



Tinkering or Transforming: Looking below the surface in how we support families

October, 2003

As family support efforts continue to grow in Minnesota, planners of those initiatives need to look beyond **What** we are doing and address the bigger issues of **Why** and **How** families receive support and information.

We often refer to this shift in planning as moving from ‘tinkering to transforming’. Webster defines the verb ‘**tinker**’ as ‘to busy oneself without useful results; to work unskillfully or clumsily at anything’.

Tinkering does not produce results.

It is not productive.

It is not a good use of time, energy or money.

Webster defines the word ‘**transform**’ as ‘to change in form, condition, appearance, nature or character’.

Transforming produces changes.

It involves action.

It produces results.

Transformation in family support results in parents finding useful and practical information, and connecting to other parents in a meaningful and supportive manner. To do so, we need to balance:

- 1) approaches that build a community among families and
- 2) approaches that expand the base of education and information for families.

In addition, we cannot neglect to expand the value and belief system among professionals that parents ARE equal partners and that formal systems need to become increasingly family centered and responsive in how they do business.

As a family support planning team, we need to address critical questions.

- Why are we doing what we do? What do we want to see happen?
- What does ‘transformation’ look like to us?
- On what are we basing our decisions?
- What kind of support do families want and need?
- How do families want to get information and find each other?
- How do we produce results?
- How do we know positive changes are occurring for families?
- What actions are a result of our efforts?
- What is the impact of our work?

WHY ARE WE INVOLVED IN FAMILY SUPPORT EFFORTS?

If we are only ‘**tinkering**’ we might answer....

- We have a fund of money that needs to be spent.
- We know those parents need that training.
- We want to increase numbers at the support group.
- We will buy more books for our library.

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If we want to think about ‘transforming’ we might answer.....

- Families need access to information and each other...how can we address these needs?
- We know children have better educational outcomes when families are involved and supported. What else can we do?
- Parents who have ‘walked the walk’ can offer incredible support to other parents. How can we connect parents to each other?
- Families who have a good, natural network of support are most likely to thrive and their children have better educational results. How are we encouraging families to find and use these natural supports?

HOW ARE WE INVOLVED IN FAMILY SUPPORT EFFORTS?

If we are only ‘**tinkering**’ we might answer.....

- We plan without direct parent involvement. They are too busy.
- We assume what families need.
- We don’t problem solve together. It’s easier to just make a decision.
- We keep offering workshops in the evenings, but no one comes.
- We use up our allocation of funding each year.

If we want to think about ‘**transforming**’ we might answer:

- We identify what options are currently available to families, we ask parents what they need, and we know the culture of our community.
- We always take the lead from parents. We ask and listen to their collective voices.
- We are flexible and look for partners to help us expand our efforts.
- We have a mutual investment in developing a family centered system
- that builds on families’ informal supports as well as formal services.
- Families have issues that do not go away when their children enter the
- K-12 system. How can we continue to support them as their children grow?
- Families can influence the development of systems.

Transformation is a continual process of growth. It need not be an exhaustive, ongoing revamp of everything. It begins with individuals making the commitment to reach out, make connections and relate to others. The end results will become formal community systems that are **family centered, responsive to the needs** of it’s ‘customers’, **committed to ‘service’** and **flexible** in their approaches. It must also mean **stronger informal community connections**; with neighbors automatically offering an extra set of hands or an hour of their time.

Are we putting our energy, time and effort into something that will make a difference?
Is it time to look at how we can work differently?

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