



December 23, 2024

Build Bridges

Parent engagement begins at first contact and continues throughout case management. Early, active, and continual contact promotes an effective working alliance throughout intervention.

Listen more

Really listen to what parents have to share. Validate the feelings they may be experiencing. Ask them to share their interests and ability to contribute to planning. Let them know you are somebody who appreciates their involvement.

Everyone has something to offer. Draw upon all of the positive things they have done. Celebrate small victories together.

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 out-of-home caregiver is present may not be the best place to speak with the parent about a recent relapse, his/her satisfaction with services, or understanding of the case plan.

High Quality Parent Contacts

Partnering with parents may result in a higher rate of family preservation, greater engagement in the treatment process, increased likelihood of family reunification, and improvement in overall family well-being.

Create a welcoming climate and build a strong partnership by:

- sharing with parents that they are crucial members of the team from the very beginning;
- being available, keeping appointments, returning phone calls within 24 hours, having an open dialogue, being honest, and keeping parents informed;
- spending time with parents - meet with parents often, in-person;
- listening to gain a better understanding of their perspective;
- using active listening techniques, such as giving eye contact, nodding, leaning forward, verbal affirmations, paraphrasing to show understanding, and reflecting the feeling and meaning behind what is being said;
- demonstrating respect of social, religious, and cultural backgrounds;
- giving fathers as much attention and encouragement as mothers;
- showing compassion and understanding while providing clear expectations;
- recognizing and praising progress toward goals;
- taking responsibility if you make a mistake and correct the situation; and
- letting parents know who they can contact when you may be unavailable.

Actively reach out to unengaged parents through phone calls, letters, and visits to the parent's home.

Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway (2021). Family Engagement: [Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes](#).

Meaningful conversations begin by acknowledging, validating, and responding to the parent's practical, psychological, and emotional needs.

- Ask parents to describe when things were better in their family;
- Address any fears they may have 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 involving their child (when safe for them to attend);
- Always ask about relatives and important people in the child's life for possible placement options and to maintain important and supportive relationships;
- Explore the parent's progress or lack of progress in relation to behavior changes surrounding the safety threats present in the family; and
- Be honest and transparent about what you plan to say in court about their progress and/or their family, whether negative or positive.

Keep parents regularly informed and involved in decisions affecting them and their children.

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.

Use change talk 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 that happen?**
- **What is the best thing you can imagine that could result from changing?**
- **Why do you think others are concerned about your behavior?**

Develop a case plan that includes counseling designed to address the parent's history of childhood trauma when applicable.

Recognize that progress toward behavioral changes may be slow and take time due to the complexity of the issues, which may be the result of trauma.

During the Exploration stage of the FFA-Ongoing, use a strengths-based lens to explore a parent's protective capacity and how it relates to their ability to ensure child safety and well-being.

Protective capacities are personal qualities or characteristics that directly relate to their ability to keep their child safe. A protective capacity is a specific quality that can be observed and understood to be part of the way a person thinks, feels, and acts that makes him or her protective of their child. During one-on-one meetings with a father or mother:

- Ask, probe, and observe. Raise self-awareness by pointing out a parent's strengths as well as any discrepancies in what is said or believed versus what is known.
- Consider the parent's protective capacity, including their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning to ensure child safety.

Emotional functioning considerations:	Cognitive functioning considerations:	Behavioral functioning considerations:
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?	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?	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?

- Determine what is the parent's perspective or awareness of his/her capacity to be protective.
- A history of being protective is a significant indicator of a parent's ability to be protective. 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 can demonstrate what he or she is able and willing to do now.
- Evaluate the relationship between the current safety threats to the child and the diminished caregiver protective capacities. Discuss what must change, how change can be accomplished and the parent's ideas for change.
- Focus on the parent's ability to be resilient.

Dos 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

For additional information regarding quality contacts with parents, please refer to DCS Policy Manual, Ch. 3: Sec. 2, Family Functioning Assessment - Ongoing

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 change process:

- Address any immediate barriers they may be experiencing in accessing services/supports, such as conflicting work schedule, transportation issues or language barrier.
- Acknowledge cultural differences and mistrust. Seek culturally relevant services.
- Tell them what you're observing and ask about their thoughts on what they may be experiencing as a barrier to moving through the stages of change.
- Encourage help seeking behavior. Do not punish someone for admitting relapse or asking for help.
- Work with the parents to understand their past experience with institutional systems and any stigma they attach to certain services (e.g. therapy, etc).
- Help them navigate complex systems by explaining eligibility requirements, filling out forms, or introducing them directly to an individual who can help them negotiate getting access to the services they need.

Source: Casey Family Programs (2021). [How can motivational interviewing be used in child protection?](#)