

# Escape from the Planet of the Gremlins

We take one last shot at those monsters of the meeting, those pebbles in the boots of collaboration, those flies in the ointment of engagement – the beady-eyed Wraparound Gremlins

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In our last two excursions into the secret world of the gremlins we discussed 4 varieties of these mayhem makers: accepting a false consensus, relying on slot-based solutions, operating competing collaboratives and succumbing to the myth of beneficence. In this article we will round out the menagerie with two members of the species whose camouflage renders them especially insidious. Both *getting trapped in the crisis cycle* and *substituting process for action* can evade detection because they appear to be worthwhile, even while they drain the energy from a child and family team and prevent it from producing sustainable outcomes.

## Getting Trapped in the Crisis Cycle

Every good wraparound action plan should include components for reducing the likelihood that crises will occur and for managing those crises that happen anyway. Early in the life of a child and family team, the focus of a team's effort should be on creating a reliable foundation for the rest of the plan. But sometimes a team can be so caught up in emergencies that it is unable to move on to address the critical unmet needs that tend to underlie recurrent patterns of disruption. When this happens, we say that a child and family team has become stuck in the crisis cycle.

To help understand how teams can get mired in making do, it is useful to look at the stages of development that child and family teams tend to pursue. Although every team follows its own path, overall we can say that they proceed through three phases: stabilization, implementation and resolution. Teams that are stuck in the crisis cycle are usually having trouble moving from stabilization to implementation. We will briefly describe each of the three phases and then look at some of the causes and cures for crisisitis. For each phase the critical issues are: duration, team membership, family engagement, insight into strengths and needs, emphasis, type of plan developed, and balance of formal and informal resources in the plan.

### Three process stages

*Stabilization.* This phase is usually short, frequently lasting only a few weeks. Membership comes mostly from service agencies and members of the immediate family. Engagement is tentative, with both the family and service professionals in a reactive mode while trust and understanding develop. Strengths and needs are described in terms of protective and risk factors. The emphasis is on the specific events or challenges that were the immediate motivation for establishing a team. The most important task at this stage is to develop a safety plan, any other planning is limited to one or two other domains with immediate needs. Initial plans also tend to emphasize formal services while the team gets to know each other well enough to incorporate more informal and natural supports. (See chart one.)

*Implementation.* This phase may last from four months to a year or more, with an average of about seven or eight months. Membership gradually changes from an emphasis on professionals, through an even mix, to a time when the majority are family members and natural and informal supports. Strengths and needs are defined contextually, often through stories of what has worked and not worked in the past. Action plans now extend into all of the domains where children and families have critical needs. Resources tapped during the implementation phase will shift from a reliance on formal options at the beginning to the development of a solid network of informal support later on.

*Resolution.* During the last phase formal system involvement either fades out entirely or shifts to a maintenance level for people with enduring needs. This transition may take two or three months. Natural and informal participants make up most of the team. Strengths and needs are now understood functionally based on observations of the child and family’s increased capabilities and reduced vulnerabilities.

**Chart One: Key Elements of the Three Stages of Wraparound**

	<b>Stabilization</b>	<b>Implementation</b>	<b>Resolution</b>
<b>Duration</b>	Two weeks to a month	Four months to a year	One to three months
<b>Team Membership</b>	Service providers and immediate family	Changing over time to include more informal and natural supports	Primarily family, extended family, informal and natural supports
<b>Engagement</b>	Reactive	Interactive	Reflective
<b>Insight into Strengths and Needs</b>	Descriptive: protective and risk factors	Contextual: stories about what has worked and what hasn’t	Functional: mutual understanding of increased capability and decreased vulnerability
<b>Emphasis</b>	Specific events leading to enrollment in wraparound	Unmet needs across life domains	Adjustments necessary to maximize family independence
<b>Plan</b>	Safety plan	Multi-domain action plan	Transition plan
<b>Resources</b>	Primarily formal	Balance of formal, informal and natural	Primarily informal and natural

**Two ways to get stuck in stabilization**

Teams can get stuck in the stabilization phase for all the right reasons. Sometimes a team will coalesce quickly during the stabilization phase and through energy and hard work produce a dramatic improvement in a child and family’s life. This immediate success is wonderful, but it can also be a hidden trap. The team may relax so much it will lack the energy or the motivation to move to the second phase of action. It can also infuse a false sense of security that prevents the team from addressing underlying needs that may have been the driving forces behind the pattern of events that led to the formation of the team in the first place. When new challenges arise, the team goes back into a crisis mode, and the cycle continues.

Teams can also get stuck for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes a team may work hard and use lots of resources but not have the right mix of strategies to provide both the preventive and responsive components of good safety plans. Then one of two things may happen. Sometimes the crisis abates on its own and the team forms the false impression that their plan was effective. Crises continue to come and go, and the team works hard, but no real change occurs. Even worse, the team may work hard and not be able to resolve the initial problem. Frustrated, the team may abandon its efforts all together.

### **Getting out of the crisis cycle**

Moving from stabilization to implementation doesn't mean dropping the safety plan and shifting to a multi-domain action plan. The idea is to build the later on the foundation of the former. The key to the transition in phases is not a change in plans, but an intensification of understanding. During stabilization, the emphasis is reactive – the primary task is to settle things down enough so that everyone can take a deep breath and figure out what really needs doing. The jump from one phase to the next comes when the team develops a common, proactive goal. Thus the first thing to check when it feels like your team is stuck in the crisis cycle is whether the team shares a vision of what it is trying to achieve. Sometimes there will be a goal or mission statement, but it will be pro forma, lacking vitality. Or else the team will have a negative goal – to make bad things stop – rather than a positive goal of replacing the bad things with something better.

Either way, the first strategy for getting out of the crisis cycle is to focus the team on the future. Using techniques like normalization (*What would it be like for a child and family similar in circumstances to your own, but doing okay?*) or visualization (*It's a year from now and through all of our efforts things are better. Let's imagine what that would look like*) the team builds a shared picture of how they want things to be and captures that concept in a simple statement (For example, "*Pulling together, learning together, helping each other out*"). The future orientation of a common compelling purpose will inject the motivation needed to move onto the deeper work required in the implementation phase.

### **Another option is to connect the dots**

If the challenge is developing a better safety plan, try taking a closer look at the connection between interventions and outcomes. Carefully document not only what people are doing and why, but the contexts in which a need for intervention occurs. Perhaps there are additional factors that are being overlooked. If challenging behaviors persist despite repeated intervention, perhaps they are delivering an important message that hasn't yet been heard. Also begin generating new options. One of the founding rules of the wraparound approach is that if we always do what we've always done, we'll always get what we've always gotten. So, the team has to check its strategies. If they are fairly typical and categorical, try doing something novel built upon what you know of the strengths of all the team members. Brainstorm by having the family tell more detailed stories about times when the problem wasn't a problem and looking for connections, ideas and alternatives. Try out hunches in controlled experiments. If an idea seems to work, scale it up. Always look for the critical unmet need hidden within problem behaviors.

Finally, consider whether the safety plan has too much or too little. Sometimes a family needs a lot of support during the first week or two of stabilization and teams are reluctant to provide

everything needed. But without that intensive short-term assistance, they family can't reach a point where they can begin to manage on their own. On the other hand, if things settled down for a while but are re-escalating, one reason may be that the level of assistance has become counter-productive. How to tell? Ask the family. Take the time to listen carefully.

### **Stuckness at the program and system levels**

Child and family teams aren't the only ones who get trapped in the crisis cycle. It can happen to agencies and inter-agency coalitions, too. The reasons tend to be analogous: the lack of a clearly defined mission or an emphasis on working harder at what we've always done, regardless of whether it is producing the outcomes we want. Moving out of the crisis cycle at these levels can be difficult if leadership in the agency or collaborative is diffuse, or, worse, if the effort is being undermined by competing hidden agendas. In the latter circumstance, the attempt to introduce innovations designed to get the agency or system of care unstuck can result in a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) defensiveness and passive resistance to change.

One way to break loose is to search for a narrow but specific common objective that can help align the disjoint partners. Successfully working together on one thing can build enough trust and understanding to move on to more comprehensive action.

### **Substituting Process for Action**

Convening a child and family team and developing and implementing a strength-based action plan can be hard work. Many facets are involved and there is a significant learning curve for both team facilitators and team members. One reason that child and family teams find themselves substituting process for action is that they are concentrating so hard on the steps that they forget to dance.

Another reason may be that the team has found a comfort level at a certain degree of interaction, and is hesitant to disrupt the relationships that have developed. For example, a team may have bonded while they were building their initial strengths inventory. It feels good to start seeing one another in a positive light. The thought of moving on to goal setting and prioritizing unmet needs is unsettling, because it means facing tough issues that could undermine the new relationships. The team finds itself cycling at a safe distance from action because it would be impolite to rush ahead while they are still getting to know one another.

Defensiveness can also call forth the gremlin of permanent process. We can be frozen by the fear of failure. The classic movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* provides a great image of a team substituting process for action. Paul Newman and Robert Redford are trapped on a narrow ledge, high above a river, with the Mexican army bearing down on them. Newman suggests that their only hope is jumping. Redford wants to stay and fight. They continue to process the pluses and minuses of jumping or staying and fighting until Newman finally gets Redford to reveal the reason he doesn't want to jump – he is embarrassed because he doesn't know how to swim. Newman looks down at the distant river and back at Redford. He resolves the matter, and gets

his team to move into action with a simple observation. “You idiot, the fall is going to kill you.” His defensiveness overcome, Redford takes the other end of Newman’s gun belt for support and jumps with him into the river.

Finally, teams may be stuck because they honestly don’t know what to do. Meeting to infinity seems better than doing nothing at all.

### **How to get folks to close their eyes, join hands, and jump**

If fear of failure is behind the team’s newfound love of nominal group process, it may be possible to open things up by taking the pressure off. When wraparound was first introduced, great emphasis was placed on preparing the first action plan. Teams often spent several weeks on strengths, goals, needs and options and wrote action plans that focused on 4 or 5 domains. Implicitly, the team was trying to come up with all the right answers on its first run through the process.

Sometimes this caused problems. First, the child and family continued to live their lives while the process rolled on. They needed help sooner rather than later. Second, teams were reluctant to try new ideas, fearing they might not be good enough.

The child and family team is a learning engine. The first plan is probably not going to work very well. If assistance for the child and family were easy to arrange, wraparound wouldn’t have been needed in the first place. One or two of the initial ideas may go okay, a few might show sparks of brilliance, but some are likely to blow up in our faces. Subsequent plans will work better, but we have to get the first plan out of the way so the team can start working on number two. As long as the stabilization phase has produced a workable safety plan, pick a domain or two and try doing something. If Robert Redford take a leap of faith, so can we.

### **Remember first things first**

If the team seems overwhelmed, reduce the scope of the initial effort. Instead of going after the biggest need, select the first need. A wraparound plan is a pathway from the way things are now to the way the child and family would like them to be. Look at the list of needs you have generated as a team. Is there an obvious or implied sequence? Sometimes the big need may be number six in the series. Get your feet wet. Focus on the first couple of steps in the path. That should help to calm those action-avoidance jitters. After the team has completed a few planning cycles they should have enough confidence to take on bigger challenges.

### **Whose need is it, anyway?**

Sometimes a family may not want to jump because it seems to them that the team has picked the wrong river. This can happen when professionals on the team try to define the child and family’s needs for them, rather than with them. The child and family have a pretty good idea of what they’d like to see happen first, but these other members are insisting on something else. If the team is stuck in this way, let the family pick a need, any need, for the team to work on. One, it may turn out to be a better bet than people thought. Two, at least it gets the team off the dime. Three, it will raise the child and family’s trust level. To themselves they might say, “These folks are serious about giving us voice and choice in the process.” With additional trust, the next time

the team moves through the planning cycle the child and family may be willing to open up a little bit more.

Substituting process for action has always been an effective political strategy at the program, intersystem and community levels. (Let's form a committee to study this issue.) Often, breaking free from cycles of endless meetings at these levels can be accomplished with the same strategies suggested for child and family teams: narrowing the focus, recognizing that the first plan is probably going to come up short, but will be a useful learning experience, and switching the emphasis from the biggest issue to the next issue. But at all levels, if the real problem seems to be that the team just doesn't know what to do next, its time to make room for the people with the wild ideas.

### **I know it sounds crazy, but it just might work**

Just because we have a team, it doesn't mean we are going to generate an original idea. Sometimes the atmosphere of a team will keep people from sticking their necks out too far. The options that are proposed have a nice sound to them, but just don't catch fire. If so, its time to shake things up. Try meeting in an unusual place like a zoo or a museum or a fire station and using the surroundings to generate new strategies. Challenge the group to propose the wildest option they can imagine, even if it is illegal, inappropriate or requires divine intervention. Create a myth or a metaphor for the team's situation, such as a circus or a volunteer fire department and use those associations to stimulate their imaginations. Use toys like Leggos® or PlayDo® to represent physically what you're having a hard time describing in words. At least for a little while, celebrate weirdness. It might be just what you're looking for.

### **Keep your eyes peeled, folks, you ain't seen the last of them critters**

We hope this tour of our menagerie will help you spot not only these gremlins, but some of their relatives as well. These six may be the ones we see most often, but there are plenty more lurking in the shadows. Don't be afraid of them. They can be friendly in captivity. Mostly they are simply reflections of our human natures. If we focus on the compelling needs in our communities and children and families, we can find the motivation to move beyond the gremlins and do together the little miracles we could never have accomplished alone.

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