



Differences and Similarities Between Service Coordination and Wraparound

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The following reflections are drawn from my experience (1990-2005) as the Coordinator of what was then called Children's Case Coordination Services for Northumberland County, the Ministry of Child and Youth Services Service Coordination hard-to-serve function for the area. Over most of that period Case Coordination, along with other children's services providers, was actively involved in the establishment of a community-based Wraparound initiative in Northumberland County. These comments are also informed by my involvement on the IMPAC (Inter-Ministerial Provincial Advisory Committee) of the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy, Queen's Park, Ontario (2004-2008).

A variety of Service Coordination models are in place across Ontario, Canada and the United States. While each is different, what Service Coordination approaches have in common is that they coordinate services for children and youth who have highly complex needs, needs which the children's service delivery system, for whatever reason, have persistently been unable to meet. Children and youth who would most benefit from a Wraparound process fit the same presenting profile.

Service Coordination processes are enhanced by utilizing Wraparound principles wherever possible. However, there are fundamental differences between Service Coordination and the Wraparound process. Service Coordination assembles mostly paid, professional, "categorical" services around a child and family, in an effort to coordinate the formal delivery system on behalf of the child. Categorical services are mandate-driven and time-limited. Where possible, informal, community supports are also pursued, but this typically happens in a piecemeal, non-deliberate fashion, and only when time permits. Further, the mechanisms within Service Coordination processes for linking informal and formal services are not adequate to ensure the effectiveness of both efforts. In other words, Service Coordination acts as an advocate for families but largely within the categorical, professional service sector. It tinkers with the existing professional system rather than fundamentally changes how supports are delivered to children and families. Wraparound, however, represents a fundamental departure from the existing way of providing services in highly challenging situations. It begins with the family's natural support system and builds and extends that system with a more natural support system from within the community. Community members respond to needs that service agencies cannot necessarily meet, with a holistic and community partnership approach.

The place of professional services within the array of supports is much different in Wraparound. Wraparound operationalizes the principle that "it takes a whole community to raise a child". Wraparound is an evidence-based practice; outcome studies across North America have demonstrated that this approach proves to be much more effective in dealing with the most complex and challenging child and family situations (see, for example, the US-based National Wraparound Initiative, <https://nwi.pdx.edu>).

Perhaps two specific scenarios can help to illustrate:

- a single mother with two children, ages 12 and 13, is unemployed and lives solely on support payments from the father, who is not cooperative in other ways. The mother has depressive features. There are real poverty issues, including eviction notices, utility cut-offs, lack of food, etc.

The 12 year-old boy is very close to entering the Youth Justice system. Service Coordination, through the identification of a case manager, assembles the variety of services involved, including the school's special education department and the principal, children's mental health, the CAS, Big Brothers, Respite services, etc. The services assembled typically offer short-term, temporary solutions, such as "Milk for Moms" vouchers, a phone call to the utility company, one-time small amounts of money from discretionary funds, etc. However, these are temporary solutions. They do not address the fundamental problem, nor do they empower the mother or respect her dignity. The true, genuine solution required is that the mother find a job. She has some specific skills and employment history. What Service Coordination lacks entirely is a linkage to the business sector that could help to provide the true solution needed. In Wraparound, the business community would be actively involved and its network would commit itself to helping to find the solution. Once that is in place, then the effectiveness of the existing formal services is also greatly enhanced—and the goal of keeping the boy out of the Young Offender system is more achievable.

- a 13 year-old boy is engaging in highly risky behaviours and appears to have the capability of extreme violence. The local children's mental health service is involved, including its psychiatrist, to work with him on serious mental health issues. However, he is a writer and his goal is to become a full-time writer. In this particular rural County, there are at least two successful Canadian children's authors. Wraparound is a strength-based process. A key component to the successful plan involves hooking him up with one of these writers as a writing "mentor". The writer delivers a central service, perhaps the most critical service, in the overall plan. With that in place, the children's mental health program's formal service delivery can assume its rightful place within a larger, more community-based plan. Without Wraparound, that capability does not exist. Wraparound provides the mechanism or "infrastructure" for this kind of linkage to take place.

Illustrations help to illustrate but they can also limit the imagination or the scope. I hope, however, that they give a flavour of what Wraparound can provide that our present service delivery cannot, even with a robust Service Coordination process in place. Often the pieces that Wraparound can provide are the most critical pieces. Formal services have traditionally done a poor job of linking to informal, community services—even as formal services are time-limited and mandate-driven. Informal services have not traditionally been respected or involved, especially early in the planning.

Gaps exist between the formal and informal sectors. Gaps also exist within the formal sector itself, due to legislated mandates for particular sectors that were developed without a view of the whole picture. Gaps exist, for example, between child welfare, children's mental health, developmental and the Youth Justice systems. Service Coordination can be helpful in closing gaps but cannot always solve them.

In the first illustration given above, the focus on the mother is as important as the focus on the son. Many formal services are mandated to work with the child as the "identified client" and do not have a mandate to work as intensively with the parent. Wraparound focuses the efforts of everyone around the whole family, recognizing that the family provides the critical context for the youth.

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