



Moms' Little Helpers

In-Home Therapeutic Parent Assistants **By Beth Powell, LCSW**

Children have to feel safe before they can trust. Children who succeed in running all over their caregiver don't feel safe. When they don't feel safe, they can behave horribly.

So, if adoptive parents are overwhelmed by the care-giving responsibilities of needy, trauma-based, easy-to-dysregulate children in their household, and feel like they are being tag teamed, it certainly could behoove them to seek extra, trained, in-home therapeutic help.

An Overwhelming Situation Mediated by an In-Home Therapeutic Parent Assistant

Jennifer, Hank and Roy (aliases) were adopted from Texas Children's Protective Services by

loving, God-focused, childless parents two years ago. They were a sibling package. At the time of the adoption, they were ages 2, 3 and 4. Like most Child Protective Services adoptees, these siblings had had a rough start in life.

The parents never thought for one second that a week-long respite from the kids, after they had been in their home for two years, would send their little ones spiraling downward into a four-month long, dark, day-after-day, time-released mega meltdown that would threaten not only the adoption itself, but also the parents' marriage and the mom's sanity.

Mom's Testimony:

"I called Beth at In-Family Services. We went

to her office as a family for an evaluation and she quickly concluded we'd be wasting our time coming to her office for counseling and behavior management advice for as long as the children were running around in our home as wild as March hares supervised by an insufficient number of caregivers. She said we needed another adult in the home, a therapeutic second adult, who could help me parent, back me up, help me socialize, educate and habilitate my children so that they could create, within themselves, a real sense of safety-security in the parts of their brains where reason didn't exist, but where reaction and a sense of history repeating itself did.

She explained to me that children who experience consistent chaos early in life with parents

who aren't ready to be parents have a template for fear and abandonment in their brains and that it takes more than love and a good home to replace that early template with a different template of trust and inner security. She said kids who come from places where fear and chaos were the norm sometimes didn't necessarily "settle in" without an extensive amount of therapeutic intervention.

Beth said with some traumatized children, that the more they loved and depended on the new, forever parents to be their forever parents, then the more they feared losing them... as if the dream eventually had to end and the nightmare had to return. She said that with sibling groups, when the children were of similar age, that the fear of one could spread throughout the ranks, just like a wild fire until a group "panic" ensued. She said when we went for a week's respite that it looked to the children that what they most feared was happening: They were getting abandoned again. And if we could leave once, we could do it again, but next time for good because they certainly never trusted that they were good enough for great parents anyway.

She said that another reason why the children's behavior was getting worse and more out of control at home was because they were proving to themselves that I wasn't strong enough to keep them safe as they kept overpowering me and tag-teaming me. They were becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: working hard to work themselves out of a good home and into homelessness. She said we had to stop them, reverse their course and get them off their self-disintegrating path to destruction because they were taking us, my husband and me, with them into a personal hell of their own making.

I didn't have anyone who would come into my home and help me with my kids and we certainly couldn't afford to pay a professional "super nanny" even if we could find somebody.

It was a blessing that Beth had a social work intern with her whom she was training in her systems-based, in-family approach to helping families rehabilitate the brains, hearts and

minds of their children. Maria, Beth's intern, under Beth's supervision, saved our home.

Beth came to our home with Maria several times until Maria felt she had the hands-on, on-the-job, real-life-experiential training in our home to come on her own to help me curtail the histrionic, violent antics of my children. Maria helped me re-establish myself as the benevolent boss of the household and the protector of children. She helped me turn around their stinking thinking so they didn't have to create so much chaos on the outside in an attempt to control the chaos on the inside.

I realized that before the children would let me become their mother, I first had to become their teacher. Before I could be their teacher, I had to have their respect. Before I could get their respect, I had to be stronger than they were, in order to prove to them that I could protect them from evil, from the terror of their past and from the negative creativity of their own minds...

Maria, the Parent Assistant: Her Testimony

We began by getting the children's behavior under control, so trust and real learning could take place. When one child began to misbehave, we immediately removed that child from the room so as not to disrupt the other children who were cool, calm, collected and behaving. This prevented the other children from fueling off of the one acting out. We had Mom reward the children for good behavior and for trying to please her. The objective with these children was to teach them that their goal was to make Mom happy (hierarchy of benevolent authority). When they misbehaved, Mom wasn't happy and there were consequences. When they made Mom happy by displaying good behavior and doing what she wanted them to do, they were rewarded.

Mom's whole attitude has changed during the two months I have been helping in the home, from feeling hopeless and defeated by these children to feeling confident and in control. The children have improved dramatically. Mom can go to the bathroom, go to the kitchen and make a meal, and she can run errands

with the children, even by herself, without major meltdowns.

Having a parent assistant come and help out in the home enabled mom to go on with her daily activities with the children and their relationship became peaceful and even fun. I not only helped Mom tag-team the kids, but I also played and interacted with them as well, giving Mom the opportunity to put a load of laundry in the washer or get lunch prepared. Besides helping the children regulate their own behavior, I was also there to help Mom home-school the children, assist with their neuro exercises, and reinforce the cause-effect relationship experiences the children needed. Above all, we were consistent and clearly the adults in charge.

All in all, things just ran a lot more smoothly for Mom, and the children got better because they felt safer. Yes, there is still more work to do, and the situation is not perfect, but now, this family knows that they are going to make it, and they are getting there."

Conclusion

Like the nursery rhyme, sometimes moms of numerous adopted children feel like the "little old woman who lived in a shoe... who had so many children she didn't know what to do." So, this article is a call to social work supervisors and professional counselors who have interns and externs. Think about training your supervisees as in-home parent assistants. It's a much-needed service to help keep placements not only intact, but also to help heal kids from hard places in families who may have little left financially to provide for the extra needs of the children in their care.

Beth Powell, LCSW, is licensed in Texas to evaluate and treat mental health issues with children, teens, adults and couples. She is a Texas CEU training provider and a Texas social work supervisor of college and university social work interns and of licensed masters social workers seeking their licensed clinical social worker degree. She has created a unique time and cost-effective child-in-family approach that includes the child's caregivers as part of the treatment team. For more information, visit www.infamilyservices.net.