

MRS!

INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF NORTH CAROLINA'S MULTIPLE RESPONSE SYSTEM

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SEPTEMBER 2005

Welcome to Our First Issue

North Carolina is on a journey. With every step, we are working to make services for families and children more consistent, supportive, and family-centered. We want them to be more about collaboration than compliance. More about strengths, partnership, and progress than about deficits.

In North Carolina we call this journey the Multiple Response System, or MRS. We truly believe MRS is the way to improve safety, permanence, and well-being for all children in our state.

This new quarterly publication is designed to support county departments of social services as they put the strategies and principles of MRS into practice. Produced collaboratively by the NC Division of Social Services and the Jordan Institute for Families, part of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work, **MRS!** will spotlight successful family-centered practices, provide news and updates, and feature information about MRS-related training opportunities. Every issue will strive to give you information you can use to enhance outcomes for families and children.

In this issue, we feature information from the "MRS Learning Institute" that took place in Greensboro on June 1-3, 2005. Although representatives from 89 county departments of social services attended this event, we know that many people were interested in this Institute but could not attend. On pages two and four of this issue you will find the first in a series of articles that will attempt to pass along some of the knowledge and excitement from the 2005 MRS Learning Institute.

If you are in a county that has been involved with MRS for a while, thank you. We would not be where we are today without your hard work, leadership, and willingness to try new ways of working. If your county has just joined or is soon to join MRS, we'd like to thank you in advance. With your help we will continue making child welfare services in North Carolina more family-centered.

We are proud to be on this journey with you as our partners.

—The Editors

MRS Meetings

Meetings will be held from 10 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Eastern Meetings

Sept. 22
Wilson Co. DSS
Wilson, NC

Oct. 24
Wilson Co. DSS
Wilson, NC

Central Meetings

Sept. 29
Randolph Co. DSS
Asheboro, NC

Oct. 25
Guilford Co. DSS
Greensboro, NC

Western Meetings

Sept. 16
Higgins Methodist Church
Burnsville, NC
(Yancey County)

The time and place for the October Western meeting has not yet been chosen

If you have questions about meeting times, locations, or topics, contact Holly McNeil 828/757-5672, Holly.McNeill@ncmail.net

Training Dates

Supporting Partnerships in Parenting

Sept. 29-30
Marion
Contact: Elaine Highsmith
336/954-1747
336/954-1750 (fax)

Oct. 13-14
Charlotte
Contact: Bonnie English
704/395-2110
704/395-2101 (fax)

Oct. 27-28
Fayetteville
Contact: Amy Campbell
910/677-0460
910/677-0468 (fax)

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Comments?

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Online

www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs

Peter De Jong: Child Safety and the Language of Change

Based on presentations at the 2005 MRS Learning Institute

At the MRS Learning Institute in June, Peter De Jong, Professor of Sociology and Social Work at Calvin College and an expert on solution-focused practice, gave some challenging advice to North Carolina's child welfare workers and supervisors. De Jong urged them to see conversation—not parenting classes or other services—as their primary tool for inviting client change.

Over the years, De Jong says, he and his colleagues have discovered that professionals do not change clients. Rather, clients *change themselves* by doing something different. He believes the flip side of this is equally true: you can't force someone to change, even if it is for the best.

Thus, De Jong argues, short of the extreme step of removing children from their homes, the only way we can ensure the safety of children is to establish cooperative relationships with parents.

De Jong says practitioners can do this by listening for "hints of solutions" and asking the right kinds of questions when they talk to parents. For De Jong, the right kind of questions are "not knowing" questions—those based in a genuine desire to understand someone else's perspective, questions that do not harbor assumptions about the other person's motives or concerns.

Because he sees them as central to our ability to achieve positive outcomes for children and families, De Jong wants practitioners to be keenly aware of what they are listening for and what they ask. How we ask questions matters, De Jong says, because how we ask shapes the answer we get, which shapes our next question, and on and on.

De Jong says that asking the right kind of questions—such as those below—can help clients open the door to positive change:

- What tells you that ... (echo client words) ?
- Tell me more about ... (echo client words) ?
- So ... is really important to you.
- So what you want to see different is ...?
- Suppose that were to happen, if ...?
- How would ... be helpful?
- What difference would ... make for ...?
- Could that happen? What would it take?

If you are interested in learning more about De Jong's work, consider reading *Interviewing for Solutions* (1998, Brooks/Cole), which he coauthored with Insoo Kim Berg. You can also find the handouts from his keynote address and workshop by going to www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs/.



Peter De Jong

Governor Signs New MRS-related Legislation

On May 23, 2005, Governor Easley signed House Bill 277 into law, allowing all North Carolina counties to change the way they respond to reports of abuse, neglect, and dependency.

When it goes into effect on October 1, 2005, HB 277 makes changes—described at right—to chapter 7B of North Carolina’s legal code. These changes reflect the reformation of child welfare practice that has been taking place in our state’s 52 MRS counties since 2002.

HB 277 gives county DSS’s two tools to help them work with families to ensure the safety, permanence, and well-being of North Carolina’s children. The **family assessment response** allows agencies to

use a more supportive, nonadversarial approach when assessing and engaging most families reported for child neglect and dependency. The **investigative assessment response** allows agencies to conduct a thorough investigative assessment and to work closely with law enforcement in response to reports of intentional child abuse. The investigative assessment response sends a clear message that violence against children is a crime and will be punished.

The passing of HB 277 signifies the General Assembly’s strong support for family-centered practice, which they believe is the most effective way to protect North Carolina’s children and make their families stronger.

MRS Staff Changes at the State Level

In July, Holly McNeill joined the staff of the Division as the new MRS Policy Consultant, filling the vacancy created when Tony Troop was made statewide MRS Coordinator. McNeill comes to the Division from Caldwell County DSS.

“I am excited to work with the counties on MRS,” she says. “With MRS we are sharing the burden of making children safe, not only with their families, who most want them to be safe, but with the community, which greatly benefits from healthier, more self-sufficient families.” You can contact McNeill by phone (828/757-5672) or e-mail (Holly.McNeill@ncmail.net).



Holly McNeill

Changes Under NC House Bill 277

Effective October 1, 2005:

1. Throughout chapter 7B the word “investigation” is changed to “assessment.”

2. The following definitions are given for the two assessments DSS’s can use to respond to reports of abuse, neglect, and dependency:

“Family assessment response. A response to selected reports of child neglect and dependency as determined by the Director using a family-centered approach that is protection- and prevention-oriented and that evaluates the strengths and needs of the juvenile’s family, as well as the condition of the juvenile.”

“Investigative assessment response. A response to reports of child abuse and selected reports of child neglect and dependency as determined by the Director using a formal information-gathering process to determine whether a juvenile is abused, neglected, or dependent.”

3. When assessing reports of abuse and neglect in child care facilities, DSS is no longer required to visit the residence of victim children.

Training Dates

Cornerstone IIIA: A New Perspective on CPS

Sept. 13-15

Marion

Contact: Donna Walters

828/433-7187

828/430-8762 (fax)

Oct. 4-6

Granville/Vance

Contact: Judy Prophet

704/ 545-9512

704/ 573-4802 (fax)

Oct. 18-20

Morganton

Contact: Donna Walters

Oct. 19-21

Washington/Dare

Contact: Judy Prophet

Nov. 29-Dec. 1

Kinston

Contact: Donna Walters

Cornerstone IIIB: Intro to Family-Centered Practice

Sept. 21-23

Charlotte

Contact: Donna Walters

Oct. 11-13

Winston Salem

Contact: Donna Walters

Oct. 11-13

Plymouth

Contact: Judy Prophet

Oct. 19-21

NH/Hertford/Bertie

Contact: Judy Prophet

Oct. 24-26

Kinston

Contact: Judy Prophet

Nov. 2-4

Fayetteville

Contact: Judy Prophet

Nov. 15-17

Charlotte

Contact: Donna Walters

Training Dates

Family-Centered Meeting Learning Events

There are a great many events being offered this fall to train counties in the use of child and family team meetings. Specifically, the Family-Centered Meetings Project at NCSU is offering:

Setting the Stage for Family-Centered Meetings: An Agency and Community Orientation

Caution: Family Meeting Ahead! A Guide for Social Workers Attending Family-Centered Meetings

Anchors Away! How to Navigate Family Meetings: The Role of the Facilitator

The ABC's of Including Children in Family-Centered Meetings

Widening the Circle: Family-Centered Meetings and Safety Issues

County-Specific Transfer of Learning Activities in Support of Family-Centered Meetings

For a complete listing of the dates and locations of these course offerings, consult the Division's training calendar at <www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/training/>

Minnesota Shares "Lessons Learned" from an Evaluation of Its Alternative Response Approach

Before North Carolina created its Multiple Response System, it spent a lot of time studying similar efforts already underway in other states—especially Minnesota, which also has a state supervised, county administered child welfare system. Minnesota began implementing "Alternative Response," its MRS-like child welfare system reform effort, in 1999.

North Carolina liked what it saw in Minnesota. Many features of that state's Alternative Response were incorporated into MRS, including a continued emphasis on child safety, a revised screening tool, the use of Structured Decision Making Assessment Tools, a focus on family strengths, the early provision of services to families, and the ability to switch a response from one track to another as needed.

Because of the similarities of our efforts, North Carolina was very interested when the results of a five-year evaluation of Alternative Response were published November 2004. Thanks to foundation funding, Minnesota conducted a top-quality, longitudinal evaluation of its efforts. The evaluation used a design that randomly assigned families to treatment and control groups, and it featured a three-part study of the impact, process, and cost of Alternative Response.

At the MRS Learning Institute in June 2005, David Thompson, a program manager with Minnesota's Division of Child Safety and Permanency, gave a summary of the evaluation, which concluded that Alternative Response:

- Enhances child safety and lowers recurrence of maltreatment
- Is appropriate for more than 50% of reports
- Increases the number of families that receive services early
- Decreases the need for more intensive services in the future
- Increases social worker perception of family cooperation
- Is significantly more cost-effective

Impressive as these benefits are, the strongest argument in favor of Alternative Response may be the positive impact it has on families. Evaluators found that after receiving the Alternative Response, families have more stable living situations, are more likely to be employed, report a reduction in alcohol/drug use and domestic violence, and have fewer concerns about their children's school behavior, emotional health, and delinquent behavior.

To view slides from Thompson's presentation, go to <www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs/>. To read the final report on the evaluation of Minnesota's Alternative Response, go to <www.iarstl.org/papers/ARFinalEvaluationReport.pdf>.

"Alternative Response produced significantly better outcomes for families at significantly lower cost."

—David Thompson,
MN Dept. of Human Resources