making wraparound principles and system of care values real is the responsibility of all wraparound staff. Values statements are often very personal to family partners. Some projects will find that family partners are often the first ones to comment on situations that don't fit with the values. Putting the family partners in the policing role can result in organizational isolation as well as creating dependence within the rest of the project.

Mistake 9

Family Partner as Decoration: Family partners seem to make wraparound work better. Family partners can also take on symbolic importance by reflecting the project's commitment to involving and listening to families. Projects must strive to create meaningful roles for family partners rather than using this role solely as a symbol of family involvement.

Mistake 10

Confusing Personalities and Skills: The first family partners hired are usually true pioneers who are in a position to extend their personal lives to help others. These strong personalities with a sense of vision are usually successful because of who they are rather than anything the project does. As the project matures it is important for projects to move from simply hiring strong personalities to assuring that family partners have the right skill set to perform the job.

Mistake 11

Confusing Peer-to-Peer Support and the Wraparound Process: There are many roles for parents within the service system. Being a family partner within wraparound is just one among many possible peer-to-peer support roles. Many quality projects can use peer-to-peer support to enhance the family's experience of service and to increase the capacity of the system to provide customer centered care. Wraparound is not the only vehicle for peer-to-peer support to occur. Indeed, the entire service system including outpatient mental health clinics, in-home counseling programs, family re-

source centers and school based interventions, can realize benefits from hiring family members in peer support roles.

Mistake 12

Stopping at One: Family partners represent a very real enhancement to the way the wraparound process is implemented. Depending on the project's capacity, stopping at the first family partner may keep the project from building real capacity for peer-to-peer support. Projects should be strategic and take a long view in building their capacity for peer-to-peer support. Projects that think they have built this capacity when they have hired only one family partner—even as the project continues to grow—are failing to realize the potential and power of peer-to-peer support and its potential impact on the efficacy of the wraparound process.

Author

Patricia Miles is a consultant who lives in Oregon and helps communities, agencies, schools and others work to improve outcomes with people who are receiving public services.

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