



The Nuts and Bolts of Service Planning

Joyce's Voice

At first it was hard to work on the plan. I didn't feel like I was a member of the team; most of them were strangers. I wasn't really involved in the plan, but I still showed up for every meeting. I heard harsh things about what they said that I had done and what I had not done for my children.

In the beginning, it felt like they were talking over my head. My mother and sister were taking care of my kids. Catena was 4 weeks old when I left her with my mother. She was born drug affected. They talked more to my mother than they did to me. I was doing what I was supposed to do. I had gone to treatment and was 90 days sober, but they still didn't talk to me. I knew something about my children—things that only a mother knows. I wanted to tell them that Catena was colicky and Tyrone had the shakes, but they asked my mother about this, instead of me.

I put my hand on the table and said, "Please talk to me." When the team couldn't hear what I was saying, I wrote a personal letter for my worker to read to the team. She read it at the meeting. This really helped. It was the icebreaker for me.

The team will ask you what you would need to get your kids back. You need to think of a plan. Here's what I did to get my kids back. I went to a parent support group. I learned how to speak for myself. I learned how to let my emotions guide the team meeting. I found out that I could let others know that I needed help. I got a parent partner from the family organization in my town. She came to the team meetings and to court

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with me. She was my advocate. She was also an ex-addict and had been sober for 13 years. Her life was not always peachy creamy. I could identify with her. People had looked down on me, so I had started to think that my kids might be better off with someone else. She told me that my kids needed to be with me and that I shouldn't give up. I started reading novels about women. I began to feel better about myself. I learned how to go to market again. I learned to fix healthy foods for my kids. I cut coupons to save money. I had to learn to bond with Catena again. She was so young when she left me. This was all part of my plan.

After the kids came home, I had to play referee. I had to learn how to handle situations without hitting them. I called the Parents Anonymous hotline when I felt on edge. It's not easy, but my children are doing well. I've been clean and sober for more than 8 years now. I've had a job all that time. I have my kids with me, and I'm a volunteer advocate for other families. I've been there, done that, and got the T-shirt. This helps when I work with other families.

What is a service plan?

When you become involved with the child welfare system, you will be involved in making a written "service plan." This plan is like an agreement between you and the child welfare agency.

Service plans should describe the following:

- the reason your child is involved in the child welfare system
- your family's strengths and needs
- your child's strengths and needs
- your child's and family's goals
- actions you and the child welfare system are to take
- services you and your child are to receive and participate in
- a time period for working on these things

If your child is living at home with you, the service plan will describe what needs to happen so that she will be safe and can continue to live in your home. If your child is in out-of-home placement, the service plan states the reason she came into care. It will say what needs to happen for her to be returned home and for the child welfare agency to no longer be involved with your family.

You will be asked to sign the service plan. You will receive a copy of the service plan to keep.

When will my service plan be developed and reviewed?

Some states begin to develop service plans with families at the first contact. Other states might start the service planning process later. The service plan is to be discussed at least once every 6 months. This may happen sooner if your family situation changes.

Is a service plan the same thing as a case plan?

It could be the same. Different states use different names for the service planning process. Your state might use the term “permanency plan,” “case plan,” “family service plan,” “reunification plan,” or “treatment plan.”

What are the benefits of a service plan?

You can use a service plan like a road map. It tells you where you are going (for example, trying to keep your child at home, helping your child return home, or planning another permanent home for your child). It also gives directions as to how to get there. A service plan can help you focus on what needs to change to help your family’s situation improve. A service plan also helps you know how far you have come and to keep track of the progress that is being made.

Who is involved in developing the service plan?

You, the parent, should always be involved with the agency worker in developing, writing, and signing the service plan. It is also important to include children who are old enough to participate.

Often a “child and family team” helps you and the agency worker develop the service plan. This team should include people that you know, such as a service provider, someone from your child’s school, a counselor who works with your family, a family advocate, someone from your church, a good friend, or a close relative. There may be some people on the team that you are meeting for the first time. Members of the child and family team will have some responsibility for helping you and the agency complete the service plan.

Practical Tips for Families

- ✓ If your child is in out-of-home placement (also referred to as foster care), the state is required by federal law to develop the service plan for your child and family with you. Working on the service plan with the agency worker gives you the chance to do the following:
 - explain what help both you and your child need
 - set goals that are important to you
 - ask for specific services
 - ask questions
 - have a say in the type of care your child will receive
 - clarify your rights and responsibilities as a parent while your child is in foster care
 - understand your responsibilities and the agency's
- ✓ Sometimes people on the planning team like personal touches. They need to feel that they know you and your kids. Joyce (see her family voice on page 25) suggests writing a personal letter to the team and bringing pictures of yourself and your kids to the team meetings and to court. She says if you don't write so well, that's ok. Talk from your heart. Say what you can.
- ✓ When you sign the service plan, it means that you agree with it. If you don't agree with it, you don't have to sign it. Instead, you could ask the agency worker to reconsider the parts that you don't agree with.
- ✓ When parents who have pending criminal abuse or neglect charges against them participate in services to help themselves and their family, this is not an admission that the charges against them are true.
- ✓ Make sure your child has input into the plan if she is old enough.
- ✓ Ask for and keep a copy of your service plan and any updates to it.
- ✓ You can have an advocate or someone you trust present with you when the service plan is developed. Let your agency worker know if you want someone else there.

Can my family have more than one service plan?

Yes. If you are involved with several different service agencies and/or the school system, you and your family could have a number of service plans. A few examples are listed below.

- If you participate in mental health or substance abuse counseling services, you might have a “treatment plan.”
- If your child is under age 3, has some type of disability, and receives early intervention services from Part C of IDEA (see the Section on Relevant Laws), your family might have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP).

- If your child is age 3 and older and needs special education services, she might have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- If you are receiving financial support from TANF (see Terms You Might Want to Know), you might have an Employability Plan or a Personal Responsibility Contract.

How do I handle more than one service plan?

While each service plan is meant to be helpful for you and your family, it can be difficult to keep track of and meet the expectations of all of them. It is very important for you to let workers from each system know that you are involved with other service plans. Some parents have found it helpful to have a child and family team, as described above, and to include someone from each of the service plans on the team.

Practical Tips for Families

- ✓ Talk with your agency worker about how to bring together your child welfare service plan with other service plans you are involved in.
- ✓ Ask your agency worker to help coordinate appointments and activities that are part of all your service plans.

What does a good service plan look like?

- A good service plan *starts out with a good assessment*. This means that your family's strengths, needs, and problems will be reviewed.
- *You, as the parent, will be actively involved* in a good service plan. It is an understanding between you and the agency/court as to what needs to happen. It is your opportunity to say what kind of help you need to reach the goals that have been set. A service plan that only lists tasks that the agency or court says you must do is *NOT* a good plan.
- The service plan will help you work on both *immediate and long-standing problems* in your family.
- A good plan will be *reviewed regularly* by you and the agency worker. The plan will be *flexible* enough to change as your family's needs and progress change.
- The service plan will be *written clearly* in simple, straightforward language. It should not be filled with bureaucratic and legal jargon.
- *Goals will be reasonable*. Steps for achieving the goals should be spelled out clearly. Timeframes will be understood by everyone.

- The service plan will show an understanding of your family’s culture and beliefs. It will include services that will be right for your family’s culture.
- A good service plan *will fit your family*. It will not have a list of goals and services that could fit any family.

Practical Tips for Families

- ✓ If you have trouble speaking or understanding English, ask the agency worker to have an interpreter available while you are creating the service plan.
- ✓ Ask for a written copy of the plan in your first language.
- ✓ Keep track of your responsibilities and the agency’s so that you can show the court the responsibilities that you have fulfilled. You may want to keep all information in a journal, so it’s in one place.

Is there any other type of planning process that I might be involved in?

Yes. There is. Some families whose children go into out-of-home placement become involved in a planning process called “concurrent planning.”

What is concurrent planning?

Concurrent planning means that the agency and the court work with you on two different goals at the same time. The primary plan is to get children and parents back together. However, *at the same time* (thus, the use of the word “concurrent”), there is a back-up plan for the child to live in another permanent home in case she cannot return to her own family. This is one way that states try to shorten the amount of time it takes for children to find permanent homes. It also reduces the number of placements for a child. About 37 states have laws about concurrent planning.

Here are some examples of how concurrent planning works:

- A child in foster care lives with a family (usually a foster family or a relative) who is willing to work closely with the parents to help the child return home. This family also is willing to become the child’s permanent family, through adoption or legal guardianship, if she cannot return home.
- Sometimes agency workers look for adoptive homes for children before their parental rights have been terminated. A child might be placed with a “pre-adopt” family who would like to adopt the child, *if* she cannot return home.

Do all families whose children are in foster care participate in concurrent planning?

No. Concurrent planning is appropriate for many children in foster care, but not for all. When it seems that it will be difficult for a child to return home, concurrent planning often occurs. There are other factors that might influence the decision to use concurrent planning:

- age of the child
- how long the child has been in out-of-home placement
- likelihood that the child will return to her own family
- family's past history
- family's level of cooperation with the agency
- the willingness and ability of foster parents to provide a permanent home
- placement of the child's siblings

Is concurrent planning used with teens?

Sometimes it is. If a teen cannot return to her own home, the agency worker might try to find an adoptive home for her while also helping her develop positive relationships with extended family members and other adults. This is done so that the youth will have emotional supports in place if an adoptive home cannot be found by the time she turns 18.

How will I know if my family is involved in concurrent planning?

If concurrent planning occurs with your family, it should be part of the service plan that you agree upon with the agency worker and court. As the parent, you should be fully advised of the concurrent planning process.

Practical Tips for Families

- ✓ It is important for you to know how the concurrent planning process works so you can help decide whether it is right for your child and family.
- ✓ If you are uncertain of what this process means for you and your child, be sure to get answers from the agency worker, your lawyer, and/or the court.
- ✓ It is important for you to help your child understand how she will be affected by concurrent planning.

