



ND Child Welfare Supervision

ENGAGEMENT IS MORE THAN JUST A BUZZ WORD

At just about every training you go to, engagement is a key word used when talking about working with children and families in child welfare. It seems to be used so much that we often refer to it or talk about it without really thinking about what it is, what it means and how impactful it can be. We also tend to think that all of our workers, despite their lack of experience, know what this is, how to achieve it, and assume that they know the importance of it as well. Because of this, we tend to not talk about it or coach our workers in this area. During Child Welfare Certification, we spend multiple days talking about engagement, why it is so important and how to work with families of all shapes and sizes. Most importantly, we talk over and over about how change is not likely to happen if there isn't a relationship.

While you read this brief, I encourage you to think about how you can bring engagement back to the forefront as a critical aspect to our work with families. There isn't a tool or a checklist that can empower or teach workers how to engage with families. Lastly, but certainly not least, I challenge you to think about how this is a parallel process with those that we work with and supervise. If I see the importance that my relationship has with those that I supervise, and because of that relationship, those workers, want to achieve more, and produce great outcomes for families; isn't it more likely that they will do the same with the families with whom they work? That they are more likely to create relationships with families and as a result those families will feel confident in the system and with those that they are working in order to make the changes necessary to keep their children safe?

CHALLENGES THAT MAKE ENGAGING MORE DIFFICULT

Every day workers face challenges to engaging children and parents. Below are just some of the barriers that are impact the work on a regular basis:

1. Vulnerable and mistrusting families: Having child welfare involved with your family is stressful no matter what the situation. Families often mistrust the child welfare system due to stories that they have heard or due to their own prior experiences. Previous trauma for families can also lead to reactions that include anger, frustration, skepticism, and lack of trust.

2. Power Differential: There is an inherent power imbalance between that of the family and the child welfare system. Often families do not voluntarily choose to work with us but are perhaps court ordered to do so. We are also many times involved with law enforcement and the court system making the situation more adversarial. Many of the systems that are providing oversight rely heavily on compliance and consequences to produce change.

3. Mental Health or Addiction: Many times, families that are dealing with mental health or addictions will also struggle in forming relationships, especially if there is a history of trauma or history where they feel that they have been misguided by the system in general.

4. The caseworker's dual role: While we are charged with keeping children safe, we also have the role of keeping families intact whenever possible. While we provide support and assistance, we also have the authority and ability to make recommendations that may lead to a child's removal from a home.

5. Logistical Challenges: Having a large coverage area where we are serving families hours away, scheduling conflicts, and large caseloads tend to impede the worker's ability to spend meaningful time with families.

6. Implicit Bias: We all are wired to have unconscious beliefs and attitudes about others and it is critical that we are aware of our own biases and how that may negatively impact our work with children and families. Common biases may include "they are never going to change" or "if parents loved their children, they would wouldn't make that choice". If we are aware of what biases we bring to the table and talk through how they are likely to impact others and what we can do to reframe that belief or attitude, we are less likely to let this impede our work with families.

7. Agency Culture: Is there an expectation of the workers at the agency to spend time engaging with the children and parents that they serve? Does the agency hold this as a value and critical in seeking well being and permanency for families? If it is not held in high regard, it is likely that most workers won't strive for this at all.

Adapted from: "Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare", Children's Bureau, July 2021; retrieved on June 27, 2022 from: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_fam_engagement.pdf & "Improving Outcomes by Improving Practice A Practice Focused Newsletter" Engaging Children, Youth and Families; The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, September 2011; retrieved on June 27, 2022 from: http://www.childwelfaregroup.org/documents/VoII_Issue2.pdf

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

The benefits of engagement are numerous and its importance cannot be stressed enough. Experience and research has shown us that when there is a relationship and engagement has taken place, we see **increased "buy in" by the family**. They start to trust the process, because they trust the worker that is meeting with them. With that trust comes **confidence with the process** and empowerment. They see that someone believes in them so they start to believe in themselves. They have confidence in themselves that change is possible and they start to take the steps to making those changes, leading us to **achieve reunification or establishing permanency sooner**. In addition, we see **improvement in the quality of caseworker visits**. When workers are approaching the home visit with empathy, genuineness, and respect, this leads to **quality, purposeful interactions between families and caseworkers**. These quality visits lead to **better assessment of families**, a better understanding of why children are unsafe, what diminished protective capacities are present and lead to the unsafe conditions as well as a better understanding of when children can return home safely.

Remember, Change will not happen without relationships!

Strategies to Support Workers

Opportunities for engagement happen on a regular basis. So what can we do as supervisors to coach and mentor workers around this topic?

- 1.Listen.** When we come prepared to listen to understand versus to respond, our "takeaways" from the discussion are much different. Model for your workers the ability to really take the time to listen to what they are saying versus worrying about how you will respond.
- 2.Make Implicit Bias and Cultural Humility a part of your daily conversations within your agency.** This makes workers aware of our cultural lens that they bring to the table and how that lens impacts their work with families.
- 3.Use Children and Family Team Meetings as an opportunity to engage parents.** The connections that we make with families prior to the meeting as we prepare them for the meeting, how we handle ourselves at the meeting as a whole, and how we connect with families after a meeting are critical. (For more information on how to use CFT meetings as a means of engagement with families, please click on the following links: [What Families Want From CFTs](#) and [Partners in Planning](#))
- 4.Lead with Trust and Honesty.** Many families are mistrustful of the child welfare agency, so clear and honest communication is vital. This trust begins at the top with administration being forthright about changes, policy, and expectations. When workers feel safe and secure in their work place, they are much more likely to extend those same values to the families with whom they work. As a result, providing families clarity about the process as well as clarify any questions around expectations they start the relationship on clear ground. Good engagement involves a mutual understanding and agreement between the family and worker about what led to the child(ren) being unsafe, the steps necessary to achieve the goal as well as the role of each team member. Are workers unsure about the process and expectations? Talk this through, role play how they can approach this with the family, have them shadow a worker that has good engagement skills that they can learn from, and encourage ongoing dialogue between workers on how they approach this with their families so that they can learn from each other.
- 5.Approach families with genuineness, empathy and respect.** This can be hard to do with families that may not be willing to meet with us or are angry about our involvement. The goal however is to treat all families with these values. Help the worker think about a situation from a different perspective by providing insight into the reasons child welfare families may display anger, withdrawal and resistance. Provide opportunities for workers to attend training on trauma and how this not only impacts the children that we work, with but also their parents, and then continue that dialogue throughout the agency.
- 6.Provide specific and constructive feedback that identifies strengths, focuses in on areas for improvement and encourages efforts to move forward.** Many families are so overwhelmed with the challenges they face that they don't recognize their own strengths. This can also be true for workers at times. The engagement process provides an opportunity for workers to affirm to families the strengths they recognize, not only to build the relationship but also to offer the family a vision for a different future, to provide hope. Supervisors enhance this skill in the workers in their unit by helping workers to identify their own strengths, creating yet another opportunity for that parallel process to take place.

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"Everyone has an invisible sign hanging from their neck saying, 'Make me feel important.'
Never forget this message when working with people." - Mary Kay Ash

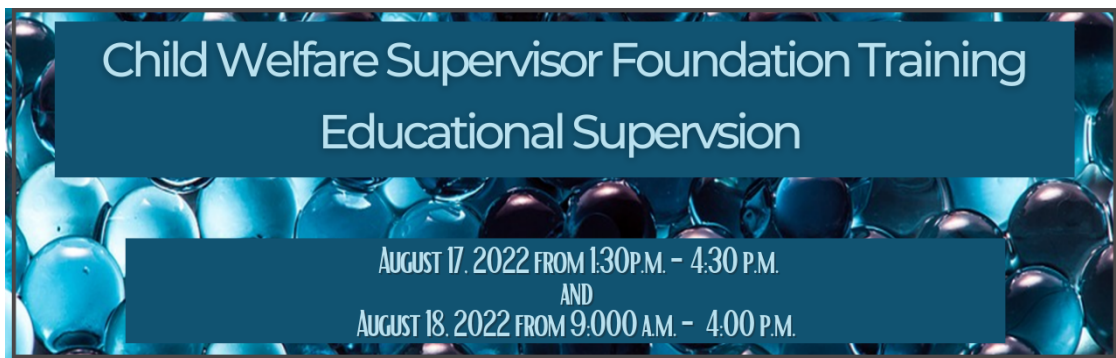
Additional Resources for Supervisors

Did you know that a key to retaining good employees is creating an environment that encourages learning and growth?

The orientation of new workers, increasing staff competence in skill development, assessing staff needs and promoting a healthy learning environment can be a daunting task. This foundation training will focus on identifying the learning style of your workers and how to implement strategies before, during and after training that will facilitate the transfer and integration of knowledge and skills on the job. We will also identify important factors in orientation and the development of a training plan for individual development.

Join us in August for Educational Supervision. This is open to all Zone Supervisors in North Dakota.

To register, click on the graphic below:



Another great opportunity for connecting, learning and growth is coming in October. Join us in Fargo for the Behavioral Health and Children and Family Services Conference.

Registration and Agenda coming soon!



Leadership is not about titles, positions, or work hours. It's about relationships.
- Jim Kouzes