

Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

Engaging families in the casework process promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system and is central to successful practice. Effective family engagement occurs when child welfare practitioners actively collaborate and partner with the family network, including maternal and paternal relatives and fictive kin, throughout their involvement with the child welfare system and recognizing them as the experts on their respective situations and empowering them in the process.

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Family engagement is a family-centered and strengths-based approach to making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes for children and families. At its best, family engagement encourages and empowers families to be their own champions and to work toward goals that they developed, with the support of their caseworker, based on their strengths, protective factors, and needs. This partnership between caseworkers and families is founded on the principle of communicating openly and honestly in a way that supports disclosure of culture, family dynamics, and personal experiences to meet the individual needs of every family and child. Additionally, family engagement is recognized as essential to success across the human services and education fields and is considered a core competency in the Council on Social Work Education's [accreditation standards](#).

This bulletin for professionals provides an overview of the foundational elements of the family engagement approach, followed by strategies and promising practices for implementing it. While this publication is intended to provide information for frontline caseworkers who directly engage families, it also provides information about family engagement at the system, program, and community levels, as best practices are grounded in these higher levels of the child welfare system.

THE BENEFITS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In child welfare practice, families are recognized as experts in determining what is best for themselves and their children. A family engagement approach to casework involves supporting families in developing solutions to their unique challenges. Using this strengths-based approach, caseworkers work to create a safe space and build trust with a family network, then empower and encourage them to partner with caseworkers in developing plans and goals to ensure child safety and, in turn, improve outcomes for children and families. Prioritizing family voice in decision-making and planning processes enhances the fit between family needs and services and increases the likelihood that families will access services that will result in case plan completion.

Rather than being a single tool, family engagement represents a mindset and approach that can reap extensive benefits, including the following:

- **Family preservation.** Involving family members early in the casework process may eliminate the need for a child to be placed outside of the home (Children's Bureau, 2019).
- **Improved interpersonal relationships.** A family's belief that all its members are respected—and that its strengths, challenges, concerns, and cultural differences are recognized and accepted—strengthens the relationship with the caseworker. This creates confidence in the process that increases the chances for a successful intervention (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).
- **Increased family buy-in.** Families are more likely to commit to achieving goals when they help make decisions about a plan that will affect them and their children (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).

- **Creating a sense of belonging and family connectedness.** The inclusion of kin and extended family members in case planning expands placement and permanency options for children when in-home care is not feasible and can nurture children's sense of belonging during what is oftentimes a tumultuous, unsettling time. Some people who play an important role may be "fictive kin"—those who may not be related, but who have an emotionally significant relationship with the family or child.
- **Improved quality of caseworker visits.** The engagement of families through empathy, genuineness, and respect leads to quality, purposeful interactions between families and caseworkers. In turn, quality contacts provide opportunities for caseworkers to make an improved assessment of the child's safety, risk, and needs so they can better support the family (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017b).
- **Youth empowerment.** There are also tangible benefits to engaging youth. These include supporting adolescent brain development, encouraging development of leadership skills, improving self-esteem, and helping form critical social connections (Children's Bureau, 2019).

Family Engagement During a Public Health Crisis

A public health crisis, such as a pandemic, can have major implications on the ways in which caseworkers can engage with families. Agencies may need to adapt their processes and services, e.g., shift to virtual caseworker and family visits. It is important that caseworkers are flexible and supportive as they engage with families during such crises. This could involve helping a family access technology or the internet so they can continue to participate in the case planning process (Children's Bureau, 2021). Caseworkers should also be aware and sensitive of financial difficulties and other family stressors that may be caused or exacerbated by public health crises. For more information on engaging families during times of hardship, see the following resources:

- [Supporting Child, Caregiver, and Family Well-Being in Times of Crisis: Strategies to Promote Effective Virtual and Phone Engagement](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [Responding to Disasters](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ACYF-CB-IM-21-03: [Lessons From the COVID-19 Pandemic: Supporting Families Through More Just, Equitable, Proactive, and Integrated Approaches](#) (Children's Bureau)
- [Virtual Case Management Considerations and Resources for Human Services Programs](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation)

CHALLENGES TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Caseworkers regularly face challenges to engaging parents and extended family members. Common barriers to engagement include the following:

- **Vulnerable and worried families.** Involvement with the child welfare system often results in vulnerability and stress that is difficult to cope with. It is important that caseworkers establish a foundation of trust to address these challenges (G. Pilarski, personal communication, May 19, 2021).
- **Unreceptive or mistrusting families.** Parents who become involved in the child welfare system often mistrust child welfare services (Mirick, 2014). Their mistrust may be conveyed through a range of emotions, such as anger, frustration, confusion, skepticism, and questioning.
- **An inherent power imbalance.** There is an inherent power imbalance in the roles of parents, other family members, and social workers in child protection processes (Toros et al., 2018). The nature of the relationship is often involuntary on the parents' part and investigative and punitive on the workers' part, which can make forming a partnership challenging.
- **The duality of the caseworkers' role.** On top of the power imbalance, practitioners are required to play multiple—and oftentimes contradicting—roles in the casework process. On one hand, they provide support and assistance, while on the other, they have the authority and ability to make recommendations that remove children from their homes (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).
- **Caseworker turnover and/or high caseload.** Caseworker turnover adds an element of instability that can hinder the engagement process and take away from time needed to build trust (Cheng & Lo, 2020). In addition, a caseworker with a high caseload may not have sufficient time to build strong relationships with families (Toros et al., 2018).
- **Logistical challenges.** Transportation costs, scheduling conflicts, and other logistical challenges that both families and caseworkers face can impede engagement. Utilizing active and joint problem-solving around these barriers can support family buy-in (Stephens et al., 2018).
- **Family stressors.** Problems including substance use, mental illness, and intimate partner violence can hinder a caseworker's efforts to build a productive, engaging relationship (Cheng & Lo, 2020). Some families facing these stressors benefit from intentional collaboration across service sectors, such as behavioral health and the education system.
- **Implicit bias.** Child welfare agencies should be aware of the implicit biases held by caseworkers, supervisors, and others about the families they work with, as these can impede effective engagement. Common biases include "Individuals can't or won't change" or "If parents loved their children, they would make different choices" (Children's Bureau, 2019). Caseworkers may be particularly biased towards fathers and unwilling or unprepared to engage them (Arroyo et al., 2019). This can result in caseworkers engaging only mothers, despite evidence that father involvement can have beneficial impacts on case outcomes.
- **Interpretation of confidentiality statutes.** Caseworkers can be hamstrung by conservative interpretations of confidentiality laws, precluding them from sharing critical information with the family network.

Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives

Engaging fathers and paternal relatives is a crucial component of family engagement, but these family members have been historically overlooked. The findings from round 3 of the [Federal Child and Family Services Reviews](#) show fathers were engaged in less than half (49 percent) of the reviewed cases, while mothers were engaged in 64 percent of cases (JBS International, Inc., 2020). Child welfare agencies should provide training for their staff on how to effectively engage fathers and work to create greater opportunities to partner with fathers and paternal relatives whose children are involved in the child welfare system.

The benefits of involved fathers include the following (National Fatherhood Initiative, n.d.):

- Improved emotional and social well-being of children
- Fewer maltreatment incidents
- Better school performance
- Fewer behavioral problems for boys and fewer psychological problems for girls

For more information, refer to the following resources:

- [Engaging Fathers and Paternal Family Members](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [“Tips & Tools to Help Your Organization Learn to Better Engage Fathers”](#) (National Fatherhood Initiative)
- ACF-ACF-IM-18-01: [Integrating Approaches That Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement](#) (HHS, Office of Family Assistance)
- [“Engaging Participants and Facilitating Groups”](#) (National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse)

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES AT THE PRACTICE LEVEL

Quality family engagement occurs at the practice level between the caseworker and the family. Effective, collaborative case planning relies on the caseworker's transparent efforts to continuously engage family members and others as appropriate, including utilizing the following activities:

- Visualizing the family system through developing genograms and network maps
- Engaging the family as key decision-making partners
- Identifying behaviors and conditions that need to change
- Matching strengths and needs with solutions and services
- Reviewing, tracking, and acknowledging progress regularly

- Determining readiness for key case transition points, such as reunification
- Marshaling supports for relapse prevention as needed
- Preparing for case closure

The following sections describe approaches caseworkers can use to promote family engagement in daily practice.

USING SUPPORTIVE BEHAVIORS

Being supportive can go a long way with a family that is involuntarily involved in the child welfare system. Caseworkers should use the following supporting behaviors:

- Considering the socioeconomic stressors and institutional and societal biases associated with class, race, gender, and culture
- Balancing discussions of problems with the identification of strengths and resources
- Listening to the family's concerns with empathy
- Helping families meet concrete needs (e.g., housing, food, utilities, child care) by connecting them with appropriate supports and services
- Setting goals that are mutually agreed upon and may be generated primarily by the family and stated in their language
- Focusing on improving family members' skills rather than providing insights
- Providing family members with choices whenever possible
- Obtaining commitment from the family that they will engage in mutually identified tasks
- Sharing openly and transparently with family members about agency and court expectations and timelines
- Conducting frequent and substantive caseworker visits with the parents, caregivers, children, and other members of the family network
- Providing virtual alternatives to parent-child visits when face-to-face meetings cannot occur
- Recognizing and praising progress
- Embracing family meetings with the widest family network possible by inviting fictive kin and other members of the family's support system to participate
- Incorporating the child or youth in case planning and family meetings, including helping them be physically present, encouraging them to participate by sending letters and videos, or suggesting participation through other methods
- Holding meetings at times and in locations that are most convenient for family members
- Providing a welcoming physical environment for the meetings

SUPPORTING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN BIRTH AND FOSTER PARENTS

A strong relationship between a child or youth's birth parents and foster parents can help improve family engagement and child welfare outcomes (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020). These relationships work best when caseworkers support and facilitate early and ongoing communication between the parties.

The [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) (QPI) is a strategy developed by the Youth Law Center that emphasizes the importance of developing a robust relationship between birth and foster families. As of January 2021, 75 jurisdictions in eight States had implemented the QPI approach (Quality Parenting Initiative, 2021). Rather than being a standalone program, QPI is a philosophical approach that communities use to design policies and practices that suit their individual needs (Casey Family Programs, 2020a). The QPI approach in Louisiana, the first State to adopt QPI statewide, involves two core strategies to facilitate shared parenting between foster and birth families: initial calls and icebreakers.

An initial call between the families takes place as soon as possible following the removal of a child from their family. These calls serve to confirm that the child has arrived at the foster home, to introduce the birth family to the foster family, and to exchange information about the child. Caseworkers facilitate this early conversation by preparing both parties for the call, providing topics for discussion, and offering support and guidance if the call does not go well.

An icebreaker meeting is a short meeting between birth and foster families that is facilitated by the caseworker in the foster family's home within 3 to 5 days of placement. This meeting focuses on initiating a relationship between caregivers and serves several purposes:

- The resource parent can learn about the child's needs.
- The birth parent can meet the person caring for their child.
- The child can see their caregivers collaborate.

INSTITUTING FAMILY MEETING MODELS

The hallmark of family engagement practice is convening the family network to support and plan for its children and family members. When it comes to putting together the family network, child welfare agencies have implemented different types of family meetings, including models such as family group decision-making, family team conferencing, permanency teaming, and team decision-making meetings. For a detailed description of these four approaches, visit the [Annie E. Casey Foundation website](#).

The various family meeting models involve different structures and procedures, but common threads across these approaches include teamwork and family engagement (Kim et al., 2019). Family meeting approaches bring together a group of family members, caseworkers, and other significant stakeholders to develop, implement, and evaluate individualized case plans. Service selection is often a part of these family meetings, which can help build trust between the family members and caseworker. When family members feel safe and can meaningfully participate in assessing their situation, they are able to guide the caseworker on what services and supports will help them.

Such approaches can strengthen family relationships, help identify and nurture a system of family supports, intentionally involve fathers and paternal relatives, and prevent unnecessary placement and placement disruption. For example, a study in Texas found that after controlling for demographic variables, family team meetings reduced the odds of removal by 51 percent (Lambert et al., 2017).

INCORPORATING FAMILY FINDING

In agencies that implement [family finding](#), child welfare professionals cast a wide net to identify and search for family members and other important people in the lives of children in foster care. Once identified, the professionals make them aware that children have entered care and ask them to become part of the family circle that is engaged in the case decision-making process. This process intentionally creates a lifetime network for children, which fosters a sense of belonging and create meaningful connections with maternal and paternal family members as well as fictive kin. Family finding was initially viewed as a tool to enhance permanency for youth aging out of foster care. However, the practice became more widely used following passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which requires State agencies to identify and notify family members within 30 days of removing a child from their home.

Family finding can be time intensive. Since caseworkers have limited time, it is most common for family findings to be carried out by relative search units. Recognizing this, the Fostering Connections Act authorized \$75 million over 5 years for grants that enable agencies to implement programs to increase permanency for children and youth, including intensive family finding programs.

The Illinois Recruitment and Kin Connection Project

One family finding program funded by the Fostering Connections Act grants was the Illinois Recruitment and Kin Connection Project (RKCP), which was funded by the Children's Bureau from 2010 to 2015. This project sparked policy and practice changes that continued after the project's conclusion (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services & Illinois Center for Adoption and Permanency, 2015).

The RKCP program model included a kin connection specialist who began family finding outreach the same day temporary custody was granted, actively engaging the birth family and case management team in the process. After conducting the search for 40 days, the specialist documented their findings in Illinois' statewide automated child welfare information system.

At the project's conclusion, project leaders determined that RKCP services improved concurrent planning, increased the likelihood that future placements would be with relatives or fictive kin, and succeeded in locating more family members and kin who could serve as alternative placement options and positive attachment figures (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services & Illinois Center for Adoption and Permanency, 2015). Ultimately, the project was successful in catalyzing systems change at the legislative level, the State policy level, and the professional development level. The project's impact exceeded expectations, and front-end family finding is now considered a best practice in the Illinois child welfare system.

More information is available in the [RKCP final report](#).

EMPLOYING SAFETY ORGANIZED PRACTICE

Safety Organized Practice (SOP) is a collaborative practice approach designed to enhance family participation and encourage equitable decision-making (Northern California Training Academy, 2018). The practice emphasizes the importance of teamwork and aims to strengthen partnerships within a family by involving a network of family, friends, service providers, and the child welfare agency. A core belief of SOP is that all families have strengths.

SOP is both a framework for practice and a set of tools and strategies that caseworkers can utilize. These tools and strategies are informed by several solution-focused techniques used in child welfare practice. These three questions offer a guiding framework for SOP:

- What are we worried about?
- What is working well?
- What needs to happen?

For more information about SOP, check out the California Social Work Education Center's [Safety Organized Practice toolkit](#).

USING MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Motivational interviewing is a nonconfrontational engagement practice that can help families work toward potential changes. It may be particularly useful in encouraging parents to recognize the benefits of participating in a home-based family support program. The approach was originally designed to help adults with substance-use issues but has since been adapted as an effective model for working with involuntary or reluctant families to help resolve their ambivalence toward change (Casey Family Programs, 2021).

When skillfully employed, this technique helps an individual see the possibilities for—and merit in—positive change and then encourages and supports them in this effort. The practice requires a caseworker to listen empathetically and build trust with the family before encouraging them to consider possible changes. A traditional approach to family engagement may involve a caseworker telling a parent they are at risk of losing custody of their child and directing them to participate in services. Using motivational interviewing, the caseworker listens to the parent's concerns about the allegations, encourages them to look at the positives and negatives of engaging in services, and helps them decide what changes are consistent with their goals and values (Hall et al., 2020).

For additional information, see Information Gateway's [Motivational Interviewing: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals](#).

Engaging Families Affected by Parental Incarceration

The intersection of child welfare and parental incarceration is a growing concern for child welfare caseworkers. Engaging incarcerated parents may be difficult for caseworkers due to a lack of clear agency policies and insufficient training on working with this population. However, incarcerated parents typically have the same rights as other parents regarding visitation, engagement in case planning, and reunification efforts.

Caseworkers should engage incarcerated parents early and often, from the time of arrest until release. When working with families affected by parental incarceration, caseworkers should consider the following engagement practices:

- Become familiar with the rules and procedures for visitation and other forms of contact at the facility in which a parent is incarcerated in order to facilitate parent/child contact.
- Seek out ways for incarcerated parents to participate in case-planning meetings, dependency hearings, family decision-making meetings, and other appointments.
- Revisit discussions about case and visit plans as incarcerated parents near their release dates.

For more information about working with incarcerated parents, read Information Gateway's [Child Welfare Practice With Families Affected by Parental Incarceration](#).

PRACTICING CULTURAL HUMILITY

Caseworkers who partake in cultural and diversity training have reported higher success rates in engaging families (Cheng & Lo, 2018). This suggests that when a caseworker demonstrates sensitivity about a family's ethnicity and culture, they can build trust and rapport with that family.

Many of these cultural trainings are labeled and designed to achieve "cultural competency." However, many social work professionals have suggested shifting from the term "cultural competency" to "cultural humility." While competency suggests mastery, humility involves admitting that one does not know everything there is to know about another culture but that they are willing to learn from their clients and address their inherent biases and embedded perceptions (Lekas et al., 2020). Cultural humility is described as a lifelong learning process involving self-reflection and self-critique.

Child welfare caseworkers should seek to apply cultural humility in any instance when one is working with people different from oneself in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity expression, socioeconomic status, or geographic location (Mallon, 2020). A lack of sensitivity to the cultural needs, values, and strengths of an at-risk population may undermine the quality of a family's case plan and provided services. It could also lead to assumptions and misconceptions that can result in limited family engagement, frustrated efforts, and misguided resources.

The [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute](#) (NCWWI) suggests that caseworkers integrate the following cultural humility strategies into their practice (NCWWI, 2019):

- Embrace the complexity of diversity.
- Be open to individual differences and different social experiences.
- Reserve judgement.
- Communicate with others in ways that are most understandable to them.
- View cultural humility as an ongoing effort to become more familiar with the worldviews of others.
- Promote collaboration.
- Demonstrate familiarity with children's and families' living environments.
- Self-reflect on the ways in which biases interfere with the ability to objectively listen to others.

Use the following resources for more information on culturally sensitive child welfare practice:

- ["Seeking Equity Calls Us to Cultural Humility"](#) (Children's Bureau Express)
- [Racial Equity Resources for Child Welfare Professionals](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [National Center for Cultural Competence](#) (Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development)

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AT THE SYSTEM, PROGRAM, AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

While this bulletin is intended for caseworkers who work directly with families, child welfare agencies play an important role in family engagement by implementing programs and supporting their workers in executing best practices for engagement. Community groups and organizations also play a critical role in partnering with agencies to provide tailored services and supports for families involved with the child welfare system.

INVOLVING FAMILIES IN SYSTEM-LEVEL CHANGE

The experiences that families have with all levels of the child welfare system begin at the system level. One of the strongest ways to promote more positive interactions with the system is to have family and youth voices involved in how it is designed and operated (Children's Bureau, 2019). System-level family engagement occurs when family members who were formerly involved with child welfare services actively collaborate with child welfare agencies in effecting practice and systems change. Providing the opportunity for families with lived experience to have a voice in policy and program development, serve on decision-making bodies, and help train agency staff on family engagement can have many benefits in the child welfare system (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019).

Even when States and jurisdictions understand the value of stakeholder engagement, many still struggle to engage families and youth authentically and sustainably in the development and implementation of programs, policies, and training. Pitfalls for family engagement include not giving family members an explicit role or involving them as an afterthought (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019). This often results in the families feeling as though they are involved in a process only to "check a box" or fulfill a requirement. Authentic engagement occurs when child welfare agencies actively work with families and youth early and throughout a process or project and recognize them as equal partners.

Agencies can increase the prominence and impact of family and youth voice in the child welfare system by implementing the following principles (Children's Bureau, 2019):

- Prioritize family and youth voice.
- Work with families and youth to create a vision for how to implement family and youth voice
- Challenge the inherent power imbalance between agencies and families.
- Use mindful and empowering language to describe parents, youth, and caregivers. (For example, use "child" instead of "foster child," "parent" instead of "birth parent," and "resource family" instead of "foster family.")
- Ensure parents and youth have high-quality legal representation.
- Implement peer-led and supported services.
- Establish feedback loops for continuous quality improvement.

Recognizing the benefits of agencies, families, and community partners working together, the Children's Bureau Capacity Building Center for States developed the [Family Empowerment Leadership Academy](#), a collection of resources designed to help agencies improve collaboration with families.

ENGAGING PARENTS AS PEER MENTORS AT THE PROGRAM LEVEL

One of the most commonly used practices for engaging families at the program level is the [parent partner program](#), which enlists individuals who were once involved with child welfare services to help parents currently involved with the system meet case plan goals and navigate the system. Parent and caregiver mentors assist current parents through mutual sharing, support, and advocacy. Parent partner programs are founded on the premise that these experienced parents and caregivers are uniquely qualified to help by serving as empathetic peers, mentors, guides, and advocates.

Studies show that parent partner programs in child welfare have resulted in higher rates of reunification, lower rates of reentry, and increased family participation in services and court hearings (Casey Family Programs, 2019). They can also be beneficial to the parents who serve as mentors (Casey Family Programs, 2020b). As former clients of the child welfare system take on leadership roles and responsibility, they build workplace skills and self-esteem and are compensated for their efforts. In addition, many who take on roles as parent partners go on to pursue careers in child welfare or degrees in higher education.

To be successful, parent partner programs need strong leaders who can work collaboratively with multiple agency and community partners. Because some agency staff are not accustomed to treating their former child welfare clients as paraprofessionals, leadership should communicate clearly that parent partner programs can be a powerful strategy to improve family engagement in child welfare cases (Casey Family Programs, 2020b). These programs can also influence the culture of child welfare agencies by shifting the perception of caregivers from clients to partners. It is also important that the leadership implementing parent partner programs include diverse representatives so that the diversity of the parent partners reflects the diversity of the population served by the agency (Casey Family Programs, 2020b).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN CHILD WELFARE

Community engagement in child welfare involves partnering with community members who have firsthand knowledge of the strengths their neighborhoods possesses and the challenges they face. Communities are also home to independent organizations that offer specialized programs and services that can support families served by the child welfare system. Integrating community voice into child welfare systems can improve family engagement and increase the efficacy of services.

Agencies can use the following strategies to engage communities:

- Recognizing promising practices and partnering with programs and services that are highly valued within a community
- Hiring staff that represent the race, ethnicity, and cultural makeup of the community
- Encouraging agency staff to attend community events to build relationships and learn about community strengths and concerns
- Involving community members and organizations in assessment and evaluation activities

The Children's Bureau funded a series of Community Collaborations grantees in Federal fiscal years 2018 and 2019 that encouraged collaboration between child welfare agencies and communities. The grantees were awarded funds to develop, implement, and evaluate community-based primary prevention strategies and activities for strengthening families, preventing maltreatment, and reducing entry into the child welfare system. Read about lessons learned from these grantees in the Children's Bureau's [Primary Prevention: Themes From Fiscal Year 2018 Grantee Site Visits](#).

Use the following resources for more information about community engagement:

- [Building Agency/Community Partnerships](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [Building and Sustaining Collaborative Community Relationships](#) (Capacity Building Center for States)
- ["Embracing Community and the Wisdom of Lived Experience"](#) (HHS, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau; Information Gateway; & FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention)

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Families involved in the child welfare system often have multiple and complex needs across different human services sectors, such as mental health issues and juvenile justice involvement (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017a). Effective collaboration across human services systems can help agencies achieve better outcomes related to safety, permanency, family preservation, and reunification.

For example, interdisciplinary family engagement has proven successful when there is overlap between the child welfare and juvenile court systems (Olson, 2020). When families, caseworkers, legal personnel, extended families, and other stakeholders work collaboratively—sometimes with the help of a facilitator—the benefits can include parental empowerment, strengths-based decision-making, and the focused exchange of information. Visit the Information Gateway website for resources about how child welfare agencies can collaborate with the [courts](#), [behavioral health and wellness professionals](#), and [domestic violence service providers](#).

CONCLUSION

There are many ways in which child welfare caseworkers and agencies can engage families, ranging from large-scale policy changes to simple changes in daily practice. Fundamentally, though, it requires a paradigm shift in attitude where the family is treated as the expert on its unique situation and encouraged to draw on its specific strengths and resources to ensure more positive long-term outcomes. By reviewing the concepts presented in this issue brief, child welfare professionals can assess how well their own agencies engage families and initiate changes to improve their work in this area.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Family-Centered Practice (Information Gateway) provides resources on family-centered practice approaches, including information on engaging families in case planning.

Quality Worker-Parent Visits: A Tip Sheet for Supervisors and Managers (Capacity Building Center for States) provides guidance to support caseworkers through three phases of quality worker-parent visits: before the visit, during the visit, and after the visit.

Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University) provides information on how science-based principles can inform child welfare policy and practice development, including strategies caseworkers can apply to their work engaging families.

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