

A green highway sign with a white border and a white outline, mounted on a metal post. The sign is set against a blue sky with light clouds. The text on the sign is white and centered.

Critical Questions that Engage Families

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WARNING!

- » Horrible situation ahead.
- » You are stuck and can't get out.
- » You have to make a change.
- » People are watching and there will be consequences.
- » What do you do?

Assess Your Options

- » Run away!
- » Grit your teeth and get it over with. But be there in body only.
- » Lie and say you did it already.
- » Do the minimum required.
- » Do it, but with an attitude.
- » Bargain to something acceptable.

Least Likely of Options

» “Brilliant!! I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to change my behavior patterns, and now that my back is up against the wall, I will roll up my sleeves and get busy. Just tell me where and how to begin; I can’t wait to follow orders.”

Are Drop-Out and Non-Compliance Facts of Life?

- » Rates range from 35% to 70%.
- » Noncompliance with child and family services has very serious consequences:
 - » Continued risks to child/family
 - » Placement of children into foster care
 - » Termination of parental rights

Engagement is Job #1

» It is our job to engage families: not theirs to become cooperative.

Dropout/noncompliance:

» Takes its toll on service costs.

» Takes its toll on worker burnout.

» Takes its toll on families who are penalized.

» Evidence-based treatments don't work if no one shows up.

What is Engagement?

» Compliance versus Cooperation

- » Compliance is for the moment, built on fear or anger, and a perceived imbalance of power.
- » Cooperation creates long term gains and changes; is built on partnership and a perceived balance or sharing of power.

So How Do We Engage? We Share POWER

- » We do have power - it is not helpful to deny or hide that fact.
- » People who feel they have some power, control or choice in the situation are much more likely to cooperate rather than comply.
- » We can provide choices and share decision making in many ways.

Engagement is all about Respect and Control

- » Showing respect
 - » Acting like a guest in the family home.
 - » Asking for, not directing, actions.
 - » Bringing what concrete resources you have to the first encounter.
 - » Calling people by their preferred names, not "mom," etc.
 - » Providing choices where you can.

Questions that Show Respect

- » Ask the family:
 - » When is a good time to visit?
 - » May I come in?
 - » Where would you like me/us to sit?
 - » What would you define as your largest challenge at the moment?
 - » What would you say are your family's strengths / resources?

Other Forms of Respect

» Evidence says:

- » Provide an immediate response.
People who have to wait or who have to work on your goals don't feel heard or respected - solving small concrete problems early or immediately increases family engagement.
- » Listen, listen, listen - this takes time.
- » Be supportive, not punitive.

Questions that Enhance Family Control

- » Choices, choices, choices. There are multiple solutions from which to choose for any situation.
- » Ask families what has not worked for them before, so you won't make the same mistakes.
- » Spend lots of time listening.

Questions that Enhance Family Control

- » Ask yourself:
 - » What can I let go of?
 - » Where can I provide choice/options?
- » Ask the family:
 - » What is the first small thing we could take care of that would make you feel better today?
 - » What do you see as possible solutions?

Start with the Basics

- » Evidence tells us:
 - » Small successes early in a case bode well for engagement and continued success. Look for the easy problems and easy solutions first. Show families that together you can make things happen, and Bob's your Uncle.
 - » The best case outcomes come when concrete problems are solved first, followed by the more difficult changes in behavior and attitude. Don't jump right into to the tough stuff.

Dangerous Territory

- » Evidence tells us:
 - » Ask questions that lead to mutual goal setting.
 - » Stay focused on skills.
 - » Working on attitudes is a losing proposition - staying goal-focused will keep you working on skills.
 - » Make services relevant to skills.

Take Time to Listen

- » Evidence tells us:
 - » Families engage and stay engaged when they feel heard. Ask lots of questions about what has and has not worked for this specific family in the past, or what they wish had happened. This gives you the means to individualize your response to the specific need/wish of the family.

Creativity (a note to managers)

- » Evidence tells us:
 - » That helpers need the ability to think and work flexibly around the needs and goals of families. Asking workers to assess the individual needs of families presupposes that they have the autonomy/resources to then respond to those individual family needs and goals.

Evidence about Caseworkers

Caseworker behaviors are more related to outcomes than are caseworker qualities.

- » Be specific.
- » Seek client input.
- » Get a commitment.
- » Train to the task.
- » Praise, praise, praise.
- » Gradual difficulty in what you work on.

The Road Ahead

- » As we say in the U.S., there is more than one way to skin a cat -- eeww. Options, options, options.
- » Ask questions and then listen.
- » Share decision making whenever and where ever you can.
- » Caseworkers need flexibility, too.