Your Community Needs a Child Care Resource and Referral Agency

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ABSTRACT: This article describes three major contributions made by child care resource and referral agencies—meeting parents' needs, meeting providers' needs, and providing coordination of resources and communication about child care in and beyond the community. The article also gives suggestions to child care advocates who want to provide resource and referral services in their communities.

Your community needs a resource and referral agency for child care, if it does not already have one. "What's a resource and referral agency?" is a likely response, even from child care advocates. The purpose of this article is to point out the important contributions that resource and referral agencies make in their communities.

Resource and referral agencies are designed to meet the specific needs of their communities. Even though unique, most of these agencies make contributions in three broad areas: (a) Meeting parents' needs; (b) Meeting providers' needs; and (c) Providing coordination of resources and communication about child care in and beyond the community.

None of these contributions would be possible without the all-important factor of accessibility of resource and referral agencies. These agencies take an active role in publicizing the availability of their services. Locations and phone numbers are advertised through the media, word of mouth, bulletin board notices, home visits, and other means. "Drop in" visits to resource and referral agencies are welcomed, although most information is provided by trained telephone workers.

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Meeting Parents’ Needs

Nearly all parents need child care at one time or another. Usually parents attempt to meet their child care needs by relying on help obtained through an informal network. However, this informal network may be inaccessible to parents who are new to a community or neighborhood, and it often works imperfectly.

Resource and referral agencies provide an important service to parents who need to find child care. They are systematic in gathering information about all of the available child care services in a community, and they file this information so that it can be readily available to parents in need. They also continuously update information about openings in order to spare parents the frustration of calling providers who are already at their licensed capacity. In some communities without resource and referral agencies there is not even an accurate list of all child care services. These agencies provide such lists and much more in that they also know about current openings.

Resource and referral personnel listen carefully to the preferences and needs of parents about child care. They then try to match several child care referrals with these expressed preferences and needs. Sometimes, of course, parents are unaware of the range of child care alternatives, and the telephone worker can provide important information about what is available and how to tell if it meets the specifications of a particular family situation.

Parents’ needs for services often extend beyond child care, and resource and referral agencies make referrals to other child and family related community services. The prevention of child abuse is just one area in which they are active. Primarily through telephone contacts, staff members identify the need for critical support services and make the necessary referrals.

Meeting aprents’ needs for child care information and referrals is the most basic function of resource and referral agencies. There is much rhetoric about maximizing parental choice; for parents to make meaningful choices, they must be able to obtain the kind of information that these agencies can and do provide. Such agencies make a valued contribution to parents in their communities.

Meeting Providers’ Needs

Providers of child care often have needs that are not met by existing agencies. The services that resource and referral agencies offer to providers of child care tend to reduce any feeling of