WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

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“I SURE ENJOY WORKING WITH THE KIDS, BUT GRRRR, THE PARENTS DRIVE ME CRAZY!!!”

WE ALL CHOSE THE WORK WE DO, BECAUSE WE CARE ABOUT KIDS, AND WE REALLY WANT TO HELP THEM.

AND THE REALITY IS, THAT EACH KID HAS THIS “GATEKEEPER” THAT WE MUST GO THROUGH, TO REACH THE KID WE WANT TO HELP, CALLED “THE PARENTS.”

SOMETIMES WE SERVE THE KID “BECAUSE” OF THE PARENT,” AND SOMETIMES WE SERVE THE KID “IN SPITE” OF THE PARENT.

PARENTS ARE VERY RARELY PURPOSEFULLY DIFFICULT!!

POSSIBLE REASONS A PARENT MIGHT BE DIFFICULT

* THEY MIGHT HAVE THEIR OWN MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES
* THEY MAY HAVE CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY ISSUES
* A PARENT MAY HAVE VALID OR NON-VALID TRUST ISSUES WITH AUTHORITY
* THEY ARE LIKELY UNDER A LOT OF STRESS, FROM RAISING A DIFFICULT CHILD.
* OR PERHAPS, THE PARENT JUST HAS A GRUFF, PRICKLY PERSONALITY.
ALTHOUGH I'VE MET A LOT OF PARENTS I WOULD LABEL AS DIFFICULT, I'M NOT SURE I'VE EVER MET A PARENT WHO DID NOT LOVE THEIR CHILD!

AND THE FACT THAT A DIFFICULT PARENT LOVES THEIR CHILD IS SOMETHING THAT WE, THE CHILDREN'S WORKERS, CAN RESPECT.

AND IT IS ALSO SOMETHING THAT WE CAN BUILD UPON, IN OUR WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARENT.

SINCE WE CAN UNDERSTAND THAT THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE PARENTS DIFFICULTNESS IS NOT US, THEN WE SHOULD DO OUR BEST, TO NOT TAKE IT PERSONALLY!

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

BECAUSE “TICKED OFF” CHILDREN'S WORKERS, CARRYING AN ATTITUDE, ARE RARELY EFFECTIVE AND HELPFUL PEOPLE.

TYPES OF DIFFICULT PARENTS

1. THE RELUCTANT PARENT –
2. THE CRISIS-ONLY PARENT –
3. THE KNOW-IT-ALL PARENT –
4. THE DYSFUNCTIONAL PARENT –
5. THE OUT-MATCHED PARENT –
6. EEYORE THE MARTYR –
7. THE HOSTILE PARENT –
8. PARENTS WHO CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR CHILD’S MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES (THE HARDEST PARENTS) –

PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT STATEMENT IN THIS PRESENTATION:

KIDS WITH SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES NEED AND DESERVE YOUR HELP, EVEN IF THEY HAVE DIFFICULT PARENTS!!!

SOMETIMES WE CAN BE TOO QUICK TO CLOSE OR DISMISS A CHILD OR CASE, SIMPLY DUE TO DIFFICULT PARENTS.

Professional sounding excuses we use to do this:
“well, it’s a voluntary service….”
“I’m not gonna work harder than the parent….”
“well, we have to have some investment from the parent…”

But, what we as children’s mental health workers need to always remember is this….that it’s not the kid’s fault that their parent is difficult!!!
If a child's mental health condition is less than a 5, and they have a parent who is just awful to work with, and completely uncooperative, I may just let the case close on its own. Because that child will probably be fine.

But, if a child's mental health condition is a 5 or greater, I as a professional, and I as someone who really cares about kids, is probably going to work extra hard with those difficult parents, and do every single thing in my power to keep that case open. Because that kid needs and deserves help!

TWO KEY THINGS TO ALWAYS REMEMBER

IT IS NEVER THE CHILD'S FAULT THAT HIS/HER PARENTS ARE DIFFICULT!

THE KID SHOULD NEVER HAVE TO SUFFER & GO UNHELPED, BECAUSE OF HIS/HER DIFFICULT PARENTS!

STRATEGIES IN WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

1. CHANGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS – ACCEPT THE FACT THAT MANY PARENTS YOU WORK WITH WILL BE DIFFICULT IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. THINGS WE EXPECT ARE GENERALLY EASIER FOR US TO DEAL WITH.

2. A SIMPLE PARENT SIGNATURE CAN GIVE YOU A PRETTY LONG LEASH AT LEAST IN MY CMH WORLD, IF I CAN GET A PARENT TO SIGN AN APPLICATION, A FEW RELEASES OF INFORMATION, AND A CASE PLAN, I HAVE A PRETTY LONG LEASH TO SET UP SERVICES FOR THE CHILD.

3. BYPASS – IF YOU CAN, CHOOSE SETTINGS OF SERVICE WHICH DO NOT INVOLVE THE PARENT. (SCHOOL, DAY-CARE PROGRAM, ETC.)
STRATEGIES IN WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

4) Intentionally choose to be Diplomatic and Patient

“Diplomacy – the art of dealing with people in a sensitive & effective way.”

Difficult parents can be difficult enough, without or making it worse by being rude, insensitive, or being difficult ourselves.

5) Intentionally choose to NOT take difficult parents, personally!

* Ticked-off children’s workers are rarely very effective or helpful.
* The difficult parent is probably difficult to everyone, not just you.
* The difficult parent is difficult for reasons that go well beyond you.
* Try to develop some professional “thick skin” and not take it personally.
* When it comes to difficult parents, try to be Rubber not Velcro!

STRATEGIES IN WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

6) Self-Focus on Calmness & Communication – For you to be as effective as you want to be in your work, you need to master two things. You need to be great at staying CALM. (Don’t match the escalation level of your upset parent!) And you need to become great at COMMUNICATION.

7) Be humble enough to regularly ask yourself: “Is there anything that I, the worker, am doing to make working with this parent more difficult, and harder, that really needs to be? *We are human, none of us are perfect.*

* We get tired, annoyed, irritated, frustrated and exhausted.
* Sometimes this can leave us less than the “best version” of ourselves.
* So, just be honest with yourself, and in a case with difficult parents, ask yourself from time to time, “Am I doing anything to make working with these difficult parents, harder than it needs to be? Am I contributing to the problem?”

8) Affirm the Positive the Parent has – “Now Mrs. Smith, I know that you love Suzie and that you just want her to succeed…”

* Every parent has some positive trait, even if it’s only that they LOVE their child.
* Difficult parents get chastised a lot. (School, social worker, probation, etc.)
* Switch things up, and give them a compliment! Or at least point out that you know they love and care about little Suzie, and that’s why you are working on, what you are working on. This approach often softens parents.

9) Try to Keep the Conversation on the Main Topic – The Child’s Mental Health and Well-Being

* Try not to get lost in the details – or let the parent get lost in the details.
* Difficult parents themselves try to bait us into arguing about the small and fairly insignificant, while missing the big picture.
* So, be the one who is always reminding of the BIG picture—the child’s mental health and well-being.


10) The Old “Switcheroo” – Just like not all therapists “click” with all kids, not all children’s workers “click” with all parents. If you feel like you are at an impasse with a parent you work with, see if you can let a colleague who does the same job, give it a try. This is NOT letting the parent win. If the case stays open, it’s the KID who wins!


* If the child had severe diabetes, and the parents were not checking blood sugar regularly, or giving the child insulin, what would we do?
* Mental health needs are no less important – and if the child is suffering due to the neglect of the parent to follow up with recommended mental health services, it’s worthy of a Child Protection Report to Social Services.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

1) There will always be difficult parents to work with. Not all! But some.
2) It will always annoy you. But it will annoy you less, if you anticipate it!
3) This is ok, because it’s not about you! So, try not to take it personally.
4) Our work is always about the kid we are working with, who needs us!
5) It’s NOT a Child’s Fault that his/her parent is difficult!
KEY TAKEAWAYS

6) Children with mental health challenges, who have difficult parents, DESERVE us, as workers, to be patient, persistent, and determined, to help them, in spite of their parents. It’s our job! Don’t give up easily!

7) You cannot control the attitudes or actions of a Parent, but You can control your own attitudes and actions! And you can make sure that no matter what kind of parent you are working with, that you are intentionally and consistently PROFESSIONAL and CARING!

THANKS FOR ALL YOU DO!!