

Our History

"Before there was a national organization, there were individuals" begins an early newsletter article about the National Federation. These individuals, the founding grandfathers and mothers of our movement -- a collection of parents and caregivers -- started a series of events in the late 80's that would, ultimately, lead to the formation of a then, yet unheard of type of movement, one that would rapidly elevate the field of mental health to a whole new level.

The family movement can trace its roots back nearly three decades, beginning with a group of parents dissatisfied over the treatment of their children within many of the child serving systems. For example, only half of their children were in school, and of the half who were not, 75% were in the juvenile justice system. Some parents were forced to give up custody of their children in order to receive services.

In 1982, Jane Knitzer, a renowned researcher, defined the problem in an [issue brief](#). "Unclaimed Children" turned the spotlight on a group of children and youth with the most serious disorders who were largely ignored and underserved by the mental health system. Her detailed descriptions were so engaging they set the stage for public conversations on these important issues to improve services for families living with mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities, especially in low and middle-income areas where effective services were often scarce.

In 1986, Portland State University Research and Training Center on Family Support sponsored the first Families as Allies conference. Bringing together a diverse group of individuals looking to network with each other, this landmark meeting became a catalyst for the family movement, if not in part due to the conference's novel theme, well ahead of its time: "Families and Professionals Working Together."

Shortly into the meeting, those in attendance quickly realized that they all shared common issues, a common connection that bonded them together: all families were going through the same experiences when it came to being a voice for their child(ren) with mental health challenges.

This realization led to families networking together at every opportunity they were given as they quickly noticed that a collective voice was stronger than a single one, a collective that shared enlightening and thought provoking stories around children who have from mental health challenges and their families.

Around the same time, a new stream of support for the federally funded Child and Adolescent Service Systems Program (CASSP) gave families an opportunity to take their experiences nationwide and present at important meetings. By this point, the family movement was starting to get into full swing as Barbara Friesen and Naomi Karb arranged for a group of parents to talk with Madeline Will and Patty Smith, two senior officials in the Department of Education. This meeting marked the first time parents had the opportunity to talk with high-ranking, national officials from the Department of Education about the issues facing families of children with mental health needs. The discussions that took place at this meeting led to support for an additional important meeting.

In December 1988, Portland State University Research and Training Center on Family Support with the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) co-hosted a conference in Arlington, Virginia. This "Next Steps" conference served the sole purpose of creating an agenda for children's mental health. That meeting was attended by 75 parents and 25 professionals.

At this point, the movement was growing and it was decided by the attendees that a Steering Committee should be put into place to further discuss this issue and determine "next steps" (hence the name) for taking and improving children's mental health services on a national scale. Completely consisting of families with children who had mental health needs, its inaugural members included Danny Amrine (Oklahoma), Ederle Brooks (D.C.), Al Duchnowski (Florida), Glenda Fine (Pennsylvania), Carol Freebairn (Arkansas), Gloria Graves (Kansas), Marilyn and David Henry (Pennsylvania), Barbara Huff (Kansas), Yvonne Jacobson (Alaska), Dixie Jordon (Minnesota), Naomi Karp (Virginia), Creasa Reed (Kentucky), Marge Samels (Maryland), Bonnie Shoultz (New York), Judith Sturtevant (Vermont), and Jane Walker (Maryland). Ann Turnbull (Kansas) and Barbara Friesen (Oregon) served as facilitators.

Around the same time, we embarked on another ambitious task. For years, many of our chapters had been holding events during May to create awareness around children's mental health. These chapters asked if the National Federation could head up a national event in support. As a response, the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health declared the first full week of May as National Children's Mental Health Awareness Week.

The first funding cycle from the National Institute of Mental Health funded the first five family-run organizations which were established in Vermont, Hawaii,

In February 1989, this twenty-man Steering Committee met in the basement of Naomi and Gene Karp's home. After hours of discussions, it was decided and voted on to form a national parent-run organization that would speak on behalf of children with mental health needs and their families.

Eager to get started, the Steering Committee, representing 16 states, became the Interim Board. Barbara Huff was elected Interim President by this group of parents. Barbara would guide the group while establishing the foundation of the organization.



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