FAMILY SYSTEMS LIVED OUT

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All Youth Development Leaders (YDLs) are involved in family systems within their programs regardless of the program in which they work. Even YDLs that never meet a child’s family will have influences from the relationships the child has with their family. Understanding the balance between the individual and the whole, it is possible to see how a holistic approach to youth development is essential to understand family systems (Cox and Paley, 1997). Therefore, all YDLs need have a basic understanding of family systems and how they affect the young people they work with. Knowing how to act with families will help every YDL in their work with children. The key to developing a good family systems process is finding a success story on which to reflect.

In my opinion, the Hiller family has had the greatest success. I met Juliette and Natalia Hiller seven years ago when Natalia was just three years old. I took a special interest in the development of Natalia. In mentoring Natalia, I occasionally babysitting for her while Juliette was in class or otherwise occupied. I also participated in family outings, both necessary and leisurely. I also worked to engage Natalia in learning opportunities when I had the chance. I also developed a close relationship with Juliette in an effort to help her in any way possible. Natalia was a challenging child. She was energetic and always wanted attention. Juliette is an unmarried single mother, and was trying to finish a college degree. She was also trying to give her daughter the best possible experience growing up.

Despite the challenges present in Natalia’s life, she is still one of the most well-adjusted young person I know. The reasoning behind Natalia’s successes is, firstly, her mother’s strength in making sure Natalia is well-adjusted, despite the constant changes and challenges life has brought to their family. Also, Natalia has a strong support system outside of her immediate family. She has a plethora of informal mentors in which she can get support. Finally, Natalia has
found solace in a spiritual relationship, as well. All of these factors has led Natalia to adapt to any challenges quite well. Juliette and Natalia have developed a resilient home life that can withstand almost anything.

For Hiller family, there are number of family factors that have influenced Natalia’s development. Juliette is an unmarried mother. During the time when I was working with Juliette and Natalia, they moved almost once a year for the first five years of Natalia’s life. Being a single mother, Juliette has had the typical stresses of single life. The demands of parenting, work and school at times made it difficult for Juliette to be as good as mother has she wanted to be. The transitions that both Juliette and Natalia have faced with regard to Juliette’s work and school. Although, Juliette has never had a divorce, she has still struggled with the amount of resources available to her (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Her standard of living was based on university housing and favors from friends. Juliette typically relied on friends from the fellowship to help with resources.

Another factor of development that has caused the Hiller family stress are Juliette’s romantic relationships. Parents are the example of a positive relationship for their children, particularly male/female relationships. Parents provide examples of how to communicate emotions and how to resolve (or not resolve) problems (Cox and Paley, 1997). Natalia’s relationships with her father is almost non-existent. He has no part in her life and has constantly made promises and broken them. Children raised in single parent homes are commonly struggle academically and behaviorally (Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi & Taylor, 2003). All the issues Natalia struggles with comes back to her father and his absence, according to Juliette.

Also, the relationships Natalia has had with her mother’s significant others many having varying effects on Natalia. There have been many close relationships that have not worked out.
Natalia would get her hopes up and they would be crushed when the relationship ended. Currently, Juliette is in a permanent relationship with a gentleman. They are speaking of marriage. The process is beginning all over again, but even I have hope for this relationship. However, the addition of a new parent will have its own problems. Juliette is still getting used to having a partner in raising Natalia. Natalia now has another parent to confide in and learn from, and that is taking time in which to get acclimated. Natalia, always having an easy temperament, is finding easy to adjust, but having a present father is always something she has wanted and needed.

On the positive side, Natalia has many non-parental mentors. Adults who knew her as a baby and continue to encourage her to be her best. Juliette was a part of a college Christian fellowship, where Natalia was constantly around adults. She had little exposure to children her age when she was little because her mother was still in university. However, her mother being in the fellowship allowed for Natalia to develop relationships with all the adults around her creating a network of mentors. Each person in the fellowship had a part in raising Natalia, whether it was watching her for a few hours while Juliette was in class or spending an hour socializing every week. All of these adults are considered informal mentors (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009). As they were not traditionally assigned to Natalia by an organization. They choose to be positive influences in Natalia’s life. Though most of the relationships were more readily available when Natalia was little, each of those adults would still do anything for Natalia, if she needed support.

Juliette is very invested in Natalia’s development. The goal of parenting is to help children become confident, competent, caring adults who are able to find purpose in society (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004). The areas of investment are typically ones that most parents try to provide their children without even knowing what they are. Because of the inconsistency in their
lives, Juliette always made sure that Natalia knew that home was where ever they were together and ensured that Natalia was in want for nothing. Juliette made sure Natalia was healthy, even if her own health was left by the way side. While in school, Juliette protected Natalia from outside negativity. Juliette relied on outside help to provide stimulation, through dance and girl scouts. The best thing Juliette did for Natalia is encourage reading. While still provide basic socioemotional support for Natalia, Juliette concedes that it is the one thing that could be better for Natalia. As for structure, school helps provide much of the structure in Natalia’s life. However, Juliette makes a point of having family dinners and family time. In the early years, Juliette relied on her friends to help provide surveillance for Natalia. Nowadays, Natalia is beginning to look for more autonomy, but Juliette is still keeping Natalia protected through a network she has created with the neighbors and other parents at school. All of these investments Juliette makes for Natalia is one of the biggest reasons Natalia is as well adjust as she has become (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004).

Lastly, Juliette and Natalia have a foundation in Christian beliefs. Studies show that religious beliefs encourage positive development in young people. It can influence health, academic achievement, community engagement, and identity. Although Juliette has found it challenging to find a base church where they can grow together, she has made a point to build upon those beliefs to create a positive home. It also provides Natalia with a moral compass to draw from (King, 2007). With that firm foundation, Natalia knows God will always love her and be her true father.

As Natalia grew and began school, I helped pick her up from school and helped with homework when I could. All too soon, though I was moving away. I still kept in touch with Juliette and Natalia when I could. I suggested youth development activities for Juliette to
participate in when Natalia. Whenever we were in the same area, we would meet up and socialize. Even now, when Juliette and I have lived away from each other for four years, I am still invested in Natalia’s life and am always looking to help out Juliette when she needs it. If I were to make different choices, in regards to Natalia, I would have tried to stay around longer to develop a stronger relationship as she grew up through elementary school.

YDLs have a hard task of working with young people and their families. In today’s world, many families look like the Hiller’s. Parents struggling to provide the best for their children and children trying their best to adapt to the changing world. To these families, it does not matter what the systems theories are called or where they fit into society. To them, it is about protecting the ones they love and providing them with the best life they can. Juliette will continue to be successful with Natalia because she is determined and she has a good support system. Natalia will continue to thrive because she trusts her mom to make the best decisions for her. As YDLs, we have to help their families find the resources they need. If we make an investment in a family, we have to follow through. Nothing breaks trust like breaking a promise. That is one thing that all YDLs should take away from working with young people and their families.
References


