

Hard Days Behind Her, She Helps Families With Theirs



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

“I can get personal with my clients,” says Robin Lyde, a parent advocate for the Center for Family Representation. “I lived it.”

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The subway in New York is a high-speed tour of the best and worst the city has to offer, a fast-moving showcase of surprising civility, but also, occasionally, unnerving cruelty. At those times, the commute home feels like a test: A woman across the car is shaking her child, shaking him hard enough that it hurts just to watch, but who’s to say what to say, or when to say it?

It’s the split-second version of the dilemma experienced by the neighbors of Nixzmary Brown, the 7-year-old girl whose stepfather is on trial, accused of abusing and murdering her. One neighbor heard loud noises from the apartment; a retired paralegal told The New York Post that the girl had shown him her welts. Neither intervened, with uncertainty overriding instinct.

Intervention could have saved her life, it seems tragically obvious now. But so often in abuse cases, trying to guess the right intervention is a hazardous game. Even the simplest impulse — to confront that mother on the A train — can inflame an already angry parent. The better way to defuse the situation, experts say, is empathy, even if it's false. "Aren't kids that age so hard?" might open the door to a helpful conversation. Judgment almost never will.

Robin Lyde is a professional withholder of judgment — it's what she does for a living, and it's how she helps parents who have been accused of neglect or abuse. Ms. Lyde is a parent advocate, and her professional credentials are highly personal: She's a former addict who lost custody of her children after charges of neglect. Her co-workers at the Center for Family Representation, lawyers and social workers, may explain the best advice to their clients, but often it's only Ms. Lyde, or one of her two parent-advocate colleagues, who can persuade the clients to follow it.

Ms. Lyde and other parent advocates, all of whom have had some experience with charges of neglect and have received some training, are the social service system's answer to the empathetic approach. "I can get personal with my clients," Ms. Lyde said. "I lived it."

It is an approach that has had its problems, but also produced quiet successes. Sara Greengrass, a lawyer at the nonprofit center, and Raquel Davis, a social work staff member, were recently struggling during a meeting with a client, an older man who'd been charged with excessive use of corporal punishment. The two young women were trying to convey the intricacies of the law, but their client's stance only grew more hostile the more they talked. When he asked, in effect, how these two women could know the first thing about his life, Ms. Davis decided to bring Ms. Lyde in on the conversation.

Ms. Lyde, a 45-year-old woman with a direct gaze and a leisurely way with conversation, came into the room and sat down. She spoke about how she had been raised by the belt, and had even used it once or twice. She knew where he was coming from, she told him, but things had changed, and this was the law, like it or not. Within minutes, the client was laughing: If she could change, he acknowledged, then so could he — he just needed to hear it from someone who spoke the same language.

Ms. Lyde's life has been a series of not just changes but wild swings, from middle-class comfort to desperate addiction and back again to financial security, with a three-story brownstone she owns in Crown Heights and a son thinking about college. The daughter

of a churchgoing, loving family from Brooklyn, she fell, in her 20s, into the grip of a three-gram-a-day freebasing habit. Her mother's grievous new burdens included looking after Ms. Lyde's two children and removing labels even from groceries so Ms. Lyde couldn't return them for cash.

It wasn't until Ms. Lyde's third child, a daughter, turned 3 that "the system came into my life," she says, nodding with respect and perhaps some fear for the social services bureaucracy, with all its rules and whims and capricious power to change her family's life for worse and then for better. Family Court granted custody to the mother of the 3-year-old's father. And then the twins Ms. Lyde gave birth to two years later bypassed her altogether, slipping straight from the hospital into foster care.

For Ms. Lyde, that was the breaking point. She got clean, stayed clean, and a year later had reunited her family. Eventually she started working as a parent advocate, for the last two years at the center. She helps clients navigate the system, but more than that, she provides living proof that it can recognize change.

Recently, Ms. Lyde has been working with a young woman who lost custody of her 2-year-old daughter after marijuana was found in a drug raid at her father's home, where she and her daughter were living.

The young woman understood, with Ms. Lyde's frequent encouragement, that if she wanted to get her daughter back, she had to move out of her father's home, even if it meant living in a shelter, and that she had to stay clean, even if living in a shelter made her want to get high. "She gave me a lot of courage," said the young woman, who now has her daughter back, but declined to give her name because the case is still under court oversight.

"Our deal was, instead of picking up the get-high, pick up the phone," says Ms. Lyde. She spoke to the woman on Thanksgiving, and again on Christmas, knowing those two days she'd be particularly vulnerable to relapsing.

It didn't take a degree to glean that insight; it took firsthand experience, and empathy, both of which she has in exquisite abundance.

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