Safety Planning for Parents in Recovery

by
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Chemical dependency is often the reason children are removed from their parents and placed in relative or foster care. Returning children home to those parents is perceived as risky. Relapse can mean that the children must be removed and placed in care again. Rather than viewing relapse as a parent's failure, it might be more useful to understand that relapse is considered a part of the recovery process. The goal is to keep the use of drugs or alcohol from placing children in harm's way or experiencing neglect. By making it safe for parents to talk to professionals about their recovery and possible relapse, before it happens, children may not need to be returned to care. Chemical dependency professionals use relapse prevention planning as part of their treatment because they know most relapses are not impulsive. Child welfare workers can build on that by helping parents to develop a 'safety plan' for their children in order to prevent, or cope with, relapse. The parental safety plan can include the following elements:

- Identify a friend, family member, or other supportive person who can check on the parent(s) regularly. It should be someone who is trusted, knows the signs of stress in the parent(s), and agrees to act to protect the children, including talking to professionals.
- Attend recovery support meetings, such as a 12-step group, on a regular basis.
- Keep a list of community resources and phone numbers, including resources such as rental assistance, support help-lines (e.g., parenting support, 12-step), and food assistance. Laminate this list and keep it accessible.
- Develop a list of people who are not allowed in the home when the children are present. This list should be developed with the help of someone such as the chemical dependency counselor. Laminate this list and keep it accessible.
- Develop a list of reasons to stay clean and sober, including both the risks to their children and the joys of parenting. Help the parent create a visual representation of this that can be displayed in the home (for example, by making a collage or vision board) or can be carried with them (for example, on a laminated key chain with the "number one reason" and a picture of the child).
- Develop a 'relapse plan.' *Without giving the parent(s) permission to relapse, or promising immunity from all consequences, it is realistic to plan for it.* Help the parent(s) take responsibility and think about potential consequences by creating a written agreement including the following.

In the event of relapse:
- o My children must be somewhere safe, with someone safe. Here are the names and phone numbers of safe people who will be able to come and get my children, or who I will be able to take them to, if I have used or know I am going to use. (These names and phone numbers should be on the resource list.)
- o I have a bag of supplies set aside with food, diapers, extra clothes and toys to make sure the children have their basic needs met.
- o After relapse, I will take steps to regain sobriety and make the home safe for the children. (Parent(s) should identify the steps and names of people who need to be included in that plan.)

A relapse does not mean that a parent doesn't care about their children or is unable to care for them. Parenting while in recovery is a long-term process that can be learned and practiced safely, with the focus on the well-being of the children. But everyone involved needs to be clear that the goal is always to protect the children.