

Module 5 Chapter 4: Family Engagement

Overview

This chapter defines engagement and partnership, identifies common engagement and partnership barriers, presents the essential components for building working relationships, partnerships and shared decision-making, and presents an overview of the most commonly used family engagement strategies.

Engagement and Partnership

Respectful **engagement** is effectively joining with family and community to establish common goals concerning child safety, permanency and well-being. Engagement includes understanding and honoring the family's history, culture, and traditions; and empowering families to meet their unique and individual needs through utilization of family strengths, and educating families regarding the child welfare process.

Partnership is seeking opportunities for joint decision making, working in respectful and meaningful collaboration with families and community to achieve shared goals, and being mindful of the child welfare agency's responsibility to ensure child safety. Families, communities and the public child welfare system are primary and essential partners in creating and supporting meaningful connections in a safe and nurturing environment for children and youth. Relationships and partnerships are built through empathy, respect, authenticity and discretion.

Family-Centered, Strengths-Based Practice

When you engage and partner with families, you are expected to represent the values and character of Minnesota's child welfare system through family-centered, strengths-based practice. This means:

1. **The family unit is the focus of attention.** You work with the family as a collective unit, ensuring the safety and well-being of family members. Families include custodial and non-custodial parents, children, maternal and paternal relatives, other extended family members, and people in kinship roles.
2. **The capacity of families to function effectively is strengthened.** You work with the family to identify and build upon existing strengths to help maximize family functioning and meet areas of need. This includes acknowledging needs and learning about the family's cultural, ethnic, linguistic and other unique factors.
3. **Families are engaged in designing all aspects of the policies, services, and program evaluation.** You partner with families to use their expert knowledge throughout the decision- and goal-making processes and provide individualized, culturally-responsive, and relevant services to meet needs and address non-negotiable child safety concerns.

4. **Families are linked with more comprehensive, diverse, and community-based networks of supports and services.** You assist in resource mobilization to maximize communication, shared planning, and collaboration among the multiple community systems that are directly involved in services to the family.

Family-Centered Child Welfare Services

Module 3 introduced the concept of family-centered practice. Remember, family-centered child welfare practice is strengths-based child. The key components of family-centered practice and services are:

Engagement – Families are engaged in ways relevant to their situation and sensitive to their cultural values.

Assessment – The assessment continuously looks at and discusses capabilities, strengths, and resources of families throughout the life of the case. Awareness of strengths supports the development of strategies built on competencies, assets and resources.

Out-of-Home Placement – Child welfare workers help birth families and foster/adoptive/kinship families build partnerships. Respectful, non-judgmental, and non-blaming approaches in partnerships are encouraged.

Implementation of Service Plan – Child welfare workers ensure that families have reasonable access to relevant and culturally-appropriate services.

Permanency Planning – Families, child welfare workers, community members, and service providers work together to create permanency options and plans.

Re-evaluation of Service Plan – Information from the family, children, support resources, and service providers is shared continuously with child welfare in order to modify intervention strategies as needed to support positive child safety, permanency and well-being outcomes.

Is there something we're not talking about?

Families usually don't enter the child welfare system because they think they need help. Contact typically occurs because someone else is concerned about how the family is functioning; this contact is often involuntary. Families may react with anger, frustration, hopelessness or other strongly expressed emotions because they feel pushed into something they don't want to do.

When you first meet with families, you might notice tension or resistance to your presence; in other words, barriers are present. A **barrier** is sometimes referred to as “an elephant in the room.” Elephants are looming concerns or issues – people are acutely aware that something is going on, but they are afraid to explore the tension and give it a name. Ignoring elephants allows barriers to remain in place and can keep you from

engaging and building a relationship and partnership with a family. It is important to use your relationship-building and engagement skills to uncover barriers.

Giving the Elephant a Name

It is imperative to explicitly discuss barriers as soon as you sense they exist because they can significantly undermine engagement efforts if ignored. If you don't bring these very powerful issues to the forefront, it is unlikely the family will.

The most common elephants in child welfare are:

- Emotions
- The nature and use of authority
- Culture and race – yours and the family's
- The family's prior experience with child welfare
- Family involvement.

You know that emotions, authority and culture influence your work. Now let's look at other potential barriers to engagement and partnership.

What if the Elephant is Child Welfare?

Families come with a variety of experiences and expectations that affect the way they interact with you. Exploring past child welfare experiences supports positive engagement and partnership.

When families share prior child welfare involvement experiences, you may hear negative feedback. Take a few moments to acknowledge what you hear and ask what you can do differently. Also, ask questions to discover what expectations each family member has regarding your involvement with them. Exploring concerns and experiences of the family helps make the current experience and contact meaningful for the family.

What if the Elephant is Including other Family Members?

- The family may not want other members such as non-custodial parents or grandparents involved.
- Additional family members may be unwilling to become involved.
- The child welfare worker may be unwilling to include other family members.

It is best practice to make every effort possible to locate and work with non-custodial parents and extended family as directed by federal and state law. Encourage involvement by communicating benefits of family participation and its impact on the child's life. Now let's look at essential components for building strengths-based relationships and partnerships with families.

Relationship and Partnership Essentials

Healthy working relationships are important to building partnerships with families in strengths-based practice. The four essential components of building relationships and partnerships with individuals and families are: **empathy, respect, authenticity and discretion.**

Empathy

The first essential element is **empathy**. Empathy is the attempt to experience another person's world from his or her perspective and communicate that understanding with compassion. Empathy goes beyond the facts, circumstances and events of the family's life and conveys an understanding of how those things uniquely affect them. Empathy builds trust, openness and rapport; it also reduces anxiety, which is a common experience for families in the child welfare system.

How Can I Show Empathy?

- Maintain a non-defensive stance
- Remain involved and provide encouragement
- Be a good listener
- Understand each point of view – there may be many different view points in each case
- Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues
- Discuss what is important to the family
- Acknowledge feelings
- Encourage discussion.

Boundaries of Empathy

Empathy has boundaries. Child safety is always the priority. Being empathetic does not mean agreeing with the person when what he or she says or does is inappropriate. You need to listen to your client's understanding of what is happening and empathize with what the client feels, but be prepared to clarify when behaviors are harmful to children. Your response must be non-judgmental but clear about what needs to change for the children to be safe.

Empathetic but Focused

While demonstrating empathy, child welfare workers must also assess risk factors and make decisions about child safety because the worker's primary role is to ensure safety, permanency and well-being for children. A good balance is to be empathetic but focused and ready to move on to the work that must be done.

Respect

The second essential relationship and partnership element is **respect**. Respect is how you communicate acceptance, caring and concern for the children and family. When you demonstrate respect, you are acting with integrity, and you honor the family for who they are as human beings.

How Can I Show Respect?

- Ask permission to enter the home.
- Ask whether to remove shoes – this is an expectation in some cultures.
- Ask permission to sit down.
- Allow the client to choose where in the home he or she would like to talk.
- Say "please" and "thank you."

Professional Courtesies

Here are some professional courtesies that show respect:

- Ask permission to interview the child unless safety concerns are present; you will practice handling parental refusal during classroom training.
- Accommodate the family's schedule as much as possible.
- Come to meetings prepared and on time; preparation may include arranging for interpreters.
- Explain the child welfare process; provide informational brochures.
- Explain confidentiality and its limits, and how families can access their records.
- Explain why you will take notes or record the conversation and what will happen with notes or recordings after the meeting.
- Avoid meeting interruptions, cancellations and rescheduling.
- Return phone calls in a timely fashion.

Professional behaviors help assure transparency in child welfare, engage the family and build trust.

Respect for Families

You can demonstrate respect for families when you:

- Allow them to express values and preferences that are different from yours
- Identify and build on strengths while assessing risk and safety.
- Listen to the family's story.
- Emphasize available choices, even when choices are constrained.
- Check with family members periodically to ensure they understand the information being provided or the plans being developed.
- Avoid labels for families, i.e., dysfunctional or problematic; labels often have negative meanings that don't support family strengths.

Authenticity

The third essential principle is **authenticity**. When you are authentic, you make a choice to be genuine, sincere and transparent in what you say and do. You are also honest and open in your relationships with others.

Demonstrating Authenticity

There are a number of ways to demonstrate authenticity:

- Be honest without being insensitive or rude.
- Make sure your verbal and nonverbal responses match.
- Acknowledge the uncomfortable and often involuntary nature of your work.
- Be clear about the legal authority of child welfare.
- Be transparent in your actions, communication and decisions.

Use Discretion

So, we're telling you to demonstrate empathy, respect and authenticity – but we are also telling you to use **discretion**, the fourth essential relationship element. You may feel shock and anger as you listen to a parent or child describing abusive behavior, but showing your reactions is not productive and communicates negative judgment. Be aware

of your feelings, control your non-verbal reactions and carry through with the meeting or interview.

Talk with your supervisor and colleagues about how they remain open and honest with families while keeping internal reactions discrete.

“But they aren’t responding!”

Sometimes, even though you use empathy, respect and authenticity, families and children are still not ready to engage and partner with you. That really isn’t surprising when you think about their situation. It is normal to feel helpless, angry, embarrassed or defensive when questioned about your parenting.

As a child welfare professional, continue to focus on family strengths and act with empathy, respect and authenticity while addressing factors that may present barriers to a working relationship.

The next section presents an overview of family engagement strategies that the Minnesota DHS Child Safety and Permanency Division, includes under the umbrella of safety-focused family partnerships. These strategies help child welfare workers establish partnerships and engage with families.

Safety-Focused Family Partnership Strategies

Since the early 1990s, child welfare agencies have been using strategies to engage families, look for competencies, and fully utilize family strengths in planning for child safety. The overarching goal is to bring the family, extended family, and the family’s support network together to make decisions regarding child safety, permanency and well-being. **Safety-focused family partnerships** seek to engage the family concerning child safety and work in partnership with the family to resolve barriers to safety.

Safety-focused family partnerships refer to the practices, methods, and principles of respectful family engagement and shared decision-making that are used to create safety for all family members. Minnesota includes the following strengths-based approaches under the umbrella of safety-focused family partnership strategies:

- Family Group Decision Making
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Solution-Focused Approach
- Signs of Safety.

The section provides a brief overview of these approaches.

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)

Family Group Decision Making is a strengths-based approach that helps families and child welfare agencies address primary areas of concern, such as safety and transitioning to adulthood.

FGDM:

- Focuses on, and promotes, child safety, permanency and well-being

- Involves the family: mothers and fathers – custodial and non-custodial – children, maternal and paternal relatives, other identified persons
- Provides children and families with the support and assistance of their family group
- Positions the family to lead decision making for identified concerns, and positions workers to support family plans that address agency concerns
- Brings the family and child welfare workers together to create and carry out a safety plan
- Positions the agency to organize culturally appropriate, relevant services and resources to implement the agreed-upon plan
- Is open, honest, authentic and safe for all members – including the child, family, support resources and workers.

Potential FGDM Benefits

FGDM provides families and child welfare agencies with a model of open communication and appropriate problem-solving techniques. With FGDM, families often develop a greater sense of hope and vision for the future because they are actively involved in a shared decision making process.

Potential benefits include:

- Increased child safety
- Family continuity and connection through kinship care when placement is necessary
- Increased willingness of family members to accept and use suggested services
- Enhanced relationships between families, extended family members, and professionals
- Positive agency experiences for families
- Increased job satisfaction for professionals.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based strategy that searches for and supports competence in families and the circumstances that support competence. This strategy helps families recognize and celebrate what they have done right. It provides avenues for families and child welfare workers to identify strengths and successful experiences to build on to prevent further child maltreatment. AI can and should be used throughout the life of the case – from intake to case closing.

Appreciative Inquiry - EARS

The flow of Appreciative Inquiry follows the acronym **EARS**:

- **Elicit:** Ask questions that allow the person to choose and describe situations where success occurred. The responses provide child safety and risk information. (Example: Has there been a time when you felt like physically disciplining your child, but you didn't?).
- **Amplify:** Ask follow-up questions. Amplifying questions seek details. (Example: How did that work for you? Tell me more about that.)

- **Reflect:** Ask questions that help the family buy into child safety, prompt change, and build relationship. Families gain a sense of being heard. (Example: What worked for you? Were you surprised that your idea worked?)
- **Start Over:** Repeat the process. Ask the family about another situation. (Example: What is another thing that you did well or struggled with?)

Appreciative Inquiry helps parents and families generate positive energy to change, create concrete safety plans and keep their children safe. To learn more, visit the website for a link.

Solution-Focused Approach

Application of the solution-focused approach in child welfare was developed by Insoo Kim Berg. According to Berg, “The basic premise of this model is that exceptions to problems offer keys and clues to solving problems...” (Berg, Insoo Kim; 1994; *Family Based Services: A Solution-Focused Approach*; W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, NY).

The basic practice principles of the solution-focused approach are:

1. Assess the person and family first, within their cultural context, not the problem.
2. Look for exceptions – times child maltreatment did *not* occur.
3. Search for and identify sustainable solutions to prevent future child maltreatment.
4. Help the person and family assess progress towards goals find ways to celebrate success.

The website has a link to the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association website for further information.

Signs of Safety

Applying signs of safety principles from a strengths-based practice approach means workers and families are clear about real and potential harm to children, immediate and future danger, and child and family concerns while identifying and utilizing family strengths.

The basic principles of this strategy are:

1. Understand the position of each family member
2. Find exceptions – times maltreatment did not occur
3. Identify family strengths and resources
4. Focus on the non-negotiable goal of child safety
5. Develop a safety plan and a safety team of people to keep the child safe
6. Use scaling questions to check safety and progress.
7. Assess willingness, confidence and ability to increase and provide child safety within the family’s cultural context,

The website has a link to the Signs of Safety web site for further information.

Safety-Focused Family Partnership Strategies Wrap-up

Clearly there are similarities between the different approaches. Most families have numerous strengths to help them keep their children safe. Your application of safety-focused, strengths-based practice principles will help you engage with families in your joint endeavor to increase child safety.

Summary

Family-centered, strengths-based practice builds partnerships with families.

Everyone enters the partnership with past experiences that influence current perceptions and willingness to engage in change. Your use of empathy, respect, authenticity and discretion are essential elements in building partnerships, and overcoming barriers and tensions created by past experiences.

Safety-focused family partnership engagement strategies are best practices.

Next Steps

The Module 5 Chapter 4 Transcript is available on the website along with:

- “A Strengths Approach to Helping Native American Families.”

Consult with your supervisor about:

- Attending MCWTS trainings relevant to this chapter’s content
- FGDM Practices in your county

Complete the Module 5 Post-Test.

Remember to check the website as it has many helpful resources discussed within this chapter. Also, print the documents labeled for classroom use. You will need to bring those documents to class with you.

When you are ready, begin Module 6.