



Department of
**Children &
Family Services**

Building a Stronger Louisiana

**Engaging Families to Build, Support
and Maintain Connections
February, 2013**

www.dcfs.louisiana.gov

Purpose

The purpose of this course is to focus on the importance of using family engagement as a tool to build, support and maintain connections for children in the Child Welfare System.



Overview

This course will provide information about family engagement. The content is related to the classroom course curriculum: Building Skills for Meaningful Family Engagement. Topics in this course include the following:

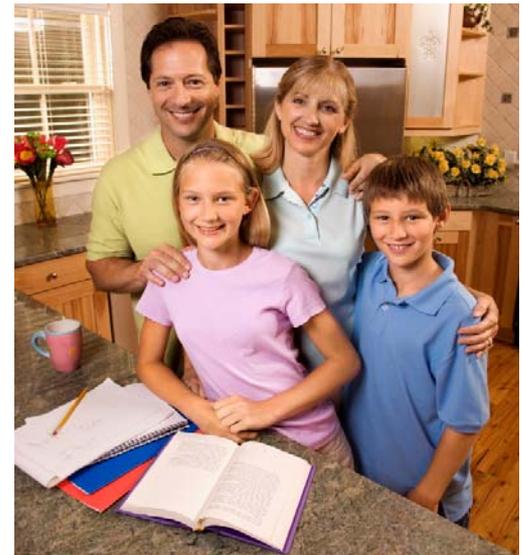
Importance of Connections

What is engagement?

Who Is Involved in Engagement

Strategies to Engage Families

Benefits of Engagement



Underlying Premises

- Children's connections to family members and others are important
- If a child is in placement or adopted, these connections should still be maintained
- Fathers and noncustodial parents are important in the lives of children and must be involved, whenever possible
- Child welfare workers must play an important role in engaging families so that these connections can be built and maintained.



Why Are Connections So Important for Children?

Children's connections are important because in most instances, children have bonded with their parents, families and other significant people in their lives. This bonding is critical for a child's emotional, social, mental and physical development.

The child welfare system, in itself, cannot provide that bonding factor. Bonding or lack of bonding has an impact on a child's ability to relate to others and to function successfully in society in later years.



Why Are Family Connections So Important for Children In Placement?



Enabling children to maintain family connections while in placement may assist children in the following manner:

1. Allows the children to know that the important people in their lives, such as family members, are safe.
2. Allows the children to know that the important people in their lives care about them.
3. May assist children in understanding what has occurred.

Why Are Family Connections So Important for Children In Placement?



4. If the family and/or significant other connections are not maintained during placement, those relationships may be lost during placement.
5. May assist the children in building relationships with others while in placement.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS WITH FATHERS AND NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS

Research has demonstrated that both fathers and mothers have an important role in caring for children. Even if a father has not been a part of a child's life in the past, he can become a part for the future. Single parents can raise a child alone successfully, but a child's contact with the noncustodial parent can be very beneficial to the child.



Children need support from all significant others, including both parents, family members, extended family, and any other persons important to the child. If the child does not have support from significant others, DCFS workers can be instrumental in helping adults and children identify and build supportive relationships.

Definition of Engagement



What Is Engagement?

Engagement is the process of obtaining the attention, efforts and involvement of a person or persons. This includes motivating others to participate in planning, decision-making and courses of action.

Who Should Initiate the Engagement Process

1. The child welfare worker should take the initiative in the engagement process. Families may feel helpless when dealing with a powerful agency and the courts, and may need assistance in learning to trust agency staff and processes.
2. The child welfare worker needs to be a role model for the family in terms of learning how to participate in planning and course of actions.
3. The goal of child welfare is the safety, permanency and well-being of the child. Utilizing the engagement process effectively can increase the chances of that goal being met.



Who Should Be Involved in the Engagement Process?

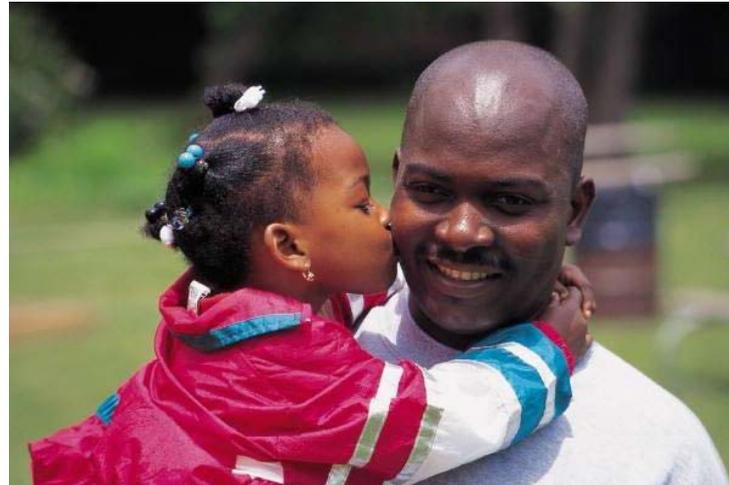
Child Welfare workers should include the following people in the engagement process, whenever possible:

- Both biological parents
- The child (when age appropriate)
- Stepparents
- Siblings (when age appropriate)
- Grandparents
- Other relatives
- Significant others



Who Should Be Involved in the Engagement Process?

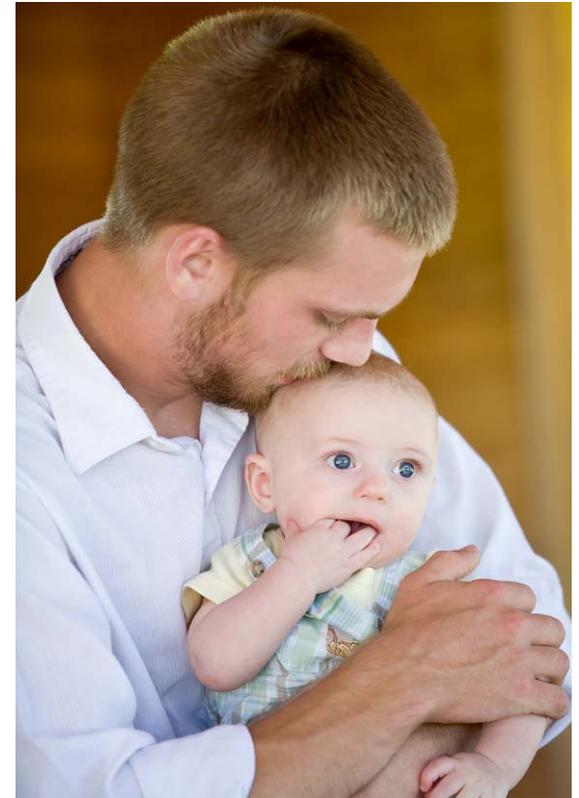
Although in many single parent families, fathers are the ones who are not living with the child, it is very important to include fathers in the engagement process. Even if the father has not been involved in the past, has not paid child support or is not involved in any way in the child's life, the father may still become a future resource for the child.



Who Should Be Involved in the Engagement Process?

It is important that workers use extra effort in locating fathers, because they may provide the support that the child needs. They may have been uninvolved in the past due to a feeling of guilt, concern over payments, or due to discouragement of the father's involvement by the mother. They may not have known how to be involved with the child.

However, once many fathers learn that they can successfully be involved in the child's life, they may wish to do so.



HOW?

- Now that we have discussed what is engagement, why it's important, and who should be involved, let's talk about how to effectively engage children and others connected with the case.



HOW: Respect

- Before any engagement will occur, trust must be established between the child and worker, parent and worker and significant others and worker.
- Respect: To build trust, one must first be respectful of the client. A client will often notice if a worker does not respect him/her. This may be an indication of the worker's attitude toward child abuse/neglect or toward the client. Workers need to learn respect for all, even if they disagree with what a client has done. This respect should be displayed when dealing with each client.



HOW: Respect



- Lack of respect may be displayed by a worker through his/her body language, tone of voice, lack of consideration for the client's time and/or needs or through actual words.
- Respect may be displayed through respectful body language, tone of voice, knowledge/understanding of cultural differences between the client and worker, and respect for the client's culture. Consideration of the client's time and needs is very important, yet sometimes forgotten.

HOW: Honesty

Honesty: It is very important that workers are honest and direct with all parties involved in the case.

Adults: The worker should explain all aspects of the case to adults clearly and directly within the confidentiality guidelines. The worker should also explain the processes involved, as well as the parent/caretakers' rights and responsibilities.

Child: The worker should explain to the child honestly and directly in terms that the child can understand and at the child's level.



HOW: Listening

- Sometimes a worker can be so busy trying to get things done or telling the client what he/she needs to do, that the worker forgets to listen.
- Listen to the client. Try to hear what the client is saying and what the client is feeling.
- Give the client your full attention when the client is speaking.
- Paraphrase what the client is saying to be sure that you fully understand, and if you are incorrect, listen again.

HOW: Invitation to Participate

Invitation to Participate: Workers will need to invite and encourage the significant others to visit with the child, to attend meetings related to the case, to participate in planning and decision-making to establish safety, permanency, and well-being of the child. It is important that workers consider the parents' needs in terms of time of day and other factors when scheduling.



HOW: Invitation to Participate

One important consideration is that workers and other agency staff consider the parent, child and significant others' input as valid and worth consideration. If the parents' comments and suggestions are ignored, parents and significant others will learn that the invitations to participate are only words, rather than a meaningful collaboration.



HOW: Assisting in Identifying and Using Options



Identification and Use of Options: When working in a collaborative effort, the worker, parents, child and significant others may be able to identify more options for the child, as well as best ways to use those options. For example, someone or the group might be able to identify another person who is close to the child. In another instance, someone might be able to suggest a method of handling the problem of leaving the child home alone that would provide for the child's safety.

HOW: Encouraging and Assisting in Making Visits More Fun and Meaningful

Improving the Quality of Visits: The worker can discuss with the child, parents and significant others ways of making the visits with the child more fun and more beneficial, both in terms of the child's enjoyment as well as in terms of meeting the case goals.



HOW: Encouraging and Assisting in Making Visits More Fun and Meaningful

Improving the Frequency of Visits: Studies have demonstrated that increased visits with the child relate to more positive outcomes of the child returning home. Frequent visits assist both parent/caretaker and child in maintaining their relationship and in maintaining hope that a positive outcome can occur.



HOW: Encouraging and Assisting in Making Visits More Fun and Meaningful

Increasing the Number of Significant Others Who Visit with the Child: The worker can also identify (with parental, child, and significant others' assistance) other persons whose visiting with the child would be beneficial.



HOW: Encourage and Appreciate Participation, Ideas and Methods in Case Planning

Encourage and Appreciate Case Planning Input from Parents/Caretakers, Child and Significant Others: Many case participants may not offer case planning ideas without strong encouragement and appreciation by the case worker and staff. However, the participation, ideas and suggestions of case participants can improve outcomes. Note, however, that simply asking for ideas with a case plan already written, is discouraging, rather than encouraging. Parents will know that you have already decided on the case plan and they are not really a part of the planning process.



Benefits of Engagement

There are many benefits to utilizing the engagement process. These include the following:



- Promotes better outcomes
- Allows children to maintain connections
- Timelines can be met more easily
- Increased trust between the agency and clients
- May increase placement stability
- Identified services may better fit the clients' needs

Conclusion

We've discussed what family engagement is and the benefits of family engagement. We've discussed how to effectively use family engagement as a child welfare tool to enhance practice.



Caseloads are often high and workers often feel overwhelmed by their cases. However, family engagement can promote better outcomes and, in the long run, may make the caseloads more manageable. We hope you will use what you learned in this course to assist your clients and families.

Thank You

We appreciate your time and attention in taking this course.



Have a good day.