

**CLINICAL EDITOR:** These two authors present an in-depth case which demonstrates the power and value of filial therapy. They discuss their unique 12 week program, its benefits, processes and community resources that all come into play to facilitate a mother and her children in a healthy reconnection.

# The Journey Toward Reunification

## *A Filial Group Parenting Program*

In 2001, the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) developed a Parenting Collaborative Program focused on the provision of prevention and early intervention services. The goal was to reduce dependence on the child protection system and preventing re-entry into the system. Along with private agencies, DHS solicited creative parenting program proposals from local clinicians. As trained Filial Therapists, we developed and received a grant for an innovative parenting program based upon Filial Therapy. We partnered with a specialized mental health agency, the Children's Crisis Treatment Center (CcTC) that provided administrative support and the use of a treatment nursery facility. This proved to be a very positive relationship for all concerned.

Although short-term Filial group therapy models have been in existence for many years (Guerney, 1976; Landreth & Bratton, 2006), the authors were faced with the challenge of developing a short-term model in the format of a parenting program for families in crisis. These families were facing complex problems of which some included drug recovery, alcohol abuse, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, and domestic violence. The children in these families experienced or witnessed violence, abuse, neglect, and as a result of these traumas, many of the children had attachment issues and problematic behaviors.



The authors were trained by Louise Guerney, Barry Ginsberg and Rise VanFleet, (Ginsberg, 1997; L. Guerney, 1976; VanFleet, 2005). Their program, the Philly Filial Parenting Program, subsequently renamed the Caplin-Pernet Filial Group Program, is a 12-session parenting program that retained the fundamental elements of the Guerney model. The program used mock play sessions and live supervision during which parents played with each child in the family. Over the four-year period that the authors conducted these groups, the families who participated were women (and a few men) from racially and economically diverse backgrounds. The household structures varied from single parent and two parent families to foster care, adoptive and kinship families. The participants ranged in age from their early 20s all the way to the 70s and 80s and included mothers, fathers, caregivers, a great aunt, grandmothers and a great grandmother. The treatment nursery facility provided by CcTC, gave the authors the unique ability to conduct the parent group while the children (ages three to eight) received childcare. Consequently, the children were available during the demonstration and training portions of the program. The following is the story of one group member's journey through the Philly Filial Parenting Program (the names have been changed for confidentiality).

### Hope's Journey to Re-unification

She was a scared young woman when she walked into the first meeting at the Philly Filial Parenting Program. She entered the room, her straight blonde hair in a ponytail, eyes facing downward, and her face held much sadness. Hope looked more like a teenager than the mother of two daughters. Unlike her name, she was losing hope of regaining custody of her children. While some parents in the group kept their histories to themselves, Hope was relieved to have a place to tell her story. Eighteen months earlier, she made the difficult decision to place her children in foster care through the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS). At the time, she faced an overwhelming set of obstacles including an abusive boyfriend, an undiagnosed bi-polar disorder, a lack of family support, no friends, and poor prospects for making a living as a high school dropout. Hope was screaming at her children and felt she was on the verge of physically abusing them. Her oldest daughter Maria was two and the youngest Elana was a toddler, barely learning to walk. Their father was Mexican and not involved in parenting.

The children were placed in a Hispanic foster home, with a Spanish-speaking foster parent. Due to the timing of the placement and language development, Elana did not learn English; instead, she learned to speak Spanish like her "Mama", the foster mother, Mrs. Vasquez. Sadly, Hope was unable to speak to her youngest daughter, now 2-1/2, without an interpreter. Currently, she was battling with the system for the return of her children. She entered our group hoping for just one more chance at family reunification.

At the first session, Hope was surprised at the support she received from the other parents. After a playful icebreaker, the group leaders (the authors) explained that the Filial

Program parenting group was unique and would involve a combination of support and hands-on parent training. Instead of a lecture and discussion, the group leaders and later the parents would be conducting play sessions with their children. The play sessions are based on the non-judgmental acceptance of each child and parent and on the power of education and practice to make positive relationship shifts. The group members learned four basic parenting skills: empathic listening, structuring, limit setting and imaginative play. These skills are used in the special play time sessions and ultimately generalize the play session skills to everyday life. During the parenting program, the leaders would first demonstrate "special play time", (non-directed child-centered play sessions), with each child individually while the parents watched. After the demonstration, the leaders trained the parents to do the play sessions then supervised the parent playing with their child or children and finally, planned the transition of the play to home.

Hope's oldest daughter Maria was a delicate and smart four-year-old with beautiful brown eyes, a charming smile and problematically screaming outbursts and temper tantrums. During the leader's demonstration session, Hope was surprised that Maria played and interacted so easily with an adult she did not know. When Hope began doing mock play sessions she allowed herself to laugh, to learn the four basic parenting skills and to make mistakes. She soaked up the positive feedback and the specific skill building suggestions. When the time came to begin the play sessions with Maria, Hope was able to enter her daughter's world. At the time, their contact was limited to one short visit a week in addition to the group session. Initially, Maria was cautious with her mother, letting her mother watch, but not actively interacting with her. Maria would quietly draw pictures with her back to her mother. Hope would use the empathic listening skill as Maria drew pictures. Quietly she would say, "You are using a lot of red ... you're working hard drawing that picture." Maria would let her know subtly that her comments were heard and taken in. During the debriefing post-session discussion, Hope became upset at what she perceived as Maria's rejection of her. The authors were able to help her appreciate

When Maria asked for them to draw together and proudly displayed their picture, Hope's face lit up. She realized that Maria was allowing herself to reattach.



Maria's process and give her feedback on her ability to accept Maria exactly as she was.

As the play sessions continued, Maria became freer in her play and wanted her mother to connect with her. When Maria asked them to draw together and proudly displayed their picture, Hope's face lit up. She realized that Maria was allowing herself to reattach. Hope was observed and received supervised feedback on five different occasions for 15-minute play sessions with her daughter. This shorter observation time allowed all participants to be observed during supervised sessions on multiple occasions and with all age-appropriate children in their household. Hope was assisted in generalizing the play skills to play at home. This process when combined with the play sessions helped reduce Maria's tantrum behaviors.

Hope used the check-in time at the beginning of the group meeting to express her frustration, disappointment and fear of losing her children. She worked diligently in the group, accepted the support of the other group members and offered suggestions to them. Hope also had help from the leaders in dealing with child protective services. One of the leaders wrote a letter to Hope's psychiatrist, which facilitated overnight home visits. She also had assistance regarding participation in her reunification planning meeting with DHS and the foster care agency. Hope was able to reunify with her daughters and connect with community supports including a community center geared to women's issues, a trusted counselor, in-home Head Start for her youngest child (which helped with the language challenge), and a GED program to help her complete her education. At the end of the 12 weeks, Hope wrote, "Wow, it's been an amazing twelve weeks, my daughter comes to (CcTC) school for her behavior and my children are in temporary foster care for about 1 year ... I started this program a little nervous

and end up very confident. Before I yelled a lot and now I use the techniques they taught me, I learn to look at the situation before acting, and also allow my child to demonstrate thru play to tell me how she's feeling ... it allows me to go inside her world ..."

During one of the author's last conversations with Hope, she remarked on the improvement in her relationship with both children. As a consequence of her improved self-confidence and self-esteem, she was better able to access and maintain ongoing relationships with community programs. She proudly announced that she was participating in a march to City Hall to help keep community programs funded. In her elongated, yet empowering journey to reunite with her children, this young woman who had never known her own voice found hers. She had so little hope, yet gained confidence through the Filial Group Program. Now Hope and her daughters, Maria and Elana, face a future filled with connection, care and newfound hope.

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