

FAMILY INTERACTIONS-LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES

History/Introduction: The Family Interaction Program provides supervised interactions for family members and their children in a safe and nurturing environment. The program began in January 2005 and was developed in collaboration with Lutheran Social Services, Eau Claire County Department of Human Services, and the Western Wisconsin Partnership. Our programming has literally **quadrupled** since its inception in 2005. Beyond Eau Claire we also serve Dunn, Jackson and have expanded this year to Walworth County. We are in process of building in other counties as well. Interactions recently received an honorable mention from COA for the Innovative Practice Award in 2011!

Philosophy/Innovation: LSS's Family Interaction Program is multi-dimensional service to families to promote attachment and permanence in a safe and supervised setting. The core philosophy is that family interaction is a process, not a place. This program is not specifically a building or a place to go, but a service that occurs in the most natural setting safely available to the individual family. Interactions could occur at the library, in the foster home, at school, in a park, or at the home of the parent(s), in addition to a formal location. While traditional supervised "visits" are often a restrictive and imposed setting, an "interaction" is one of rehabilitation, not punishment. Our program builds on family strengths with an emphasis on strengthening attachment and bonding. The goal of the program is to provide families with a road to permanency.

The innovation lies in that Family Interactions is a therapeutic activity versus the traditional model of simply observing a parent and a child visiting. The program follows the philosophy that we do not "visit" our children we interact with them. The Family Interaction Program provides an opportunity for families to enhance their relationships in a safe and educational environment. Further innovation includes tailoring the program objectives to each individual family. Family interactions may initially occur in a structured on-site setting, followed by the community or in-home environment, tailored to the unique circumstances and familiar surroundings of the family. We offer flexible and convenient scheduling including early morning hours for families with infants, evenings, weekends and holidays to maximize time for attachment.

Research/Evidence: Over the past years, Lutheran Social Services' Family Interaction Program staff have worked closely with County Family Services Units to design and deliver services that embrace the philosophies and practice standards articulated in the Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA). LSS staff has participated in joint training with county providers (provided by the Western Wisconsin Partnership) to implement comprehensive, competency-based service approaches.

Interactions is described in the *Field Guide to Child Welfare* as a "developmental model concurrently considering both deficits and potentials" LSS strives to help families gain the skills they need to safely parent; at the same time, we understand the federal mandates that can dictate the direction and timeline of a case plan

Goals/Stages: Our family-centered interaction program goals include:

- *Improving child well being with a focus on child-development.*
- *Improve interaction and attachment between non-custodial parents and children.*
- *Strengthen non-custodial parents as nurturers and to make a parenting decision.*

Traditionally, a family moves from the most restrictive setting to increased flexibility. LSS works with the family and case manager to design the component most fitting to the parent(s) skills and emotional impact for the child. The duration and frequency is also individualized to the family and the developmental stage of the child. LSS is sensitive to the critical importance of infant attachment in child development. An infant should see the parent five times a week, even if the visits are short. The *Field Guild to Child Welfare* states, "While in placement, the child should have regular and frequent visits with family members and with other relatives and friends when appropriate. Regular visitation is critical to maintaining the child's emotional health during substitute care placement and is necessary to support reunification" (pg. 39).

The services, which will take into account the uniqueness of each individual family, need first to protect the child from maltreatment and second to strengthen and empower the child's own family. The overall goal is to move families through the phases to when they can have unsupervised contact with their children. Services and staff operate from a culturally competent stance.

Services are divided into three stages:

- In the *first stage*, services begin in the office during a 6-week assessment period. Some families may never move past the first stage. LSS will provide necessary documentation to the social worker to move toward termination. In those cases, LSS will continue to provide visits at the same intensity but in an office setting until a court decision is made.
- The *middle stage* will be in the community- or home-based settings when appropriate. Visits at this stage will be for longer periods of time, with staff moving in and out of the visit. The worker may pop in and see how things are going several times during a several-hour visit.
- The *third stage* is the last step before unsupervised contact and/or reunification by the Department of Human Services. This will include overnights with the parent(s).

Staff orientation: Program staff are not parent aides in the traditional sense. However, they do present parent-child educational information in a hands-on way as the situations arise, and then observe the parents' reaction to this information. They look to see how the parent responds with the information or intervention. Staff observe how or if the parent uses the information and whether the parent generalizes the information to the next situation. This is documented in the context of safety for the child. The core belief is that the more attached a parent is to their child, the safer the child will be.

Measureable Goals and Outcomes 2005-2011:

- *Decrease time for resolution. Since 2005, we've served 225 families. Over 85% of cases in FI were closed within the federally mandated time frame for permanence of 15 months.*
- *Strengthen capacity of families to provide safe and nurturing care for their children. Since 2005, there have been no substantiated reports of abuse or neglect while families were receiving services within the Family Interactions Program.*
- *Support Child permanence: Fewer than 4 pct of cases are re-referred. Staff adhered to DHS concurrent plans in all 100 pct of cases.*
- *Assist parents in identifying parenting needs. 85 pct demonstrated improvement in parenting skills.*

Goals are measured using the KIPS-"keys to interactive parenting" (Comfort and Gordon, Phd) and with the 0-5 CANS version now available we will begin using this for outcomes as well. Family Interactions is a model that has proved to be successful, strength based and empowering to families with solid outcomes. We will continue to expand the model statewide to serve families in years to come.