

Number 6.1 June 2008  
For workers

## Including parents in treatment

### Introduction

Working with young people can be rewarding but it can also be challenging because, although they are individual clients, they must be considered within the context of their family and their relationships with their parents.

Dealing closely with clients and their families places workers in a good position to observe family relationships and to help bring about changes that may improve understanding and communication between all parties involved.

### Parents' perspective

In the past, young people have been the focus of treatment and their parents have sometimes been seen as either irrelevant to the treatment process, as a hindrance to treatment, or even as the cause of the whole problem.

Even though many troubled young people come from difficult and complex family situations, it is now considered to be beneficial to include parents in the treatment process. However, difficulties can arise as parents find themselves involved in helping to treat the young person, while they are also highly emotionally involved in the situation. This requires a great deal of sensitivity on the part of the worker.

It is worth remembering that even though the client may be a fresh challenge for you, their parents may have been trying to deal with the situation for a number of months, or even years by the time they finally approach a treatment service.

Parents may come to you with feelings of:

- › shame, that they couldn't deal with the situation themselves
- › guilt, if they feel they may have caused the problem
- › anxiety and frustration about their inability to control the situation
- › confusion about what is the best approach for them to take
- › fear for the safety of their young person, or even for themselves
- › isolation, as they may have withdrawn from friends and family because of their situation.

Often parents have placed their lives on hold, and have neglected themselves and other relationships, while they attempted to deal with the crisis. There may also be particular strain on the parents' relationship.

### Workers' perspective

Experienced workers are likely to have seen numerous "unhealthy" family situations that may have left them feeling frustrated and wary of involving parents in treatment.

Remember though, that almost all parents want the best for their children and they can be a valuable resource if they are given the opportunity to be involved in the treatment process.

It is important that you are aware of your own prejudices or expectations which may act as barriers to effective treatment.

You will also need to recognise the level of hurt and pain that has occurred within the family. It may be necessary to arrange a secondary referral for parents to obtain support for themselves.

## Families in treatment

There are a number of ways that you can assist families through the treatment process:

- › Parents are likely to respond better if they are given some kind of education and information about the chosen treatment. For example, they may not fully understand concepts such as harm minimisation.
- › Meeting other parents in a similar situation, through support groups or group therapy, can help by allowing them to see what has worked for other families and to discuss their situation without feeling that they are being judged.

Looking at parental coping strategies within the family can be really helpful. Some of these may have been carried over from when their children were younger and may not be appropriate when dealing with an adolescent. General parenting courses may be recommended to help parents to update their parenting strategies.

Often parents have hidden the problem or “picked up the pieces” when their child has got into trouble, denying them the chance to learn the consequences of their actions. This puts considerable stress on families. Showing parents that it is possible to set limits to prevent their child from infringing upon the rights of other family members, and encouraging them to follow through with consequences can be a useful strategy.

Including, or at least considering, siblings during treatment can help ease family tensions, and help unite the family in dealing with the young person.

Consider the cultural aspects of parent–child relationships. Many cultures have different social norms and expectations to those in general, contemporary Australia. You will need to be particularly sensitive to these issues when dealing with families in treatment.

Ideally workers will have a relatively brief, though important, role in the life of the young person. It is important that you try to encourage or maintain positive relationships between family members, as these will be the enduring relationships.

A sense of connectedness with their family is a key protective factor for health and wellbeing in a young person. If you can encourage positive parent–child relationships you may be providing them with a resource that can help support them through difficult times for the rest of their lives.

## More information

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 85 85 84, email [druginfo@adf.org.au](mailto:druginfo@adf.org.au).

## More information

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 8585 84, email [druginfo@adf.org.au](mailto:druginfo@adf.org.au), or see our website [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)