

New open-source program aims to help parents of children in foster care

January 7 2015, by Deborah Bach



Alise Hegle with her daughter, Rebekah. Credit: Alise Hegle

The first time Alise Hegle saw her daughter again after her birth was 11 months later at a court-ordered, supervised visit.

Newly out of jail and treatment for drug addiction, Hegle was riddled with anxiety. She had no idea how to parent her only child and worried about the visitation supervisor who sat silently observing, taking notes.

"I was terrified," she recalled. "I felt worthless. When the setting and the environment is intimidating and you don't feel supported, it's hard to leave the visit feeling positive."

Court-ordered visits are necessary for [parents](#) like Hegle to regain custody of their [children](#) after they're placed in [foster care](#), but the arrangement is stressful on both sides. Children might be frightened or angry and act out. Parents, often grappling with issues ranging from substance abuse to [mental health](#) challenges, may feel defensive and discouraged.

It's hardly a scenario conducive to effective parenting. But a new open-source parenting program developed by Partners for Our Children, a center within the University of Washington's School of Social Work, aims to help those parents become better caregivers and in turn, reunite families and reduce the costs associated with children in foster care.

"If you don't engage these parents in more effective parenting, they and their children become lifelong users of very expensive services," said Ben de Haan, Partners for Our Children's executive director. "So we're thinking about this from a prevention angle."

Developed in collaboration with the Washington state Children's Administration, the program, dubbed STRIVE, will be downloadable online at no cost and was created specifically for parents of children in foster care.

The program's initial 15 sessions focus on helping parents understand what to expect during visits, which can be emotional for them and for

children. They provide instruction on interacting with children through playing and reading to them, as well as problem-solving, self-care, dealing with trauma and managing setbacks. Additionally, the center is developing a model for group classes, also designed for parents with children in foster care.

The program is based on the group's own research and existing programs. It is intended to be flexible, allowing parents to spend more or less time on each module depending on their needs, or skip modules altogether.

"What we're trying to do is develop something that really takes into consideration the various struggles of the parents involved in child welfare," said Doug Klinman, a data analyst with the Children's Administration and UW graduate who helped develop the program.

Many parenting programs, Klinman said, focus on teaching parents how to appropriately respond to children with behavioral challenges. Such programs have been found effective for parents who have abused children. But since close to 80 percent of child maltreatment cases involve neglect, the main problem is often not parents responding inappropriately, but struggling with issues such as [mental health problems](#) or [substance abuse](#), and consequently failing to meet their children's basic needs.

Existing parenting programs are typically geared toward those who have sought help proactively, Klinman said, while parents involved in the child welfare system are typically not asking for guidance and are often defensive.

"It's a much more coercive thing, where a case worker is telling the parent they have to do this or risk losing custody," he said. "Part of what we're trying to build into the program is a lot of motivation, helping

parents see where they are and understand what steps they can take to be where they want to be."

STRIVE is funded mostly through private donations, with around \$150,000 from the state. By contrast, de Haan said, most parenting programs are developed with federal funding, resulting in narrowly defined initiatives that are not easily modified. Effective programs are often spun off into private enterprises and become prohibitively expensive for providers to access.

"They're mostly held by private companies, they're proprietary and you have to pay a lot to use them," de Haan said. "Changing them to meet the needs of a specific clientele doesn't pencil out well. We wanted to solve that problem."

STRIVE is being rolled out this month by a Tacoma nonprofit that will test it with parents it serves. The program will be refined based on feedback from that process, then Partners for Our Children plans to conduct a randomized controlled trial, with the ultimate goal of having the program rated as an evidence-based practice by an independent panel of evaluation experts.

The program is believed to be the first open-source initiative designed for parents in the [child welfare](#) system, de Haan said, and feedback so far has been positive, with a few exceptions.

"The only people negative about it are the people who own programs," he said. "Our price is very hard to beat. But they can use it too."

Hegle regained custody of her daughter, Rebekah, now 5, and completed a bachelor's degree in behavioral science. She is now the parent engagement coordinator for Children's Home Society of Washington, a Seattle-based nonprofit focused on strengthening families, and was part

of a parent focus group that provided feedback on STRIVE.

Hegle thinks the program would have helped her tremendously as she struggled in those early parenting days.

"There's a huge need, because families are in a process of trying to turn around their lives, and it's very emotional and traumatic," she said. "The more concrete tips, tools and strategies we can use to be better parents and better people, the more likely our children are to thrive."

Provided by University of Washington

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