

A Focus on Engagement in Child Welfare

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This publication for child welfare professionals is produced by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families within the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!

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We're drawn to child welfare work because it gives us a chance to help families and children. Our ability to make a difference, however, depends a great deal on whether we can build relationships with families.

Many things can get in the way of this, of course, not least of which are the power we hold over families and negative experiences they may have had in the past with child welfare agencies or other authorities.

Yet often—a surprising amount of the

time, really—we overcome these and other barriers to forge trusting, constructive connections with the families and youth we serve.

To support you and your agency with the critical task of connecting with the families you serve, this issue of *Practice Notes* focuses on engagement in child welfare. ♦

The ability to engage families is the key to our success in child welfare work.



Engagement: An Indispensable Skill in Child Welfare

A Conversation with Dan Comer

Being able to engage families is an indispensable skill in our work. For insight into how to cultivate this core skill we spoke with Dan Comer. A child welfare veteran of more than 30 years, Dan sees engagement as the key to keeping children safe and achieving positive outcomes for families.

What is engagement?

Engagement can mean different things to different people, but you know it when it's happening. It means you are really *with* somebody—you've got their attention. There is a conversation happening: they are sharing their take on things and then you are collaborating on a solution to that situation.

Why is engagement so important?

Because it's the first step in the path toward reaching the outcomes we want for children and families. Without engagement you tend to just spin your wheels and not get anywhere. You don't get the information you need to assess if a child and family is safe. If people come into a conversation being resistant, and you are not able to overcome that resistance, you can't get an accurate picture of what is going on in the family.

Is there a secret to engagement?

If there is, the secret is in the way you approach families and how you see them. It is really related to how you put the Principles of Partnership into practice (see box below). The way you use those principles is going to be different with each family. This means you need to be flexible, and be willing to go in whatever direction you need to go with that family at that particular time.

Why is engagement so hard?

In child welfare we are starting

continued next page

The Principles of Partnership

The NC Department of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with its partners, protects the health and safety of all North Carolinians and provides essential human services. The Division of Social Services works to accomplish this mission by applying these family-centered principles of partnership:

- Everyone desires respect
- Everyone needs to be heard
- Everyone has strengths
- Judgments can wait
- Partners share power
- Partnership is a process

Source: NC DSS, 2016; AFI, 2003

An Indispensable Skill

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in somewhat of a “hole,” because of the nature of our work. We have to be able to come back from the fact that right off the bat families feel judged, evaluated, and forced into this partnership. So we have to work hard to get out of that hole and get to square one with families.

We do this by being transparent, being a real person and sharing a bit of yourself. We do it by going slow and fighting the urge to “get to the next thing.” We’ve got to take the time to ask more question and be ready to hear the full answers.

What advice do you have for working with hard-to-engage families?

Families who are hard to engage have often been in the system before and dealt with many workers in the past.

To engage them, start by being different than what they are expecting. That gets their attention and demonstrates that this encounter may be different than ones in the past.

This can mean asking different

questions, being more yourself, being more respectful, or any other way you can show the family you are different from what they are expecting.

I knew a CPS worker who made it his practice on his first visit not to bring anything with him—no notebooks, no briefcase, no official documents. That is definitely not what families expect. What this does is show the family that I am here to listen to you and I don’t want anything between us.

That’s a pretty dramatic example of what I mean by being different than what they expect. If you can achieve this, you can change the entire nature of the relationship from the very first meeting.

Can you share an engagement success story?

There was a CPS worker I met who told me a great story that really captures what I mean when I talk about engagement. She had worked with a mother as a CPS worker and had to do a removal of her two children. That

mother worked with in-home services and was eventually reunified with her kids.

Several years later this worker was now working in in-home services and was assigned to this same mother after a new CPS referral had occurred. She was nervous to work with the family, knowing she had removed the kids in the past. But when she arrived at the home the mom opened the door and said, “Oh my God, I am so glad to see you! I am so glad it is you!”

What that says to me is that worker had done what she needed to do to keep the kids safe in the past, but had done it in such a respectful way that the mother felt she could trust this woman any time in the future.

This just reinforces to me that engagement is always possible, even in the most difficult circumstances. ♦

Dan Comer is part of the Coaching and Curriculum Development team at the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Training on Engagement: NC Resources

Want to sharpen your family engagement skills? Consider taking—or re-taking as a refresher—one or more of the following NC DSS-sponsored courses, all of which touch on family engagement:

- Building Cultural Safety
- Coaching Children’s Caregivers through Challenging Moments
- CPS Assessments in Child Welfare Services
- CPS In-Home Child Welfare Services
- Domestic Violence Policy and Best Practices in Child Welfare
- Engaging the Non-Resident Father for Child Welfare Staff
- Introduction to Child and Family Teams
- Introduction to Supervision for Child Welfare Services
- Investigative Assessments in Child Welfare Services
- Keeping It Real: Child and Family Teams with Youth in Transition
- Motivating Substance Abusing Families to Change
- Navigating CFTs: The Role of the Facilitator
- Step by Step: An Introduction to CFTs
- The 3rd Dimension of Supervision: The Role of Supervisors in CFTs
- Understanding and Intervening in Child Neglect



North Carolina child welfare professionals employed with county child welfare agencies who want to learn more about or register for any of these courses should go to <http://www.ncswLearn.org>

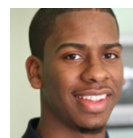


Engaging Youth in Foster Care

As youth in care begin to develop their own sense of self and independence, caseworkers may find it hard engaging them in their case plans or helping them realize the impact their decisions may have on their long-term future.

This podcast (runtime: 27:53) gives caseworkers the perspective of a former youth in foster care and provides:

- Insight and tips on using Facebook to learn more about youth in care
- Information about the knowledge gaps youth may have about transitioning to adulthood
- Ways to help youth recognize the supportive adults in their lives and develop trusting relationships



Featuring: Sixto Cancel, a former youth in foster care, current consultant for the Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States, and CEO of Think of Us.

Available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-welfare-podcast-engaging-youth>

CFTs: One of Our Most Powerful Engagement Tools

In North Carolina it's impossible to talk about engaging families involved with child welfare without mentioning child and family team meetings (CFTs). This indispensable strategy for partnering with families is very well supported in our state. We've focused on CFTs in past issues of *Practice Notes* (including vol. 13, no. 1 and vol. 8, no. 2) and other publications, and an entire chapter of the state's child welfare policy manual is about them. On top of that, the Division of Social Services sponsors a number of CFT courses—one of which is mandatory for all county child welfare staff.

This emphasis makes sense, since CFTs are a mainstay of how we work with families. A CFT must occur within 30 days of a CPS case decision requiring involuntary services, and at many other points during the life of the case.

Emphasizing CFTs also makes sense because, as often as they happen, we can't take them for granted. North Carolina has a clear model for conducting these meetings, but like case plans—and like the families we work with—each CFT is unique. "Cookie-cutter" CFTs will not lead to the outcomes needed for families.

Two Reminders

For this reason we'd like to offer two reminders. First, the box at right is a reminder of what families want from CFTs. The box below is a reminder about the Center for Family and Community Engagement, a wonderful organization that would love to help you and your agency make your CFTs as engaging and successful as possible. ♦



What Families Want from CFTs

In focus groups North Carolina family members have said they want the following in connection with child and family team meetings.

Before the Meeting

- Give me a chance to share my story
- Help me find my informal supports so they can come to the meeting
- Educate yourself about my child's illnesses or my situation, don't just say you don't know
- No surprises—make sure I know beforehand what we will be talking about at my meeting
- If it's about me, don't have the meeting unless I can come
- Work with me to set up a time that I can be present at the meeting; be sensitive to my needs
- Recognize my feelings (e.g., angry, scared, etc.)
- Help me understand my options and how the CFT works
- Listen to what I am saying and explore why I am saying it

At the Meeting

- Allow me to introduce myself to the team
- Talk to me, not about me
- Monitor your tone of voice
- Call me by my name, not "mom," "dad," or "the youth"
- Be sure I have someone at the CFT I feel will support me
- Use words I can understand
- Use humor to make me feel safe
- Give me a chance to share my story
- Help me to meet my immediate needs first (e.g., housing, transportation, child care, food, utilities)
- Remind me of my family's strengths and build on them
- Ask me how my situation looks in my child and family's life
- Provide services where needed, not just mandated services—don't waste my time on services that will not help my family
- Know what the family has to do in all of the agency plans so we can come up with one plan
- Listen to my needs and my family's needs
- Use visual prompts so I can follow better
- Tell the truth
- Let me explain why I behave the way I do
- Let us speak more
- Be open to our questions and opinions
- Make the meeting more active and fun
- Everyone who says they'll attend must be at the meeting
- Speak to the me and my child like we are a part of the solution, not like we are the problem
- Ask for information—don't assume you know the answers
- Respect me and know that I am doing what I know to do

After the Meeting

- Respect my confidentiality—don't talk about me to others
- Let me call meetings when I feel I need to
- All team members need to be held accountable, not just the parents

Source: NCSOC, 2007

NC STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for Family and Community Engagement

The Center for Family and Community Engagement (CFFACE) at NC State University offers the following to support county DSS agencies around the use of CFTs:



- Training. The Center delivers a variety of in-person and online CFT courses, including several that are available on-demand.
- Technical Assistance and Learning Support (TALS). The Center is available to provide activities tailored to meet the specific learning needs of your county and to support what you learn in the classroom. TALS can help you develop a training plan and acquaint your agency with the benefits of CFTs.

For more about CFFACE, visit <https://cface.chass.ncsu.edu> or contact the Center's project coordinator, Erin Omba (eeomba@ncsu.edu; 919/513-2339).

Engaging “Familiar” Families by Considering Parent Trauma

So much of who we are as adults is shaped by what happened to us as children. For child welfare professionals this has profound implications for how we understand and work with parents. Especially when families are familiar to our agencies due to multiple incidents of child welfare involvement, engagement means seeking to understand parents’ past experiences, as well as their present struggles.

“Familiar” Families and ACEs

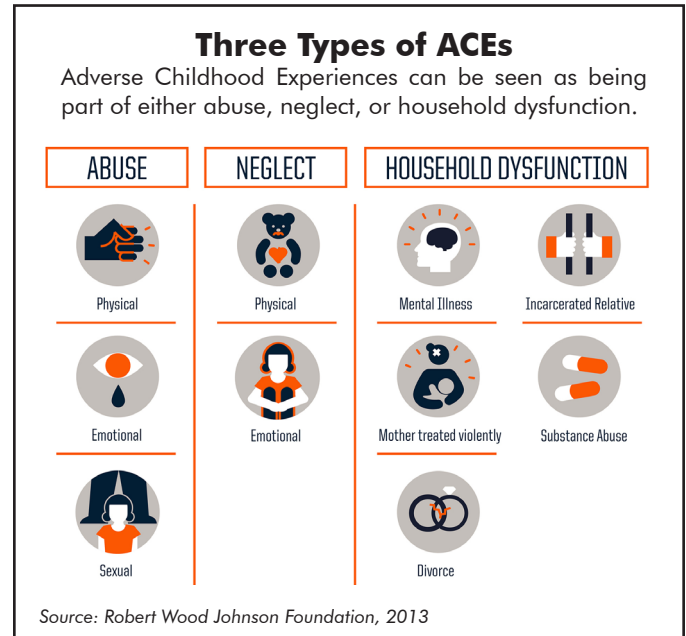
Research tells us that families with repeat referrals to child protective services are more likely than other families to (CCPCW, 2006):

- Have parents with substance abuse, mental health, or domestic violence issues,
- Be experiencing unemployment (and therefore poverty),
- Have young children or teenagers, and/or
- Have children with emotional disturbances or mental illness.

This won’t surprise child welfare workers, but it’s notable how many of these risk factors are reflected in, or easily correlated to, the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, shown in the box at right.

Traumatic childhood experiences are amazingly common in the general population. In a study of 17,000 middle class adults with Kaiser Permanente insurance, 26% of the subjects had one ACE, 16% had two, and 23% had three or more. This study and subsequent research has shown that as the number of ACEs a person has increases, so does their risk for negative health outcomes (CDC, 2016). Some of these problems—including depression, mental illness, and drug or alcohol abuse—are also risk factors for CPS involvement.

The point here is that like other parents you encounter in your work, parents in “familiar” families may be struggling



with their own unresolved trauma histories, which may interfere with their coping, parenting, and ability to work with the child welfare system. Exploring this possibility may help you connect with and engage these individuals.

To be clear: it’s still our job to ensure children are safe. Understanding what a parent is dealing with isn’t a magic bullet and won’t necessarily change what we must do. But it can change how we do it.

For ideas about what this might look like in practice, consider the suggestions below. For a deeper study of this topic, check out the National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s free online course *Working with Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System* at <http://learn.nctsn.org/enrol/index.php?id=452>. ♦

Suggestions for Trauma-Informed Practice with Families

Child welfare professionals cannot undo parents’ traumatic experiences, but they can:

- Understand that parents’ anger, fear, or avoidance may be a reaction to their own past traumatic experiences, not to the caseworker him/herself.
- Assess parents’ history to understand how past traumas may inform current functioning and parenting.
- Motivate parents by approaching them in a non-judgmental, non-blaming, strengths-oriented way.
- Build on parents’ desire to keep their children safe and reduce children’s challenging behaviors.
- Help parents understand the impact of past trauma on current functioning and parenting, while still holding them accountable for maltreatment. Many parents are empowered and motivated when they learn there is a connection between their past experiences and their present reactions and behavior.
- Pay attention to how trauma plays out during CFTs, home visits, visits to children in foster care, and court hearings. Help parents anticipate their possible reactions and develop different ways to respond to stressors and trauma triggers.
- Refer parents to trauma-informed services whenever possible. Generic interventions that do not take into account parents’ underlying trauma issues may not be effective.
- Become knowledgeable about evidence-supported trauma interventions to include in service planning.
- Advocate for the development and use of trauma-informed services in your community.

Reprinted from *Birth Parents with Trauma Histories and the Child Welfare System: A Guide for Child Welfare Staff*. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2011. http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/birth_parents_trauma_history_fact_sheet_final

Identifying and Engaging Child Victims of Human Trafficking

Child welfare work with minors who are victims of sex trafficking can be tough. Though they have been repeatedly traumatized, often these young people don't see themselves as victims—they may feel strong loyalty or even "love" for their exploiters. What's more, to survive many have developed behaviors and coping strategies—including a propensity to run away—that can make them hard to connect with and help. Here are some suggestions for working with this sometimes challenging population.

Victims, Not Criminals

First, understand these young people for what they are: victims and survivors. State law is explicit on this point (see NCGS § 14-204). Children and teens are not culpable for crimes committed due to human trafficking and are automatically victims regardless of their knowledge of or agreement to commercial sex acts (Polaris Project, 2010).

Unfortunately, some people mistakenly see minors who have been trafficked as delinquents or criminals. This puts them at risk of involvement with the criminal and juvenile justice systems. We can help by educating others on this point whenever necessary.

Identification

Few children and youth who have been trafficked know their status in the eyes of the law. Many believe they are guilty of crimes. Pimps may send this message as a way to manipulate them. As a result, these young people tend to hide or evade identification.

Thus, it helps to know the signs a child or teen may be a victim of sex trafficking. The following signs (from youth.gov) are potential indications:

- Misses school on a regular basis and/or has unexplained absences
- Frequently runs away from home
- Makes references to frequent travel to other cities or towns
- Has bruises or other signs of physical trauma, withdrawn behavior, depression, anxiety, or fear
- No control over their schedule, identification, or travel documents
- Is hungry, malnourished, or inappropriately dressed (based on weather, etc.)
- Shows signs of drug addiction
- Gives "canned" (coached or rehearsed) answers to questions
- Sudden change in attire, behavior, relationships, or possessions (e.g., expensive items)
- Is uncharacteristically promiscu-



Photo illustration

Because victims are more likely to reach out to DSS for concrete assistance, we must teach staff who work in those areas (e.g., economic services) to recognize possible signs of human trafficking.

ous or makes references to sexual situations or terminology that are beyond age-specific norms

- Has a noticeably older "boyfriend" or a "girlfriend"
- Conceals recent scars/tattoos
- Sudden change in attention to personal hygiene

Signs observed during travel:

- Travel companion controls documents, tickets, and movement
- Avoids eye contact with travel companion
- Lacks knowledge of travel plans and destination

Again, these signs are not definite confirmation of trafficking—further inquiry should occur. *continued next page*

Project NO REST

Have you heard about Project NO REST? Short for "North Carolina Organizing and Responding to the Exploitation and Sexual Trafficking of Children," this federally-funded effort, which will run from Oct. 2014 - Sept. 2019, seeks to reduce the number of youth trafficked and improve outcomes for youth who are trafficked by increasing awareness of human trafficking affecting children and youth age 25 and younger in NC, especially those involved in the child welfare system.

In 2015-16 the project brought together government agencies, organizations, and stakeholders to develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan to address human trafficking of youth. Through this plan, our state's infrastructure for dealing with human trafficking issues, especially the trafficking of youth, will be made stronger and more effective.

Through Project NO REST, five communities are serving as pilot sites for implementing anti-human trafficking efforts: (1) 30th Judicial District, comprised of Cherokee, Clay, Gra-

ham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties along with the Eastern Band of the Cherokee; (2) Our Voice, comprised of Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Yancey counties; (3) Pat's Place in Mecklenburg County; (4) Friend 2 Friend, comprised of Montgomery, Moore, and Randolph counties; and (5) Cumberland County Sheriff's Office.

Lessons learned from Project NO REST will be used to develop a toolkit for implementing similar efforts in counties across the state and throughout the country. This project will also use existing and new data sources to develop valid and reliable estimates of the size of the human trafficking problem in the state. Information Project NO REST will be widely disseminated across the state and made available across the country. To learn more go to <http://projectnorest.web.unc.edu/>



There is some evidence that when they interact with DSS, minor human trafficking victims do so to seek out concrete services (Swaner, et al., 2016). For this reason, agencies should make it a priority to teach staff who work in those areas (e.g., economic services) to recognize possible signs of human trafficking.

Responding to Possible Victims

If you identify a potential child victim of human trafficking and it is an emergency situation, call 911. If for some reason your agency can't respond (e.g., the report does not meet the legal mandates for CPS involvement), call the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888/373-7888).



Engagement Tips

If child welfare professionals need to interview a young person they suspect of being a survivor of sex trafficking, the following tips, adapted from *Inter-vene: Identifying and Responding to America's Prostituted Youth* (Shared Hope International, 2010), may prove helpful. (Note: these tips may be useful in talking to all child-welfare involved youth, not just trafficking survivors.)

- 1. Be non-judgmental and kind.** This is the basis of all future interactions.
- 2. Meet emergency and basic needs first.** You can't have real dialogue if basic needs are unmet.
- 3. Check the room.** The interview space should be youth-friendly, comfortable, and private.
- 4. Allow enough time.** Give yourself time before the interview to develop rapport with the youth.
- 5. Be flexible.** Let the youth guide the conversation at first. This will help you achieve your goals in the end, and it begins the empowerment process.
- 6. Be up front.** Explain at the start who you are, your mandated reporting requirements, and what your goals are for the conversation.
- 7. Ask permission.** If you must use

Online Training Resources

Here are two online resources on this topic we'd like to mention:

- National Human Trafficking Resource Center** ("NHTRC"). Offers a wide range of services for trafficking victims and the people and groups who help them, including dozens of online trainings and an extensive resource library. <https://traffickingresourcecenter.org/> 
- NC DSS Webinar Recording.** "Human Trafficking: What Child Welfare Agencies Should Know," (event date: 10/24/2016) features Erin Conner from the NC Division of Social Services and Lindsey Roberson, a former assistant DA and expert on human trafficking. <http://fcrp.unc.edu/webinars.asp> 

a form or take notes, ask permission so the youth knows why you are writing things down information about them, what it will be used for, and whether it is confidential.

8. Use youth-friendly language. Mirror (appropriate) language used by youth when asking questions about events in their story.

9. Use "listening" body language. Your body language should be open and communicate a desire to hear everything, including unpleasant or uncomfortable details.

10. Limit the personal information you share. While it's important to participate so the conversation doesn't feel one-sided, sharing significant or really personal stories in an effort to connect can place an inappropriate burden on the youth to counsel you. Additionally, don't share your personal information (home address/cell phone number, etc.).

11. Use interruptions wisely. When youth begin to share, avoid constantly asking questions; this can feel invasive. However, taking numerous short breaks can help the youth avoid feeling re-victimized. If at any point you notice distress, "check in" by asking, "What are you feeling right now?" Listen to the response and resume the narrative only when the youth is ready.

12. Meet youth where they are. Respect where the youth is psycho-

logically and emotionally. The youth may not acknowledge her situation as exploitative and may even have to or desire return to the abusive situation. Work first to understand and define the youth's immediate and long-term goals. When this is done, guide the youth (over time) into defining and understanding her situation; do not to assign a label to her.

13. Set boundaries with youth. Respect boundaries set by the youth, especially regarding touch. Don't touch without permission. If the youth gives permission to hug, let the youth be the one to initiate the hug.

14. Be a team player. A multidisciplinary team approach is key to holistically caring for the youth. It's natural for youth to bond more with certain team members. Don't take this personally. Never talk disrespectfully with the youth about others on the team.

15. Be transparent and reliable. When working with survivors, always follow through with what you say you will do. Never make a promise you can't keep. You will have to earn their trust. The more you can involve youth in achieving their goals, the more quickly trust will grow. For example, include the youth in referral calls. This allows the youth to watch "her" practitioner interact with another professional as well as hear how and why you're making the referral. ♦

NC Works to Engage, Consult, and Respond to Families on a Systemic Level

According to the US Children's Bureau, "parent and youth involvement in agency councils and boards is a proactive way for State and county agencies to gather and use parent and youth input in program and policy development, service design, and program evaluation" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

North Carolina has long believed that child and family services should involve both parents and youth in service design and delivery to increase accountability to the needs of the community and those it serves. While family-centered principles can be seen throughout North Carolina's policy and guidance concerning direct practice, we have more work to do to ensure our child welfare system proactively engages consumers on a broader, systemic level.

Improving Our System

In 2015, our state participated in Round 3 of the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). Based on the results, in spring 2016 it held five stakeholder meetings to determine the root causes of the issues identified by the CFSR and to brainstorm ways the system could improve. Information from these meetings helped North Carolina develop the goals, strategies and activities outlined in its federal Program Improvement Plan (PIP).

Several parents who had been subject to a report of

child abuse or neglect and youth who had been served by the foster care program were able to participate in these CFSR/PIP stakeholder meetings. Having family voices present was so beneficial to the process that it strengthened North Carolina's resolve to engage families in all levels of child welfare. As a result, the NC Division of Social Services has prioritized engaging families on the state level over the next two years.

A Family Advisory Council for Child Welfare

The development and implementation of a family leadership model for North Carolina is part of our PIP. In partnership with the Center for Family and Community Engagement at NC State University, the Division plans to bring family and youth perspectives to the table by establishing a NC Child Welfare Family Advisory Council.

The council's purpose will be to help guide policy and practice and to provide ongoing consultation around statewide child welfare goals and objectives. The process for creating this council will include a review of state and national family leadership models, a state-level readiness assessment for family leadership in child welfare, and the development of the council itself.

Next Steps

The Division has convened a workgroup of stakeholders to help establish the



Photo illustration

"On an organizational or system level, family engagement means including families as key stakeholders and advisors in policy development, service design, and program and service evaluation" (McCarthy, 2012).

council. This group will be involved in the review of family leadership strategies and the assessment of the state's readiness to recruit and sustain a Child Welfare Family Advisory Council. This workgroup will help the Division identify and implement activities needed to ensure the council is sustainable and successful. When these preparations are complete, families and youth with child welfare experience who are interested in this leadership

opportunity will be recruited to serve on the council.

Take Action

If you have been successful in engaging families in the design and delivery of your child welfare operations, or if you have a parent you would like to recommend as a potential member of the North Carolina Child Welfare Family Advisory Council, please contact Kara Allen-Eckard (kral-lene@ncsu.edu; 919/515-5511). ♦

Developing Parent Leaders: A Resource

Looking for ways to better involve families in your agency and community? Check out *Meaningful Parent Leadership: A Guide for Success*.



A Guide for Success. Created by the FRIENDS National Resource Center, this practical guide shares information, strategies, and tools for developing successful models of parent leadership and partnership. It's available online at: https://friendsnrc.org/jdownloads/attachments/pl_guidebook.pdf

Suggestions for Engaging Families When a Parent Is Incarcerated

Parental incarceration is a serious issue for the child welfare system. Approximately 10 million children in the United States have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives, and 15 - 20% of youth entering foster care have a parent who's in jail or prison (IWGYP, n.d.; NRCCFI, 2014).

When it occurs, parental incarceration has a huge impact on children and their families: two out of three families with a parent in jail or prison struggle financially due to the loss of income and the cost of visiting and phone calls (IWGYP, n.d.). Having an incarcerated parent increases children's risk of living in poverty, having behavioral problems, and physical and mental health conditions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). However, when they get the support they need, these children show less distress and adjust more easily to the separation from their parent (NRCCFI, 2014).

So how can we engage these children and families and help meet their needs? For suggestions *Practice Notes* spoke with Melissa Radcliff, Program Director for Our Children's Place of Coastal Horizons Center, a statewide education and advocacy program in North Carolina focused on children of incarcerated parents. (*This interview has been edited for style and length.*)

What are the top things workers should know about children with a parent who is incarcerated?

These kids still love their parents. They might not like what their parent did, but they still love and want a relationship with them.

They aren't destined to follow in their parents' footsteps. Research shows these children are no more likely than other children to end up in jail or prison (NRCCFI, 2014).

We can make a difference by being supportive. The best way we can support children is to make sure they can have a relationship with their parents. For most people, this leads to realizing

the parent needs support, too.

How can workers develop a positive relationship with these children? How can we engage them?

Recognize—but don't express—any negative feelings you may have about these parents. There's a lot of stigma associated with incarceration, and youth notice our feelings about their parents quickly. Even if you have some negative feelings about a parent, she's still the mother and the child still loves her. She will always be an important part of her child's life. If you speak negatively about the parent, it is hard for the child not to take it personally.

Do your homework and advocate. Know the difference between jail and prison. Know what the rules are about family contact (e.g., is there a dress code or a limit on how many family members can attend the visit?). Know what services are available in the parent's facility. Facilitate family visits and contact via phone and letters as often as possible. Coach both the parent and child so they are prepared for family contact.

Ease the burden. Parents in prison can be in a facility over 100 miles away from their child (IWGYP, n.d.). Transportation and phone calls can be expensive. Consider transporting the family to visits and providing bus passes or phone cards. Encourage



One way to engage families separated by jail or prison is to make it clear we understand how important it is for them to stay in connected.

families to write letters to each other. Letters help the family stay connected between visits.

Be honest with the child. The child needs to know where the parent is and why. It is the parent or caretaker's responsibility to have an honest conversation about this with the child. Help the family consider how to tell the child in a way she can understand. Visit www.ourchildrensplace.com and click on Resources for a list of children's books that help families talk about incarceration. This page also contains resources that could be helpful to social workers as well.

Focus on more than the incarceration. Talk with the child about their parent outside of the incarceration. Ask questions like: Tell me what you like to do with your dad? Did you ever go out to dinner with your mom? What would you talk to your dad about if

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Resources to Support Parents Who Are Incarcerated



Guide for Incarcerated Parents Who Have Children in the Child Welfare System. This guide focuses on helping these parents work with the child welfare system to stay in touch with their children and stay involved in decisions about their children's well-being. It also discusses steps required by the child welfare system for reunification, or having children return home to their family after foster care. Available at <http://youth.gov/feature-article/guide-incarcerated-parents-child-welfare-system> (613 KB, 34 pages).

Rise Magazine. The summer 2008 issue of this publication by and for parents in the child welfare system is "Parenting from Prison." In it, parents in prison describe their efforts to stay connected to their children in foster care despite their incarceration and to reunify after release. Available at http://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Rise_issue_10-prison.pdf (459 KB, 12 pages).

Rise

Incarcerated

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he wasn't in prison? The incarceration isn't the child's or the parent's identity.

What should workers keep in mind about parents in jail or prison?

Many are still trying hard to be parents. They learned how to parent from their own parents, who may not have been the best model. Give them a chance to explain how they became the parent they are today. Explore what type of parent they would like to be. These parents are hungry for information that will help them be a better parent; help them access that information.

They won't be incarcerated forever. They will be released at some point, so we need to think about their reentry. Explore how you can ensure the child's safety and the family's success when the parent is released.

Know the limits. Consider whether parents can realistically do the things on their case plan. Programs and resources vary across facilities and many incarcerated parents may not have access to the services they need. Recognize that not all facilities have social workers; some have case managers instead. Prison staff have high caseloads and may not have voice-mail. Understand that contacting someone in the facility may take considerably longer than usual. Consider these limitations and think "outside the box" when drafting the case plan.

How can we build a positive relationship with these parents and engage them with the agency?


Respect them and let them make decisions. In prison, inmates are constantly told they don't make decisions anymore. Giving parents the chance to make decisions regarding their children builds your relationship and helps them regain a sense of control over their life. This also prepares them for reentry, where they will face a host of parenting choices all the time. If parenting classes are in the case

Practice Knowledge Checklist

The guide *Child Welfare Practice with Families Affected by Parental Incarceration* (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015) suggests child welfare professionals explore the following to help prepare them to work with incarcerated parents and their families:

- Do you have any opinions, biases, or discomfort about working with families affected by incarceration or possibly visiting a correctional facility?
- Does your agency have any specific protocols for working with incarcerated parents and their families?
- Do you know your State's laws governing how incarceration affects the termination of parental rights or other aspects of casework with incarcerated parents?
- Do you have contact information for the State and local correctional facilities near your community?
- What are the procedures for scheduling visits or having other contact with incarcerated parents at correctional facilities in the area? Are there special procedures or considerations for child visits?
- Are you aware of the services in your agency, in the community, or in the nearby correctional facilities to support inmates in being involved parents? Fulfilling their case plans? Reentering the community?
- Does your agency allow case planning meetings to occur in a correctional facility or be conducted by phone or videoconference?
- Do courts in your jurisdiction allow incarcerated parents to participate in hearings by phone or videoconference? If so, what is the process for setting that up?
- Do the police departments in your area have protocols, including agreements with the child welfare agency, regarding arrests when children are present or when a parent is arrested?
- What trainings are available within your agency or State about working with incarcerated parents and their families?
- Do the correctional facilities in your area have liaisons for working with child welfare professionals?
- What services or supports are available in your agency or community for relatives caring for children with incarcerated parents? For foster parents?

It may also be helpful to explore similar questions when working with parents detained for immigration issues.



plan, give the parent a few options to choose from. Be aware of literacy level and how parents learn—will lecture, videos, or role play be most helpful? Which would they prefer?

Keep them involved. Remind parents that they have an important role in their child's life. Although their relationship with the child may look a bit different now, it is still important. Help the parent explore ways to remain involved and to connect with their child.

Recognize their parenting priorities. A parent of a 9-year-old may be concerned about bullying, while one with a teenager may be worried about

whether their child is having sex. Neither of these things may be a priority for you as a child welfare worker, but having a conversation with the parent about these things shows you care about their concerns.

Conclusion

Engaging parents who are incarcerated isn't always easy, but doing so can pay off in a big way for the parent, the child, and the entire family. Child welfare workers have an important role in helping parents and children maintain their bond, even when they're separated by jail or prison. ♦

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