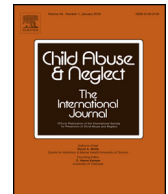




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## Child Abuse & Neglect



# Differential Response family assessments: Listening to what parents say about service helpfulness<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

An increasing number of Child Protective Services (CPS) systems are implementing Differential Response (DR) approaches in which lower-risk families are served through a family assessment response that emphasizes a family centered approach and the provision of concrete and preventative services. Quantitative survey data collected from parents suggests that those who receive family assessments are more engaged, receive more concrete services, and have higher overall satisfaction than those who receive a traditional investigation; yet little is known about which services provided through a family assessment are most helpful to parents. This qualitative study sought input from 20 parents who received a DR family assessment response in order to provide an in-depth analysis of which aspects of their CPS experience they perceived as most helpful. Results suggest that a positive and emotionally supportive relationship with the caseworker was of utmost significance. Other caseworker-provided services were described as helpful, particularly those that helped parents establish or improve relationships with others, including advocacy with other service providers, mediation of family disagreements, and coaching on parenting or relationship skills. Material support, such as providing cash assistance for rent or furniture, was helpful when received but occurred less frequently and was sometimes a source of frustration when accompanied by lengthy waits for assistance. These findings have implications for CPS practice, including enhancing caseworkers' relationship-building and engagement skills through pre-service educational coursework and in-service trainings; allowing caseworkers adequate time to develop supportive relationships with parents; and reducing the institutional barriers that delay the provision of concrete support.

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### Introduction

The perceived shortcomings of the traditional investigative response to maltreatment reports have prompted many states to implement a child protective services (CPS) reform known as Differential Response (DR). Loosely defined, DR allows CPS systems the flexibility to respond to screened-in reports of child maltreatment in more than one way, depending on the initial allegations or level of risk. High risk reports that include allegations of severe physical or sexual abuse, imminent

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risk of harm to the child, or a high likelihood of court involvement receive an investigation; and reports that involve low to moderate risk allegations and minimal chance of court involvement receive a family assessment. Although the overall goal of both CPS responses is the same – keeping children safe from further maltreatment – the manner through which this goal is achieved differs between an investigation and a family assessment.

During a traditional investigation, CPS workers collect information to determine whether the child is safe in the home, the alleged abuse or neglect occurred, there is a high risk of additional maltreatment, and in-home services or child placement into substitute care are needed to protect the child. If the abuse or neglect allegations are substantiated, the names of the perpetrators are entered into a central registry so that reports can be tracked over time and used for background checks. In addition, voluntary or involuntary child welfare or allied services can be provided to the family, although the likelihood of post-investigation service provision varies significantly among states and is uncommon among unsubstantiated cases (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2012).

Unlike an investigation, the primary goal of a family assessment is not to determine whether maltreatment occurred, but rather to understand the underlying conditions and factors that jeopardize child safety as well as areas of family functioning that can be strengthened to protect the children in the home (Schene, 2005). There is no formal substantiation of maltreatment allegations at the conclusion of the assessment, and parents' names are not entered into a central registry. Although the structure and content of a family assessment response varies among jurisdictions that have implemented DR, common practice elements include an approach that emphasizes parent and family engagement in the assessment process and the provision of voluntary and short-term services that often emphasize material assistance (Fuller, 2014; National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response [QIC-DR], 2011).

Several states that have implemented DR have conducted rigorous evaluations comparing outcomes between low-risk families who received either a traditional CPS investigation or a family assessment. The results are promising and suggest that families who receive a family assessment have rates of maltreatment re-reports and substantiated re-reports that are similar to those who receive an investigation (Fuller, Nieto, & Zhang, 2013; Loman, Filonow, & Siegel, 2010; Loman & Siegel, 2004, 2012; Murphy, Newton-Curtis, & Kimmich, 2013; Ruppel, Huang, & Haulenbeek, 2011; Shusterman, Hollinshead, Fluke, & Yuan, 2005; Siegel & Loman, 2006; Winokur et al., 2014). With one exception (see Murphy et al., 2013), these evaluations also find that compared to investigated parents, parents who receive a family assessment report significantly higher levels of satisfaction with both the manner in which they are treated by their workers and their overall experience with CPS, and they are more likely to receive services, especially material assistance such as food or clothing, financial assistance, and help with utilities (Fuller et al., 2013; Loman et al., 2010; Loman & Siegel, 2004; Ruppel et al., 2011; Winokur et al., 2014).

Despite these promising results, much remains to be understood about child protective services delivered through a family assessment response. Because families receive an array of services that differ among families and across jurisdictions, little is known about which service components contribute to improvements in family functioning and child safety. Quantitative survey responses from evaluations indicate that the majority of parents who receive a family assessment feel positively about their overall experience with CPS and their interactions with their worker (Fuller et al., 2013; Loman et al., 2010; Loman & Siegel, 2004; Murphy et al., 2013; Ruppel et al., 2011; Winokur et al., 2014), but no published study to date has gathered in-depth qualitative information from parents regarding which aspects of their DR family assessment were most helpful to them. The purpose of the current study is to report findings from a qualitative study that gathered detailed information from parents who received a CPS family assessment to explore which aspects of their assessment and services were most helpful to them from their perspective.

#### *Parent perspectives on in-home family preservation services*

Although qualitative or mixed methods studies that incorporate parent views of DR services are scarce, studies have been conducted with parents who received intensive family preservation services or other types of mandated, in-home child welfare services. Family preservation services are similar in many respects to those provided through a DR family assessment, including caseworker utilization of a strengths-based, family centered approach and the provision of short-term services in the home to prevent additional maltreatment and child placement. Although there are some important differences between the two types of services, such as the type of families that are eligible to receive them and intensity and duration of services, a review of the qualitative research conducted with parents who received family preservation services may provide insight into the types of services and aspects of service provision that parents involved with CPS find most helpful.

Several early studies with parents were conducted following the proliferation of family preservation programs that occurred in the mid-1990s (Coleman & Collins, 1997; Drake et al., 1995; Drisko, 1998) to “provide policy-makers and practitioners with valuable information which can enhance services, making them more attractive to consumers” (Drake et al., 1995, p. 392). Coleman and Collins (1997) interviewed 104 parents to explore what was most helpful to them in their family preservation services and found that parents appreciated it when workers provided emotional support and modeled appropriate parenting behaviors. More important to these parents than therapeutic services, however, was their relationship with the worker. This finding was replicated in the other studies – although parents appreciated the concrete services they received through their family preservation program, the most important element of service provision was a supportive relationship with the caseworker, which was facilitated by the worker's availability and responsiveness (Drake et al., 1995; Drisko, 1998; Gockel, Russell, & Harris, 2009; Kauffman, 2007).

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