



Duty to Support: Continuing the Conversation

In response to the overwhelming interest following our Learning Network and Knowledge Hub Webinar on ***Duty to Support: Supporting Families to Stay Together*** we posed some follow-up questions from the audience to the presenters: Laraine Michaelson, Candice Norris, Kari Stout, and Linoy Alkalay and asked them to write out some responses. The following report includes their answers.

This Webinar focused on the Duty to Support - the idea that community has the responsibility to support parents to care for their children and keep the families together. It is a response to the current mandate to first report families whose children are perceived to be at risk. In the current child welfare system, families experience state-based violence that ruptures family structures, contributes to marginalizing women, and perpetuates cycles of trauma. The Webinar shared findings from a community project hosted by RainCity Housing in Vancouver, BC, in the Downtown Eastside, on the stolen lands of the Coast Salish People that engaged mothers, fathers, grandparents, young parents, and youth who have all been impacted by the child welfare system, as well as the community organizations that support them. Presenters shared real-life scenarios provided by participants as an opportunity to explore what a harm reduction approach involves and how Duty to Support can be used in your own work to enhance your capacity to support families.



Laraine Michaelson



Candice Norris



Kari Stout



Linoy Alkalay

1

How do those working within the welfare system, such as service providers, social workers etc., balance the "duty to report" with "duty to support". What would be the best way to explain to those we are building relationships with that we also have a mandate or legal responsibility in our role to report?

From the very beginning when you are disclosing your limits of confidentiality, instead of using language like, "I am mandated to report you," we encourage you to make a commitment to care for your clients instead. For example, "**I am committed to bringing the concerns I have to you. I can guarantee to you that if I do have to make a call, I will talk to you first, and I will do it with you.**" This will reassure them that you won't go behind their back and that you are acting out of concern for them and not in a way to police them

Duty to report should not be a threat to the family, so how could you express your concerns in a more supportive way? Even with a legal mandate, our role does not need to be to surveille, report, and police families. Our role is to respond, to support families, and to be committed to our community.

Imagine that there is no foster care system. What would you do to build safety? Build teams to help care for families so they are not alone and that you are not alone either.

2

Survivors often have challenges with seeking supports and services due to limited childcare. Moms and grandmothers are dealing with so much. Any ideas how to provide support with child minding?

The current system is reactive instead of preventative or supportive which means child-"care" is often provided through extreme interventions such as apprehension and as a last means necessary. Instead of paying for the foster system to take kids into the system, how can we invest in community and family?

Lack of childcare resources can be a consequence of people not growing up with family or connected to family. We encourage you to be prevention oriented and support connection building in your community. When someone comes to you and expresses that they are overwhelmed with the care of their child, follow their lead and ask who they could reach out to, or who do they trust? Are there any known family, aunts, friends? Help them reach out; they may feel stigma about asking for help.

Consider as well what systemic barriers are contributing to why some biological and community supports may not be able to help care for the children and how you can address those barriers. For example:

- Does Dad have child-friendly housing? Can you support a visit in the community?
- Does Grandma have a way to get to the visits? Can you help with transportation?
- Does Auntie need more money to feed her kids and theirs? Can you advocate for funding?
- Can they go somewhere in the community?
- Can you find transportation for them?
- Can you use Jordan's Principle for funding?
- What solutions can you come up with together?

Service providers can enact a duty to support through actions such as:

- » Supporting choice and strengthening capacity by giving cash instead of providing what you think they may need.
- » Supporting families to apply for programs like after school care, daycare, weekend programs but remember that forms can be intimidating and inaccessible. Procrastination is also a fear response, so providing info about them is not enough, support them to apply and follow up break. You can include.
- » Finding ways in your program to give parents a break- include childminding in AA/NA groups, art groups, counseling, doctor office that supports the family to engage in programming and reduces the overwhelm by adding people who can care for the children. We've heard that in some smaller communities there is a known home for respite where kids are dropped off when the parents need support. This is done formally in military communities for example, or informally in an auntie's house etc.
- » Considering and including culture. For instance, is the respite, program, support person culturally safe for the family?
- » Following the family's lead in making decisions.

When the goal is to keep families together, there are ways to build safety around them. In our programs, getting families together facilitated informal support. Consider how you might be able to create safety and support for families so they are not raising their children in isolation.

3

What does it mean to problematize the term "in care"?

The identification of issues with the term "in care" came from our participants.

The term "in care" has the implication that the kids were not being cared for in their family and are being cared for now in the foster system or group home. This is inconsistent with how the families experience the government's intervention.

Similarly, **child 'protection' implies that children need to be protected from their families and that protection is done by the government, which again is not the family's experience.**

For our youth group, the term 'aging out of care' was also problematic as it also has an implication that they were cared for when in government custody and that they will no longer be cared for when they reach an age.

Care goes deeper than that, and in fact often families can care for each other and are being cared for by one another despite government intervention and restrictions that are placed on them.

We just encourage you to be mindful of your language. Instead, we use terms like 'foster system', 'government custody', 'child apprehension', 'family policing' which resonate more for families. When it is appropriate, follow their lead and use the language the family uses.

4

Is there an approach to harm reduction that allows us to do this work in a way that respects the time it takes to build relationships and trusts, and also prioritizes the safety of families?

Considering the history of colonized practice, generational trauma, and systemic racism that has shaped the foster system and child apprehension policies and practice, it will take time to build trusting relationships, however, there are ways you can approach crisis situations or incidents in a relational way that supports safety:

- Approach families in a strength-based way with encouragement
- Trust them in order for them to trust you
- Be mindful of your language
- Bring food for the family
- Addressing the barriers that they might have to not engaging
- Supporting longer relationships and engagement

These can all be done simultaneously and you can build safety while building the relationship. Consider including others who might be perceived as safe and may have an easier time connecting such as an Elder, and peers.

5

How can we balance keeping families together with immediate safety concerns or cases where the lifestyle of mothers and/or the environment may be unsafe for children?

This can be hard and uncomfortable to bring up. We urge service providers to have an honest and transparent conversation with the family. The discomfort that you might feel is worth sitting through for the outcomes and trust that can be earned. Reporting families after they leave an interaction with you will only contribute to their feelings of being unsafe and untrusting around you and other services.

Identify the strengths that you see. Name the concerns. Be curious about barriers. Offer support to address those concerns. Keep it focused on tangible things you see as opposed to what you might consider a 'lifestyle or way of being'. For instance:

- What are some ways to address the immediate concerns?
- Do they need a place for tonight? Do they need a meal?
- Do they need someone to check the home?
- Do they need a family member to come by?
- Do they parent differently in their culture? Are they parenting the way they have been parented?
- Have they grown up in government custody and never been parented?
- How can you connect them to their cultural supports?
- How can you role model what they may have not grown up with?
- What can be done to strengthen their existing supports - bring in more people to build a team around the parents that support them as they support their kids?

Challenge stigma and the way you approach the people you support. Is it choices or is it the circumstance they are in? Whether it is substance use, mental health challenges, poverty, trauma, what is contributing to where they are at? How can you meet them there and offer support?

Find ways to connect related to their strengths. Name simple and yet important things. Building a connection will go a longer way to support the family, than a reactive intervention, and it is more important that they come back.

Importantly, we are not asking you to not address concerns but to bring them to the family and be collaborative and flexible when addressing these concerns.

When possible, remember our community commitments:

- NOT MAKING ANONYMOUS CALLS
- FOLLOW THE FAMILY'S LEAD TO THEIR CARE
- SUPPORTING AND FACILITATING CONNECTION TO FAMILY MEMBERS
- BEING CURIOUS AND HUMBLE AND WEAVING IN CULTURE AS PART OF MY SUPPORT
- INVESTING IN MY COMMUNITY BY CREATING RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORTING CONNECTIONS