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# Engaging Families in Case Planning

Successfully involving family members in case planning may be the most critical component for achieving positive outcomes in child welfare practice. Research suggests that when families are engaged and supported to have a significant role in case planning, they are more motivated to actively commit to achieving the case plan. Additionally, families are more likely to recognize and agree with the identified problems to be resolved, perceive goals as relevant and attainable, and be satisfied with the planning and decision-making process (Antle, Christensen, van Zyl, & Barbee, 2012; Healy, Darlington, & Yellowlees, 2011; Dawson & Berry, 2001; Jones, McGura, & Shyne, 1981).

## What's Inside:

- Basics of engaging families in case planning
- Caseworker strategies that support family engagement in case planning
- Agency strategies that support family engagement in case planning
- Findings in the Child and Family Services Reviews
- State and local examples



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Child welfare professionals at the State, Tribal, and local levels—including administrators, supervisors, and frontline workers—can use this information to establish policies and encourage practices that support family engagement in case planning.

## Basics of Engaging Families in Case Planning

Collaborative case planning occurs when the caseworker's efforts effectively and continuously engage family members and others as appropriate in case planning activities, including the following:

- Gathering and assessing information in order to visualize the family system
- Matching strengths and needs with solutions and services
- Identifying behaviors and conditions that need to change
- Reviewing, tracking, and acknowledging progress regularly
- Determining readiness for key case transition points, such as reunification
- Preparing for case closure
- Marshaling supports for relapse prevention, as needed

The case plan is a living document that should reflect ongoing input from the family and be reviewed and updated throughout the life of the case. Caseworkers should expect to engage the family for the initial drafting of the plan as well as throughout the planning and implementation process. Family participation helps ensure buy-in from the family and also adds a higher degree of accountability for the family.

The following are tips that can help caseworkers coordinate a case plan meeting in a way that enhances family participation:

- Assist family members with practical issues that may prevent them from attending, such as child care and transportation.
- Take into account family members' other obligations, such as employment, when scheduling meetings.
- Ensure that the physical environment for the meeting is welcoming (e.g., enough space for all members, accessibility for individuals with disabilities).
- Invite people identified by the family as being part of its support system, which may include other family members or individuals external to the family, such as friends, teachers, and clergy.
- Minimize the possibility of family members receiving unanticipated information during the meeting (e.g., communicate information regularly to family members).
- Help the family meet concrete needs (e.g., housing, food).
- Resolve acute behavioral or health-related issues that may impede family participation (e.g., provide housing assistance, if needed).

- Prepare the family for the meeting by reviewing items such as expectations, roles and responsibilities, and goals.
- If the child is unable to participate or will otherwise not be present, incorporate him/her through other means, such as a photograph or artwork (Healy, Darlington, & Yellowlees, 2011; Dawson & Berry, 2001).
- Working with the family's definitions of the problems (rather than the caseworker's definition)
- Setting goals that are mutually agreed upon and may be generated primarily by the family and stated in their language
- Focusing on improving family members' skills rather than providing insights
- Providing family members with choices whenever possible
- Getting a commitment from family members that they will engage in mutually identified tasks
- Regularly spending time with the family discussing goals and progress
- Recognizing and praising progress (Dawson & Berry, 2001; Trotter, 2002; Dawson & Berry, 2002)

## Caseworker Strategies That Support Family Engagement in Case Planning

The following are several examples of approaches caseworkers can use to enhance family engagement in case planning.

### Using Supportive Behaviors

A number of studies have suggested that the following caseworker behaviors may support a collaborative relationship, including better engaging families in case planning:

- Listening to and addressing issues that concern the family
- Having honest discussions about the nature of the caseworker's authority and how it may be used (this is required by [CAPTA](#))
- Sharing openly with family members what to expect, particularly regarding court issues and timelines
- Balancing discussions of problems with the identification of strengths and resources

"This was the first time someone asked me what I thought."  
— Mother, responding to a satisfaction survey designed to elicit family members' reactions to being involved in the child welfare system

## Visualizing and Describing the Family System

Developing a visualization or description of the family system can help caseworkers gain insight about how a family views itself and help establish the family as an expert. In this approach, the caseworker asks the family to share information about family relationships, patterns of family interactions, and active community supports and stressors. The family may also want to reflect on family events, some of which may have a lasting significance on family and individual dynamics. This information can help the family and caseworker develop a more thorough case plan. The following are three examples of this approach:

- Genograms, which outline family relationships, multigenerational patterns, and the roles played by individual family members
- Ecomaps, which describe the family's perspective of itself in relationship to the wider community and can help the caseworker and family explore important spiritual and cultural connections
- Family timelines, which highlight life events that are noteworthy to family members

For additional details about creating and using these tools, the Missouri Department of Social Services' *Child Welfare Manual* (2011) offers brief descriptions: [http://www.dss.mo.gov/cd/info/cwmanual/section7/ch1\\_33/sec7ch25.htm](http://www.dss.mo.gov/cd/info/cwmanual/section7/ch1_33/sec7ch25.htm)

## Instituting Family Teaming Models

Family teaming models may include a variety of family group conferencing, decision-making, and teaming approaches. Although the specific tenets of each approach vary, the basis of each is a belief that families should be involved in a strengths-based, solution-focused team that values the families' voice and focuses on the child's safety, permanency, and well-being (Annie. E. Casey Foundation & Casey Family Services, 2009). These approaches bring together a team of family members, fictive kin, and other individuals who are significant to the family in order to discuss the issues, consider alternative solutions, make decisions, and develop a plan. Using family teaming approaches can strengthen family relationships, prevent unnecessary placement and placement disruption, and help caseworkers identify and nurture a system of family supports (Crea & Berzin, 2009; American Humane, n.d.).

For more information about family teaming models, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/overview/approaches/family\\_group.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/overview/approaches/family_group.cfm)

"The family group conferencing process provides a venue of effective communication, in a neutral place, where private family time is respected. I felt this process helped to bring our family together."

— Family member commenting on the experience of participating in a family group conference organized around a child welfare case

## Incorporating Family Finding

Family finding includes identifying and searching for family members and other important people in the lives of children in foster care and then engaging them in the case decision-making process, including the development and fulfillment of case plans. Family finding can increase the number of individuals who may be able to provide legal and emotional permanency for the child, are aware of the case plan, and can assist the child and family in achieving case goals. Family finding initially was viewed as a tool to enhance permanency for youth aging out of foster care, but many agencies are now using it for all children in care (Malm & Allen, 2011).

For more information about family finding, visit the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections' web section on Family Search and Engagement: [http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/family-search.html](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-search.html)

## Employing the Solution-Based Casework Approach

Solution-Based Casework (SBC) is a child welfare practice model built on three theoretical foundations: family life cycle theory, relapse prevention/cognitive behavioral therapy theory, and solution-focused family therapy (Antle et al., 2012). The theoretical foundations of SBC establish a framework of case practice with families based on full partnership with every family as an essential goal, partnerships for protection that focus on the patterns of everyday life of the family, and solutions that target prevention skills needed to reduce the risk in typical life events.

Fundamentally, SBC is a model of empowerment that drives case planning and focuses on:

- Capitalizing on family strengths
- Finding exceptions to problems by searching with the family for ways in which they have successfully solved problems previously
- Writing goals and objectives using the families' own language, acknowledging their culture, and supporting their "ownership"
- Creating concrete, behaviorally specific goals and objectives tailored to the individual and family needs
- Tracking progress with the family and celebrating successes along the way

SBC encourages workers to "walk alongside the families to make sure they have the supportive team they need to navigate the system successfully" (B. F. Antle, personal communication, June 7, 2012). Research on SBC has shown that this partnership between the caseworker and family generates better family outcomes. Specifically, in regard to case planning activities (i.e., referrals to services, participating in case plan development), several studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of SBC have shown the following results (Antle, Barbee, Christensen, & Martin, 2008):

- Most families involved with SBC followed through with referrals to services.
- A substantial proportion of families who co-created their case plan within an SBC framework also signed their case plan—an important indicator of their involvement.

- Families assigned tasks through an SBC case plan process were more likely to complete those tasks, compared to families not involved in SBC case plans.
- Families in an SBC group achieved significantly more goals/objectives from the case plan compared to those in a non-SBC group.
- Families with a history of involvement with CPS achieved even more goals from their case plan when SBC was used than those without such histories and those for whom SBC was not used.
- Families experienced significantly fewer recidivism referral reports for repeat maltreatment when SBC was used in case planning.

Research suggests that SBC is associated with significantly greater family engagement in case planning activities, which may lead to better safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families (Antle et al., 2008).

For more information on SBC, visit <http://www.solutionbasedcasework.com>, or contact Becky Antle: [Becky.Antle@louisville.edu](mailto:Becky.Antle@louisville.edu)

## Integrating Structured Decision-Making and Signs of Safety

Structured decision-making (SDM) offers caseworkers an approach that relies on the use of objective, research-based criteria to assess a family's situation (e.g., risk of harm to the child), screen the case for investigation, and make case decisions. These factors are incorporated into the case plan. Although SDM provides a systematic and analytic method of assessing family situations, it is not intended to be an interview tool with families.

Signs of Safety (SoS) is a strengths-based, solution-focused approach that promotes building relationships with families and using a safety mapping process to assess next steps. Safety mapping, in brief, focuses on caseworkers and families determining the answers to three questions:

- What are the worries (e.g., previous abuse)?
- What's working well (e.g., family protective factors)?
- What needs to happen (e.g., safety planning)? (Turnell, 2010)

Both SDM and SoS are approaches that can be used alone or combined. By combining these two models, caseworkers can add the defined assessment criteria of SDM to the safety mapping approach of SoS and use the family engagement and inquiry techniques of SoS to gather information needed for a comprehensive SDM assessment, all of which can inform the case plan (Park, 2010). Recently, States have also begun to integrate SDM and SBC, further strengthening the practice of engaging families throughout the entire life of a case.

For additional information about SDM, visit:

- The Children's Research Center at [http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/crc/c\\_sdm\\_about.html](http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/crc/c_sdm_about.html)
- Child Welfare Information Gateway at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/assessment/approaches/decision.cfm>

For more information about Signs of Safety, visit: <http://www.signsofsafety.net>

## Agency Strategies That Support Family Engagement in Case Planning

Child welfare administrators and supervisors can use policies and practices already shown to improve general casework practice to support family engagement in case planning within their agencies, including:

- Using family-centered language in policies and other agency documents
- Creating a family-friendly environment in agency offices
- Reducing caseloads in order to give caseworkers more time to engage families
- Providing supervision, coaching, and training that encourage family engagement
- Including family-friendly practice in position descriptions
- Engaging families in decision-making processes and in designing policies and practices
- Assessing whether child welfare information systems support a family-centered approach
- Including family engagement measures in agency evaluation and performance measurement
- Ensuring that caseworkers have the necessary research tools and other resources to aid in finding and engaging family members

## Findings in the Child and Family Services Reviews

The results of the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), which are Federal monitoring evaluations of each State's child welfare services, show that States are having difficulty involving parents and children in case planning. This is assessed specifically in the CFSR Item 18. In both rounds of the CFSRs, all States received a rating of "Area Needing Improvement" on this item. Across the States, CFSR case reviewers found that all parents and children were involved in case planning in 21 to 75 percent of cases, with an average of 50 percent. The involvement of fathers in case planning, however, was consistently lower than the involvement of mothers and children. Additionally, families were more often included in case planning in cases where the child was in foster care rather than receiving in-home services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

### Challenges

A review of Statewide Assessments prepared for the second round of the CFSRs found that States identified the following challenges to engaging families in case planning:

- Staff lacking the skills needed for family engagement in case planning (42 States)
- Staff attitudes and behaviors (25 States)
- Organizational issues (e.g., high workloads) (21 States)

- Parent attitudes, behaviors, or conditions that impede active involvement in case planning (17 States)
- Difficulties created by court-related requirements (14 States)
- System issues and documentation requirements precluding the production of a written case plan in a family-friendly format (17 States)

### Strategies to Enhance Family Involvement

The CFSR Final Reports indicate that most States (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) have policies regarding family engagement in case planning, with 28 States having policies requiring family engagement and an additional 12 having policies that suggest or encourage it. Additionally, 46 of the 51 States (including the District of Columbia) addressed family engagement in case planning in their Program Improvement Plans (PIPs), which were created to address any deficiencies noted in a State's CFSR. Some States' PIPs included very specific plans for improvement in family engagement, while others tangentially mentioned it. The following are strategies listed in the CFSR Final Reports as facilitating family engagement in case planning:

- Family group decision-making (29 States)
- Diligent searches (9 States)
- Video or teleconferences to allow the participation of family members who otherwise could not attend due to travel issues or incarceration (6 States)
- Training for caseworkers (3 States)
- Mediation (3 States)

The strategies most frequently mentioned in the PIPs to address deficiencies in family engagement in case planning were enhanced family group decision-making meetings (9 States) and training (6 States). Examples of other strategies include equipping caseworkers with smartphones and laptops that would enable them to complete assessments and case plans with clients outside of the agency (Vermont), developing and disseminating a checklist to caseworkers about engaging families in case planning (North Dakota), and adding or modifying questions in its case review instrument to monitor compliance (Kansas).

## State and Local Examples

The following are three examples of how jurisdictions are implementing strategies to engage families in case planning.

### Texas Department of Family and Protective Services: Family Group Decision-Making

The El Paso Regional Office of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) uses family group decision-making (FGDM) as a way of involving parents and children in case planning and decision-making. Texas DFPS implemented family group decision-making throughout the State in response to issues raised in its 2002 CFSR.

El Paso DFPS has a team of coordinators that plan and facilitate the meetings. The purpose of the FGDM meetings is to reach consensus on how they will safely prevent removal or on the best placement resource that will protect the child. After consensus is achieved, the participants determine the next steps for the case, with each family member commenting on the tasks (e.g., whether they are achievable). The resulting case plan then is put into writing and signed by the participants.

El Paso's diverse population poses some challenges for implementing FGDM. El Paso is a border community with a large Mexican population, and it can be difficult to locate and engage family members and support individuals who may reside in Mexico or are undocumented. Having staff from diverse backgrounds and who are bilingual helps with the FGDM process, including being able to conduct the meeting and write the case plan in the family's preferred language. Additionally, Federal partners sometimes are able to help parents in Mexico obtain a day pass so they can attend court in El Paso.

El Paso also is home to a large military base. Bringing family members and other support individuals together for military families often is a challenge because the parents and child may have no family in the area and may have not developed strong supportive ties in the community.

El Paso DFPS staff have found the following staff behaviors and attitudes to be essential to the FGDM and family engagement process:

- Being culturally competent and respectful of the family
- Being authentic about the process

- Keeping in mind that the FGDM is the family's meeting, not the department's
- Having the DFPS investigator and caseworker attend the FGDM together, which helps create a seamless transition from investigation to services

### **Fairfax County (VA) Department of Family Services: Family Partnership Program**

The Fairfax County Department of Family Services (DFS) implemented the Family Partnership Program (<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/childreneyouth/family-partnership.htm>) to ensure families' and children's views are considered when making placement decisions and developing case plans. Family Partnership meetings use a facilitated team approach and are led by one of seven trained facilitators, who otherwise are not associated with the case and do not carry a caseload. Family Partnership meetings can be convened quickly (within 24 hours, if necessary) and are arranged in response to any of the following five designated events: an emergency removal order, the high risk of out of home placement, before a goal change, before a placement change, or at the request of family or staff. DFS strives to reduce barriers to family participation and provides transportation, child care, and phone conference lines, as needed. Additionally, DFS staff are able to travel for a meeting. In one case, DFS arranged for an out-of-State meeting that resulted in achieving permanence for a large sibling group with their paternal relatives.

During the meeting, which includes the parents, children, extended family members, service providers, and other individuals significant to the family, the facilitator helps

the group understand why the meeting is taking place and leads them in developing a collaborative solution that will provide safety for the child. The plan developed at the meeting is then incorporated into the overall case plan and utilized in applicable court proceedings. Additionally, the group sometimes schedules a follow-up meeting to ensure the plan is proceeding as discussed.

Benefits of the Family Partnership Program include the discovery of additional family supports and the increased engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in case plan development.

### **New York Agency Uses SBC to Achieve Family-Driven Case Planning**

In late 2010, Graham Windham, a private New York City agency offering an array of services from prevention to postadoption, conducted a national search for a new approach to practice. The agency was looking for a model that would provide their direct practitioners with a practice framework consistent with Graham Windham's commitment to partnering with families in a way that strengthens families' ability to care safely for their children.

The agency began implementing SBC in early 2011, providing intensive training and coaching to supervisors and caseworkers. Caseworkers began to use concrete and specific plans of action, which were co-developed with families. Case plans targeted needed skills in critical risk areas that could be demonstrated and documented. Family accomplishments were celebrated regularly and in ways meaningful to families. Additionally, tools such as genograms integrated into the case planning process helped prompt staff to have more meaningful,

empathic conversations with families, while supporting earlier identification of kin as potential supports to the family.

Graham Windham supervisors have found that leading SBC requires intensive study, along with consistent supervision and coaching to ensure staff follow protocols and safeguard model fidelity. This has led to a new focus on assessing the issues that preceded the maltreatment and to tracking behavior instead of service compliance. These changes are echoed in remarks from a supervisor in the Bronx office who said, "SBC has also allowed me to be more compassionate. In the past... the paperwork says the family did X, Y and Z and so they need to do A, B, and C services. But now, we hear the buildup of circumstances and emotions that preceded the maltreatment."

Workers and supervisors also perceive families as taking more ownership in case planning. As one worker commented, "It's empowering. They're excited to come to the agency. They're not coming in screaming and yelling and we're not getting into that old type of relationship...and we celebrate – we celebrate with kids and families when they make progress in their action plans, but staff are celebrating then too. They're just as excited as the families are."

Agency supervisors are now working toward SBC certification, and this goal has resulted in broad organizational change. When asked how SBC has affected practice with families, Graham Windham President Jess Dannhauser stated, "It changes the entire framework of our interaction with families by focusing the intention of our work and providing tools to deliver on that intention" (personal communication, June 7, 2012).

For more information, contact Jess Dannhauser at Graham Windham at [Dannhauserj@graham-windham.org](mailto:Dannhauserj@graham-windham.org) or visit the website at <http://www.graham-windham.org/contact-us/>

## Conclusion

There are myriad ways in which caseworkers and agencies can improve the manner in which they engage families in case planning, ranging from large-scale policy changes to simple changes in day-to-day practice and attitudes. When families are provided with the opportunity to participate in case planning, they are more likely to buy into the plan and work toward its requirements. This eases and enhances the efforts of caseworkers, and most importantly, helps improve outcomes for children and families. By reviewing the concepts presented in this issue brief, child welfare professionals can assess how well their own agencies engage families in case planning and initiate changes to improve their work in this area.

## Additional Resources

### Child Welfare Information Gateway

The Family-Centered Practice section of the Information Gateway website provides resources on family-centered practice approaches, including engaging families in case planning. <http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/>

### National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRC PFC)

The NRC PFC developed a web-based toolkit on family engagement that provides promising practices, programs, and resources for programs, States, and tribes. <http://www.nrcpfc.org/fewpt/introduction.htm>

### California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC)

CalSWEC's Family Engagement in Case Planning and Case Management curriculum is designed to help caseworkers better understand the dynamics of engaging families in case planning. <http://calswec.berkeley.edu/family-engagement-case-planning-and-casemanagement-version-21>

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