Parents Who Have ‘Been There’ Help Parents There Now

The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) in Washington, DC, created the Parent Engagement Education and Resource (PEER) Support Unit, a new practice approach to engage and assist birth parents who are working toward reunification. PEER has the added benefit of a staff with personal experience with the child welfare system as a parent who can speak, relate to, and empathize with parents currently involved with the system. We have both had the honor and privilege of providing parenting support, advocacy, and coaching to birth parents as they navigate the often-murky waters of the family court and child welfare systems. These are parents who, like us, have not always shown up as the best version of themselves. These parents are struggling to face complex and compounding challenges, such as unresolved trauma, generational poverty, substance use, mental illness, domestic abuse, cognitive impairments, and a multitude of adverse childhood experiences. While these parents are diverse in their strengths and needs, they all share one common trait—they love their children. Unfortunately, love is not always enough to keep children safe. The parents that we serve need support, tools, skills, knowledge, and resources to operationalize their love in ways that promote the safety and well-being of their children. Our job is to help facilitate healing for parents so that they can, in turn, facilitate healing for their children. PEER provides these parents with the benefit of partnership, guidance, and insight from those who have successfully overcome similar situations and challenges in their own families.

In June, 2018, the CFSA PEER Support Unit hosted its first annual Family Unity Day celebration in honor of National Reunification Month to celebrate these brave and hardworking parents who often face seemingly unsurmountable odds to show up as better versions of themselves so that their children and families can be whole. Family Unity Day included 25 parents and 53 of their children, as well as 19 CFSA volunteers and two foster parents. The event boasted a dynamic keynote speaker, engaging discussions with foster parents on shared parenting, self-care workshops, lunch, and family-friendly fun and activities. At this event, we laughed, cried, ate,
played, and came together around the things we share and came to the understanding that we have much in common. We heard from so many of the parents in attendance about how grateful they were to have been given the opportunity to see the agency differently. One parent commented that this was the first time they felt genuinely cared for and acknowledged by our agency. Other parents shared their excitement about being able to meet and talk to families in similar situations, which helped them understand they’re not alone. This event proved to be a positive step in showing the families we serve just how important they are to us and how much we need and value their partnership as we work together to ensure the safety, permanence, and well-being of their children.

For more information, please visit the Washington, DC, CFSA at https://cfsa.dc.gov/service/become-foster-or-adoptive-parent.