

**CHILDREN’S UNDERLYING NEEDS:
The Foundation of Assessment, Engagement, Teaming and Service Crafting**
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It is difficult to recognize underlying needs because children’s behaviors are the focus of families, other caregivers, teachers and service providers. We tend to jump to a service to “fix” a problem behavior. Instead, when we ask questions such as “What is the child telling us about his/her needs with this behavior?” or “What is the need behind this behavior?” we are able to design more effective supports and services. The answers to these questions demonstrate that two children can have different needs behind a similar behavior and to meet their needs would require different responses from caregivers and providers.

Looking behind a child’s behaviors to identify underlying needs happens throughout a case: when talking with families and other caregivers, during any assessment, in team meetings, and as supports and services are put together and refined over time. The more we wonder together about “What is the need behind this behavior?” the more capable parents and other caregivers become at tailoring their responses to the child.

No one person knows the needs behind a behavior of a child—everyone has a different understanding of why the child acts in a certain way. Some team members have specialized training to identify developmental, trauma-related, safety and other needs while others bring their personal experience of the child to the discussion. During assessment and teaming, it is important for each person in the child’s life to (a) be prepared in advance that they will be asked their views of what is behind the child’s behavior; (b) feel that their perspective is valued by others; and (c) be reassured that if they are uncertain how or if they can meet the child’s needs, their views about what supports they require will be addressed in the assessment/team meeting. Pre-teens and teens will be difficult to engage if they do not want what we think they need, so it is especially important they see their views being incorporated into statements of their needs. Ensuring that these conditions are met as needs behind behaviors are discussed results in greater engagement of families, foster parents, youth, and providers.

The starting point is listening to each other’s hunches about the child’s needs behind behavior, as described in the example below:

TYQUAN

“Tyquan” is a 15-year old African American in a D-Rate foster home. He is the second oldest of 8 children with siblings ranging in age from 7 months to 17 years old (plus a 24-year old half-sister). When Tyquan was 8, a new sibling was born positive for cocaine and his family received Voluntary Family Maintenance Services (VFM); a year later the children were not attending school, their parents were involved in substance abuse and domestic violence and Family Preservation Services were put in place. The following year, his mother gave birth to her 7th child, and she and the newborn tested positive for cocaine, their father was in prison (where he remains), and all the children were removed. The four older boys were placed together in a foster home for three years when Tyquan was asked to move due to angry outbursts. One sister has been adopted, one is in a group home and one lives with an adult half-sister. Their mother gave birth in jail (and she is in prison) and their 8th sibling was also placed at birth with their adult half-sister, making it impossible for Tyquan to move in with her as he had hoped. Although Tyquan’s behavior has improved in six months in the foster home, he gets angry at home, school, and his siblings’ homes

where he visits and his foster mother fears he is hanging out with negative peers on his way home from 9th grade. Below are the ideas Tyquan and the adults in his life have about his needs:



TYQUAN

- I want to live with my sister
- I want a job at the music store
- I want to see my mother



HALF-SISTER

- Not to get angry so often
- To be happier with me and our time together
- To stay in school



THERAPIST

- To have prosocial interpersonal skills
- To accept his foster home as a good enough permanent home
- To have a goal of something he wants to achieve



FOSTER MOTHER

- To get home on time & take major streets only
- To ignore peers
- To do better than a C average
- To see his siblings



TEACHER

- Not to be so easily angered
- To be respectful and not talk back
- To hang out with good students



CSW

- To have permanency and stop wishing he could live with family members
- Not to make unsafe choices

Listening to everyone's thoughtful hunches, we see that some are caregiver and teacher imperatives, but what an adult wants the child to do is not the need behind the behavior. For example, the adults want him to do better academically but Tyquan does not need to get better grades and getting specific about whether his underachievement in school is driven by a learning difficulty, social issues, and/or his preoccupation with sad things in his life will make a difference in what supports and services will be effective. Furthermore, the hunches above include little attention to the effects of trauma on Tyquan's behavior. Most needs lists in child welfare include both trauma-related and developmental needs, and hopefully professionals can be supported to talk about such needs without jargon.

While there is overlap among the lists above, it will take discussion for the team to reach agreement about Tyquan's needs. The following is an example of how Tyquan's needs could be stated, and the roles his sister, foster mother, teacher, CSW, therapist and 1:1* have in meeting his needs:

TYQUAN'S STRENGTHS

He is a good singer

He loves and is loved by his siblings

His foster mother is patient and supports him

TYQUAN'S NEEDS (age 15)

- To make peace with not living with family & feel more connected to his whole family
- To ask for what he wants & calm himself when he doesn't get it right away
- To believe that he is smart & good at music
- To feel he is likeable and worthy of friends

SUPPORTS & SERVICES

- His therapist helping him make a list of all his losses, grieve them, not blame himself that family cannot provide a home for him & feel satisfied with his foster home
- His sister feeling proud of all she does for him
- His foster mother not feeling hurt by his wish for family
- His 1:1 working with his therapist & sister to help him write a letter to his mother, discuss her response, & plan a visit to her in prison
- His siblings' godmother babysitting on Sunday afternoons so just Tyquan & his sister can do something each week
- His 1:1 working with Tyquan & his sister to plan a family event
- His therapist teaching him self-soothing
- His therapist helping him see why he gets so anxious when things are not in his control & gets angry
- His therapist coaching his foster mother, sister & 1:1 on what triggers his anxiety & how to help him calm himself
- His 1:1 & foster mother looking for singing or other music instruction & opportunities with musical peers, with the goal that a music teacher could join his team & guide his school aspirations & peer choices
- His therapist recognizing his accomplishments & guiding his foster mother, sister & teachers in praising him
- His 1:1 & foster mother helping him learn about an arts high school
- His 1:1 & foster mother helping him get a music-related internship or job
- His therapist helping him change his ideas about the friends he deserves
- His foster mother, sister, teachers & 1:1 encouraging his pro-social friendships & activities with friends
- His 1:1 supporting his confidence with new peers

* His 1:1 could be TBS, Wrap staff or a community support person who spends individual time with Tyquan several times a week to meet specific needs, with the guidance of his therapist and in concert with the rest of the team.

Although the above appears to be just four simply-stated needs, respecting each person's hunches in order to reach a shared view is an essential—and time-consuming--process. The outcome is that each team member feels their views were incorporated into needs they play a role in meeting. After agreeing about needs, then the team asks for each need, "What will it take to meet this need?" This is the opportunity for thinking together creatively to design individualized supports and services and avoid standard one-size-fits-all programming. For Tyquan, who had no community supports outside his family, the involvement of a 1:1 to help meet several needs and a music teacher are examples of tailoring supports and services for a youth and his family. The supports and services above also were specifically designed to build on Tyquan's strengths, especially his talents and his family and foster family support.

The four needs above meet the criteria of strong needs statements:

- SPECIFIC
- NOT ADULT IMPERATIVES
- NOT SERVICES DISGUISED AS NEEDS
- NOT IN JARGON
- RECOGNIZE THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON BEHAVIOR
- REFLECT VOICE AND CHOICE FOR THE YOUTH AND FAMILY

Universal needs statements (such as "He needs to be safe") are avoided because they are too vague to guide individualized supports and services. Needs statements such as "He needs counseling" are avoided because they are services, not needs, and the need would instead be what counseling is proposed to meet. While using the exact words of the youth, family or foster family may not be essential, needs statements phrased similar to their wording makes them more likely to see what they can do to effectively meet them. Although none of the needs statements is exactly on Tyquan's want list, he has the satisfaction that a visit with his mother and support to get a job are both part of what his team commits to help him accomplish.

There is no "right" needs list. It is impossible to list all the child's needs. A realistic goal is to agree on 3 or 4 specific and easy-to-understand needs. Because arriving at agreement about needs begins with everyone's hunches and discussion about what needs could be behind his behavior, another team might come up with somewhat different needs. Tyquan's needs might also be refined over time, as he changes and as his team understands what is behind his behavior better.

The four needs are underlying needs behind Tyquan's angry and socially risky behaviors, which are why his case remains open and which threaten permanency. In this example, the family's and foster family's needs are not on the child's needs list, but are purposely designed to be met in the supports and services. His sister's and foster mother's needs include guidance about how to respond to Tyquan's angry behavior, help him be satisfied with not living with family and encourage his school success and positive peers. This plan calls for individual guidance for his sister and foster mother to address these needs to be provided by his therapist, partnership with a 1:1 who is meeting the same needs and assistance from two community supports (music teacher and godmother).