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Inside the “Black Box”: Parent Perspectives on Differential Response in Child Protective Services

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What is Differential Response?

- Approach to Child Protective Services (CPS) that allows for two or more responses to screened-in maltreatment reports
- Most jurisdictions have 2 responses: an investigation and a family assessment
- Number of states that have implemented DR continues to grow; each has adapted the approach to suit local needs
- Commonalities in the family assessment response (FAR) include:
 - Supportive, family-centered approach to working with family
 - Case management
 - Emphasis on concrete services or assistance
 - Short-term service provision



DR evaluation

- Six RCTs have compared child protective services provided through an investigation versus family assessment response
- Parent perspectives on services have been captured through a survey distributed at case closure
- Limited information about *which* services parents find most helpful



Research Question

Among parents who received a CPS family assessment response following a screened-in maltreatment report in Illinois, which aspects of the services and experience did they perceive as the most helpful to them?



Illinois Family Assessment Response

- Initial visit from paired team of workers
- Voluntary services
- In-home caseworker visits 2x week for up to 90 days
- Caseworker as “agent of change”
- Emergency cash assistance up to \$400



Sample

- Parents indicated willingness to be interviewed on the Family Exit Survey
- Quota sampling was used to select 5 families who received a family assessment from each of the 4 regions of the state
- Selected parents were first sent a letter that described the interview, then called to solicit participation



Sample Demographics (n=20)

Demographic	Number
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	5
Latino	1
White	14
Education	
GED/High school diploma or less	9
Some college	6
Four year degree or higher	4
Did not report	1

Demographic	Number
Gender	
Female	17
Male	3
Annual Household Income	
Less than \$20,000	12
\$20,000 to \$40,000	4
Greater than \$40,000	2
Did not report	2



Data Collection

- Interviews were done over the phone, audiotaped and transcribed
- Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions such as:
 - What happened during the first visit? Tell me everything you remember.
 - What kind of help did you need at the time?
 - What was the most helpful thing that your worker did for you?



Data Analysis

- Analytic coding – attention paid to both content of text and intensity of emotions
- After initial coding scheme developed, three researchers independently coded transcripts
- Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached
- Trustworthiness was increased through peer debriefing and member checking



Key Findings

- An emotionally supportive relationship with the caseworker was the most helpful thing to parents
- Some case management services were also helpful, particularly those that helped parents establish or improve relationships with others
- Material support was also helpful, but less frequently mentioned and also a source of frustration when needed and not received



Emotional Support

Many parents were struggling with multiple and chronic stressors, often related to poverty. They found it helpful when the caseworker **listened** to them, **normalized** their involvement with CPS, and **empowered** them to try new methods of dealing with their problems.



Case Management Services

FAR caseworkers spend much of their time providing “case management” services: **information and referrals** to other services, **advocacy and mediation**, and **transportation** to services. Parents described all of these as helpful.



Teaching and Coaching

A prominent feature of the Illinois DR program was that the FAR caseworker was to act as the “agent of change” and help the parents learn the necessary skills to prevent additional contacts with the child protection system. Several parents found this type of interaction very helpful.



Concrete Support

A critical component of most DR family assessments is the provision of concrete support. Families were often grateful for the material assistance, but sometimes expressed frustration when it was slow to arrive or was not as much as expected.



Implications

- Training and supervision should emphasize relationship-building skills
- If financial assistance is offered, streamline the application process so that parents don't become frustrated if it is delayed or denied
- Importance of including parent voices in child welfare research, even though there are challenges in interviewing this population



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