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Employment: Assessment & Strategies for Increasing Work-Life Integration for Your Clients: A Workshop for Service Providers

Parents caring for children with serious emotional or behavioral disorders experience unique challenges in finding and sustaining employment that fits with the needs of their families. Consequently, the integration of job and home responsibilities during any given time period in the family's daily life is complicated and stressful. Family support, defined as the provision of assistance and resources families can use to meet their goals (rosenzweig, Friesen & Brennan, 1999), is seriously lacking for working parents caring for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Research conducted by the Support for Working Caregivers Project identified diminished community supports, such as child care and educational programs that specifically address the needs of families with children who have ongoing mental health challenges (rosenzweig, Brennan, & Ogilvie, 2002). Without adequate community-based support, managing work and care responsibilities simultaneously is difficult at best.

The concept of work-life integration emphasizes the ways people integrate paid work with the rest of their life. Although individuals seek to find some comfortable level of integration, their decisions are not based only on individual choices but occur within the context of values and assumptions operating at a variety of system levels (Lewis, Rapoport, & Gambles, 2002). The three primary systems with which all families interact and seek greater work-life integration through flexibility are work, family, and child care (Emlen & Weit, 1997). With the lack of appropriate child care and educational resources, parents caring for children with emotional or behavioral disorders are forced to seek greater integration in their work and family life mainly through employment adjustments (rosenzweig, Brennan, & Ogilvie, 2002).

Service providers who interact with families of children with mental health disorders can play an important role in assisting parents to achieve a more satisfying level of work-life integration. Information provided in this workshop was designed to increase service providers' understanding of the employment issues experienced by parents caring for children with emotional or behavioral disorders and to provide materials that can be used to support parents in their efforts to meet employment and family commitments.

Common Ground? Families and Employers is a research project focusing on the employment experiences of parents caring for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. The pro-

ject has three primary goals: 1) to understand and describe how parents' employment is affected when caring for a child with a mental health disorder, 2) to identify strategies used by parents to manage employment and family responsibilities, and 3) to identify workplace practices and policies that support employees who are caring for children with special mental health needs.

An online survey of parents caring for children with serious mental health disorders was conducted by Common Ground?. The survey solicited participation from parents who were currently caring for children with serious emotional or behavioral disorders at home and who were employed, seeking employment, or unemployed by choice to care for their children with emotional or behavioral disorders. Eligible parents answered 30 questions about how they manage both employment and family responsibilities. Over three hundred parents responded (N = 349). The typical respondent was a college educated European-American woman in her forties. Sixty percent worked full-time and 19 percent were unemployed. Of those employed, most were in professional or technical positions. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were in partnered relationships and most were biological parents of their children. A total of 766 children were represented, 60 percent of whom were identified by the respondents as having serious emotional or behavioral disorders. The majority of the children with disorders (73 percent) were boys. The mean age of all the children was 13 years old.

Barriers to employment can lead to undesirable outcomes for parents caring for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Parents often reported that they had trouble maintaining adequate employment due to care responsibilities. In fact, 18 percent of parents in the study reported they were currently unemployed because of care responsibilities, while nearly 30 percent had lost employment at some point due to care responsibilities for a child with an emotional or behavioral disorder. With the significant challenges to employment experienced by these parents, it is not surprising that 67 percent reported that they are "dissatisfied" with their ability to meet both work demands and family responsibilities.

Parents were asked: "What have you personally found to be the most significant challenges/barriers to finding and keeping employment because you are caring for a child with emotional or behavioral disorders?" Respondents identified workplace barriers, including insufficient family friendly workplace policies and practices and limited flexibility that constrained their ability to meet the demands of caring for their child. Four themes emerged from the responses: 1) inadequate workplace support, 2) lack of community resources, 3) limited workplace flexibility, and 4) high levels of stress.

One parent characterized inadequate workplace support in this way:

Supervisors who are unable and unwilling to understand the long term nature of caring for kids with serious mental health problems...think that if you have taken the child to the doctor every week for six months then the child should be ok. Generally, they are less supportive as time goes on.

This parent commented on the difficulty of work/life integration while lacking community resources, "finding sources to help care for your child that are qualified, dependable, and affordable is difficult. Without those services, one cannot work."

Workplace flexibility, or the ability to alter the time and location of work (Lewis, Kagan, & Heaton, 2000), is critical for parents caring for children with emotional or behavioral disorders, in order to meet the care needs of their child. Another parent spoke to this issue:

This company was not flexible as a whole. I did have a supervisor who covered for me regularly and most of my co-workers were very supportive. However, before I left the company my supervisor was getting an enormous amount of pressure from higher-up. I felt his job may be threatened because of my performance and the amount he covered for me.

On the topic of overwhelming stress, a parent stated, “the most significant challenge was maintaining my productivity and concentration at work, while dealing with his often destructive and difficult behavior at home and school.”

While it is true that these parents experience significant barriers to work, they also articulated a distinct set of strategies that can provide guidance to service providers in their work with families who may be experiencing similar challenges.

Work-Life Integration: Assessing Employment Issues

Employment assessment involves asking parents questions about their work-life experiences. In particular, questions should elicit information about the degree of fit between their employment with the care needs of their children. For example, service providers may want to ask parents, “How has having a child with an emotional disorder changed the type of job or career you have?” Alternatively, service providers may want to ask more focused questions on the availability of flexible work options, such as, “How much flexibility do you have at work to respond to the needs of your child during work hours?” The service provider may also want to determine if the parent is knowledgeable about the availability and accessibility of any workplace benefits that would be of assistance. Inquiring about resource persons within the workplace is useful. For example, whom might the parent approach for information on benefits, flexible work arrangements or parental leave policies?

Work-Life Integration: Employment Strategies

Work-life integration strategies are ideas, plans, actions, resources, services, programs, or policies that, when utilized by parents, improve their ability to meet employment and family responsibilities and enhance their satisfaction with multiple roles in the family, workplace, and community (rosenzweig & Huffstutter, 2004). Based on responses from parents, four major work-life integration strategies were identified: 1) finding a family-friendly workplace, 2) restructuring employment, 3) disclosing one’s child’s mental health status, and 4) reciprocity negotiation.

A family-friendly workplace is one that acknowledges and responds to the work and family responsibilities of its employees (Pitt-Catsoupes, 2002). Service providers need to be prepared to provide parents with information about the characteristics of the family-friendly workplace. Most often family-friendly workplaces offer some form of flexible work options, such as the compressed workweek (scheduling the hours of work into a shorter time frame) or telecommuting (working from home). A few additional family-friendly workplace policies may include dependent care supports, family leave, and community volunteering opportunities. Another aspect of an employer’s family-friendliness that is also important to assess is

the workplace culture. A workplace that has a family-friendly culture is one in which parents feel entitled to utilize family-friendly workplace benefits. A family-friendly workplace is characterized by an atmosphere of support. Workplace support incorporates flexibility in work arrangements, supervisor support, supportive workplace culture, positive coworker relations, respect in the workplace, and equal opportunity for workers of all backgrounds (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998). On the other hand, some parents may choose to restructure their employment situation by changing careers or working non-traditional hours. One parent comments on restructuring, “my current strategy has been to quit my job and go back to school for medical transcription so I will increase my odds of being able to have [a] much more flexible employment situation.”

Disclosing about a child’s mental health status was identified as a significant strategy to achieving greater flexibility in the workplace. A parent’s decision about whether or not to tell a supervisor or coworkers about a child’s mental health disability is complicated and has associated risks and benefits. Factors, such as the timing of disclosure, the amount of information to disclose, who to tell, and issues of confidentiality and privacy are all important to consider in working with parents who may be experiencing challenges with employment. Fully discussing the topic of disclosure with the parent is important to the decision making process. Identify the goals, benefits and risks of disclosure and the pros and cons of different timing options. For example, what are the benefits and consequences of choosing to disclose at various possible times, such as at the interview, after the job is secured, when a positive pattern of performance is established, when a response to a non-crisis situation is needed, or during a crisis?

Some parents found that being selective about the type of information they provide in the workplace is a useful strategy for obtaining support from various people in the organization. This is one parent’s strategy about disclosure: “I do try to be up front with selective people about this. Some people I tell about my son’s emotional disorder; to others I just say that my son has a chronic illness that requires hospitalization.”

Another important component of work-life integration strategies is reciprocity negotiation. Workplace reciprocity refers to the relational process of mutual exchange between the parent/employee and the immediate supervisor or coworkers resulting in costs and benefits to both the parent and the workplace (rosenzweig & Huffstutter, 2004).

Service providers conferring with parents about the strategy of reciprocity negotiation may suggest several steps in the process, such as learning about which flexible work options are available at the workplace, developing a plan that clearly indicates benefits to the employer, and identifying skills they have developed directly as a result of parenting a child with an emotional disorder that will contribute to the success of the plan. The plan needs to be realistic and accurately reflect the commitment that the parent is able to make. This parent illustrates the process of reciprocity negotiation:

I have been employed in small, family-owned businesses that understand the need for parents to be accessible to their kids. They have more flexibility to their positions, especially when you prove how valuable you can be to their business and give 150% when you are there.

This workshop furnished service providers with assessment techniques and strategies to improve work-life integration for parents caring for children with emotional or behavioral disorders based on the results of the Parent Employment Experiences Survey. While parents caring for children with emotional or behavioral disorders experience formidable challenges to meeting both work and care responsibilities, these caregivers have voiced a number of useful employment strategies to help guide service providers in their work with families who are seeking greater integration of their work and family roles.

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