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Family Participation in Service and Education Planning

The relationships between institutions, professionals, and families are gradually changing as the multiple benefits of the importance of involving families in services for their children are being recognized (Koroloff, Friesen, Reilly, & Rinkin, 1996). These changing relationships are prompted by research linking family participation to positive outcomes for children by legal mandates and by the development of a strong family movement in children's mental health. Yet, little is known about family members or staff experiences regarding family involvement. The purpose of this study was to describe and compare issues that are relevant to family participation from the perspectives of parents, supervisors, and line staff.

Method

Three focus groups of family members whose children were in residential care for the treatment of emotional disorders were conducted at a meeting of a national advocacy organization. Three other focus groups including supervisors and direct care staff representing over 10 residential programs were also held. This analysis focused on their perceptions of parent-child contact, parent involvement in treatment and educational decisions, barriers to family involvement, and recommendations for change. The qualitative analysis was conducted using Ethnograph, a social sciences computer program (Seidel, Friese, & Leonard, 1995). Three research team members reviewed the content of the files, developed initial categories, and

compared preliminary coding. One member coded the transcripts, and a second member coded a 20% sample to check inter-rater reliability. The results were compared. A third member of the research team arbitrated differences, and transcripts were re-coded to eliminate discrepancies.

Findings

Themes identified concerning family participation included safety issues, flexibility and control, environment, and integration in treatment process. Barriers to family involvement were identified at the family, staff, institutional, and system levels. Findings

highlighted perceptual similarities and differences among the three groups of participants. While the three groups shared some common perceptions (e.g., need for greater family involvement in the facility and staff training on interacting with family members), the differences in the three groups were more numerous than their similarities. While family members saw institutional contingencies and negative staff behaviors as major barriers, line staff were most likely to identify staff deficits and lack of organizational resources as hindrances. Supervisory staff saw barriers as primarily due to larger system issues.

References

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Seidel, J., Friese, S., & Leonard, D. (1995). *The Ethnograph v 4.0: A user's guide*. Amherst, MA: Qualis Research Associates.