

‘WORK WITH ME:’  
BEST PRACTICE  
WITH SUBSTANCE USING  
MOTHERS

Diminishing Risk  
By  
Promoting Strengths

Sydney Michelle Weaver, MSW, RSW

## Qualitative study 2003

Focus groups with substance using mothers  
and child protection workers

Recorded and transcribed data  
Conducted thematic analysis

Study yielded rich findings  
workers and mothers:  
relationship continuum  
ranged from  
'fighting' to 'partners in parenting'

**The  
'Partners in Parenting'  
end of the relationship continuum  
provided us with descriptions of  
collaborative helpful relationships  
and successful outcomes.**

**From these findings,  
we can determine  
what characterized approaches  
that worked.**

Mothers describe positive experiences with child protection workers:

**‘acknowledgement’**

**‘validation’**

**‘non-judgemental’**

**‘took time out to listen to me  
and ask me questions’**

‘really patient with me’

‘realizing, like, she’s not out to get me  
she’s not out to steal my children...  
she’s willing,  
she’s there to *work with me*’

‘she believed in me...  
she was non-judgmental...  
took time out to listen to me ...’

These descriptors are  
consistent with a  
strengths approach:

- listening
- non-judgmental
- validating
- working WITH

Survey conducted in 2003  
40 child protection workers  
working in British Columbia, Canada

- Workers estimate almost 70% of caseload substance-using, however
- self-rated knowledge of helpful approaches with substance users was poor, and
- *70% self-rated as lacking in knowledge of strengths approach.*

# Workers were asked what challenges they face working with substance using mothers

- ‘my lack of knowledge regarding substance abuse and addictions’
- ‘How to facilitate change without resorting to removal’

• *‘Mother’s denial’*

*(a result of the approach?)*

Workers were asked  
what they need to know  
to better help substance-using mothers

- ‘More about theory and how to implement the theory’
- ‘Successful methods to create change’
- ‘What types of substances are being used and how’

- ‘Building trust with clients...being direct with clients’
- ‘Learn motivational strategies’
- ‘Approaches/techniques to deal with substance- using parents’

In response to study findings,  
training was developed  
for child protection workers

The training incorporates information  
about drug use and effective  
approaches with substance users,  
with a strengths-based philosophy

This training was conducted on a contract basis in 2004 in British Columbia, Canada

There have been several revisions to the initial training, based on analysis of the attending workers' feedback, and comments from senior child welfare consultants

This training provides child protection workers with the information and tools they need to work helpfully and effectively with the population that dominates their caseload.

Former substance-using mothers co-facilitate the training.

The training takes place over three full days.

There are five sections to the training.

The training sections can be delivered on successive days, or monthly over a longer period.

Ideally, team leaders are trained first, to enhance support and follow up for workers' practice.

Each section is about 3 hours.

# Training Outline

1. Values and Beliefs
2. Cross-Cultural Awareness
3. Power and Control
4. Helpful Interventions with Substance-Users
5. Practice: Strengths-based Strategies with Substance-Using Mothers

# VALUES AND BELIEFS: Where do they come from?

The media on motherhood ...

*“Today's mother is all about balance. She juggles a career, husband and the kids, navigates traffic, puts food on the table and still gets in a workout before 7 a.m. She manages, because she has her priorities straight: family comes before the rat race.”*

**Calgary Herald**

Published: Sunday, May 14, 2006

**the media on drug users...**

***'Slain grandpa a drug addict'***

**Chris Purdy, The Edmonton Journal**

Published: Tuesday, June 13, 2006

**and drug using mothers...**

***Crack Babies: The Worst Threat is Mom Herself***

**<http://www.welfareacademy.org/pubs/crackbabies-0889.shtml>**

# and the media on child protection workers...

Posted on Sun, Oct. 15, 2006

## **Inquirer Investigation: 'Bury Your Mistakes'**

**“young children are still regularly abused to death  
after coming to the attention of DHS”**

**By Ken Dilanian and John Sullivan**

**Inquirer Staff Writers**

# CROSS CULTURAL AWARENESS

## What makes mothers keep using?

- Popular street drugs:  
crack, cocaine, heroin, crystal meth
- Drug-using subculture:  
values, beliefs, language
- Drug effects:  
behaviours, physical effects

# POWER AND COLLABORATION

- Broken Squares
  - Dream House
  - Assumptions

## Recognizing our Relationship to Power:

*“When I feel powerless, I...”*

*“When I feel powerful, I...”*

## Collaborative Practice:

Getting comfortable with the power of  
child protection work; empowering  
mothers

# Film / Art / Theatre

Power themes in mixed media

- relationships
- across cultures

# HELPFUL INTERVENTIONS WITH SUBSTANCE USERS strengths-based

- Harm reduction/Health promotion
- Stages of Change
- Motivational Interviewing

# What treatment works, when, and for who?

- detox/withdrawal management
- support recovery
- residential and day treatment
- 12 and 16 step models
- alternatives to 12 step models

# **STRENGTHS-BASED STRATEGIES WITH SUBSTANCE-USERS**

- **Incorporate principles of strengths approach**
  - **Applied working with substance-using mothers in a child protection situation**

“for me as a mum...if the social worker could get to see that I’m depressed...and really trying to find out what’s actually going on for me, instead of just finding out if I’m using drugs...but if she’s going to ask me time and time again, are you using drugs, she’s not going to get to know me, and I’m going to feel worse...I’m going to feel like the person doesn’t care about me, right, because I’m feeling like an object, not really feeling like a person”

mother

- be transparent about the presenting concern
- ask her what is going on in her life
- validate her feelings: is she afraid? is she depressed?
- let her know you are there to work *with* her
- acknowledge that you *both* want the same thing: the children to be safe

- let her know you are not the police
- you are not there to judge her
- ask her – in general terms – about her drug use - what is her drug of choice ? does she find it problematic? does she want help?
- explore periods of recovery – has she had ‘clean time’? how did she do that?

- *be ready to let her know what help is available: detox? day treatment?*
- is there a counselor or sponsor that she has worked well with in the past?
- invite mother to plan with you – collaborate -give her choices
- identify resources and needs with her
- what are her goals? to stay with the children? to get clean?

- how can you help her? what resources can you offer? bus pass? advocacy? information about resources?
- *always notice what is working in the situation – emphasize and build on that*
- give her choices and be clear about choices and consequences,
- be clear about your expectations

In this final section, workers practice conducting collaborative, strengths-based interviews with substance-using mothers

Practicing this approach helps workers learn to build relationships with mothers and effectively meet the mandate of facilitating safety for both children and mothers, increasing potential for family preservation

**This approach precludes  
confrontation and therefore  
mothers' 'denial'**

**Child protection workers become  
an effective entry point for mothers  
to access help with problematic  
substance use**

‘Addiction is not a disease  
it is a way of coping with poverty  
and oppression.

Addicted moms love their children  
and deserve to be treated with  
respect.’

*worker, survey respondent, 2003*

**Heartfelt thanks to the substance-using mothers who participated in the research and co-facilitate the training. They give from the heart.**

**Sydney Michelle Weaver, MSW, RSW**  
**[sydneyweaver@shaw.ca](mailto:sydneyweaver@shaw.ca)**

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