Practice Guidelines
High Quality Parent Contacts

Build Bridges
Building parent engagement begins at the first contact and continues throughout the case. Early, active, and continual contact promotes an effective working alliance throughout intervention. Prioritize seeing the child in their home, and at service intakes (such as for parent aide services).

You are a motivator
Really listen to what parents have to offer. Ask them to share their interests and abilities and to contribute. Let them know you are somebody who appreciates them. Everyone has something to offer. Draw upon all of the positive things they have done. Remember, parents are people, not cases.

Hold conversations in a safe space
Have conversations with parents in a safe and comfortable environment that allows for open and honest communication. For example, a meeting where a service provider or foster placement is present may not be the best place to speak with the parent about his/her satisfaction with services or understanding of the case plan.

Partnering with parents creates lasting engagement in the treatment process, increases the likelihood of reunification, brings timely permanency, and improves family well-being.

DCS Specialists and other team members encourage partnerships when they:
- create a welcoming climate and identify parents as a crucial member of the team from the very beginning;
- stay available, keep appointments, return phone calls within 24 hours, have an open dialogue, be honest, and keep parents informed;
- spend time with parents - meet with parents often, in-person;
- actively reach out to unengaged parents through phone calls, letters, and unannounced visits to the parent’s home;
- listen to gain a better understanding of their perspective;
- use active listening techniques, such as giving eye contact, nodding, leaning forward, brief verbal affirmations, paraphrasing to show understanding, and reflecting the feeling and meaning behind what is being said;
- give fathers as much attention and encouragement as mothers;
- let parents know when their case is being transferred and who they can contact in the interim when the DCS Specialist is unavailable;
- show compassion and understanding while also providing clear expectations;
- demonstrate respect of social, religious, and cultural backgrounds;
- take responsibility when you make a mistake and try to correct the situation.

Meaningful conversations begin by acknowledging, validating, and responding to the parent’s practical, psychological, and emotional needs, as well as the parent’s cultural perspective.

In-person and telephone contact with each parent should focus on keeping parents informed and involved in the decisions affecting them and their children, and promoting behavior changes that enhance the parent’s protective capacities:
- ask parents to describe when things were better in their family;
- be honest and transparent by telling parents what you plan to say in court about their family, whether negative or positive;
- address fears about what the agency can do;
- inform parents of their rights;
- provide clear and reasonable expectations, repeatedly and in writing, using language the parent can understand;
- discuss what the parent’s behavior would be if the unsafe behavior was no longer present, getting their ideas and input;
- respect a parent’s right to make or have input into decisions about their children during their time in out-of-home care;
- inform and invite parents to school, medical, and social events for the child (when safe for them to attend);
- always ask about relatives and important people in the child’s life for possible placement or building relationships to help the child grow and thrive;
- explore the parent’s progress or lack of progress in relation to behavior changes surrounding the safety threats present in the family.

Source: Center for the Study of Social Policy, Ideas Into Action (cssp.org); Motivational Interviewing – Listening for Change Talk by Ellen R. Glovsky, Ph.D., RD, LDN
Inspire Change
Help parents discuss their desire, ability, reason, and need to change behavior; and their commitment to changing. **People are more likely to change if they set the parameters than if someone else dictates changes.** Change talk can be used to address discrepancies between a parent’s words and actions in a manner that is non-confrontational. To move toward change, get the parent to think about and verbalize the following:

- What would you like to see different about your current situation?
- If you were to decide to change, what would you have to do to make this happen?
- What is the BEST thing you could imagine that could result from changing?
- Why do you think others are concerned about your behavior?

### Do’s and Don’ts
Positive engagement begins with warmth, non-judgmental acceptance, flexibility, understanding, and a strengths-based focus:

- **Don’t** doubt
- **Don’t** judge
- **Don’t** shame or blame
- **Don’t** punish for asking for help
- **Don’t** ignore
- **Don’t** focus on deficits
- **Do** push towards success
- **Do** require accountability
- **Do** listen to understand
- **Do** communicate & inform
- **Do** focus on strengths

### Through a strengths-based lens, explore a parents’ protective capacity and how it relates to the ability to ensure child safety and well-being.

Protective capacities are personal qualities or characteristics that contribute to vigilant child protection. A protective capacity is a specific quality that can be observed and understood to be part of the way a parent thinks, feels, and acts that makes him or her protective. During one-on-one meetings with a father or mother:

- Ask, probe, and observe. Look for consistency. Be careful about over or under estimating what a parent may say.
- Consider the parental protective capacities, including their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning to ensure their child’s safety. What can be improved upon?

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<tr>
<th>Emotional functioning considerations:</th>
<th>Cognitive functioning considerations:</th>
<th>Behavioral functioning considerations:</th>
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<td>Does the parent possess love, sensitivity, and empathy for the child? Is the parent emotionally bonded/positively attached? Does the parent have control over his/her own emotions?</td>
<td>Does the parent understand his or her protective role? Does s/he understand and recognize threats to the child? Does the parent have an accurate perception of the child and the child’s needs?</td>
<td>Does the parent set aside his/her own needs for the child’s? Is the parent adaptable to varying situations? Is s/he able to control impulses? Does the parent have a history of being protective of the child?</td>
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- What is the parent’s perspective or awareness of his/her capacity to be protective?
- A history of being protective is a significant indicator. While every safety and protection situation must be examined on its own, what a parent has done and how a parent has behaved in the past exists as a record of merit concerning what he or she is able and willing to do now.
- What is the relationship between the current safety threats to the child and the diminished caregiver protective capacities? What must change? How can this be accomplished? What are the parent’s ideas for change?
- Focus on the parent’s capability for resiliency; one’s ability to overcome adversity and their ability to be resilient.


### When a parent holds negative attitudes and beliefs about the process, they are less likely to actively participate.

Consider the following approaches when attempting to engage a parent who is struggling with engaging in the case plan:

- Address any barriers the families may have in accessing services/supports; is their employer understanding? Is transportation an issue? Language barrier?
- Encourage help seeking behavior. Do not punish someone for asking for help.
- Work with the parents to understand their past experience with service systems and any stigma they attach to certain services.
- Help them navigate complex systems by explaining eligibility requirements, filling out forms, or introduce the parent to an individual who can help them negotiate getting access to the services they need.
- Acknowledge cultural differences and mistrust. Seek culturally relevant services.
- Give parents opportunities to help meet concrete needs of other families in the program or the community, to encourage reciprocity.