

West County Psychological Associates

The WCPA Newsletter

1215 Fern Ridge Parkway, Suite 110 St. Louis, MO 63141

Website: WCPASTL.COM

Phone (314) 275-8599

Email: wcpa@sbcglobal.net

Winter, 2021

What to Do When We Can't Fix It: Parenting in a Pandemic

Cari McKnight, MSW, LCSW



As parents, one of our most basic instincts is to try to protect our children, and to help pave the way for them. Living through the Covid-19 pandemic has certainly thrown an interesting curveball to parents in that regard. Sure, there have always been minor frustrations and things that haven't gone the way that we or our children wanted them to go, but these days we are seeing major interruptions on a very large scale. We've seen the heartbreak of high school seniors unable to play their final season or perform their final theatre performances. We've seen the challenge of kindergarteners having to start their school experience virtually. We've seen middle schoolers' social lives severely disrupted, college scholarship opportunities lost, and major milestones missed. We've seen children lose loved ones to this pandemic. The list of impacts on our children goes on and on. For many of us, this is the first time we are simply unable to fix things and make their world as we want it to be.

So what are we as parents supposed to do? We want to make it right, we want to give them what they have lost. However, much of the time, today, we simply cannot make it so. Truth be told, there will be many times when we will be unable to fix things for our kids – pandemic or not – and this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Actually, in some sense, there are tremendous opportunities for growth and development when we teach our children independence and give them the tools to work through hard situations for themselves.

While it is important to make sure that we help keep our children out of harm's way, in today's parenting culture it can be very easy to find ourselves trying to fix everything for our children. This over-parenting can rob them of precious lessons; in order to teach our children how to do hard things, we need to let them go through hard times. So perhaps, instead of trying to clear the path for our children, our energies are better directed toward teaching them tools to cope when things don't go the way they'd like them to go. These disappointments will happen over and over again in their lifetimes, so we need to help them learn to manage disappointing and frustrating situations. What are some ways that we can stop fixing and start building grit and resilience in our children?

One of the most basic things we can do is to allow our kids to have their emotions about their frustrations and losses. It is absolutely normal for them to feel upset about the many losses and disappointments that they have endured. Even if we think that others have it worse and that our children need to "just deal with it," their emotions are very real. We need to allow them to grieve, and to be sad or angry.

Sometimes as parents, we are hesitant to let our kids be sad or upset because we don't want them to get stuck in a negative mindset or wallow in their tears or anger. We want them to focus on being grateful for what they do have. However, until they are allowed fully to feel and acknowledge those emotions, to know that it is safe to do so, and to know that they are heard, it is difficult for them to move forward. Often, if children don't feel heard, they keep feeling the need to act out or

Parenting in a Pandemic, *Continued*

be more dramatic to feel finally heard. When people feel heard and understood, they feel validated. When they feel validated, they are empowered. And when they feel empowered, they gain the strength to handle things better on their own. They can face their own pain, and carry on in the face of that pain.

Once we have acknowledged and validated the complex feelings that they are experiencing, then we can shift the focus and help them learn to find ways to take in the good that is happening in their lives. Even when things go wrong, there are always good things in our lives that we can notice. Our natural tendency is to hold onto the negative things that happen and obsess about those things, playing them over and over in our minds. If we can make a conscious effort to learn to do the same when positive things happen, it can be a game changer. For example, if we can observe how we feel after enjoying something very simple – after a delicious meal, a fun socially distanced interaction, or hearing kind words from a loved one – we can emphasize and deeply ingrain those good feelings. We can replay those moments and download them into our psyche, which helps us hold onto them and increase our sense of well-being. We can do this, and we can help our children learn to do these things if we show them how and guide them.

Another key step is to simply recognize that we have the power to help our kids decide how to react to things that happen to them. We, as parents, are the single biggest influence on how this pandemic will affect our kids, and quite frankly, how many life circumstances will affect them. Our children are watching our reactions to everything – from our interactions with others in the grocery store, to the way we discuss things with our friends, to the comments we make about the school's decisions. It is so important to model healthy responses to challenges. In simply doing this, we are teaching resilience.

When certain situations seem hopeless, we can teach our kids to think outside of the box. During this pandemic, many of us have had to give up many of our “normal” ways of doing things. However, this does not mean that we have to give up those interests entirely. We can be creative and find ways to do versions of the activities that we are missing right now. Examples of this could be helping our children plan Zoom birthday parties or encouraging them to set up outdoor socially distanced meet ups with friends. We can help them see that just because we have always done things a certain way doesn't mean we can't do it differently and still have a rewarding experience.

In the face of adversity, we can also offer coping techniques that our children may not yet have mastered. For example, instead of allowing them to cope by eating their emotions or numbing out on electronics, introduce them to some new coping tools. We can model and suggest some new ways for them to feel better when they get down or disappointed. Some ideas of alternative coping skills are going out for a walk, Face Timing a friend, playing a family board game, practicing yoga, going outside to shoot hoops, using the Calm app to learn mindfulness, or journaling. If we show our children that these strategies can be fun and helpful, they may learn to utilize these healthy methods for themselves.

When we feel overwhelmed, it is critical to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. Never before have there been so many unknowns, and as parents, that can be scary. However, it is important to be honest, and learn to say that we don't know what will happen next or why things didn't go their way. In order to do this, we need to try to work through our own discomfort with uncertainty. Whether we realize it or not, kids pick up on our emotions. If we feel anxious, they tend to absorb that. If, instead, we try to tackle our own difficult emotions that are being brought to the surface and work to accept and embrace the uncertainty around us, this can be such a gift to our kids. If we work through that for ourselves, or if necessary, with the help of a therapist, we are much better equipped to be present and straightforward with our children.

This pandemic has been incredibly hard on so many of us, for numerous different reasons. As parents, we need to give ourselves plenty of compassion and grace, especially now. This is a time where we are being faced with impossibly difficult choices and don't know what is right or wrong. Should I have my child do virtual or in-person school? Should I allow play dates and sleepovers? Should I let my child go to basketball practice? We need to be able to trust that we are doing the best we can on the things that are within our control, and then allow our children to learn the lessons that are so abundant in the things that are not currently within control.

Despite the overwhelming challenges that this past year has brought, there are some glimmers of positivity that we can glean from this time. Maybe, in the end, we will look back at this and see that it was an opportunity for us to grow as parents and to instill some lifelong skills in our youth. This pandemic has changed the world, and each of us...but perhaps in some good ways. If we can teach our children how to grieve, push through, and persevere, it might just be one of the best gifts we will ever give to them.

Ask Amy

With Amy Neu, MSW, LCSW



Caring for a loved one is hard! The caregiving journey comes with a wide range of emotions, circumstances, and (let's be honest) some baggage from our past. The experience is often isolating, now more than ever in the midst of a pandemic, which places even more pressure on family members to do more work with less access to resources. We created the Ask Amy column to give guidance to commonly asked questions from family caregivers.

Q: What do I say when my dad makes comments about being a burden? He does need help now, but I'm happy to do things for him. He's not able to do what he used to do, but that's okay. I tell him he's not a burden, but it doesn't seem to make a difference. It feels frustrating when I just can't seem to get him out of his pity party. Any ideas?

A: As caregivers, we often place pressure on ourselves to fix whatever issues arise. In many situations, we are able to coordinate, schedule, or manage what needs to be done and resolve the problem quickly. Yet when it comes to our loved ones' emotional needs, often there are not quick resolutions. Unfortunately, there are no magic words that take their pain away. However, we can turn their statements into meaningful discussions to help alleviate their pain. Here are some strategies to help you plan your conversation:

- Plan ahead if possible. Mentally plan for a time when you and your loved one can be together (in person or virtually) and uninterrupted. Try to minimize any distractions such as a TV in the background, so that you are both able to focus on the conversation.
- Open the conversation using an "I" statement followed by a question. Avoid using language that could be perceived as accusatory, such as "you said," as that automatically makes people get defensive. Rather, try a sentence like, "Dad, I heard you mention that you've been feeling like a burden. How long have you been feeling this way?"
- Use open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions to continue a conversation. Who, what, when, and how are my favorite words to keep conversation flowing.
- Remember that you do not need to have answers. Your presence and caring are powerful. They are enough.
- Realize that it is not your job or responsibility to resolve their feelings. You are there to be supportive, and you can use this opportunity for discussion if you choose to do so. But these difficult feelings are theirs, and you are not responsible for them.
- Observe your own emotions during this conversation. How are their words impacting you? What thoughts and feelings come up for you in this discussion? It is imperative that we honor our own needs and feelings in addition to our loved one's needs. Just as our loved ones are responsible for their emotions, we are responsible for ours.
- Discuss ideas for moving forward. This will look different for each person, and that's completely okay! For example, if you are open to your loved one coming to you to talk about their emotions in the future, then communicate this. Do not offer to do something that you are not comfortable, willing, or ready to do. This leads to resentment in the long run.
- To close the conversation, remind your loved one that you care about them and want them to be happy.

I hope these ideas help! If you have a question for Amy, contact us at 314-275-8599 or email amy.neul@gmail.com. Your question may be featured in the next Ask Amy column!

Amy Neu, MSW, LCSW is the Assistant Director of Senior Services at West County Psychological Associates. She provides private therapy for adults, families, and seniors who are facing a variety of issues including depression, anxiety, dementia, grief, coping with medical issues, and end of life. Amy also leads WCPA's Caregiver Support Group via Zoom.

Letter from the Director

I am writing this letter in mid-December. I had promised myself that I wouldn't write about the pandemic. I'm tired of it, as most of you are. Besides, what more can I say that hasn't been said? The vaccine is now being given to hospital workers and, with a 95% efficacy rate for these vaccines, we can start to become hopeful again. I realize that it's been a while since I've been hopeful. It's a feeling that is a little difficult to trust. And while I don't want to write about the pandemic, there is little else on my mind.



I was struck by two thoughts over this past Thanksgiving that have stayed with me. The first is that we talk about anxiety and depression being a natural response to what all of us have been experiencing, but the word that I don't hear often is fear. There are those who say that they aren't afraid – *If it happens, it happens*, or *We're making too much out of this*, or *I've been lucky so far, why should I think I'm going to get Covid now?* But even in therapy, I don't regularly hear, "I'm afraid. I'm afraid of getting sick. I'm afraid of my children becoming ill. I'm afraid for my job. I'm afraid that we're never going to see "normal" again." As we know, this fear is the basis for our anxiety and depression, but we don't call it out. Maybe because to do so would be too raw, too frightening. So, let me say this: I am afraid. I am afraid for all the reasons I just stated and many more, which I can't quite put into words.

And then I have experienced the other extreme – an appreciation of joy and incredible delight. These experiences have been there in the past, but I do not recall being so aware of the highs contained in those feelings. Only recently have I noticed the extreme swings in my emotions. Thanksgiving highlighted this for me. I was invited to my daughter's house for the holiday. I had told her I would be coming. She was having only one of her four sons there; two were out of town and the other had just welcomed a set of newborn twins the previous week. Many people were taking precautions and staying home for the holiday. My grandson and his wife who were going to be there have three children. It had been a while since I had seen them, and I was anxious to be with them.

That morning I was feeling incredibly conflicted. Do I go and enjoy myself, or will I be too afraid? I felt both the fear and the excitement of being with my family. Both feelings were intense. Never in my life could I have imagined that just being with family could be so frightening. My other option was to be alone. What eventually helped me make my decision, right or wrong, was a suggestion from a friend to wear my mask the whole time, sit and eat apart from them and limit the amount of time that I would stay. So, at ten o'clock that morning I made my decision. Even as I write this, I do not know that it was the right decision, but I decided to go.

I had two experiences that day that deeply touched me. One was a conversation with my five year-old great granddaughter who brought up a conversation about dying. She had just told me that someone in her mother's family had passed away. Very sadly and wistfully, she wanted to know if we were all going to die. My response was, "*Someday, but not today.*" I was struck by the intense sadness in her face and then within seconds she jumped up and ran off to play with her brothers. The next incident happened as I was leaving. It was about 7:00 p.m. and, of course, it was dark outside. My three year-old great-grandson looked at me and said, "You can't go home by yourself. It's dark outside. Who's going to take you home?" My first reaction was to question my age – am I that old??? The second was to feel incredibly touched by his concern. It turned out to be a wonderful Thanksgiving. But, as I reflect on it, I still experience those intense and conflicting feelings of both fear and guilt but also a deep sense of loving and being loved

I think about that day often and wonder if I made the right decision. I may not have. I look forward to the day when it is not so complicated. I look forward to the day when there is no fear nor guilt. I look forward to the day when I am able to love without worry.

-Mary

When Life Throws Us a Curveball: Redefining Ourselves through Unexpected Life Transitions

Katelyn Schaefer, MSW, LCSW

As with so many Americans, Covid-19 completely changed Matthew S.'s life. Matt was a hard-working 30-something who worked in sales until April, 2020, when he lost his job due to Covid-19. He took this unexpected loss incredibly hard. After having been unable to finish college and struggling to find a job, Matt had felt lucky to land that sales position, and had been there four years before Covid hit. He had just saved enough money to put a down-payment on a home. In the spring of 2020, he now had a mortgage, a wife, and a baby on the way, with no income and, in his mind, no true career path to fall back on. Matt faced an unexpected, difficult life transition that challenged him to rely on his supports, reconsider his priorities, and re-imagine his future.

As one of the most challenging years in our collective history comes to an end and a new year begins, many people are looking back on the ways the year 2020 shaped them. For a lot of us, including Matt in the example above, this means reflecting on the circumstances that forced us to grow in unexpected ways. Those circumstances could have been job loss, challenges in relationships, caring for a sick or dying loved one, figuring out new routines within the home, remote education for our kids, or any number of other truly difficult experiences. 2020 has forced so many people to redefine who they are or who they may need to be in the coming months and years.

There are times in every person's life where one is faced with transitioning into a new phase of their journey. For some, these are planned or natural transitions such as school, marriage, children, career advancements, etc. However, there are also many times when we are forced to face unforeseen, unplanned, and often difficult, life changes. These trying times are typically the moments that challenge us both physically and mentally, requiring us to grow and redefine ourselves in previously unimagined ways.

While natural life transitions are typically manageable, these unexpected changes can cause tremendous amounts of stress, anxiety, and fear. What do we do when we are faced with having to make life decisions we may not feel we have adequate answers to? How do we cope with the stresses these transitions bring? How do we not lose ourselves as we grow in these experiences? Simply put, how do we move forward?

There may not always be an easy answer to these questions, but the concepts below are a good place to start.

Identify a Support System - During difficult times, it is essential to know who we can count on to support physical and emotional needs as they arise. Connect with those supports often and directly communicate the desire to be there for one another through these transitions.

Become Informed - Many times during life changes, we will be asked to face the unfamiliar. It is important to become informed and well-educated on options and facts regarding the situation at hand.

Ask for Help - Whether it be a trusted friend or family member within your identified support system or a trained professional, recognize the importance of asking for help. Know that you are not alone on this journey and there is always someone who can walk with you if you are willing to let them. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness; it is always a sign of strength.

Make Time for Yourself - If you have been placed in a position where you are now taking on a new role in life, it is so important to keep the things that make you, you in your daily routine. Make time for yourself and the things that bring you joy. In high stress times, we should be purposeful in prioritizing our needs as individuals. When redefining ourselves we must always find ways to keep who we are at our core alive and well.

Allow Yourself Space to Grow - Full transitions don't often happen overnight. There is a process of learning, changing, and growing. Be kind to yourself during this process. Allow yourself time to shift gears and figure things

out. If you must make a difficult decision quickly, remember that many changes can be temporary if needed. Do the best you can and give yourself intentional grace during these times.

Know It's Okay to Not Feel Okay Sometimes - As a society, it often seems frowned upon to be open and honest that one is struggling. There may not be a better time to break that stigma. A large number of people are really struggling right now, in one capacity or another. Have empathy for others and yourself.

Get Help for Depression or Anxiety - While it's normal and okay to feel down sometimes, it is also important to recognize if you are having increased feelings of "not being okay" or if you have been experiencing negative or harmful thoughts for extended periods of time. Take this as a sign and opportunity to reach out for help from your doctor or a mental health professional.

Seek Hope - When we are thrown into the unknown, there is so much uncertainty. Many times this can become incredibly overwhelming and cause us to lack hope for the future. In these moments it's important to seek hope. Find things that you can look forward to. Create goals for your future, things you want to do or accomplish. Intently look for positives throughout your day. It may be as simple as acknowledging the sun is shining, but over time finding these small glimpses of hope and joy will wire your brain to more optimistic ways of thinking.

Consider "Kintsugi" as a Metaphor for Transition- Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with melted gold. The concept is built on the idea that, in embracing flaws and imperfections, we can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art.

While the year 2020 was, for many, a year of uncertainty, fear, grief, and change, we must remember that it was also a year where we gained strength and resilience. It has set us up to be much more equipped to work through any challenging transitions we may face in years to come. We may at times still feel broken, but, just like the Japanese art of Kintsugi, we are allowed to use our brokenness to create something new that has meaning.

Together we can choose to see the beauty in the broken. We can lean on one another to be the golden glue when we feel disconnected. Dare we suggest that this could even be the silver lining in redefining ourselves during difficult life transitions?

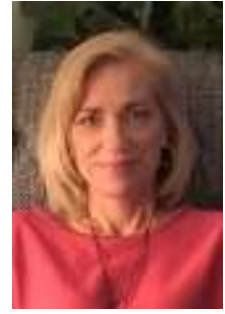
This idea that we are asked to keep all the pieces of ourselves and shift them into something new is a unique request. It is often a difficult task, but the opportunity to mold ourselves into someone that has grown in strength and resilience is a very powerful thing. With the new year comes renewed understanding that we are still beautifully crafted individuals. We can find peace in knowing that we are capable of facing the curveballs life will throw our way and we can find hope in believing we are worthy, more than ever, of the promises our future holds.



Katelyn Schaefer, MSW, LCSW provides therapy services to school-aged children and adolescents and their families, addressing anxiety, depression, ADHD, Autism, and other emotional and behavioral concerns. Katelyn has experience providing support to teachers, schools, and other helping professions to address the mental health needs within their place of work. Katelyn also enjoys working with adults and seniors, as well as senior caregivers. Katelyn acknowledges that for many people, the idea of therapy may be met with hesitation or fear – she provides a safe space built on trust, compassion, and respect to meet their therapeutic goals.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE: HELP IS AVAILABLE FOR THOSE WITH OCD

Angela Cook, MSW, LCSW



What's the first thing most people do when they think they have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)? Ironically, they obsess. The signs and symptoms of OCD bother them to the point where they have trouble doing what they need to do to take care of themselves and carry out their day-to-day responsibilities. Is this you? If so, here's something that may be comforting to know. It's not *just* you.

Approximately 3% of the population in the U.S. is diagnosed with OCD, but the true number is likely higher because estimates are that one-third of those who suffer do so in silence. Fear of being rejected, discriminated against, or embarrassed creates barriers to reaching out, as does thinking that one's symptoms are not severe enough. Nothing seems more daunting than reaching out for help – yet we know that, with the right treatment and support, individuals with OCD can experience significant improvements in quality of living.

Research in the field of OCD has come a long way. If these symptoms are causing you to have trouble managing your life, then it's time to get help. There are people and resources to turn to for relief from the obsessive thoughts, images, urges, compulsive behaviors and/or thinking loops that you have been experiencing.

First, talk with your doctor to see if you have any underlying medical problems, such as a bacterial virus, viral infection, (e.g., PANDAS), thyroid issue, and/or a vitamin deficiency, all of which can lead to symptoms of anxiety and OCD.

Second, start therapy with a licensed mental health professional who specializes in OCD and is well versed in providing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, especially its component Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP).

Third, if there is any question about the diagnosis, a psychological evaluation is recommended. A formal evaluation can rule out any possible co-occurring mental health issues such as ADHD, PTSD, personality disorder, phobias, or generalized anxiety disorder.

Many types of treatment are available for OCD today. The primary treatment, Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), works to change the thoughts and behaviors that fuel the obsessions and compulsions of OCD. One element of CBT is Exposure and Response Prevention, which helps one sit and accept the uncomfortable and intrusive thoughts, urges and feelings of the obsessions, while not performing the compulsive behavior or thinking pattern. Mindfulness is used to increase self-awareness, to help focus on what's going on around you, with nonjudgmental acceptance.

Family Therapy helps family members learn more about OCD and new ways to respond and cope, while not enabling or reassuring the unwanted behaviors, thoughts or feelings. Group therapy can supplement individual therapy, while providing group input and exposure practice in-between individual therapy sessions. The camaraderie also helps decrease the stigma associated with OCD, which helps decrease feelings of isolation.

Medications are often used in conjunction with therapy and can be prescribed by psychiatrists or primary care physicians. The first line of defense in treating OCD is often Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), a type of medication that includes Prozac, Lexapro, Celexa and Paxil, but anti-anxiety medications are also prescribed at times. SSRI's have fewer side effects and directly affect the neurotransmitter Serotonin, responsible for the anti-obsessional effects.

Finally, Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) is a relatively new option, used when standard treatments are not successful. Coils are placed on the scalp to alter electrical activity, which helps alter malfunctioning brain structure circuitry, connecting emotion and thoughts to movements. Sessions are approximately 20 minutes long, five days a week and last for six weeks.

If you are struggling with symptoms of OCD and haven't yet found the right support, help is available for you. You can contact **Angela Cook, MSW, LCSW** at the WCPA office, (314) 275-8599. Angela has 25 years of experience as a therapist and is passionate in her craft of empowering people of all ages, break down the barriers that are holding them back and find inner peace. Areas of focus include OCD, Trauma, ADHD, Anxiety, Mood Disorders and Binge Eating.

Therapist Spotlight



Angela Cook, MSW, LCSW has 25 years of clinical social work experience helping children (ages 3+), teens, adults and seniors find peace within themselves and their relationships. She has extensive training and experience helping clients with trauma, ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD, Binge Eating Disorder, and regulating emotions. She also provides presentations on trauma and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Mindfulness, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Play Therapy, Solution Focused Therapy, Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), Cognitive Stimulation, and Trauma Focused – CBT are the treatment modalities Angela uses in her counseling practice while utilizing a holistic framework.



Taylor Kennedy, MSW, LMSW enjoys working with clients of all ages and specializes in private therapy for children (as young as age four), adolescents, young adults, and families. Taylor utilizes a variety of therapeutic techniques and often incorporates multiple approaches, such as Person-Centered Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) and Mindfulness to assist clients in growing and creating long-lasting change with issues such as challenging life experiences, anxiety, ADHD, depression, and other adjustment or behavioral concerns. She uses an individualized approach to ensure each client's needs and therapeutic goals are taken into consideration.



Katelyn Schaefer, MSW, LCSW has extensive experience working with school-aged children and adolescents (ages 4-18) and their families addressing anxiety, depression, ADHD, Autism, and other emotional or behavioral concerns. Katelyn has experience providing support to teachers, schools, and other helping professions to address the mental health needs within their place of work. She also enjoys working with adults and seniors, as well as senior caregivers. Katelyn acknowledges that for many people, the idea of therapy may be met with hesitation or fear, and she is dedicated to working with her clients to provide a safe space built on trust, compassion, and respect to meet their therapeutic goals.



Chloe Schechter, MSW, LCSW In addition to her license, Chloe has a certificate in Gerontology and is a Certified Dementia Care Specialist. She has worked with the older adult population in many different settings, such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities and adult day centers. Chloe provides therapy for seniors with feelings of depression or anxiety, or who are experiencing adjustment issues, grief or memory loss. She also has significant experience counseling those combating a variety of medical challenges, including vision loss and terminal illness. Chloe uses a holistic approach that involves family and caregivers when needed. She can provide services in the office, a care facility or the client's home.



Jacqueline Siempelkamp, MS, NCC, LPC enjoys working with clients of all ages and has experience in working with young children, adolescents, college-age students and adults experiencing concerns including depression, anxiety, LGBTQIA+, adjustment or phase of life transitions, body image, self-esteem, relationships, divorce, substance abuse, behavioral concerns, and school/academic issues. Jacqueline uses a combination of treatment modalities including Person-Centered Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Jacqueline supports collaboration with family members and other professionals to effectively achieve goals and facilitate change.