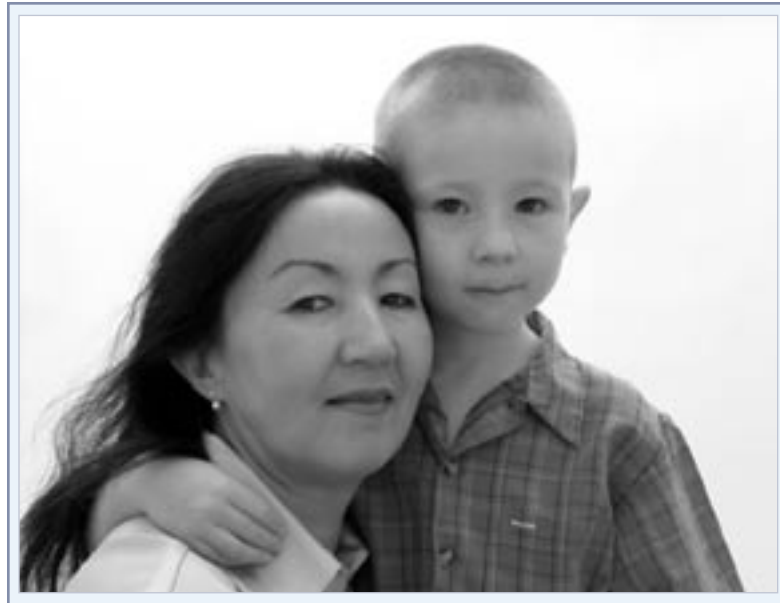


NATURAL SUPPORTS FROM A PARENT PERSPECTIVE



I am the mother of a grown son who had significant behavioral health and other challenges as a youth. I am also a wraparound trainer, trainer of youth and parent mentors, and an active leader in our local parent support organization. It is from these perspectives that I will share my thoughts about the importance of natural supports in the wraparound process.

My adopted son, Jason, presented many challenges. Some professionals thought his biological mother's heroin and cocaine addiction during pregnancy were the cause of his difficult and sometimes frightening behavior. He was given numerous diagnoses: Conduct Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, PTSD, ADHD, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

In 1994, when Jason was 14 years old, he was nearing discharge from residential treatment. A psychiatrist who had evaluated Jason told me he would likely need institutionalization

for most of his life. I rejected this prediction and believed there must be a way for Jason to come home and stay in our community.

In the early 1990s, wraparound was in its initial implementation in King County, Washington. I was receiving support from parents involved in a parent organization in our area. One of the local leaders and a professional partnering with the parent organization suggested that a new support- and strength-based approach, wraparound, might be beneficial to Jason and me, since typical professional services had not resulted in sustained improvement in Jason and our family life. I was given a copy of a wraparound training manual, which I read on my own.

I learned that the core of the wraparound process was a child and family team and that the team should include professional service providers as well as natural supports—those individuals in the life of the youth and family

who knew them best. I learned that the team's job was to provide support and to develop and implement an individualized and strength-based plan that addressed priority needs.

As I considered the possibility of the wraparound process for Jason and me, I recognized that the prospect of including natural supports on a team was a good "fit" with our family culture. The tradition and culture of our family emphasizes community, i.e., taking care of our own and each other are prominent values of the tradition. I was also raised in a Bible-believing family. Biblical scripture emphasizes supporting one another unconditionally in the community of faith. Involving natural supports on our team was consistent with our values, personal beliefs, and family culture.

I recognized that the idea of organizing natural supports to help Jason and me through the wraparound process felt comfortable, safe, and natural. Who better to provide support

than those individuals whom we trust the most and who know us the best? Natural supports would be there with us over the long haul—professionals turnover and eventually go away—

gotten to know Jason through shared interests in REI (A Seattle-based outdoor equipment company), could defuse his rages by simply coming to the door when I called for help. Jason's

from an extended family member who organized an impromptu barbeque for me to relieve the unrelenting tension from one of Jason's frequent 'runs.' This simple act of celebrating as family and friends, rather than being consumed by worry and caught up in the 'drama' of my son's behavior, gave me a completely new perspective.

In the years since as a wrap-around trainer, trainer of youth and parent mentors, parent partner, and as an active leader in our local parent support organization, I have been involved with many other youth and their families who were facing daunting challenges. My experiences with these families have validated over and over again the wisdom and importance of helping families to identify, mobilize and build sources of natural support. Natural support is suitable for the culture of most families as well as essential to

achieving and sustaining functional outcomes.

Postscript

Jason is 25 now. His life is not perfect. He lives on his own. He lives in the community and we continue to have an important relationship with each other.

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This article was written by Greg S. Dalder and Lyn Gordon, based on an interview with Jeanette Barnes.



and natural supports would be more accessible. I could call a neighbor or friend at 2 a.m. and know that they'd be there; not so with Jason's therapist.

I decided to conduct our own wraparound process. I convened and facilitated our own child and family wraparound team. Our initial team was composed of Jason's older brother and sister, my best friend from work, a boxing coach and his wife, my parents over long distance, our case manager, Jason's therapist, and a teacher. Later a neighbor couple joined the team along with Jason's friend Peter and his mother. All of these people already knew us, and knew our family's story; each person brought an ability, a strength to match a specific need. The boxing coach, for example, used his skills to teach Jason how to regulate his emotions, and a neighbor, who had

older brother—his BIG older brother, all of 6'3" and 240 pounds—also helped interrupt disruptive behavior, while Jason's older sister and her husband provided respite care.

Though there were many ups and downs, our team showed us persistent commitment, gave us much needed emotional and tangible support, and came up with many creative ideas we would have never thought of alone. One creative idea came from our neighbors. After we'd agreed that they would come over to my house to help calm Jason, we needed a reliable, quiet way to signal that help was needed. They found a solution: when we needed help, I would flick on Christmas lights in our kitchen windows (a porch light wouldn't serve the same purpose, and our porch was not visible from their home in any case). Surprising emotional support came

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