

# MRS!

INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF NORTH CAROLINA'S MULTIPLE RESPONSE SYSTEM

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December 2008

## Working with Families Who Are “Stuck”

Child welfare work is tough. Because the safety, permanence, and well-being of children are at stake, there can be a great deal of pressure to act decisively and get results quickly. At the same time, most families we work with face complex challenges that defy simple solutions.

*When a family is stuck, we need to find what will work for them, not blame them for being stuck.*

For proof that child welfare work is hard, consider the phenomenon of families who get “stuck.” Typically, the situation looks like this: (1) a case decision has been reached, requiring involuntary services for the family; (2) the family and DSS have developed a case plan; and (3) there is a distinct lack of progress on the issues that caused the family to become involved with DSS in the first place.

In other words, there is a plan, but it is not being implemented. Time is passing, but things aren't getting better. The day when DSS is out of the family's life seems to be getting no closer.

In this situation, family members are often resentful, defiant, passive aggressive, and/or defensive toward the agency. They know things are not working. They anticipate criticism and may feel despair. For their part, child welfare workers may feel disappointed, frustrated, and pessimistic about the family's future.

### Suggestions for Getting Unstuck

Here are some suggestions, drawn from Turnell and Edwards (1999) and other sources, for working with families who are stuck.

**1. Withhold judgment.** The idea that “judgments can wait” is one of North Carolina's family-centered principles of partnership. It is also a great challenge. When you feel you have done all you can on behalf of a family, it can be extremely frustrating if it appears the family is not holding up their end of the “bargain.” However, don't give in to the natural impulse to assign blame. Restrain your expectations. Keep an open mind regarding the family's motives. There are many reasons why a family might not work towards the stated case goals. Until a family can share with you their true fears and motivations, progress is unlikely. If you avoid appearing critical, you may increase the likelihood that a family will open up to you and real progress can take place.

**2. Look for positive intent.** Families often do what they do (and don't do) in order to meet some need they have. Find this positive intent and then help the family use it to get things moving in the right direction. *continued next page*

## MRS Meetings

*Due to travel restrictions, until further notice monthly MRS and System of Care meetings will take place via conference call. To learn more about this, please refer to the article on page 3. For key information for upcoming calls, see below.*

### January 15, 20, & 28

Call times: 10-11:30 a.m.  
Call-in number:  
219/509-8020  
Access code: 956303

### February 18, 24, & 26

Call times: 10-11:30 a.m.  
Call-in number:  
219/509-8020  
Access code: 956303

### MRS Questions?

If you have questions regarding the implementation of any aspect of MRS, please contact Holly McNeill at 828/757-5672  
holly.mcneill@ncmail.net

## Training Dates

### Adoptions in Child Welfare Services

#### February 10-13

Fayetteville  
 Contact: Amy Campbell  
 910/677-0460  
 (fax) 910/677-0468

#### May 19-22

Kinston  
 Contact: Betty Williford  
 252/520-2413  
 (fax) 252/520-2417

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### Comments?

Contact Patrick Betancourt, Child Welfare Services, NC Division of Social Services, 2408 Mail Service Center, 325 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh, NC 27699-2408, Courier: 56-20-25, 919/334-1104; [patrick.betancourt@ncmail.net](mailto:patrick.betancourt@ncmail.net)

### Online

[www.ncdhs.gov/dss/mrs](http://www.ncdhs.gov/dss/mrs)

## Working with Families Who Are “Stuck” *continued from page 1*

**3. Focus carefully on details.** This will help ensure you do not overlook subtle changes or signs of progress. It may also help you identify new things to try. A family may have some small detail they are willing to work on that seems relatively unimportant to you—but it may be crucial to building rapport and increasing their motivation for bigger changes.

**4. Consult your supervisor and/or peers.** As soon as you notice yourself feeling frustrated, disappointed, or pessimistic about working with a family, talk to your supervisor and other social workers in your agency. Timely consultation and hearing varied perspectives can help generate ideas for achieving progress and renew your enthusiasm and sense of possibilities.

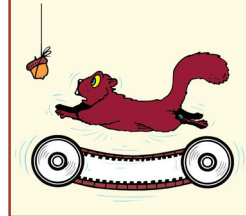
**5. Be clear on the fundamentals.** Review the situation. Are you clear about the purpose of your involvement with the family? Do you have clear and reasonable criteria for case closure? Sometimes a case appears “stuck” because, although the family may have continuing needs, safety and CPS issues have been addressed. When this happens, the case should be closed because the issues that remain are better left to community resources.

**6. Own your part in things.** When a family seems resistant, they are in part resisting or reacting to your relationship with them. Acknowledge to the family that your partnership has gotten stuck and ask how to get it back on track. If your agency has been wrong or missed something, admit it. If what the agency is doing clearly isn’t helping the family, let them know that you know. Sometimes an admission of this kind can change the power differential with the family just enough to spark or rebuild cooperation.

**7. Hold a family-led review of the situation.** When the family is stuck, we need to find what will work for them. The best way to do that is to ask them. This can be done in a discussion with the family and the caseworker, or in a Child and Family Team meeting (CFT).

**8. Do something different.** When a family gets stuck, it is a cue that we need to change strategies (Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Don’t try to solve problems with solutions that aren’t working. If what you are doing (e.g., current case plan) doesn’t work, don’t do it again. Do something different. Ask the family their ideas again about what they want to change and how they think you can help. Once you know what works, do more of it (deShazer & Berg, 1995).

*“Stuck” means the family and agency are caught in a cycle of repeatedly doing something that is not working.*



### References

- deShazer, S. & Berg, I. K. (1995). The brief therapy tradition. In J. Weakland & W. Ray (Eds.), *Propagations: Thirty years influence from the Mental Research Institute*. NY: Haworth.
- Miller, W. R. & Rollnick, S. (1991). *Motivational interviewing: Preparing people for change*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Turnell, A. & Edwards, S. (1999). *Signs of safety: A solution-oriented approach to child protection casework*. NY: Norton.

## MRS/SOC Monthly Conference Calls

Because the current economic climate has severely limited travel for many public agencies in North Carolina, until further notice the three meetings the Division of Social Services holds each month to support MRS and System of Care will occur via conference call. Below are the guidelines for participating in these meetings.



1. There will be three dates offered during each month; these will be spread over two to three weeks.
2. Counties may join in any conference without regard to "region."
3. Meeting dates and agendas will continue to be announced through the MRS e-mail list within the first week of the month. Dates and call-in numbers will also be listed at <[www.google.com/calendar/embed?src=multipleresponse%40gmail.com](http://www.google.com/calendar/embed?src=multipleresponse%40gmail.com)>. If this link doesn't work, go to Google, click on "calendars," and search in public calendars for "Multiple Response System."
4. Counties will need to RSVP to Holly McNeill so arrangements can be made for the necessary number of phone lines. An RSVP due date will be included in the meeting announcement e-mail. RSVPs will not need to list the names for who will be on the call, just that one or more people from your agency will be participating. If your county or agency will need more than one phone line, please indicate that in your RSVP. RSVP by calling 828/757-5672 or e-mailing [holly.mcneill@ncmail.net](mailto:holly.mcneill@ncmail.net).
5. Conference calls will be presented in a "Conversational Mode," allowing participants to ask questions when needed. However, to reduce background noise participants are asked to use the mute option when they are not speaking. We will be using "Freeconference.com" for our calls. This service allows participants to mute/unmute themselves by pressing the "\*6" button on your phone. (Note, different conference call services may have different ways of muting participants.)
6. Conference calls will be scheduled for 90 minutes, but will have a cushion of an extra 30 minutes to allow conversation to be completed.
7. Agendas will be sent out at least two weeks in advance of the first meeting. It will be helpful if questions are sent to Holly McNeill ([holly.mcneill@ncmail.net](mailto:holly.mcneill@ncmail.net)) in advance so they may be answered or put to the group for suggestions.
8. If questions come up during the conference call, participants are asked to please announce their name and county/agency before speaking.
9. Though calls will be facilitated by the Division, we will continue to rely on counties and other partners to provide thoughts, insights, and ideas openly.
10. At the beginning of each meeting, we will use the RSVP list to confirm who is in attendance. Participants will be asked to announce who is on the phone from each county or partner agency so that we may continue to track attendance and report this information to our federal partners. If you did not RSVP, please be sure to announce yourself on the phone so that your presence will be documented.

## Training Dates

### Introduction to the Monthly Foster Care Contact Record

This 90-minute, self-paced online course is always available. To take it, simply log on to [ncswLearn.org](http://ncswLearn.org) and access this course via the Personalized Learning Portfolio (PLP) / Online Courses section of the website.

### CPS Assessments in Child Welfare Services

#### January 6-9

Kinston

Contact: Betty Williford

252/520-2413

(fax) 252/520-2417

#### February 3-6

Charlotte

Contact: Bonnie English

704/395-2110

(fax) 704/395-2101

#### March 17-20

Greensboro

Contact: Elaine Highsmith

336/954-1747

(fax) 336/954-1750

#### April 21-24

Asheville

Contact: Amy Campbell

910/677-0460

(fax) 910/677-0468

#### May 19-22

Fayetteville

Contact: Amy Campbell

910/677-0460

(fax) 910/677-0468

## Training Dates

### **Methamphetamine: What a Social Worker Needs to know**

This self-paced online course is always available. To take it, simply log on to [ncswLearn.org](http://ncswLearn.org) and access this course via the Personalized Learning Portfolio (PLP) / Online Courses section of the website.

### **Introduction to Supervision for Child Welfare Services**

#### **Starts March 11**

Asheville  
Contact: Amy Campbell  
910/677-0460  
(fax) 910/677-0468

#### **Starts March 25**

Fayetteville  
Contact: Amy Campbell  
910/677-0460  
(fax) 910/677-0468

### **Child Development in Families at Risk**

Sessions of this online course start on the following dates. To learn more about this course or to register, go to [ncswLearn.org](http://ncswLearn.org).

January 6

February 17

March 10

March 17

March 31

April 21

May 12

## **The Correlation Between Unemployment and Child Maltreatment**

Research has long demonstrated a correlation between increased rates of unemployment and higher rates of child maltreatment. Thirty years ago, psychologist and child development specialist Dr. Uri Bronfenbrenner, one of the creators of the Head Start program, published research revealing that rates of child abuse are higher in areas characterized by unusually high rates of unemployment. Researchers in the succeeding decades have corroborated those findings with information that increases in child abuse are preceded by periods of high job loss, and that unemployed fathers are far more likely than employed fathers to physically abuse their children.

*North Carolina's unemployment rate has been rising. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, it rose from 5.4% in April 2008 to 7.0% in October 2008.*

In a 1983 hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Labor Standards, Dr. Lewis H. Margolis, a pediatrician and researcher at the University of North Carolina, testified, "If I were to select one stress as the most damaging and disruptive to children, it would be the loss of work by their parents." At the same hearing, David Mills of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services presented the results of a study in which he compared increases in unemployment rates with increases of reported child abuse cases. His study, he said, showed that "the 10 counties whose average annual unemployment rate increased most from 1979 to 1981 [also] averaged an increase of 68.7 percent in child-abuse reporting." By comparison, those counties with the smallest increase in unemployment averaged only a 12.3% increase in reported child abuse cases, he said.

In a 1993 report on child abuse and neglect, the National Research Council identified unemployment among the "stresses" associated with child maltreatment and "specific risks posed to children." A 2000 edition of the *Handbook for Child Protection* cites "recent unemployment" among the "risk factors for abuse" in its guidance to child protective service workers, and *continued next page*

### **Tips for Reducing the Stress of Unemployment**

- Keep the family routine intact as much as possible.
- Ensure children continue to have low-cost opportunities to play while giving the caretaker parent a "break." This might include walks together, time spent in parks, and play-dates with other children.
- Use your local "One Stop" employment center. In most communities these are called Job Link Centers. They have a wealth of information, including job leads, tips on interviewing, and assistance with completing employment applications and resumes.
- Network. Stay in close contact with family, friends, and neighbors.
- Seek out supportive, positive people. Avoid those who are not.

*Special thanks to Emily Wilkins, Work First Program Representative, NC Division of Social Services*

## Unemployment *continued from page 4*

“financial problem” is listed by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System as one of twelve caregiver risk factors related to the family’s inability to provide sufficient financial resources to meet minimum needs.

Clearly, parental stress in times of financial difficulties can contribute to child abuse and neglect. *For updated unemployment figures for NC, go to <http://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.nc.htm>.* The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (1996) found that children from families with incomes below \$15,000 per year were more than 22 times more likely to be harmed by abuse or neglect than children whose families earned more than \$30,000 per year. While most poor people do not maltreat their children, poverty — as pointed out in a 2003 publication of the U.S. Children’s Bureau — particularly when interacting with other risk factors, including unemployment, can increase the likelihood of maltreatment.

With the current unemployment rate in the United States at a five-year high there is concern that our nation’s children will be put at greater risk of abuse or neglect. In August of this year, the unemployment rate jumped from 5.7% in July to 6.1%, and the rate has held through September, with the most recent numbers reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) on October 21. Significantly, the number of long-term unemployed (those jobless for 27 weeks or more) is up by 167,000 to 2.0 million, an increase of 728,000 over the past 12 months, accounting for 21.1% of the total number of those without jobs.

A national commitment to the well-being of children must recognize and respond to the correlation between unemployment and violence toward children. Supportive and preventive efforts are needed for unemployed parents and their families, especially in areas where there is a high incidence of recent job loss.

The state-by-state unemployment rates for September released by the BLS show 18 states and the District of Columbia with unemployment rates above the national rate of 6.1%. The highest are in Michigan (8.7%) and Rhode Island (8.8%); the two states with the lowest rates below 3.5% are South Dakota (3.2%) and Wyoming (3.3%). While analysts do not expect unemployment rates to reach as high as the Great Depression era rates of 25%, unemployment could approach double-digits for the first time since the early 1980s.

Reprinted from *The Washington Memorandum* (Vol. 28, No. 20 - October 31, 2008), newsletter of the National Child Abuse Coalition

## Strengthen Your Link to Work First

When the economy takes a downturn, child welfare professionals must redouble their efforts to collaborate with their colleagues in economic services. For suggestions for fine-tuning your strategies, consult volume 9, number 3 of *Children’s Services Practice Notes* <[http://www.practicenotes.org/vol9\\_no3/WF\\_final.pdf](http://www.practicenotes.org/vol9_no3/WF_final.pdf)>.



## Training Dates

### Step-by-Step: An Introduction to Child and Family Teams

To register for any of the following events, please log on to [ncswLearn.org](http://ncswLearn.org).

**December 18-19**  
Hillsborough

**January 6-7**  
Fayetteville

**January 14-15**  
Sylva

**January 14-15**  
Columbus

**January 28-29**  
Greensboro

**January 28-29**  
Elizabethtown

**February 2- 3**  
Raleigh

**February 24-25**  
Charlotte

**March 9-10**  
Wilmington

**March 25-26**  
High Point

**April 22-23**  
Raleigh

**April 27-28**  
Lincolnton

**June 3-4**  
Black Mountain

## Training Dates

To register for any of the following events, please log on to [ncswLearn.org](http://ncswLearn.org).

### CPS In-Home Services

**January 27-30**  
Kinston

**March 3-6**  
Candler

**March 24-27**  
Greensboro

**May 5-8**  
Fayetteville

**June 23-26**  
Charlotte

### Placement in Child Welfare Services

**March 10-13**  
Greensboro

**March 31-April 3**  
Charlotte

**June 16-19**  
Fayetteville

### Intake in Child Welfare Services

**February 18-20**  
Kinston

**June 24-26**  
Candler

## Tips for Helping Families in Tough Economic Times

**Reduce Food Stress.** Unfortunately, soaring food prices have made DSS Food/Nutrition Services less helpful than they have been in the past. Instead, explore low cost meals available from the NC Cooperative Extension Service, food banks, and other sources.

Also, many cookbooks contain recipes for making bubbles, play dough, and other things. Agencies could offer some of these to parents as a low cost way to provide fun for their children. A few cookie recipes could be included as a family activity.

**Encourage Volunteering.** For example, many nursing homes would welcome youth volunteers/visitors. In turn, the child would get to spend time learning about volunteering and the good feeling of being wanted. Parents could turn this into a teachable moment and family outing—a true win-win activity.

**Use the Library.** Most public libraries have DVD and tape loan programs that could help parents provide low cost movie nights for their families. In addition, a trip to the library can be educational and entertaining for the whole family.

**Engage the Community.** For example, Clay County DSS asked local grocery and drug stores to take part in a diaper drive campaign. Participating businesses provide a bin and encourage customers to donate diapers and wipes. DSS distributes donated items to low income families.

**Use the Media.** Run an article or series of articles in your local newspaper to show the community the impact economic hard times have on real families and inspire assistance to help relieve this crunch we are all experiencing. We are a generous society.

*Special thanks to Sybil Wheeler, Work First Program Representative, NC Division of Social Services*

## Relevant Learning Resource

North Carolina has developed several child welfare training courses to support professionals serving families in poverty. Among these is *Understanding and Intervening in Child Neglect*. This two-day course helps practitioners understand how poverty and neglect are linked (but not the same) and helps them develop skills for working with families who neglect.

This training, which encourages participants to recognize the need for various approaches when providing services, will be offered next on January 13 - 14, 2009 at the Division's Charlotte Regional Training Center. For more information on or to register go to [www.ncswlearn.org](http://www.ncswlearn.org).

