

One Mother's Journey to Reunification: A Filial Group Parenting Program

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In 2001, the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) developed a Parenting Collaborative Program focused on the provision of prevention and early intervention services aimed at reducing dependence on the child protection system and preventing re-entry. Along with private agencies, DHS solicited proposals from local clinicians with creative parenting program ideas. As trained Filial Therapists, Karen Pernet, LCSW, RPT-S and Wendy Caplin, Ph.D., RPT-S (the authors) developed and received a grant for an innovative parenting program based upon Filial Therapy. They partnered with a specialized mental health agency, Children's Crisis Treatment Center (CcTC), who provided administrative support and use of their treatment nursery facility. This proved to be a very positive relationship for all concerned.

Although short-term Filial group therapy models have been in existence for many years (L. Guerney, 1976; Landreth & Bratton, 2006) the authors were faced with the challenge of developing a short-term model in the format of a parenting program for families in crisis, facing complex and difficult problems. For example parents in the group struggled with issues such as recovery from drugs or alcohol, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, domestic violence and so on. Predominately, the children in these families experienced or witnessed violence, abuse and/or neglect. As a result of these traumas, many of the children had attachment issues and problematic behaviors.

As the authors were trained by Louise Guerney, Barry Ginsberg and Rise VanFleet, (Ginsberg, 1997; L.Guerney, 1976; VanFleet, 2005), they developed a program that retained the fundamental elements of the Guerney model. Their program is a family based model, which includes the use of mock play sessions and live supervision of the parents with each child in the family. Thus was conceived the 12-session parenting program called the Philly Filial Parenting Program, subsequently renamed the Caplin-Pernet Filial Group Program (Caplin-Pernet, in press). Over the four-year period

that the authors conducted these groups, the families who participated were women (and a few men) from racially and economically diverse backgrounds. The household structures were varied: single parent and two parent families, and foster care, adoptive and kinship families. The participants ranged in age from their early 20s all the way to the 70s and 80s and included mothers, fathers, caregivers, a great aunt, grandmothers and a great grandmother. The treatment nursery facility provided by CcTC, gave the authors the unique ability to conduct the parent group while the children (ages three to eight) received childcare. Consequently, the children were available during the demonstration and training portions of the program. The following is the story of one group member's journey through the Philly Filial Parenting Program. (The names have been changed for privacy.)

Hope's Journey to Re-unification

She was a scared young woman walking into the first meeting. She entered the room, her straight blonde hair in a ponytail, eyes facing downward, and a sad expression on her face. Hope looked more like a teenager than the mother of two daughters. Unlike her name, she was losing hope of regaining custody of her children. While some parents in the group kept their histories to themselves and there was no imperative otherwise, Hope was relieved to have a place to tell her story. Eighteen months earlier, Hope made the difficult decision to place her children in foster care through the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS). At the time, she faced an overwhelming set of obstacles: an abusive boyfriend, an undiagnosed bipolar disorder, a total lack of family support, no friends and poor prospects for making a living as a high school drop-out. Hope was screaming at her children and felt on the verge of physically abusing them. Her oldest daughter Maria was 2 and the youngest Elana was a toddler, just learning to walk. Their father was Mexican and not involved in parenting. The children were placed in a Hispanic foster home, with a Spanish speaking foster parent. Due to the timing of the placement and language development, Elana did not acquire English, instead she learned to speak Spanish like her "Mama", the foster mother, Mrs. Vasquez. Sadly, Hope was unable to speak to her youngest daughter, now 2-1/2 without an interpreter. Currently, she was battling with the system for the return of her children. She entered our group as one more effort at family reunification.

At that first session, Hope was surprised at the support she received from the other parents. After a playful icebreaker, the group leaders (the authors)

explained that the Filial Program parenting group was unique and would involve a combination of support and hands-on parent training. Instead of a lecture and discussion, the group leaders and later the parents would be conducting play sessions with their children. During the parenting program, the leaders would first demonstrate “special play time” (non-directed child centered play sessions) with each child individually while the parents watched, then train the parents to do the play sessions, then supervise the parent playing with their child or children and lastly plan the transition of the play to home. The play sessions are based on the non-judgmental acceptance of each child and parent and on the power of education and practice to make positive relationship shifts. The group members learn the four basic parenting skills that make up the special play time sessions and ultimately generalize the play session skills to everyday life. The four skills are empathic listening, structuring, limit setting and imaginative play. Hope’s daughter oldest daughter Maria was a delicate and smart four year old with beautiful brown eyes, a charming smile and problematically screaming outbursts and temper tantrums. During the leaders demonstration session, Hope was surprised that Maria played and interacted so easily with an adult she didn’t know.

As the 12-week group continued, Hope used the check-in time at the beginning of the group meeting to express her frustration, disappointment and fear of losing her children. She worked diligently in the group, accepted the support of the other group members and offered suggestions to them. During the mock play sessions, which the leaders use to teach the play skills, she allowed herself to laugh, to learn the four basic parenting skills and to make mistakes. She soaked up the positive feedback and the specific skill building suggestions. When the time came to begin the play sessions with Maria, Hope was able to enter her daughter’s world. At the time, their contact was limited to one short visit a week in addition to the group. Initially Maria was cautious with her mother, letting her watch, but not actively interacting with her. Maria would quietly draw pictures with her back to her mother. Hope would use the empathic listening skill as Maria drew. Quietly she would say such things as, “you are using a lot of red...you’re working hard drawing that picture.” Maria would let her know subtly that her comments were heard and taken in. During the debriefing post-session discussion, Hope became upset at Maria’s perceived rejection. The authors were able to help her appreciate Maria’s process and give her feedback on her ability to accept Maria exactly as she was.

As the play sessions continued, Maria became freer in her play and wanted her mother to connect with her. Hope continued to gain confidence in her parenting abilities. When Maria asked to draw together and proudly displayed their picture, Hope's face lit up. She really understood how big a change this was and how Maria was allowing herself to reattach. Watching this young mom accept positive feedback from the group members as well as the leaders was moving. Hope was observed and received supervised feedback on five different occasions for 15-minute play sessions with her daughter. This shorter observation time allowed all participants to be observed during supervised sessions on multiple occasions and with all age-appropriate children in their household. Hope was assisted in generalizing the play skills to home. This combined with the play sessions helped reduce the tantrum behaviors.

Hope also had help from the leaders in dealing with the child protective services system including writing a letter to her psychiatrist, which facilitated overnight home visits, and participation in her reunification planning meeting with DHS and the foster care agency. Hope was able to reunify with her daughters and connect with community supports, which included a community center geared to women's issues, a trusted counselor, in-home Head Start for her youngest child (which helped with the language challenge), and a GED program. At the end of the 12 weeks, Hope wrote:

“Wow it's been a amazing twelve weeks my daughter comes to (CcTC) school for her behavior & my children are in temporary foster care for about 1 year...I started this program a little nervous and end up very confident. Before I yell a lot and now I use the techniques they taught me, I learn to look at the situation before acting, and also allow my child to demonstrate thru play to tell me how she's feeling... it allows me to go inside her world)”...

At one of the author's last conversations with Hope, she remarked on the improvement in her relationship with both children. As a consequence of her improved self-confidence and self-esteem, she was better able to access and maintain an ongoing relationship with community programs. She proudly announced that she was participating in a march to City Hall to keep community programs funded. In her long and empowering journey to reunite with her children, this young woman who had never known her own voice and had so little hope, gained confidence through the Filial Group Program. Now she and her daughters face the future with hope.

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