

Family Engagement to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

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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 family members throughout their involvement with the child welfare system, 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, working toward case goals that they have helped to develop based on their specific family strengths, resources, 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 now considered a core competency in educational programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (California State University, Institute for Community Collaborative Studies, 2014).

This bulletin for professionals provides an overview of the foundational elements of the family engagement approach, followed by strategies—including State and local examples—and promising practices for implementing this approach at the case level, peer level, and systems level.

The Benefits of Family Engagement

A family engagement approach to casework views families as the experts on their unique challenges and seeks to support them in developing solutions. This strengths-based approach empowers and encourages families to partner with child welfare professionals to plan the best services and resources for the family to ensure child safety and, in turn, improve outcomes for children and families. Including families in decision-making and planning processes enhances the fit between family needs and services and makes it more likely the family will participate in services and complete the case plan (Bossard, Braxton, & Conway, 2014).

Family Empowerment

Recognizing the many benefits that come with family engagement, the Children's Bureau Capacity Building Center for States, part of the broader Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, is endorsing a framework of family empowerment at all levels of child welfare. The Center is working with States to assess their family empowerment models and their capacity to represent family interests at the practice, program, and policy levels.

For more information, visit the Capacity Building Collaborative Center for States website at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/family-empowerment/>.

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

Family preservation. Involving family members early in the casework process may eliminate the need for a child to be placed outside of the home.

An enhanced helping relationship. 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 a confidence in the process that increases the chances for a successful intervention.

Increased family buy-in. Families are more likely to commit to achieving case goals when they help to make decisions about a plan that will affect them and their children.

Expanded options. The inclusion of kin and extended family members early in case planning increases the number of individuals willing to help with child care, transportation, etc., and expands placement and permanency options for children when in-home care is not feasible. The caseworker should defer to the family to identify potential helpful connections, recognizing that 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 and focus of caseworker visits.

The partnership developed between the family and caseworker enhances the assessment process and the level of engagement, resulting in more constructive meetings and more positive outcomes (Gladstone et al., 2012).

Enhanced family decision-making skills. Involvement in a strengths-based decision-making process—where appropriate approaches to problem-solving are modeled—gives family members new strategies for communicating and problem-solving.

More targeted services. In a collaborative partnership, caseworkers and family members are better able to identify a family’s unique needs and develop relevant and culturally appropriate service plans that address underlying needs, build on family strengths, and draw from community supports (Pinsoneault & Fiermonte, 2013).

Challenges to Family Engagement

Child welfare practitioners face numerous challenges to engaging birth parents and extended family members on a regular basis, not the least of which is an unreceptive or nonresponsive family. Family members may be uneasy and mistrusting of the child welfare system for fear of losing their children permanently and choose not to engage with child welfare professionals. While caseworkers may often feel as though they are going down a one-way street with an unreceptive family, they should continue to pursue engagement as a best practice throughout the casework life cycle: intake, screening,

planning, reviews, and closure. Training caseworkers in “reactance theory”—reframing client resistance as a normal and expected response to a lost or threatened personal freedom—may be helpful (Mirick, 2014).

Other factors that may impede engagement include issues related to poverty, single parenting, substance use and mental health, individual caseworker bias, lack of cultural competence, and agency culture (UC Davis Human Services Northern California Training Academy, 2009). Some of these family stressors—particularly substance use, mental health, and cultural barriers—often benefit from intentional collaboration across service sectors, such as behavioral health and the education system.

To encourage family engagement across disciplines, the Children’s Bureau launched the Family Engagement Inventory (FEI) in December 2014 as a means of infusing family voice and strengthening families in the many systems that serve children: child welfare, juvenile justice, behavioral health, early childhood education, and education. The FEI is designed to provide updated information to those who work directly with children and families and those who manage programs and make policy. Professionals can use the FEI to compare approaches across the five fields, access key information and links to relevant websites, and find practical examples, among other things (<http://www.childwelfare.gov/fei/>).

An example of school-parent family engagement work is the Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, a Department of Education initiative to boost the capacity of school staff and families to work together on behalf of student achievement (<http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partnership-frameworks.pdf>).

Additional family engagement strategies to address these needs in the education and mental health sectors include:

- Intentional efforts by schools to create welcoming and culturally competent parent and caregiver communities with opportunities for family involvement (see National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/> and U.S. Department of Education Family and Community Engagement at <http://www.ed.gov/family-and-community-engagement/>)
- Family network organizations familiar with local community needs, cultural diversity, and economics (e.g., Strengthening Families Program at www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org)
- Parent and family education programs to improve family functioning, prevent behavioral issues, and promote mental health (e.g., National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health at www.ffcmh.org, Bridge to Hope at <http://bridge2hope.org/>, and Mental Health America at www.mentalhealthamerica.net)
- Out-of-school-time (OST) programs to support children and youth before and after school and during summer vacations to boost educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities (see *Engaging Families in Out of School Time Programs Toolkit: Tools to Strengthen After School and Youth Programs by Increasing Family Involvement* at <http://www.bostnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Handout-B-Engaging-Families-Toolkit.pdf>)

Strategies for Engaging Families at the Practice Level

Comprehensive family engagement improves outcomes and is a best practice throughout the life of a child welfare case. There are numerous steps caseworkers can take to partner with families.

The Basics of Practice-Level Engagement

Quality family engagement starts at the practice level. Effective, collaborative case planning relies on the caseworker’s transparent efforts to continuously engage family members and others as appropriate, including:

- Gathering and assessing information in order to visualize the family system
- 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

In addition, when a child enters out-of-home care, a vital step in establishing communication and building a relationship with the family is the “icebreaker meeting” between birth and foster families that ideally should take place within the first week of removal. These meetings allow for valuable information sharing about a child’s needs, strengths, and preferences, helping to minimize the trauma a child may experience as a result of placement. For more information, see *Resources for Planning Icebreaker Meetings Between Birth and Foster Parents*, a 2012 guide issued by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, at <http://www.aecf.org/resources/icebreaker-meetings/>.

Following are multiple approaches caseworkers can use to promote family engagement in daily practice:

Using Supportive Behaviors

- Providing cultural competency for special populations, e.g., Latino families (Rivera-Rodriguez, 2014)
- Balancing discussions of problems with the identification of strengths and resources
- Listening to and addressing issues that concern the family
- Helping families meet concrete needs, e.g., housing, food, utilities, child care
- 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 with family members about what to expect with regard to timelines, and, when applicable, court issues
- Conducting frequent and substantive caseworker visits with the parents, caregivers, and children
- Using effective and agency approved Internet, social media, and smart phone technologies to engage families (Edwards-Gaura, Whitaker & Self-Brown, 2014; Florida's Center for Child Welfare, 2013; Cahalane & Fusco, 2011)
- Recognizing and praising progress

There are additional practices that will help make case planning meetings more fluid and productive and encourage the development of a partnership between child welfare staff and families, such as:

- Inviting participation from those identified by the family as being part of its support system, including extended family members or individuals external to the family, such as friends, teachers, and clergy

- Clarifying expectations, roles, responsibilities, and goals
- Communicating regularly with family members to minimize the possibility of unanticipated issues being raised during a meeting
- Considering family members' other obligations, such as employment, when scheduling meetings
- Assisting family members with practical issues that may prevent them from attending meetings, such as child care and transportation
- Providing a welcoming physical environment for the meeting (e.g., enough space for all members or accessibility for individuals with disabilities)
- Incorporating the child in the meeting through an alternative means if s/he is unable to participate or be present (e.g., use of photographs or artwork) (Healy, Darlington & Yellowless, 2011; Dawson & Berry, 2001)

Instituting Family Teaming Models

The hallmark of family engagement practice is involving a broad team of interested family members in a child's or a family's case plan. When it comes to putting together a family team, child welfare practitioners have several options, including family group decision-making, family team conferencing, permanency teaming, and team decision-making meetings. For a detailed description of how these four particular approaches to family teaming models compare and contrast, visit <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/FourApproachestoFamilyTeamMeetings.pdf>.

Family teaming is based on the belief that family members should be key players on a strengths-based, solution-focused team that values the family's voice and focuses on the child's safety, permanency, and well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). These approaches bring together a team of family members, extended relations, and others who are significant to the family to discuss the issues, consider alternative solutions, make decisions, and develop a plan. Such approaches can strengthen family relationships, prevent unnecessary placement and placement disruption, and help caseworkers identify and nurture a system of family supports. Caseworkers often engage fathers and paternal family members separately,

but making them part of the family team early on might be more effective in terms of expanding the number of engaged family members and improving outcomes.

Family-group decision-making (FGDM) allows the family to assume a primary role when children come to the attention of the child welfare system and considers “the family” as a broad social construct that includes not only the birth family, but next-of-kin and extended relations, friendships, and communities—all of whom can contribute to the long-term well-being of children. FGDM brings family members who might otherwise be at odds with the system to the table. The collaborative decision-making process that ensues is designed to enhance the trust of both family members and child welfare agency staff, increasing the chances for more long-term positive outcomes (McMurphy, Barnes, & Merkel-Holguin, 2012).

A 3-year project funded by a Children’s Bureau Family Connection grant—*No Place Like Home*—looked at the effectiveness of FGDM in helping to prevent children receiving in-home services from entering or reentering foster care. The project centered on three child welfare agencies with well-established FGDM programs: Larimer County Department of Human Services, Colorado; South Dakota Department of Social Services, Rapid City; and Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Dallas and Tarrant Counties; with the support of the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect and Casey Family Programs.

The results showcase the importance of fidelity to the evaluation model and how caseworker attitudes and family buy-in can influence outcomes (e.g., was there a professional orientation toward child safety versus family preservation?). Ultimately, the report notes that the very complex methodology had several important limitations and may require a longer-term look.

The December 2015 *No Place Like Home Final Progress Report* is available at [https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/Blob/103415.pdf?w="+NATIVE%28%27recno%3D103415%27%29&up-p=0&rpp=10&r=1&m=1](https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/Blob/103415.pdf?w=).

The family team meeting strategy has been effectively employed with recipients of Federal supportive housing grants at demonstration sites in Cedar Rapids, IA; San Francisco, CA; and in the State of Connecticut. These sites are part of the Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System project (funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration on Children, Youth and Families), a demonstration project to test whether supportive housing can end homelessness and foster care placement among families with complex challenges, such as substance use and mental health issues. The family teaming strategy is part of the strengths-based, trauma-informed approach to addressing family service needs at these demonstration sites (Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center, 2015).

The project report makes the following observations:

- Families must be present, prepared, and supported
- Successful meetings depend on adherence to protocols and attention to training and coaching
- Efforts to identify and engage supports must be continuous and aimed at expanding the team
- Regular meetings are important for team accountability, but interim follow-up is essential

More information about this Federal initiative is available at <http://www.csh.org/csh-solutions/serving-vulnerable-populations/families/child-welfare-and-supportive-housing-resource-center/partnerships-to-demonstrate-the-effectiveness-of-supportive-housing-for-families-with-child-welfare-involvement/>.

Incorporating Family Finding

Family finding includes casting a wide net to identify and search for family members and other important people in the lives of children in foster care, making them aware that children have entered care, and then engaging family members in the case decision-making process, including the development and fulfillment of case plans. Although family finding was initially viewed as a tool to enhance permanency for youth aging out of foster care, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires State agencies to identify and locate family members within 30 days of removing a child from his or her home. The goal of family finding is to provide numerous safeguards for child and family well-being by identifying a lifetime family support network and maintaining existing family relationships. This can help to empower the family in emotional and legal permanency decisions and provide children with multiple adult resource connections once they leave foster care (Wentz & Beck, 2012).

Family finding can be challenging, particularly when caseworkers have limited resources or when family members are resistant to agency or court involvement or are at odds with certain family members. Engaging family members may also require financial assistance and additional childcare, therapeutic, or administrative supports to care for children (Jordan & Williams, 2014). Family finding is linked to a greater number of family supports for children in out-of-home care and a higher likelihood that a child will have at least one consistent relationship with an emotionally supportive adult. It has also been shown to yield more adoptive placements with a relative than traditional child welfare services, resulting in greater permanency options (Landsman, Boel-Studt, & Malone, 2014).

“You gave me back my family that I lost and haven’t been a part of for a while. Thank you.”

— Family member participant, Hawaii DHS grant project

The Family Connection Discretionary Grants project in Hawaii demonstrated that when family finding exercises were launched early in casework, children were less likely to be removed from the home, and that if they were removed, they were in care for a shorter period of time. It also showed that within 12 months of such an intervention, more children were reunified and fewer children remained in out-of-home nonrelative foster care than those who did not receive such services. Further, more family connections were identified (Hawaii Department of Human Services, 2012).

The Hawaii grant was administered by EPIC 'Ohana, Inc., a family-focused nonprofit agency that "strives to create an atmosphere of respect by providing participants a place to be heard and an opportunity to feel like a part of the solution." 'Ohana-directed family conferences allowed for family-directed meetings and included a discussion of goals, family values, and strengths; an airing of shared concerns and legal issues; identification of available family, community, and professional supports; and private family time (EPIC 'Ohana, Inc. & Hawaii Department of Human Services, 2014).

The 3-year grant concluded in 2012, but resulted in a safety net in Hawaii that ensures all children new to care are automatically identified and receive family finding and 'Ohana conferencing services. For more information on EPIC 'Ohana, Inc., visit its website at <http://www.epicohana.info/>.

Encouraging Father Involvement

The role of fathers is a key piece of the broader family finding effort, and efforts to locate and engage nonresident fathers are often the first step in the process. Potentially important relationships and permanency options are overlooked when fathers and paternal relatives are underrepresented. The findings from Round 2 of the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) shows that of the reviewed cases, fathers were engaged in less than half—only 47 percent—compared to reported mother engagement, which was at 71 percent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2011). The Children’s Bureau conducts the CFRs, which are periodic reviews of State child welfare systems.

A recent study of child welfare workers funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation points to major barriers to father engagement and also offers suggestions for how child welfare professionals can encourage their involvement (Coakley, Kelley, & Bartlett, 2014):

Barriers to Engagement

- Ongoing relationship difficulties with the mother
- Substance use problems
- Lack of a valid address or working phone number for contact purposes
- Distrust of agency and/or caseworker

Steps to Engagement

- Use diligent efforts to identify, find, communicate with, and engage fathers
- Offer fathers the same services and supports that mothers receive, and treat them equally
- Address father-specific needs (community services, father support groups, counseling, housing and employment services, etc.)
- Ensure a constructive caseworker-father relationship

For additional information, see:

National Fatherhood Initiative website at <http://www.fatherhood.org>.

A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care, featuring strategies for systems and families, especially those who are involved in systems of care, to help fathers become more involved. Available at http://www.tapartnership.org/docs/Father%20Involvement%20Guide_June%202013.pdf.

Best Practice Guide for Engaging Fathers and Non-Residential Parents, issued by the North Carolina Department of Social Services and available at http://web.archive.org/web/20150129185453/http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/best_practices_pilot/misc/Practice%20Guide%20for%20Fatherhood%20Engagement.pdf.

Employing the Solution-Based Casework Approach

Solution-Based Casework (SBC) embraces family engagement with three theoretical foundations: family life cycle theory, relapse prevention/cognitive behavioral therapy theory, and solution-focused family therapy (Antle et al., 2008). SBC assumes full partnership with every family as its goal and considers a family's unique lifestyle patterns to inform and promote the skills needed to prevent negative behaviors.

In SBC, family empowerment drives case planning and is focused on:

- Capitalizing on family strengths
- Setting goals that use a family's specific language and culture to support family "ownership"
- Creating concrete goals specifically matched to the family's needs
- Tracking progress with the family and celebrating successes along the way

SBC has proven to be an effective partnership that results in improved outcomes, including:

- Greater follow through from referrals to services
- Increase in number of families signing their case plans—an important indicator of involvement
- Higher likelihood that tasks and goals will be achieved
- Fewer recidivism referral reports for repeat maltreatment

For more information, visit

<http://www.solutionbasedcasework.com>.

Using the Motivational Interview

The practice of motivational interviewing may be particularly useful in getting parents to recognize the potential benefits of participating in a home-based family support program. 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 pushing for change. If the caseworker

neglects to do this, a parent may resist change and put children at further risk. Child welfare workers trained in motivational interviewing are more apt to develop an empathetic and less confrontational style, which has been shown to result in greater parental cooperation and follow-through (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013) and benefit casework practice overall.

For additional information, see <http://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/motivational-interviewing-module/>.

Developing Cultural Competence

Caseworkers should be trained in cultural competence so they are more culturally sensitive and responsive, particularly in areas with culturally diverse populations and when working with family members or youth who have identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ). A deficit in understanding the cultural needs, values, and strengths of an at-risk population may undermine the quality of a family's case plan and provided services (Rivera-Rodriguez, 2014). A lack of cultural sensitivity may lead to assumptions and misconceptions that can result in limited family engagement, frustrated efforts, and misguided resources.

For example, the number of Latino children in the child welfare system has grown substantially in the last 2 decades, and there is a proportional need for culturally competent providers. Because the Latino community is very entrenched in its own social networks, accessing outside services can be challenging. Language barriers and immigration status may keep at-risk families beneath the radar. Developing parent mentors within the Latino community holds promise for helping this population to access services (Ayon, 2011).

The National Family Preservation Network offers training in cultural competence (<http://nfpn.org/products/253-cultural-competence.html>). For additional resources on cultural competence, including guidelines on sensitivity and responsiveness when working with LGBTQ youth, see:

- The National Center for Cultural Competence website at <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/>
- A list of resources on cultural competence at <http://www.tapartnership.org/COP/CLC/default.php/>

- *"Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to LGBTQ Youth and Their Families"* at <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/documents/Final%20LGBTQ%20Checklist.pdf>

Engaging Parents as Peer Mentors at the Program Level

Peer mentoring programs enlist 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 and are becoming a common best practice in child welfare. 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.

Parent partner programs have proven to be beneficial to the mentors as well as the mentees. Mentors take on helping and leadership roles, feel enhanced self-worth and responsibility, build workplace skills, and are compensated for their efforts. While some parent partners might have records of substance use and criminal histories that limit employment options, serving as a parent partner might open new possibilities as they establish connections in their communities and attain new job skills (Leake, Longworth-Reed, Williams, & Potter, 2012).

To be successful, parent partner programs need strong leadership that can work collaboratively with multiple agency and community partners, such as the multilayered management model that exists in Iowa (Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2014) and the involvement of local nonprofits and faith organizations. Because some agencies are not accustomed to treating their former child welfare clients as paraprofessionals, supervisors may need to work to increase staff buy-in so that working collaboratively with parent partners becomes an established part of the process. The value of parent partners may also need to be better understood by providers in adjacent service areas, such as the judicial, mental health, and substance use arenas, many of whom

may never have worked with former child welfare system clients in paraprofessional roles (Leake, Longworth-Reed, Williams, & Potter, 2012).

Parents Helping Parents [Contra Costa County, CA]

The Parents Helping Parents program in Contra Costa County, established over 11 years ago as part of a Systems of Care (SOC) grant, has a detailed professional development plan for each individual employed as a parent partner. Each parent partner has to become competent in understanding county government, agency protocol, confidentiality, required reporting, team decision-making, options available to parents, and how the court process works.

The program participates in foster parent orientations and training, which has been helpful in dispelling any preconceived ideas about who or what “parents” look like or act like, according to Judi Knittel, program supervisor. Contra Costa County has contracted with the local Child Abuse Prevention Council (CAPC) so that parent partners are CAPC employees and eligible for benefits (vacation/sick time, health insurance, a retirement plan, etc.) that they were not able to access as contract employees.

The Parents Helping Parents program initially engaged the parent at the detention hearing, but is now employing the model in a preventive capacity. Parent partners never officially close a case, so if parents encounter problems, even after their cases are closed, they are encouraged to call their parent partner for assistance.

“...at the conclusion of the SOC grant, the data showed that having a parent partner increased reunification by about 50 percent and reduced recidivism by about 50 percent. The parent partner program has improved our outcomes in these two areas while helping parents to feel heard, respected, and included in case planning. It is a model that worked 10 years ago, and is still working today to achieve permanency for the children of Contra Costa County.”

—Judi Knittel, Family Engagement Unit supervisor, Contra Costa County

Both caseworkers and attorneys have found the parent partners to be very helpful in their work and particularly effective in explaining the court process to parents in a way that the attorneys cannot. Judges have also found the support afforded by parent partners to be useful and frequently encourage parents to sign up for the program (J. Knittel, personal communication, January 15, 2016).

An independent evaluation of the Contra Costa program showed that 62 percent of children whose parents were mentored by a parent partner reunified with their parents within 18 months of their removal, compared to 37 percent for those who did not (HHS, 2010).

Promoting Family Engagement at the Systems Level

Systems-level family engagement occurs with the intentional inclusion of family members who were formerly involved with child welfare services as active participants in systems change activities: encouraging them to advocate for policy changes and serve on decision-making boards, inviting them to evaluate child welfare services and programs, employing them as practice advisors and consultants, and recruiting them to conduct trainings and participate in social marketing campaigns (HHS, 2010).

Parent partner programs have been particularly instrumental in affecting systems-level change. In Iowa, for instance, birth parents who have been involved with the child welfare system sit on State child welfare boards, attend local meetings, and conduct trainings—and have a considerable impact on providers and child welfare agencies (S. Persons, personal communication, January 20, 2016).

Partnering With Parents for Systems Change [Iowa]

The Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) has a sweeping initiative underway to institutionalize parent engagement strategies and inform policy, programs, and practices statewide. The project, Partnering with Parents for Systems Change, includes a major expansion of the State's parent partner mentoring program. Because the initial phase of this program had demonstrated positive outcomes for children and families in its pilot areas, DHS proposed to expand its implementation from six sites covering 16 counties to 21 sites covering 68 counties and finally scaled up its plan to be offered in all 99 of Iowa's counties by 2015. The contract was awarded to Children & Families of Iowa (CFI), an existing human services agency (Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2014).

According to the Children & Families of Iowa Parent Partner Annual Report for 2014–2015, the majority of families involved with the program are benefiting from the mentoring services, most notably in the areas of being able to “effectively speak up for myself and my family,” in feeling comfortable when interacting with DHS and other service providers, and in being able to listen to DHS and other service providers “and understand their concerns with my situation.”

The Iowa multilayered parent partner management model includes a State coordinator, a service area coordinator for each Iowa DHS service area, numerous local coordinators for each cluster site around the State, and multiple parent partner roles, including lead parent partner (CFI Annual Report, 2015). The target service population for this program includes parents whose children have been removed from their care and/or those who can only reside with their children under special court-directed circumstances.

The parent program eligibility requirements include the following:

- Must have been reunited with children for at least 1 year (training may begin after 6 months of reunification)
- Must have had at least 1 year to resolve issues surrounding termination of parental rights
- Must have a stable and healthy family situation with no current child welfare involvement
- Must have no founded child abuse report since assuming role of parent partner or parent partner in training
- Must have some flexibility to attend meetings and facilitate groups
- Must have been substance free for 1 year, if substance use was a protective concern
- Must participate in all required training
- Must agree to share personal child welfare experiences with other parents and child welfare staff
- Must agree to demonstrate appropriate behavior

The following will disqualify a potential parent partner from entering the program:

- Founded sexual abuse
- Listed on the sex abuse registry
- Convicted in the death of a child

Iowa parent partner duties:

- Engage families in case planning
- Maintain connections between parents and children during out-of-home care
- Share personal experiences to help parents in their efforts at reunification and provide hope and inspiration
- Assist with reunification goal and/or the development of appropriate alternative permanent plans
- Provide encouragement, outreach, and support
- Collaborate with parent partner team

Iowa parent partners are compensated for their time and travel and are asked for a minimum 1-year commitment to mentor at least two families. The program provides parent partners clinical support for issues that arise in the provision of services.

Visit the Iowa Parent Partner page at <http://dhs.iowa.gov/parent-partners>.

Agency supervisors can incorporate family voice into policies and procedures by supporting the following best practices:

- Using family-centered language in policies and other agency documents
- Creating a family-friendly environment in agency offices
- Providing supervision, coaching, and training that encourages family engagement
- Including family-friendly practice in position descriptions
- Engaging families in decision-making processes and in designing policies and practices
- Assessing whether child welfare information systems support a family-centered approach
- Including family engagement measures in agency evaluation and performance measurement
- Providing caseworkers with the necessary research tools and other resources to aid in finding and engaging family members
- Ensuring the availability of materials and service accessibility for diverse cultural populations
- Creating an organizational structure with
 - Leadership dedicated to family engagement
 - Defined roles for planning and facilitating team decision-making meetings
 - Quality assurance and case review monitoring
 - External assistance as needed
 - Individualized performance review system
 - Systems change initiatives and program improvement plans
 - Identification of service gaps
- Including parents and youth on agency councils and boards

For more information about refining agency procedures, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway April 2015 bulletin, *Supervising for Quality Child Welfare Practice*, available at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/effective_supervision.pdf.

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

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Provides resources on family-centered practice approaches, including information on engaging families in case planning.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/>

Engaging Families: Making Visits Matter—A Field Guide

Features detailed practice recommendations for family engagement, including steps for working with resistance.

<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/PMNetworkDocs/CPM%20Field%20Guide.pdf>

Family Engagement Inventory

Website offering information and strategies for infusing family “voice” and strengthening families in the many systems that serve children: child welfare, juvenile justice, behavioral health, early childhood education, and education.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/fei/>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). Family engagement: Partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

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