

# ENGAGEMENT

Family engagement is a **prerequisite** for helping the family achieve its goals. The Child Welfare Information Gateway lists the key elements of engagement as:

- ⊙ Listening to each family member
- ⊙ Demonstrating respect and empathy for family members
- ⊙ Developing an understanding of the family's past experiences, current situation, concerns, and strengths
- ⊙ Responding to concrete needs quickly
- ⊙ Establishing the purpose of involvement with the family
- ⊙ Being aware of one's own biases and prejudices
- ⊙ Validating the participatory role of the family
- ⊙ Being consistent, reliable, and honest
- ⊙ Engaging and involving fathers and paternal family members

Let's begin our discussion on engagement with selected readings.

***Assigned Readings:*** 1. *Child Welfare text: pages 124—127, and*  
2. *Engaging Families in Child Welfare Practice from the Child Welfare League of America:*  
<http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p/cvarticlesef0409.htm>

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## Engagement and Protective Authority

In traditional child welfare services, the standard was to use the protective authority described in your reading. In this model, the worker acts primarily as a director and an enforcer. The worker's primary role is setting expectations, monitoring the family's achievement of these expectations, and administering sanctions for noncompliance – often by developing a placement plan for the child. The strength of the protective authority model is that it allows workers to intervene immediately to protect children at risk of serious

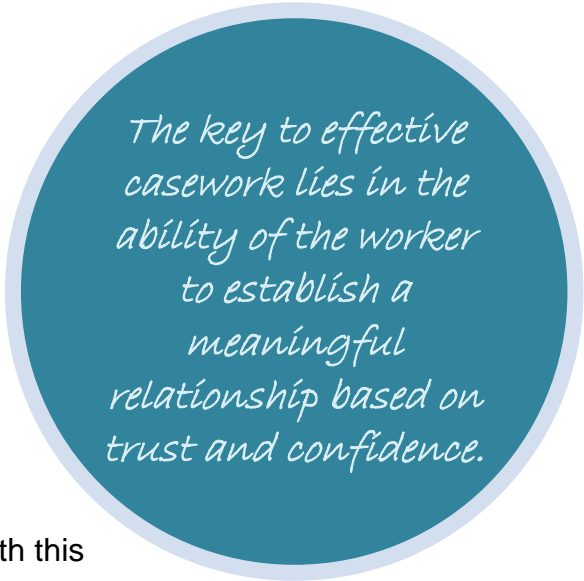
*To engage in something means to be actively involved or committed; engagement refers to persuading or encouraging someone to participate or become committed. In this discussion, engagement constitutes the process by which the family and program staff develop and maintain a meaningful connection. It also refers to the process of developing conduits for communicating needs; strategic and operational information; and an array of attitudes and values, such as concern, compassion, respect, creativity, dedication, ethics, and trust. Engagement establishes the conditions under which all further interactions and transactions occur.*

*Learning from Families: Identifying Service Strategies for Success, Worthington, et al.*

harm, when parents will not cooperate, or when less intrusive methods cannot assure children's safety.

In the engagement model, the role of the worker is that of an facilitator. Underlying assumptions include the following:

- ✦ Most families have the capacity to be partners in a collaborative process to protect their own children.
- ✦ Parents generally should retain the right to make decisions about their families, including how to best protect their children.
- ✦ Family members have strengths and capabilities that can be mobilized to produce effective change. Extended family members and communities can also be mobilized to assist with this process.



*The key to effective casework lies in the ability of the worker to establish a meaningful relationship based on trust and confidence.*

**T**he engagement model consists of the following activities or processes:

- ✦ The caseworker helps the family members identify problems and strengths and identify changes that need to occur to assure protection and permanence for their children.
- ✦ The family and worker are both involved in all aspects of the change process, such as case planning, problem solving, delivery of services, and evaluating outcomes.
- ✦ The caseworker provides guidance, support, encouragement, and reinforcement.
- ✦ The caseworker may provide advice, but the emphasis is on empowering families to develop and implement their own solutions.

**T**he engagement model can be frustrating when a parent refuses to cooperate or cannot engage. Parents who have mental illness, or who have severe difficulty in maintaining collaborative, supportive relationships, may not have the capacity to form or maintain a relationship with the worker. Some families may simply refuse to cooperate. Engagement is likely to improve over time for most parents and the worker must be careful not slip back into the protective authority mode simply because engagement strategies are slow to create trust and collaboration.

The engagement approach and the protective authority approach can be viewed as different points on a continuum of interventions. Both approaches have a common goal of protecting children and both can be legitimate, depending on the circumstances. However, the underlying assumptions, methods, strategies, and potential outcomes of the two models are very different.

The ideal approach to family-centered child protective services is to develop a collaborative relationship with families to help them make positive changes in their families without compromising the appropriate use of authority when necessary. This includes joint problem identification, joint setting of goals and objectives, and discussion with the family of the degree to which intervention can be helpful. The worker should identify, understand, and remove

barriers to the family's participation in services. With some immigrant families, for example, the notion of collaborative planning and decision-making with people in authority may be unfamiliar and confusing. In other cases, a client may insist that numerous other members of the immediate or extended family be included in the process.

The worker should always clearly explain the extent of her authority and under what circumstances it will be used. The client needs to partner with the worker to resolve concerns and promote their children's safety, or the worker will have no choice but to use authority to protect the children. The worker should also explain the actions that can occur if the use of protective authority is necessary. The use of protective authority should be limited, and is indicated only when necessary to protect children from immediate serious harm.

The exercise of authority can sometimes be used to motivate families to become involved in services, whether or not they become engaged in the casework relationship. However, in these circumstances, the worker's authority must be presented and explained in a calm, factual manner. Intimidating clients is never appropriate.

When children are at high risk of future serious harm, and strategies to involve family members voluntarily have failed, the worker is obligated to use protective authority. However, the worker should continue to help the family become involved in services, if not engaged in a collaborative relationship.

The worker should clearly explain that there may be times when the worker's actions could be perceived as unfair (e.g., when unannounced home visits, or unannounced drug screens become necessary etc.). This helps develop trust, demonstrates respect for the client, and demonstrates the worker's intent to be straightforward and honest.

The worker should explain that removing children from the home is used only as a last resort when the child cannot be kept safe otherwise and that the worker would prefer to work with the family to resolve problems.

Engagement is much more than getting the family to "like" you. Engagement means that the family is engaged in the change process. No matter how much the family may like the worker, if they are not committed to change, the conditions that necessitated DCS involvement will not improve. Further, it is possible for some families to be highly engaged in the change process and remedy the problems and concerns in their family *despite* a poor relationship with the worker. This is the rare case, however, as a trust based relationship with the family is one predictor of success.

***If you're interested:*** You can read more about evidence based practice in engagement from a variety of articles at:  
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/engagement.cfm>



Imagine that in a few minutes someone is going to knock on your door at home, ask to come into your home, and talk with you about your personal life: your children, your pets, your work, your upbringing, your educational background, your financial status, your plans for the future, your involvement with neighbors and groups in

the community. After putting yourself in this scene, think about the personal characteristics that you would want the person knocking on your door to have. How important would it be that the person at the door exhibit those qualities? Have you ever entered a store and had to deal with a less than pleasant salesperson? Did it make you want to do business with them or leave the store? Imagine encountering someone with that demeanor who also had the power to take away your children. Our approach with the family is important from the first contact. Ask an experienced worker if they have ever had to build trust with a family after a previous worker was unsuccessful in the engagement process. Chances are they will explain how difficult that process was.

**Assigned Reading:**  
**Child Protective Services: A Guide for Caseworkers. Chapter 3: pp. 17 – 23** from the Course Contents page or the Curriculum CD.

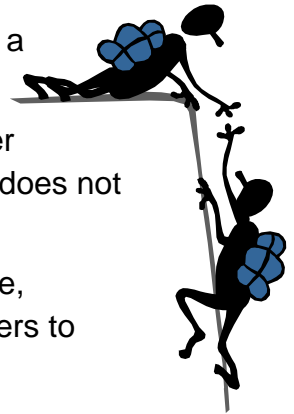
Research tells us that people are more likely to achieve lasting change if they have a positive working relationship with the helper who is facilitating that change. Building that relationship involves the use of interpersonal helping skills. Carl Rogers is known for his explanation of the core conditions necessary in the helping relationship: empathy, genuineness and respect. Your next reading describes these core conditions in detail.

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## Building The Worker-Client Relationship

The manner in which clients respond within the casework relationship exists on a continuum (Yatchmenoff, 2004).

- \* Some clients are easy to involve in a relationship. Personal contact with the worker helps them partner with the Department to achieve joint objectives. However, this does not ensure that the client will follow through with agreed-upon services.
- \* Some clients are unable to work closely with the worker. There may be a pervasive, fundamental inability to trust, personality disorders or mental illness, or other barriers to involvement.
- \* Other clients are unwilling to work closely with a worker because of a history of past poor or conflicted relationships, cultural misunderstandings, or, in the case of immigrant families, traumatic events in the country of origin. Some families may not understand the system, don't understand the language, don't know what's expected of them, or fear the unknown. They may resist the caseworker altogether.
- \* However, clients who are unwilling or unable to work closely with the worker may still be able to cooperate with casework services DCS and other social services provide. The worker/client relationship may exist only to the degree that the parents and the agency are working toward a common goal of child safety and permanence. The role of the worker may be limited to case management function, assuring that the services provided meet the needs of the child and family.



- ✱ The caseworker should not assume that lack of apparent commitment to or interest in the casework relationship means that a family is not invested in improving their family's situation.

Relationships take time to develop; this is certainly true of the casework relationship. A relationship of trust, honesty, and collaboration does not occur instantaneously. The worker's actions toward developing this relationship are called engaging the family.

**E**ngagement strategies are designed to:

- √ Establish the worker's intent to be honest and forthright in dealings with the family
- √ Create the expectation that the family will actively participate in the casework process
- √ Provide families with a "road map" of what is to occur
- √ Deal openly with the family's feelings of anger, frustration, or resistance
- √ Reaffirm that the worker is concerned, dependable, competent and respectful
- √ Demonstrate the ability to understand and empathize with the family's situation
- √ Identify support and use family strengths
- √ Promote the family's involvement

Rapport building is often the first step in engaging a client. The definition of establishing rapport is helping family members overcome initial feelings of discomfort in the presence of the worker. Greater comfort will increase their willingness to continue in a dialogue with the caseworker.

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## Interpersonal Helping Skills

Let's now explore the specific skills used in building a trusting relationship with families. We will explore the skills of *attending*, *reflections*, *summarization*, *concreteness*, *reframing*, and *use of questions*.



**Attending**: Communicating respect, interest and acceptance for the families by actively attending to them at both the physical and psychological levels.

### Elements of Attending

#### Physical Attending

##### *Use of Environment*

- ★ Comfortable
- ★ Minimize barriers
- ★ Minimize distractions

##### *Use of Body*

- ★ Gestures
- ★ Eye contact
- ★ Voice quality
- ★ Body posture
- ★ Facial expression

#### Psychological Attending

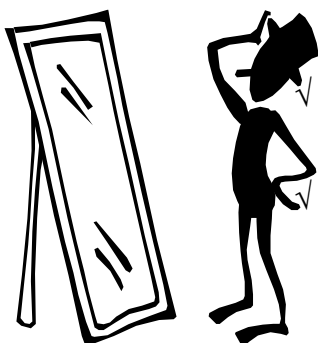
##### *Observing*

- ★ Client's congruence
- ★ Client's use of voice
- ★ Client's nonverbal behavior

##### *Responding*

- ★ Verbal following
- ★ Minimal encouragers
- ★ Congruence with client

**Reflections**: *Concise* restatements of the person's immediate past message, or some part of the person's past message that result from careful, selective and/or psychological attending to both verbal messages and non-verbal cues.



Reflections of *content* involve attending to, then stating the beliefs, opinions, events and facts of the person's message.

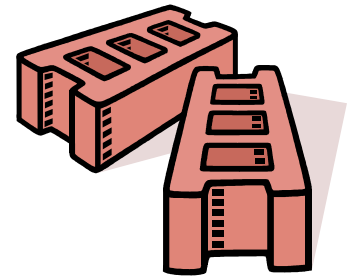
Reflections of *feeling* involve attending to, then stating the emotions or emotional aspects of the person's message.

*Combined* reflections involve mirroring both the content and feeling aspects of the message.

**Summarization**: Using multiple statements of feeling or content expressed over a period of time. Summarizations can be used for opening and closing an interview as well as in the middle of an interview or as a transition.



**Concreteness:** Asking the person for additional information when vague terms are used. For example, if a parent states: “*Johnny’s foster mother acts like she doesn’t like it when I have visitation.*” The worker should ask the parent to explain what the foster mother is doing when she “*acts like...*”



**Reframing:** Reframing is both a skill and a tool used to seek out additional meaning or explanations for family’s behaviors. It can focus on the *positive intent, trait or characteristic being expressed through family members’ behavior, feelings, or statements.* In reframing, the “lens” with which we view a behavior or statement is changed in order to get at the underlying positive intent or characteristic of the family member. We want to see the behavior from behind the person’s eyes.



**Use of Questions:** The way in which we ask questions plays an important role in determining the type of answer we are likely to receive. There are several types of questions:

**Closed Ended:** question that can be answered with one or two words, *i.e.* *When do your parenting classes start?*

**Open Ended:** questions that encourage the person to use his or her own words to elaborate on a topic, *i.e.* *Can you tell me more about what happened right before your child was injured.* Sometimes, an open ended question follows a closed ended question to ask the person to elaborate on their previous answer.

**Indirect:** questions that are statements made for the purpose of seeking information, *i.e.* *“It sounds like you have worked really hard at not losing your temper.”* Notice that this type of question can also serve as a reflection or a reframe, but it clearly invites the person to share additional information.

**Solution-focused:** questions designed to seek strengths and possible solutions. For a more thorough explanation of solution-focused questions, see the assignment box.

**Assigned Reading: 1. Solutions Focused Questions from the Contents page and**  
**2. Solution Focused Techniques at:**  
[http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/children/documents/pub/dhs16\\_140029.pdf](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/children/documents/pub/dhs16_140029.pdf)  
 Please **print** the second document (you can start print at page 2)

# CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

An important consideration in the development of any professional relationship is the impact of cultural issues. Cultural competence is more than simply understanding cultural differences. It means being able to use information about a client's culture to develop a casework relationship.

The worker should understand the values, attitudes, traditions, and beliefs of the cultural groups with which he will work. This knowledge can help the work avoid inadvertently misinterpreting or criticizing the family. The worker should be wary of generalizations and check these out with the family.

## Cultural Characteristics to Consider:

- ✦ **Level of Trust:** Trust is essential to developing the relationship. Workers must understand that many "minority" cultural groups do not trust "White" institutions to be helpful, nor to be concerned about their best interests. The worker who understands this will be less defensive, and will better engage the family by proving her trustworthiness through her behavior. People typically are more hesitant to trust someone who is different from them. The worker may have to work harder to engage a client from a different cultural background.
- ✦ **Awareness of cultural differences:** The worker should openly acknowledge cultural differences and the misunderstandings that may result from them. The worker should apologize for any cultural blunders. The worker should communicate interest in the family and in understanding things from their perspective. The worker should listen a lot, particularly early on, to be sensitive to any cultural differences that may affect the relationship. It is helpful to maintain a genuine appreciation for cultural differences between yourself and the client.

Workers should also be aware of the cultural groups they may encounter in their county and seek education on relevant cultural traits of those groups. Exercise a genuine interest in learning more about the client's culture. Help the client understand that you are aware of and sensitive about some aspects of the clients' culture but not all areas.

*When encountering an intercultural child protection interview, the engagement phase of the interaction is critically important. A caseworker's ability to effectively engage the parent is heavily reliant upon an ability to reduce anxiety levels in intercultural interactions. Certainly, there are several factors that are important for reducing anxiety levels in intercultural interactions. However, the ability to convey empathy is one of the most important.*

*~Perspectives on Practice*





Become knowledgeable about the historical and sociopolitical background of clients in an effort to understand the transgenerational trauma experienced by groups of people. Be sensitive to the oppression, discrimination, and racism that many people encounter daily.

- ★ **Respect:** Different cultures have different codes of conduct or protocols for communicating respect. These may range from being silent to being openly solicitous, for example.

Among these codes are rules that acknowledge people's status or importance, that communicate their worth, and that define one's own position and intent within the relationship. These rules may differ considerably among cultures.

One aspect of respect is how one addresses others; whether by their first names or using a title such as "Mr." or "Mrs." In some cultures, being on a first-name basis with another person may denote friendliness, the dropping of "artificial barriers" that permits free and easy discourse and equality. Using "Mr." or "Mrs." may be interpreted as a wish to maintain interpersonal distance.

In other cultures, the use of a first name when addressing a person is viewed as disrespectful and ill-mannered. It communicates you do not hold the person in high regard, or you view them as occupying a lower status. In some cultures, use of first names may imply a degree of intimacy reserved for only a very few relationships.

An additional note about the use of names: workers should make every attempt to pronounce the client's name correctly as a sign of respect and willingness to get to know the client as a person. While this may be difficult at times, most people are pleased that someone is taking the time to do that.

- ★ **View of outsiders:** The worker should know the cultural norms that govern talking with outsiders about problems, help-seeking behavior, and engaging in helping relationships. The worker may need to work with community leaders or extended family to gain access to reluctant families.

Acknowledge that when necessary, you will incorporate culturally appropriate help-seeking behaviors, treatment outcomes, and expectations into the process. (*Tips on Engaging Culturally Diverse Families, 2006; citing Chung and Bemark, 2002*). For example, indicate that when you develop a case plan, you will explore and use services that family chooses to meet its cultural needs whenever possible.

- ★ **Decision-Making:** It is important to know with whom one should develop the casework relationship. In a family where the husband makes the major decisions, he should be involved in the casework process very early, perhaps first, unless there are specific case-related reasons not to do so.

The same is true if a cultural group looks to its elders for advice and to make decisions. The worker should include them early in the casework process. For example, if you believe that a family's culture considers a particular person such as an elder to be the head of the household, the worker should ask, "Is there anyone else that you would like to include in our talk today?"



- ✦ **Language barriers:** The worker should not underestimate communication problems that result when English is the second language. Clients should be assigned to workers who can speak their language or be provided with a qualified interpreter. This is also true for people with hearing impairments. A certified sign language interpreter should be engaged to ensure good communication. While the interpreter must communicate with both the worker and the client, the worker should try to stay focused on the client and not engage in extra conversation with the interpreter. Additionally, workers should be careful not to use children as interpreters, as this involves children in parental issues. This is sometimes unavoidable, however, but workers should use children as interpreters as little as possible.

***If you're interested:*** To read *Tips on Engaging Culturally Diverse Families* see: <http://web.archive.org/web/20070321210742/www.perspectivessonpractice.org/article1.htm>

The context and meaning of words within a common language may also affect communication. Words and phrases may have very different meanings in different cultures and in different parts of the country. It is important to recheck for understanding at appropriate junctures. These "idiomatic" meanings of words and phrases can lead to serious miscommunications if they are not clarified. For example:

- √ A worker asked a client if she would be willing to accompany the worker to a school conference to plan for the child's special educational needs. The client answered, "I don't care."
- √ In the worker's culture, "I don't care" is a polite way of saying you don't really want to do something. It is interpreted as a lack of commitment or avoidance. The worker decided, because of how she interpreted the message, that the client wasn't motivated and she dropped the subject.
- √ In the client's culture, "I don't care" meant, "No reason not to... it's fine with me." The client didn't understand why the worker never followed through. She decided the worker was unreliable and didn't really care about her.

- ✦ **The Meaning of Eye Contact:** To look a person in the eye can mean many things. Eye contact may communicate an interest in the other person, a desire to get to know him. It may communicate that one sees another person as an equal. "Eye-to-eye" contact, in some cultures, is a challenge, suggests aggressiveness, and may communicate intent to fight another person for position or status. Direct eye contact may communicate disrespect or a lack of appropriate deference to someone in a position of authority.



Avoiding eye contact can also have different meanings. It may communicate shyness or discomfort. It may indicate a desire to ignore another person, discount their importance, or avoid a relationship with them. It may be viewed as "unfriendly" or as a sign of deceit or of not being truthful (such as, "look me in the eye and tell me the truth"). It may be a sign of respect and deference in the presence of someone who is esteemed or honored.

# DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

At some point in your work with each family, you are likely to encounter some form of resistance to change, meaning that the person directly or indirectly opposes changing their behavior. Resistance is possible at any point in the casework process. Resistance may be active or passive. As DCS workers, we should expect and react to resistance as a normal part of the casework process. Becoming defensive or reactive to someone who is resisting change will only serve to entrench them in their position. To move past resistance requires that you build a relationship of trust with the person so that they feel safe in lowering their defenses.

## Client behaviors that may indicate resistance

- ✪ The client is not talking. Clients may be cautious and afraid to say anything; may not want to divulge personal information to a stranger; may be afraid to acknowledge or admit to problems; or may refrain from talking in order to express their anger or displeasure at the caseworker's intrusion into their lives.
- ✪ The client seems hostile and angry, is confrontational and argumentative, and has an aggressive body posture. He may accuse the worker or others, try to shift the blame to others, or threaten or intimidate the worker.
- ✪ The client avoids the worker. She may not answer the door, won't respond to or return phone calls or letters, or regularly misses appointments.
- ✪ The client denies responsibility. This may be a defensive posture to avoid taking responsibility, or the client may, in fact, believe he or she is not at fault.
- ✪ The client lies, withholds information, or provides partially incorrect information. Lying is not uncommon, particularly in worker/client relationships. Clients may lie to maintain self esteem, protect their privacy, or address imbalances of power. In the case of some refugee families, clients may feel the need to lie even about basic demographic information. They may want to be consistent with information provided to obtain passage to this country or to receive certain benefits and privileges afforded immigrants.
- ✪ The client fails to follow through with case plan activities after promising to do so. This can be indicative resistance, depression, or lack of motivation. It is not uncommon for social service clients and medical patients to fail to comply with courses of action they have agreed upon. It is important for workers to determine how motivated the client is to accomplish a goal he cares about rather than one the has set.



## Reasons why clients may resist being involved with the worker or the agency

- ✪ The client may fear a negative outcome. "If I tell the truth, the worker will take my child away." This is a realistic fear. Sometimes people gradually open up and discuss problems only when they perceive the helping person as trustworthy and committed to helping them.

- ✪ Involvement with the worker or agency threatens the client's self esteem. The intrusion of child protective services implies that the parents are unable to adequately care for their children. This can threaten to damage their reputation in their community or with their family.
- ✪ Involvement with the worker may threaten clients' ability to manage their family in the manner that they think is appropriate.
- ✪ The client has had negative experiences with the agency or with other government services, or knows someone who has. Clients who have experienced oppression, prejudice, or racism may be especially sensitive to this issue. Yatchmenoff's study in 2004 showed that such experiences were strong predictor of clients who would not become engaged with the worker or involved in services.

### **How the worker may (inadvertently) increase resistance**

- ✪ The worker may be culturally insensitive. Workers may misinterpret eye contact or lack of it, may be too informal or overly formal and distant with client, or may disregard the family's gender roles, age, and other cultural norms dictating interpersonal relationships.
- ✪ The worker may not allow sufficient time for clients to feel more comfortable and at ease in their presence before talking about difficult and potentially threatening topics.
- ✪ The worker may use DCS jargon that clients do not understand. This can appear to be arrogant and insensitive to the client's needs to fully and clearly understand the worker and their situation.
- ✪ The worker may fail to seek, explore, or validate family members' perspectives on the nature of their problems and potential solutions. This increases feelings of resentment and a belief that they have been fully disempowered and have no say in what happens. The client may feel that worker is doing something to him, rather than with him. Understanding and acknowledging the client's perspective on the problems, his family, the agency, etc., helps build rapport and trust, and engages the client in the process of change.
- ✪ The worker may convey a punitive, authoritarian, or threatening attitude or approach. Even when there is a need to exercise authority, workers should approach families in a calm, factual, respectful way, explaining the reasons for their actions, and explaining the available options.
- ✪ The worker may explore and emphasize the family's problems while failing to elicit, explore, and recognize the family's strengths.
- ✪ The worker may convey a harsh, accusatory, judgmental and non-accepting attitude toward family members, which can prevent building rapport and collaboration.
- ✪ The use of more authority than is necessary to gain the desired or necessary response or action becomes a safety issue for the worker. Research on client violence shows that



workers who are assaulted are usually those who allowed themselves to become involved in a power struggle with the client, and when they could not resolve the issue, resorted to overly authoritative methods of interacting with the family (Weinger, 2001)

### **How the agency office or environment may increase resistance**

- ✪ Office hours that do not accommodate parents' work schedules and other family requirements (for example, insufficient evening appointments)
- ✪ Armed guard posted at the door
- ✪ No place to park nearby
- ✪ Cumbersome forms, government bureaucracy
- ✪ Waiting rooms and rooms for visiting children that are uncomfortable and unwelcoming in décor
- ✪ Workers who are not easily available to clients, or do not return phone calls for long periods of time
- ✪ Long waits to see the worker, for the worker to answer the phone, or for the case to be transferred to a follow-up worker in the agency
- ✪ Multiple workers and frequent worker turnover throughout the life of the case, because of case transfers and workers leaving the agency or changing positions
- ✪ Lack of interpreters; being insensitive about use of interpreters (i.e., using children to interpret for adults in the family)



## **Working through Resistance**

### **The Dynamics of Resistance**

In child protective services work, workers should expect clients to be resistant, especially initially. Workers should talk about it with their clients and help clients understand it is a normal response to a difficult and sometimes threatening situation. Workers should take the initiative in helping clients feel more comfortable. This will reduce resistance. Workers should understand that the most effective method for keeping themselves and others safe is to work to reduce client resistance so that it does not escalate or evolve into hostility.

However, workers must acknowledge that there are some circumstances when volatile clients may continue to react with hostility or become violence despite the workers' skilled attempts to reduce resistance.

### **How the worker can decrease resistance**

- ✪ Establish that it is the workers' intent to be honest and straightforward with the family, and behave in ways that demonstrate this.
- ✪ Clearly state the agency's intent and hope that clients will be involved in all aspects of planning and decision-making for their own families.

- ✪ Provide the family with a “road map” of the DCS’s involvement, what services the agency can provide, and what steps are involved in the process (for example, investigation and case planning) The worker should provide sufficient information to reduce ambiguity about the DCS’s role. This may reduce anxiety.
- ✪ Openly discuss the family’s anger, hostility, and resistance. Help family members to express and explore their anger, if they cannot do so themselves.
- ✪ Involve the family in discussing both the problems and strengths in their family. Take time to fully understand and respect their perspectives and, whenever possible, their wishes in the development of the case plan. This helps the family focus on their positive attributes and gives the worker information about how to engage and motivate the family.
- ✪ Allow the client to have as much control as possible, in as many ways as possible, as long as the child’s safety and well-being are not compromised. Workers should clarify that child safety is nonnegotiable, but that there are a variety of ways to achieve it, and the family’s input is essential to assure that the plan and services are relevant to and appropriate for each family.
- ✪ Workers should dress in clean, simple, businesslike professional attire; clothes that will be physically comfortable and comfortable for the client. It is important to understand the cultural norms for different groups about the propriety and impropriety of certain kinds of clothing.
- ✪ Communicate empathy for the client’s feelings, fears, and situation. Supportive responses, re-stating or re-framing what the client has said, and offering realistic reassurance can communicate that you have heard and understand what the client is saying. Examples are:
  - √ “I can certainly understand how frightened you must have been when your son ran out into the street. And, I understand that you wanted to make sure he wouldn’t do that again.”
  - √ “I know that when people are depressed it is nearly impossible to cope with everyday responsibilities.” This does not connote approval of the client’s behavior. It does communicate respect and understanding, two ingredients for managing resistance.

While you may not be able to change larger agency or administrative barriers, you can help families navigate through the system. Additionally, being sensitive to and acknowledging these barriers can help build rapport.

### **Ways the Worker Can Help Families Navigate Administrative Barriers**

- ✪ Help clients complete forms when necessary, explaining the purpose of the form and who will see it.
- ✪ Show clients written information that can be shared so they can see what has been recorded about them. If the





worker has been straightforward and honest when communicating with the client, if the documentation represents a mutual understanding of problems and solutions, and if there is a balance of client strengths and weaknesses, sharing this written information with the client will establish and strengthen trust.

- ✪ Be as prompt as possible when a client has an appointment in the office. If the wait is longer than expected, the client should be given a choice to continue to wait or reschedule. Informing clients of times the worker will be available for phone calls to discuss the case or to set appointments for home or office visits shows respect for the client's time as well.
- ✪ Conduct joint case transfer appointments when receiving or transferring a case. Discuss problems and strengths that have been identified, and the next steps in the case plan. This demonstrates that the agency is operating as a team and helps transfer the positive relationship the first worker has established with the client to the second worker. This process can also mitigate the client's worry that she will need to repeat her history to the new worker.
- ✪ Use clear, plain English rather than social work jargon. This is particularly true if there are any language barriers that impede understanding.
- ✪ Be sensitive to client inconveniences – paying to park, carrying children, toys, and supplies on the bus, walking long distances, inflexibility in scheduling appointments, child care challenges, and requiring clients to take time off from work during the day.

## **Working Through Resistance: The S.H.E.R. Model**

H.B. Karp originally developed the S.H.E.R. model of managing resistance (Surface, Honor, Explore, Recheck) for use in the corporate community. These principles are very applicable to the relationships between workers and clients. This positive approach to managing resistance consists of four separate steps: (1) surfacing, (2) honoring, (3) exploring, and (4) rechecking. Each step should be completed before moving to the next step.

### **Surfacing the Resistance:**

After the worker has clearly stated what she wants from the client, the first – and probably most difficult – step is to get the resistance out in the open. Many people intentionally withhold their resistance for a number of reasons: past experience, mistrust, poor interpersonal relationships, or a lack of an awareness of their own resistance. Workers can surface resistance easily and effectively by keeping these guidelines in mind:

- ✪ Create a safe and supportive environment that encourages clients to express and explore their feelings of resistance. The worker should demonstrate interest in the client's feelings or other issues that may lead the client to feel resistive. For example, the worker could say, "You seem very upset and angry; please help me understand why." It is a good idea to explain that resistance is normal and expected, and that the worker is confident that it can be worked through in a constructive manner. Once the client understands that he or

she is not going to be attacked, punished, demeaned, or expected to simply adhere to what the worker wants, the worker has a much greater chance of exposing and exploring the underlying sources of the resistance.

- ✦ Elicit as much information as possible about the client's concerns. Listening to a client saying what she does not like about the very thing that the worker wants can be unpleasant and uncomfortable for the worker. Nevertheless, it is the best approach to understanding the sources of the resistance. Workers can help clients express their concerns by using clarifying interviewing questions, asking for details, and encouraging them to speak their concerns. Responses such as, "What are you most afraid of?", "What makes you believe that is true?" can help surface concerns. It is much more effective to elicit details until the client has fully expressed his resistance, rather than trying to work through the situation in partial ignorance. The more comfortable the worker becomes in surfacing clients' resistance, the easier it will be to create a safe environment in which clients feel free to disclose their concerns.
- ✦ The worker may invite discussion of clients' concerns by saying, "As we talk today, please feel free to let me know if you disagree with anything that's said or if you have any concerns so we can continue talk them through" or

### **Honoring the Resistance:**

Honoring involves the following process:

- ✦ Listen. When expressing issues and concerns, clients are also making personal statements about themselves and their needs, and any attempt to discount the information not only shuts down the communication but also implies that the client's feelings and opinions are irrelevant and won't be considered or respected. Caseworkers should not attempt to reinforce their original position, try to use reason, or use other means to suggest that the client should not feel as he or she does.
- ✦ Acknowledge the resistance. The act of acknowledgment does not imply that the worker necessarily agrees with the client's feelings or point of view. However, it is important to reaffirm that the client's feelings are legitimate from his or her perspective, and the client's viewpoint is important to the worker and to establishing a working relationship. Interviewing strategies that re-state or summarize what has been said demonstrate to the client that he has, in fact, been heard and understood.
- ✦ Reinforce the notion that it is not only permissible to feel resistance but expected. The worker should keep in mind that expressing resistance in a safe environment may be a new experience for the client. Periodically reinforce that expressing and explaining feelings of resistance helps further the working relationship. It helps the client feel safe and appreciated for stating his resistance. Statements such as, "It's really all right that you don't like all of this," or "I can see why you are angry," validate the client's feelings. Further, allowing the client to verbally express his anger and frustration, and providing



understanding and calm support, can sometimes defuse a client's feelings and de-escalate a volatile situation, thereby helping keep the environment safe for the client and the worker.

## Exploring the Resistance

Exploring involves the following tasks:

- ✦ Fully explore the resistance. Once the resistance has been surfaced and acknowledged, and the client understands that the worker must keep the interaction comfortable and safe, the worker can elicit the client's concerns using open-ended and clarifying questions. These might include:
  - √ “tell me what you think about that,”
  - √ “let's see if I understand what you're saying,”
  - √ “can you explain what you mean,”
  - √ “this sounds really important to you – please tell me more about it.”
- ✦ The worker can help move from resistance to action by asking the client to consider the future, what his or her goals are, and how the worker might help achieve the goals of child safety and permanence in a way that is least distressing and most comfortable for the client. In responding to this question, the client works with the worker toward the objective rather than against it. The client may suggest alternative ways to resolve the situation. The worker can then begin negotiating a solution that meets the casework objectives, and is acceptable to the client. The end point of this kind of dialogue should be developing some kind of agreement about the next steps to be taken.



## Rechecking

Before the meeting is over, the last step is to recheck the status of the resistance and the agreements you have made with the client. This step is essential because it provides closure to the issues and ensures that no agreement will be forgotten. Re-checking also allows the worker to start the next meeting without having to deal with the resistance again.

Resistance once handled does not necessarily stay resolved. The worker should explain that there may be future situations where the client begins to feel, or the worker senses, that resistance has reoccurred. The worker should gain the client's agreement that when this occurs, the same process that worked during the current meeting will be re-implemented.

## The Dynamics of Content and Process

Content includes the verbal message: what is said and the sentence structure of the statement. However, this is only one part of human communication. Process includes all other aspects of communication: what is not said, tone of voice, and non-verbal communication, such as facial expression and body posture. Process also refers to observable dynamics and emotions between two people. Examples to illustrate this point include the ease with which people talk to

each other, their tone of voice, eye contact, body language, smiles, laughter, tension, closeness, etc.

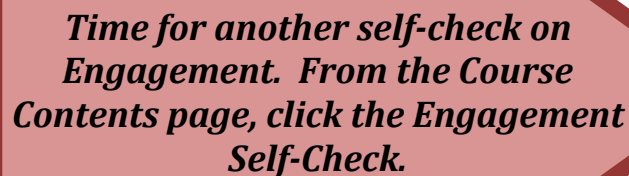
We need to remember that the ability to read non-verbal communication accurately is often culturally driven. Some smiles indicate joy while others come from embarrassment; silence can be respectful or could indicate anger. In any communication, the content message may be inconsistent with the process message. By attending to the process message, the worker can obtain additional information about and insight into the family, and communicate with the family on a deeper level than is afforded by conversations that focus only on content.

The worker should also be aware of the process issues involved in her relationship with the client. In the Forrester Family videotape of Pamela and Scott, for example, Pamela was so involved with the content of the allegation that she failed to see the process issues for Ms. Forrester. Scott, on the other hand, was so involved in the process of engaging Ms. Forrester that he failed to properly address the facts of the allegation.

Workers need to learn to respond to both content and process when interacting with clients.

Content questions and responses focus directly on what the client said. Process questions and responses focus on the unstated, feelings and beliefs behind the spoken words. Bridge questions or responses address the content issue, but invite the client to discuss their underlying feelings and concerns. The client can choose to respond in content or process. This is a gentle way of introducing process issues, without forcing the client to respond with a deeper level of self-disclosure until he is ready. For example, some parents may not be ready to talk about their deep disappointment or anger with their children until they have developed a trusting relationship with the worker.

Workers need to be gentle and judicious in their use of process questions or responses. Some clients feel embarrassed after they disclose personal information or there may be cultural inhibitions to disclosing personal information or feelings. The client may then resist further attempts by the caseworker to talk with them about issues.



***Time for another self-check on Engagement. From the Course Contents page, click the Engagement Self-Check.***



You have finished your pre-work for Week 1