
WRAPAROUND AND NATURAL SUPPORTS:



COMMON PRACTICE CHALLENGES AND PROMISING COACHING SOLUTIONS

Wraparound is a support planning process that is facilitated and team-based. The youth (or child) and family, natural supports, and service professionals partner to develop and implement a strength-based, culturally competent, and highly individualized support plan with the goal of maximizing youth and family functioning and happiness. Natural supports are individuals identified by the youth and family who participate in the wraparound process. These are people who know the youth and family well, who care about them, and who provide support without being paid. Natural supports are the individuals who provide long-term support to the youth and family, and who thus permit the wraparound facilitator and other professionals to transition out of their intensive service

and support roles over time. The role of natural supports in wraparound plan development and implementation is crucial and central to the process, and is perhaps the aspect of the wraparound that most distinguishes it from other helping models.

As a wraparound trainer and coach, I support facilitators as they learn the craft of wraparound. Wraparound facilitators frequently report that they have significant challenges building natural supports. Since this is an essential element of wraparound practice, facilitators learning the model need effective coaching support from supervisors and others who guide their development targeted to this area if natural supports are to be successfully involved on wraparound teams.

In this article, I will discuss three

specific challenges frequently reported by wraparound facilitators in building natural supports: identification of natural supports, engagement of natural supports, and recruitment of surrogate natural supports.

Identification of Natural Supports

I have lost count of the number of times enthusiastic facilitators who are learning wraparound have said to me, "I know natural supports are an essential element of wraparound, but there just aren't any for this family." I typically respond by saying, "Let's slow down and back up a few steps." It is necessary to determine if the facilitator has established enough trust with the youth and family for them to disclose information about the indi-

viduals in their life from whom they derive support.

It is important for facilitators to establish a foundation of trust with a youth and family before beginning to identify natural supports. Premature initiation of the process of identifying natural supports can result in superficial responses from the family. This can lead the facilitator to falsely conclude that the family does not have any natural supports. Beginning facilitators may need support to strengthen their youth and family engagement skills so initial trust is reliably established before the natural supports discovery process is begun.

Wraparound facilitators must also learn to conduct a discovery with the youth and family that is of sufficient breadth and depth to reliably identify current and potential natural supports. Many skillful facilitators use life domains as a structure to guide their natural support discovery efforts. It helps them ensure that the natural support discovery process covers all areas of the youth and family's lives where current or potential natural supports might exist.

Life Domains (see sidebar) are a tool used to guide the discovery process that helps ensure that the discovery is broad enough to identify natural supports across all areas of life of the family and youth.

Skillful facilitators must learn strategies to conduct deep discovery in particular life domain areas. Domains that need deep discovery include fam-

ily and extended family, spiritual and faith community, and friends.

For example, to support deep discovery in the family and extended family life domain, I teach novice facilitators skills so they can draw three-generation family trees for each wraparound family. To teach this skill to a new facilitator, we draw a family tree together using a wraparound family selected by the facilitator. We start the tree with the child or youth that was referred to wraparound. We next add the immediate family members and any other individuals who live in the household to the tree. Then we add family members not in the immediate household. Last we add maternal and paternal grandparents as well as aunts, uncles, and cousins and step-family members not already identified. I ask the facilitator to label people on the tree by first name and to note their whereabouts.

The beginning facilitator often recognizes that he or she has significant information gaps about emotionally significant relationships in the family and extended family life domain as a result of drawing the family tree. Common information gaps include: not knowing the names of one or several of the individuals who live in the household, not knowing the name or whereabouts of the youth's biological mother or father, and/or little to no information about the youth's grandparents and other extended family. I help the facilitator to understand that deep discovery of natural supports in the family and extended family life domain is not complete until all information gaps are filled. Only then can the facilitator make accurate conclusions with the youth and family about the presence or absence of natural supports in this life domain.

Engaging Natural Supports

Novice facilitators frequently tell me, "The youth and family have natural supports, but they don't want them on the team." Facilitators learning wraparound practice sometimes push prematurely for the involvement

of identified natural supports on the wraparound team. Experienced facilitators recognize that taking time to build a rationale for involving natural supports on the wraparound team maximizes the potential for the successful involvement of these crucial supports. A family is much more likely to agree with the involvement of natural supports on their wraparound team when natural supports are invited to participate on the team to meet a specific need that has been identified by the facilitator and the family.

Here are two typical examples:

1. A mother who agrees that she is tired, alone, and needs more emotional support enthusiastically agrees to involve her best friend on the team when the friend's initial job on the team is to provide her with emotional support during the meetings.

2. A single father recognizes, with facilitator support, that his adolescent son would benefit from an adult female mentor. The father and youth agree that the father's sister might help meet this need. The father is pleased to have his sister invited to participate at the next meeting.

Another factor influencing a family's willingness to involve natural supports on their team is feeling shame. Novice facilitators sometimes fail to anticipate feelings of shame and do not adequately discuss and normalize these feelings before suggesting natural support involvement on the family's team. Skillful facilitators actively discuss feelings of shame as well as other feelings and fears, address issues of confidentiality, and define what sensitive information needs to be shared with team members in order to develop a meaningful support plan for the youth and family. Sensitive attention to these universal issues prepares families for the inclusion of natural supports on their teams.

In the process of discovery of natural supports, a youth and family may identify friends, relatives, and other natural supports who have provided

LIFE DOMAINS

Family and extended family
Friends
Emotional
Safety
Spiritual and Faith community
Work and financial
Residence and neighborhood
Legal
School and education
Medical
Fun
Other

support to them in the past but who do not currently have positive relationships with the family. The family does not then see them as current sources of support. Novice facilitators often do not invest enough energy to determine if these previously supportive relationships can be restored. Experienced facilitators might say to a youth: “I understand you and Bill were best friends before the argument, and that since then, you aren’t talking anymore. What would it take for you and him to make things right?” With needed support from the facilitator and others who care, some potential sources of natural support can be restored and then become available to participate on the wraparound team.

Recruiting Surrogate Natural Supports

Some families are truly isolated—they have lost their natural supports. In this circumstance, the facilitator must assist the youth and family to recruit surrogate natural supports to participate on the team. Skillful facilitators master various recruitment strategies, including the two that follow.

In the first strategy, the facilitator, with support from his or her colleagues and supervisor, develops a plan targeting community organizations often referred to as “brokers of natural supports.” The plan is designed to identify potential surrogate supports and connect them to youth and adult caregivers who need them. Community churches, service clubs, and many other community organizations have members who are interested in volunteering their time in the service of youth and families who have needs. The community development plan begins by educating these broker organizations about the wraparound process. As relationships with broker organizations are

strengthened, a range of possible roles for interested volunteers from these organizations are defined, including support of youth and families by participation on wraparound teams and one-to-one mentoring of youth and adult caregivers. Willing volunteers are then engaged on teams to broaden the base of support of isolated youth and families.

The second strategy is strength-based recruitment of family-specific



surrogate natural supports. This strategy is based on the use of the youth and family’s strengths to guide highly individualized recruitment efforts of surrogate team members. For example, a facilitator contacts a colleague’s mechanic and asks him to meet with a youth in wraparound based on the youth’s interest in automotive repair. The youth and mechanic hit it off. The mechanic mentors the youth in automotive repair and becomes a periodic participant on the wraparound team.

Strength-based recruitment maximizes “fit” of surrogates and the youth and family by matching them on one

or more areas of shared strengths, interests, preferences, and/or culture. Mutual acceptance between surrogate supports and youth and families maximizes benefits and the establishment of self-sustaining relationships.

Conclusion

Wraparound is a complex process whereby youth and families with multiple life challenges are supported by

a team composed of professionals and natural supports. Natural support participation on the planning team and assistance implementing the service and support plan are essential and unique elements of the wraparound practice model. Wraparound facilitators often report practice challenges that can become barriers to building effective teams that include natural supports. Some of these common practice challenges were identified and discussed, and promising coaching strategies were reviewed. The preceding paper was neither comprehensive nor authoritative. Nonetheless, I hope it causes wraparound supervisors, trainers, and others responsible for wraparound practice quality to reflect on their current coaching activities in this

area of wraparound practice. Further, I hope such reflection leads to additional exploration of the role of natural supports in wraparound, as well as improved coaching activities designed to strengthen facilitator effectiveness in building natural supports.

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