

Frontline Connections Quality Improvement Center



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Background to the Frontline Connections Quality Improvement Center

The Frontline Connections Quality Improvement Center (FCQIC) at the University of Washington was one of four regional Quality Improvement Centers funded through the Children's Bureau. The funding for the FCQIC began in the Fall of 2001 and continued through June 2007. The QICs were to focus on generating knowledge to improve issues in child welfare and share that knowledge with the field.

The FCQIC identified that two topics had emerged nationally and in the northwest region that were challenging to the Child Protective Services (CPS) system. The system tended to produce poor outcomes with two kinds of families: families coming to the attention of the agency due to neglect and families of color that became involved in the system. A comprehensive literature review and needs assessment conducted during the first year by FCQIC confirmed this finding.

The FCQIC assessed local and state data on disproportionality. The available child welfare reviews¹ had limited research that was specific to the disproportionate involvement of children of color in the child welfare system and did not describe the process of how families and children of color enter and stay involved in the child welfare system.

There was some evidence to suggest that outcomes could be improved by focusing on one key aspect of practice. This was the engagement of parents, kin, extended family members, and the community in caring for children at risk.

The FCQIC focused on generating knowledge of the service approaches and service models that would effectively engage families of color and communities to achieve the goal that was foremost in child welfare which was child safety.

The FCQIC received grant proposals from agencies that would serve families at risk of being involved in the Child Protective Services system. The grants were awarded to a Native village, a tribe, and a community based agency to support projects in Alaska and Washington that showed the most promise for:

1. Implementing an engagement strategy with African American, Alaska Native, or Native American families, their kin and communities who are involved in or at risk to be involved in the CPS system due to neglect
2. Measuring the effectiveness of an engagement strategy.
3. Improving outcomes for African and Native American children involved with the CPS system.

The FCQIC provided funding and technical assistance for three years of project implementation, October 2002 through September 2005, which was followed by 6-9 months of evaluation and dissemination of project knowledge.

¹ Hines, A.M., Lemon, K., Wyatt, P. & Merdinger, J. (2004) Factors related to the disproportionate involvement of children of color in the child welfare system: a review and emerging themes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26(6):507-527

Assumptions underlying the FCQIC Projects

There were several common assumptions underlying the three FCQIC projects. The first is that the disproportionately poor outcomes CPS shows in serving African American and Native American families and in serving neglectful families lies in the accumulation and interaction of several factors. One factor is the failure of the system to engage parents, kin, and communities in the helping and protective response.

The characteristics of the communities that surround children of color who enter the system have to be considered as contributing to the children's outcomes. Poor families are more likely to be headed by a young female head of household without a high school education.² Neighborhoods in extreme poverty, where more than 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty level, also experience more neighborhood violence, poor housing conditions, high crime rates and poor public schools.³ The increased incidence of poverty, and living in a neighborhood with high crime and poor education contributes to the disproportionate involvement of children of color in the child welfare system.⁴

A social worker's bias may play a role in the entry of poor African American and Native American children into the system, as research showed that substantiation rates for neglect were higher in impoverished communities.⁵

Another factor is that culture influences the style of communication and the ways in which family members will be engaged in interactions

that will involve the larger child welfare system. A Social Worker will also act according to his or her cultural and professional values. In most interactions occurring in the child welfare system, the families' and the Social Workers' values, actions, and beliefs may be culturally incongruent with each other. However, family members and Social Workers may arrive at an understanding of each other's culturally influenced patterns of behavior.

- Culture can significantly determine the extent that Social Workers from the larger state CPS system may or may not understand the dynamics of a family, the resources of extended family, or the strengths of the surrounding cultural community.
- Specifically, a family's cultural context can be a key strength helping families engage in the healing process and helping parents and families keep children safe and strong.
- Culturally insensitive interventions result in *lack of engagement*; this failure to tap into the strengths and resources of African American and Native American children.
- Building on cultural strength tends to promote engagement and positive outcomes. Natural helping systems and cultural strengths within African American, Native American, and Alaska Native families and communities, if activated, best provide for the care and protection of children.

² Brooks-Gunn, J., Duncan, G. J., & Mariato, N. (1997) Poor families, poor outcomes: the well-being of children and youth. In Duncan, G. J. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (Eds.) 1997 Consequences of growing up poor. New York: Russell Sage, pp 1-17.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hines et al.

⁵ Drake, B. & Pandey, S. (1996) Understanding the relationship between neighborhood poverty and specific types of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 20:1003-1018.

FCQIC Subgrantee Projects, Focus, and Approaches

NIFTY Project, Native Village of Eklutna Child Advocacy Center NVECAC), Anchorage, Alaska

- The Tribe and Family Advocates used their village and local knowledge to connect with Alaska Native and Native American parents who had been referred to the court for child neglect. The Advocates had frequent interactions with parents and developed plans toward the goal of reunification of the family.

Strengthening Families Trail to the Tribe (SF-TTT), Nooksack Indian Tribe, Deming, Washington

- The Cultural and Family Specialist effectively brought tribal department leaders together to understand the ways they could support Native families. She also reactivated the intergenerational ties and cultural activities that strengthen families, while providing assistance when families experienced crises and challenging caregiving situations.

Culturally Competent Professional Practice (C2P2) Model, UJIMA Community Services and Office of African American Children's Services (OAACS), Seattle, Washington.

- Social Workers in the OAACS received coaching to help them understand and identify Afrocentric cultural values, use a strength-based family assessment approach, and refer families to culturally competent community providers, Social Workers assessed changes in their practices and families were satisfied in their interactions with Social Workers that involved decisions about children.

The subgrantees' staff / team members demonstrated these approaches to appropriately interact with African American, Alaska Native, or Native American families :

1. Put relationships first, took time to hear what parents said, were non-judgmental.
2. Reconnected families with their cultural identity.
3. Understood that trauma or problems can come from a sense of disconnection from place and tradition, family, and community.
4. Understood there is a shared history of feeling the effects of power/ privilege/ oppression.
5. Used a strength based approach to assess parents' goals.

The subgrantees also used these approaches to engage extended family members as resources of support and care for children.

1. Honored the family to involve family members in case planning, asked families for their stories, recognized what are strengths.
2. Stood beside the family and were with them in interactions with the CPS or judicial systems. Modeled with them how to interact with professionals representing different systems including legal, education, judicial or CPS.
3. Searched extensively and used multiple means to identify if kin or family members would be interested in case planning or family group conferencing.
4. Recognized that solutions could often be found inside the family and the community.

What have we learned through the implementation of three unique projects in the Frontline Connections Quality Improvement Center?

The efforts to improve communication cross-culturally led to engaging families into the CPS system.

Across the three projects, the staff, project lead, or family advocates were often working at bridging communication between parents and the encompassing Child Protective Services system. One objective was to improve patterns of understanding between families and the state Social Workers who were assigned to cases. The advocates in one project and the specialist in another project often accompanied family members to explain the court orders or other requirements to which parents were expected to comply. The project team members also met with state Social Workers or had means to provide Social Workers with coaching or information to explain the parents' situations, personal losses, and disruptions in their lives.

- As a result of the FCQIC projects, there is improved communication among representatives in partner agencies that are now in position to continue the focus of the FCQIC projects to engage parents and supportive extended family members when children have come into the Child Protective Services system.
- The Native Village of Eklutna Child Advocacy Center (NVECAC) established improved patterns of communication with the local agencies that included the State of Alaska Office of Children's Services (OCS) and Indian Child Welfare (ICWA) workers to support children and families in the Anchorage Bowl.
- In the C2P2 Project, UJIMA Community Services and Office of African American Children's Services, the engagement of families was evident in family members' strengths being assessed, family members being consulted in decision making, and family values being considered in child health and safety assessments.

When extended family members and community members could be identified to care for children involved in CPS, the children maintained connections to their cultural heritage.

Through the FCQIC projects, one outcome was that some children who came into the CPS system were placed with supportive relatives. The extended family members who had not been previously identified were engaged in problem solving and decision-making to help ensure the cultural continuity of children with their larger community.

- In the Nooksack Trail to the Tribe Project, by the last year of the project, 47 families had received multiple services and sources of support. There were other families who had been assisted in informal ways. Among the many improved outcomes that occurred because of the consistent efforts of the Cultural and Family Specialist, a grandmother who was caring for her grandchildren received support when the youngsters had challenges in school, and a relative was located in Eastern Washington to care for a young child when her mother had to heal and recover her health following substance abuse.

- In the Eklutna Child Advocacy Center, in one project year, there were 25 cases that received intensive services and 36 case consults. The project team effectively activated their contacts in villages to identify extended family members who would care for children when their parents were overcoming substance abuse issues, recovering from illness, and finding housing and employment.
- In the C2P2 Project with UJIMA and OAACS, there were 63 families who indicated increased satisfaction in being heard when they completed surveys following their involvement in family decision making that pertained to their young relatives. (Additional families were receiving direct services through the Social Workers assigned to the office, the number refers only to families completing a survey that was a focus for the C2P2 Project).

The focus on engaging families and extended family members when children of color are referred to CPS should be carried out with parallel attention to risk and safety assessments to ensure each child's safety.

The models that were implemented have focused attention in the Child Protective Services system to assess families' cultural norms and include cultural values as part of any safety assessments and plans. The results of the projects also show that any focus on cultural assessment must include a risk assessment to protect the safety and well-being of children referred to the CPS system for neglect.

- The Nooksack Cultural and Family Specialist (CFS) continues to interact with families on a regular basis which is an opportunity to provide parenting information and education to tribal members that supports them in keeping their children safe. The intergenerational tribal activities and cultural events also help to strengthen families, and that is a step to ensure that children will be cared for in a nurturing community.
- The Eklutna Child Advocacy Center (ECAC) project team members assessed cultural values evident in the families' lifestyles while also assessing potential or actual sources of injury that could be found in homes. The ECAC Tribe & Family Advocates helped some Native families to see that their village lifestyles would not keep their children safe in the city. When families altered some of their practices to make their homes safe for children this led to family re-unifications.

The three subgrantees were consistent and they were effective in stating that their unique cultures and lifestyles and patterns of communication should be respected and appreciated. They cautioned against generalizations or applications to other cultural groups. The FCQIC has shared this value of cultural relativism and has tried to be a voice for our grantees' views and we acknowledge their strength and wisdom.



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