

POLICY BRIEF

WRAPAROUND'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Much has been written about the promise and success of wraparound approaches in providing services to children and families facing difficult challenges in multiple domains of their life. As wraparound approaches have been developed and refined over the past thirty years, overwhelming research and anecdotal evidence continues to mount that only by changing the process and systems that interact with children and families will we have the best chance of supporting them getting their lives back on track and promoting long-lasting change that leads to a brighter future.

In a recent publication, [Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Wisconsin's Children](#), the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) outlined some of the basic reasons why addressing the mental health and collateral behavioral issues that too often result in youth being drawn deeper into (or even worse being bounced between) the child welfare, juvenile justice, and/or mental health is important to all of us. As part of that report, WCCF highlighted some policy options that can help address the need across the state, including promoting greater access to child psychiatrists, supporting school-based efforts to address mental health issues of students, and continue a vigorous effort to gather and analyze data about mental health needs and services across the state.

Not cited in that report are other initiatives going on across the state through programs like [Wraparound Milwaukee](#), the [Children Come First Initiative \(Dane County\)](#), and the expansion of [Coordinated Service Teams](#) (CSTs) to 65

counties and 11 Wisconsin tribes that are helping to effectively provide the kind of intervention and supports our families need. In 2015, CSTs served nearly 1,500 youth, approaching twice the number served in 2013. While Wraparound Milwaukee and Children Come First (Dane) are organized and funded differently than CSTs, the essential ingredients of success for these programs are the same. There are many sources of information about these specific programs and the [many wraparound initiatives around the country](#) and world, but the purpose of this brief is not to cover in detail these initiatives but rather highlight, in a different way the components and ingredients that have made these and similar programs successful.

Why has Wraparound Milwaukee been heralded as a model internationally? Why has the Children Come First Initiative in Dane County saved millions of dollars and kept hundreds of families together? How have successful CST initiatives developed around the state that have changed the dynamics of families and services in a way that we hope grows and informs other parts of our human service systems about how to do our work differently?

The answer is simple – and it's not.

It's simple because we know there are things that make it work. It's not simple in that it's not by accident and not without a lot of hard work by dedicated leaders, advocates, families,

and professionals. In the end “...it’s the hard that makes it great”.ⁱ

So, let’s take a look at what we know.

Defining Wraparound

What’s in a name? While the definition and/or description of wraparound has evolved since the 1980’s, the definition that in many ways drives to the heart of the matter – the family – is captured in this definition:

Wraparound is a process used to support families by bringing a group of people together as a team to help families accomplish the goal of living together safely and productively by planning and delivering services that build on family strengths and meet the needs that have been identified with the family as being essential for achieving positive outcomes.ⁱⁱ

This is one of the first ways in which wraparound is different than other programs or services being delivered to families – it is a **process** that has some definite and definable characteristics but can make it challenging for traditional systems and bureaucracies to “get their arms around”. The temptation to drag wraparound into the “normal” system/program structure is, in many ways, antithetical to what it really is and why it works.

The Recipe



What then are the key ingredients in this “wraparound cake”? What is it about the components of wraparound that make it work?

First, Use Quality Ingredients

The ingredients for a successful wraparound/CST approach come from the core values that all wraparound or system of care programs should operate under includes mix in in equal amounts of:

- Building the strengths of children and families to manage their own lives
- Ensuring that the processes and goals of the work are centered around the family and youth– not the system
- Unconditional caring and a “never give up” attitude that overcomes the inevitable “ups and downs” that all families face, especially children/families caught up in our systems
- Cultural competence that reflects an understanding of and values diversity and family norms
- Focusing on the most critical needs of the child/family and not being distracted in chasing solutions that do not make a difference in the end
- Building collaborative partnerships and relying on family teams, informal supports, and community-based resources
- Sustainable and flexible fiscal supports

Throughout the evolution of wraparound/CSTs or the more generic “system of care” approachesⁱⁱⁱ, there have been slight variations of these specific values/ingredients, but they have consistently reflected a strong base that focuses on building on strengths and promoting family engagement. Straying too far from these fundamentals has a detrimental impact on outcomes.

Second, there are Processes that need to be followed

Just like any recipe, there are other things that go into getting the results we want –processes that have proven to make wraparound/CST approaches successful; things that make the wraparound/CST approach different than our traditional way of thinking about “programs” or “services”. So, what are they? What matters?

- **Break Some Eggs - An Uncompromising Willingness to Disrupt Existing Systems**

While we get used to operating within structures and bureaucracies that are created

to serve a purpose, to deliver services, and/or to serve as mechanisms for fiscal accountability, those structures inevitably create barriers to successfully meeting the needs of children and families. Systems, and people too, inherently seek the comfort of doing things “as we have always done” or “not rocking the boat” – and most damaging to the child/family bouncing them around from one system to another until they might get what they need – all the while saying “we are here to help”. Expecting “systems” to do more, to be able to respond in ways they never have, to let go of the past and look only to the future is the beginning of the process to make wraparound work.

- **Keep Taste Testing - A Commitment to and Capacity for Meaningful Quality Assurance**

For wraparound/CST work quality assurance has to be more than a periodic “check-in” on a few of the ingredients. For programs like Wraparound Milwaukee, the Children Come First program in Dane County, for many of the CST’s developing around the state, and for successful programs around the country, quality assurance is an everyday, on-going process of assessment, feedback, learning, growing, and changing – always with a laser-like focus on meaningful child and family outcomes. Shortchanging quality assurance efforts inevitably results in stagnation, at best meeting occasional “benchmarks” that make us feel we are accountable, at worst spending a lot of time and effort and completely ignoring the feedback. Quality assurance is a living, breathing, essential component of successful wraparound approaches.

- **Get a Good Mixer - Creating Chaos out of Order**

Most of the time, our human service systems are trying to create some “order” to what we do. It makes our lives easier. This is often evidenced in the way criteria for participation in various programs are defined, how funding and access to other resources is limited, how children/families access services through defined “doors”, how services are contracted

for, and how outcomes are defined and tracked (too often in terms of process vs. meaningful family outcomes). Wraparound/CST approaches are designed to “start from scratch”, to ignore the existing rules and expectations, to overcome inevitable roadblocks, and to give power to those who have been traditionally powerless in our systems. This is not an easy transformation for systems to make, as there is constant “testing of the limits” of what we are used to doing and how we are used to operating.

In most cases, this “mixing” requires the creation of new and sustainable funding streams, some that mix and use existing funds in ways they’ve never been mixed before; in some cases finding new revenue streams; and, in most cases utilizing community and family resources that have been traditionally overlooked or discounted. Some may call it “blended funding”. I prefer “tossed salad funding”!

- **We Need a Good Chef**

I’ve often wondered why the cookies my mother made tasted so much better than the ones I make using the same recipe. It’s not that I can’t learn, and perhaps with a lot of practice over time I could come close. But, there will always be something special about her cookies and her hand in the process.

Just as successfully cooking a great-tasting cookie requires a well-trained chef who knows what ingredients are needed and how to put them together in the right order and in the right amounts, successfully implementing wraparound approaches requires creative, visionary, and persistent leadership. There is something about the kind of leadership and temperament it takes to successfully develop and manage a wraparound/CST system within a “world” (the legal/justice world, education world, government/bureaucracy world, restricted funding world) that is constantly looking over one’s shoulder and whispering “...you can’t do that”. Leading a successful

wraparound/CST approach requires solving problems that have never been solved before and convincing everyone else to approach problems with a certain sense of adventure – a certain sense of “we can overcome this together, let’s go”!

- **Practice, Practice, Practice (Train, Train, Train)**

Even the best chef may not make turn the recipe into success the first time. The truth about most of what we do in the human service world is that we need to constantly improve and grow our knowledge and skills to be successful. For wraparound approaches to be successful, perhaps this is best achieved through ensuring that all those working with families get lots and lots of training – initial training that focuses on how to make a family team work and then considerable on-going

training to improve skills and keep abreast of the latest research about working with children whose lives “cross” multiple systems. Learning how trauma, mental health, and/or substance abuse impact development and behavior can be a never-ending journey, and applying this knowledge effectively requires practice.

And, so it goes....

There is so much more to making this approach successful, but it is important to remind ourselves that the more we are willing to “break the mold”, the more we are willing to “make the values real”, and the more we keep in mind the quality ingredients and processes that make wraparound work in the often-complicated lives of children/families – the more successful we will be.

Bon Appétit

Wraparound Milwaukee began in 1994, supported by a 6 year, \$15 million federal grant that Milwaukee County received from the Center for Mental Health Services in Washington, D.C. Since its inception, Wraparound Milwaukee has served more than 9,000 children and families, has demonstrated positive outcomes for some of the county’s most challenging population, and has saved or redirected millions of dollars that would otherwise have been spent on various forms of institutional care.

Wraparound Milwaukee has received national and international recognition as a successful program, cited in 2004 as an exemplary program by the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health and was selected as a Harvard School of Government Innovations in American Government recipient in 2009.

The **Children Come First** program began in Dane County in 1990 with initial support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and has subsequently grown to be an integral part of the children’s mental health system in Dane County.

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ⁱ A line from “A League of Their Own”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndL7y0MIRE4>

ⁱⁱ Miles, Patricia, John Franz, and Mary Jo Meyers. [Rethinking Wraparound: Hello, Help, Healing, and Hope](#). 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information about the evolution and current status of wraparound initiatives can be found through the [National Wraparound Initiative \(http://nwi.pdx.edu/\)](#).