

CHILD PROTECTION BEST PRACTICES BULLETIN

Innovative Strategies to Achieve Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: MAXIMIZING FAMILY RESOURCES & KINSHIP CONNECTIONS

What is *Family Engagement*?

Family engagement is a critical component of ethical and effective child welfare practice. Family engagement embraces core principles and values as well as a number of critical practice habits related to assessment, case planning, placement, and permanency. Family engagement is a strength-based approach and a defining characteristic of family-centered and team-based decision making. Family engagement is any and all of these things, and overall, it is our best hope for preserving the family-child relationship, whether or not reunification is achieved.

The intent of family engaged practice is to maximize family resources and kinship connections. Various approaches are used to achieve consensus on key decisions related to removal, placement, and permanency while simultaneously enhancing capacity, strengthened competency, and promoting family growth and development. The family is broadly defined to include parents, children and youth, extended family, fictive kin, and others. As explained in 1990 by the Young Children's Continuum of the New Mexico State Legislature

We all come from families. Families are big, small, extended, nuclear, multi-generational, with one parent, two parents, and grandparents. We live under one roof or many. A family can be as temporary as a few weeks, as permanent as forever. We become part of a family by birth, adoption, marriage, or from a desire for mutual support. As family members, we nurture, protect, and influence each other. Families are dynamic and are cultures unto themselves, with different values and unique ways of realizing dreams. Together, our families become the source of our rich cultural heritage and spiritual diversity. Each family has strengths and qualities that flow from individual members and from the family as a unit. Our families create neighborhoods, communities, states, and nations.

What is *current practice*?

Current practice includes a number of different approaches across the state to involve families in critical decision-making, including the Casey Foundation Team Decision Making™ model in Bernalillo County, Family Group Conferencing approaches in other areas, and other family-team strategies. Training in principles and practices is emerging, as is policy and procedure.

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What is *best practice*?

Best practice in family engagement maximizes family resources and kinship connections. It requires the active participation of the family in solution- and outcome-focused planning and decision making that is needs-driven and strength based. Interactions with families are open, transparent and non-judgmental, with the relationship between families and professionals viewed as a partnership. While family engagement is a concept that should be adopted in every day work, there are several best practice tools that can be employed.

Most approaches to family engagement employ team-based planning and decision-making meetings, often managed by a skilled and independent facilitator. There are a number of established models for this work, including family team conferencing, family team meetings, family group conferencing, family team decision-making, family unity meetings, and team decision-making.

Typically these models use a trained facilitator or meeting coordinator. The facilitator/coordinator has a strengths-based orientation and excellent group process and communication skills. The facilitator asks questions in a way that is not blaming, demanding, or threatening but rather supportive and respectful. And even when a facilitator/coordinator is not involved, this same skill set is manifest by the caseworker and other professionals who manage these meetings.

A number of professionals are currently working to incorporate “Motivational Interviewing” as a tool in family engaged practice in child welfare. Motivational Interviewing is “a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients explore and resolve ambivalence.” (<http://motivationalinterview.org>). Per the website, Motivational Interviewing relies upon identifying and mobilizing intrinsic values and goals to stimulate behavior change. Motivation to change is elicited from the family and not imposed from without. Reflective listening is key to understanding the family’s point of reference; accepting and affirming that point of reference is equally critical.

Participants in team meetings typically include the birth parents, children, extended family, fictive kin, members of the family’s support system, current caregivers, caseworkers, service providers, and others. Meetings can be held in conjunction with assessment, case planning and review, and can be directed to decisions regarding removal, placement, services, and permanency.

Best practice includes families throughout the life of the case. The National Resource Center on Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPPP*) recommends family involvement in assessment, case planning, and case management as follows:

Family-centered assessment forms the foundation of effective practice with children and families. Family-centered assessment focuses on the whole family, values family participation and experience, and respects the family’s culture and ethnicity. Family-centered assessment helps families identify their strengths, needs, and resources and develop a service plan that assists them in achieving and maintaining safety, permanency, and well-being. There are many phases and types of family-centered assessment, including screening and initial assessment, safety and risk assessment, and comprehensive family assessment. Assessment in child welfare is ongoing. (NRCFCPPP)

Family-centered case planning ensures the involvement and participation of family members in all aspects of case planning, so services are tailored to best address the family’s needs and strengths. It includes the family members’ recommendations regarding the types of services that will be most helpful to them, timelines for achieving the plan, and expected outcomes for the child and family. Case planning requires frequent updates based on the caseworker and family’s assessment of progress toward goals. Through frequent, planned contact, the family-centered practitioner assists the family in achieving the goals and objectives of the service plan. This includes helping families access a range of supports and services and creating opportunities for them to learn and practice new skills. (NRCFCPPP)

Family-centered case management includes communication and planning with multiple service systems to ensure provision of appropriate services and assess service effectiveness and client progress. Families are encouraged to use their skills to access resources, fully participate in services, and evaluate their progress toward desired goals and outcomes. Caseworkers assist the family with practical needs such as food, housing, and income support; provide information on child development and parenting, as well as direct assistance such as counseling and family mediation; help build parenting and daily living skills; and assist the parent in building supportive connections with other parents, extended family, and community groups. (NRCFCPPP).

*The National Resource Center on Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPPP) can be found at <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/>

What is my ROLE...

As a JUDGE, you would ensure that there are opportunities for the birth parents, the child/youth, and the foster parents to actively participate in the court hearings. When available you would order Team Based Decision Making for the family.

As a CASEWORKER, you would engage the family at their level and explore with the family their feelings on the child/youth being removed. You would develop a service plan with the family, and create a list of what needs to be accomplished to reunify the family. You would engage the family in culturally sensitive manner, showing respect to the different family members, showing empathy to the family's situation and referring the family to appropriate community resources. You would also engage the parents and the children in development of their treatment plans, assisting the parents and children in accomplishing the goals on their treatment plans. Additionally, you would encourage parents and children to attend court hearings.

As a CHILDREN'S COURT ATTORNEY, you would talk to the caseworker or the respondents attorney, about ideas for better engaging the birth parents or the child/youth. You would encourage the birth parent and the child/youth to attend and participate in court hearings.

As a RESPONDENT ATTORNEY, you would fully explain the court process and talk to your client about how they can better work with the caseworker. You would ensure that your client has the appropriate referrals for her to address any issues that are barriers to reunification. You would also encourage your clients to actively participate in meetings with caseworkers and community providers and in court hearings.

As a YOUTH ATTORNEY or GAL, you would fully explain the court process and talk with your client about how he or she can be involved. You would ensure that the caseworker is arranging transportation and otherwise facilitating your client's attendance at hearings and meetings, and that visitation with his or her parents, siblings and other family members is taking place in the best possible way. You would consider ways in which you can help your client become more comfortable in the courtroom or at CYFD offices and encourage your client to talk with the judge at hearings. You would also encourage your client to take advantage of any counseling or treatment that is offered, while it is available.

As a CASA VOLUNTEER, you would attend and advocate for the child during all meetings engaging the family in group decision making. When age appropriate, you would encourage the child's attendance to the meeting. You would ensure the child's best interest is heard during the discussions. You would monitor and support the group's decisions and make recommendations to the Court when appropriate.

As a CRB MEMBER, you would inquire specifically about how the family is being engaged. You would document your observations and recommendations in the CRB report.

As a PARENT, you would work with the caseworker on the development of your treatment plan. You would regularly visit your child and attend court hearings. You would also talk with your caseworker about how you are doing on your treatment plan goals and any challenges you are experiencing. You would participate in Team Based Decision Making and other services as provided. As appropriate, you would provide information about your culture and any related needs you may have.

As a FOSTER PARENT, you would encourage the child/youth to maintain a relationship with their parents, when appropriate. You would support the child/youth as he deals with his feelings about being in custody and away from his parent. You would attend court hearings, Team Based Decision Making, and other staffings and provide information about how the child/youth is doing.

As a CHILD or YOUTH, you would work with your caseworker on the development of your treatment plan, attend court hearings, participate in any services provided, provide information about your culture and any needs you have around your culture, and provide information about how you are emotionally/physically doing.

Critical Elements for Engaging Families*

- **Meet the client where the client is:** Engagement is more likely when a client is in a familiar setting, and engaging on their own terms.
- **Build on strengths:** Clients are more likely to be engaged if they feel their strengths are recognized, not just their problems. Case planning involves identifying the strengths and resources clients and their families can draw on to help address the identified risk factors and increase their child's safety, permanence, and well-being. A client's cultural community may have strengths that are uniquely valuable in the change process. Child Welfare professionals should communicate respect for a client's strengths.
- **Client empowerment:** Engagement is more likely when clients feel that they are affecting the change process. Professionals empower clients when they communicate respect and expertise in making the changes in their lives.
- **Steps to success:** Engagement is more likely to result when child welfare professionals understand, and convey to families, that the processes of change happens in small steps. It is important to acknowledge incremental victories.
- **Client involvement in assessment, planning, and decision-making:** Engagement is more likely when the client/client family has all the information necessary to address concerns and is actively engaged in defining the problem and creating the solution.
- **Hope, expectancy:** Engagement is more likely when child welfare professionals convey hope and an expectation that the family is capable of succeeding.
- **Honoring and connecting with cultural resources:** A client or client family will be more likely to engage if/when the client's cultural ways of knowing, communicating, and nurturing are recognized as strengths, and when the culture of the client is valued.
- **Concrete services:** Clients will be engaged best when the needs they identify can be met. Often the more obvious and immediate needs are concrete services.
- **Skilled-based:** Engagement results from the teaching of specific skills such as motivational interviewing.
- **Honest communication:** Child welfare professionals should communicate with honesty, integrity, respect, cultural competence, and authentically.

* Engaging Families: Skills Workshop for Social Workers, May 22, 2007 —Training presented by Traci Tippet, LCSW, New Mexico State School Work and CYFD

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