



PLAN:

Helping parents evaluate options

Parents living with behavioral health conditions may benefit from support in identifying and evaluating options to make informed decisions. You can provide them with information about possibilities that exist that they may not be aware of, for example, community resources or entitlements. You might give an example of a decision-making strategy by making a list of possible options, and writing down positive and negative effects, or pros and cons. Walk the parent through the process, in a clear and concrete way. “If you choose this, then this will happen.” “If you choose that, then you might miss out on this.” In this way, you help the parent assess the options and make a choice about how to proceed.

Your role is to help parents see choices where they may not have been clear before. For example, a mother recently arriving at a domestic violence shelter may believe that her only option to support her family is to return to the partner who abuses her. A practitioner can help this mother think about what her goals are, and what options exist to help her achieve new goals successfully. This is where having good, up-to-date information about resources may be quite helpful.

A parent’s priorities may not be what you might suggest to them. You may be challenged in having to accept some choices parents may make and, while you may not be in a position to tell a parent what to do, you can offer realistic, non-judgmental feedback on the potential implications or consequences of a particular choice. This is not an easy task. It can be difficult to separate out your own opinions about the choices people make from their opinions. You can provide respectful feedback if their choices have negative consequences—not “I told you so,” but “What can we do together now to make this better?” You cannot sit by while individuals make choices that put themselves or others in danger or at risk. This is one time when you must back up your opinion with a clear statement of the potential consequences, especially if it involves you having to notify child welfare officials or the police. Parents are encouraged to seek additional professional help, if it seems warranted (e.g., children’s mental health

services). If the need for child welfare services becomes evident, then you can act as an ally in collaborating with the parent to obtain help.

The key to these tasks is creating opportunities for success. Success may be defined differently by different people. It may be something very big, or something that others might think is small but that feels big to the parent. Making and keeping a dentist appointment, while it might seem like a small success, may feel huge to a mother who hasn't been able to find the time and energy to take care of herself. Other successes, like finding housing, or ending an abusive relationship, or finding a job—are more likely to be viewed as huge by others. Benchmarks should be set along the way to mark progress and to set a time to re-evaluate and make a new plan, if necessary. Each success, small or large, represents considerable effort on the part of the parent, and should be celebrated as a step towards recovery.