Differences Between Formal and Informal Supports for Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal*</th>
<th>Informal*</th>
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<tr>
<td>Invested in the outcomes and interests of the body or entity they formally represent.</td>
<td>Tied to the interests and outcomes that comprise the family's hopes and dreams.</td>
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<td>Focused on providing pre-defined interventions and supports.</td>
<td>Involved in daily life in natural ways and participating side by side with the youth and family.</td>
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<td>Tend to be accessible during times that families are not together (day-time office hours, limited periods, etc.).</td>
<td>Can easily accompany the youth and family across a day or a week, when they are naturally present.</td>
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<td>Measure success based on the systems' expectations and demands for the family's life.</td>
<td>Perceptions of success based in family's or individual's system of beliefs and values, rather than the system's needs.</td>
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<td>Persons providing formal supports are trained to be emotionally distant from the feelings of the people they serve.</td>
<td>Informal supports are closer to the youth and family, as they have been selected by the family's choices and lifestyle.</td>
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<td>Approaches to the youth and family are frequently based in the authority of the position held.</td>
<td>Respect and shared history give rise to relationship that empowers access and support to the family.</td>
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<td>Prior experiences with difficult youth and families shape and diminish the expectations that formal support people hold for individual children and families.</td>
<td>Expectations are for a life as &quot;good&quot; as their own, and the enthusiasm they bring from their natural relationship to the family moves this forward.</td>
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<td>Formal supports have access to the resources that the system they represent holds in its services and structures.</td>
<td>Informal supports have knowledge about resources and practices of the individual family and the community they live in from a community based perspective.</td>
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<td>Involvement and commitments may be based on conditions imposed by people who are very distant from the family (supervisors, managers, etc.).</td>
<td>Investment is more often unconditional and controlled directly by the key actor and is less influenced by people outside the family.</td>
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*Editor's note: These "formal" and "informal" columns describe extremes in ranges across many domains. Agencies and service entities will have characteristics from both columns, possibly leaning towards one side.

The Role of Natural Supports in Behavioral Health Care of Children and Adolescents

Introduction: Natural supports are resources used by, or available to, the child and family within the community, which do not involve formal behavioral health services, and which are consistent with the cultural beliefs and practices of the child and family. Natural supports may involve activities, community institutions, key resource individuals outside the immediate family, community beliefs, and a variety of informal supports found in the neighborhood or larger community. It is important to appreciate that the child and family themselves are often best informed about their own community.

How can natural supports help a child with Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, or ADHD? These disorders are all physiologically-based.

Natural supports help to normalize the child’s life. As the child’s life becomes more normalized and more "typical" of that of others, the child becomes less isolated and lonely. This experience can increase the individual's motivation and hopefulness, critical dimensions of health. Normalized experiences sometimes decrease actual symptomatology.

Natural supports can also help the child’s parents, through increased information sharing, support, and addressing of difficult questions. Neighbors and extended family can help during times of crisis and by helping parents get a break from sometimes difficult care. It should be appreciated that natural supports are important for all children, not just those with SED.

Do natural supports constitute an alternative to behavioral health services?

The most critical function of natural supports is to enhance the treatment process, not to eliminate the need for it or to replace professional functions. But, a child with strong community connections might need less intensive services, compared to a child without. Similarly, natural supports may help maintain a child in the community and avoid hospitalization and/or out-of-home placement.

What is the typical progression of natural resources, in well-managed treatment?

Use of natural resources is often limited to crises, or the initiation of treatment. Community supports can be used effectively at those events, but over time the balance between professional services and supports shifts towards natural resources, enabling services to be tapered and eventually discontinued (when no longer needed). With an exclusive reliance on professional services, they may continue too long, with an arbitrary and difficult transition on ending.

How are natural resources identified?

No community is without natural resources, just as no individual is without strengths. The first authority on community resources is always the family itself. In addition, professionals who are actively engaged in the community can assist in resource identification, as needed.

How else can I tell if I am effectively using natural resources?

Indicators may include spending from a flexible fund for natural supports (e.g., membership at a YMCA/YWCA), an increase in the number of resource persons around the child and family, the balance between service professionals and others in treatment team meetings, and the life domain outcomes achieved by the child and family.

With permission, from: "Guidelines for Best Practice in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services" (2000), Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, P.O. Box 2675, Harrisburg, PA, 17105.
Listing of Informal, Community & Neighborhood Based Groups

Artistic Organizations:
choral, theatrical, writing

Mutual Support Groups:
Alcoholics Anonymous, Epilepsy Self-Help, La Leche League

Business Organizations:
Chamber of Commerce, trade association

Neighborhood or Book Clubs:
crime watch, beautification, Christmas decorations

Charitable Groups:
Red Cross, United Way, Cancer Society

Outdoor Groups:
garden club, Audubon Society conservation club

Church Groups of Houses of Worship
service, prayer, maintenance, stewardship, acolytes

Political Organizations:
political parties, caucuses, League of Women Voters

Civic Events:
Fourth of July celebration, art fair, Halloween

School Groups:
PTA, PTO, printing club, MADD

Community Support Groups:
friends of the library, block club

Service Clubs:
Zonta, Kiwanis, Rotary

Groups for the Elderly:
Meals on Wheels, support

Social Cause Groups:
peace, rights, advocacy, service

Ethnic Associations:
Sons of Norway, Black Heritage Club

Sports Leagues:
PAL (police athletic league), local sports

Health & Fitness Groups:
aerobics, dancing, sports

Veteran's Groups:
VFW, American Legion, Amvets

Interest Clubs:
poodle owners, antique car owners

Women's Groups:
cultural, political, social, educational, vocational

Local Governments:
town, township, electoral unit, fire department, emergency unit

Youth Groups:
4H, Scouts, YWCA/YMCA, Future Farmers of America

Local Media:
radio, newspaper, local access, cable TV

Local Governments:
town, township, electoral unit, fire department, emergency unit

Men's Groups:
cultural, political, social, educational, vocational

Adapted, with permission, from: EQUIPO Familiar del Barrio Training Manual; Working as Partners: Supporting and Strengthening Families in Our Community, Abriendo Puertas Family Center, Miami, FL, in conjunction with Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL; funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.