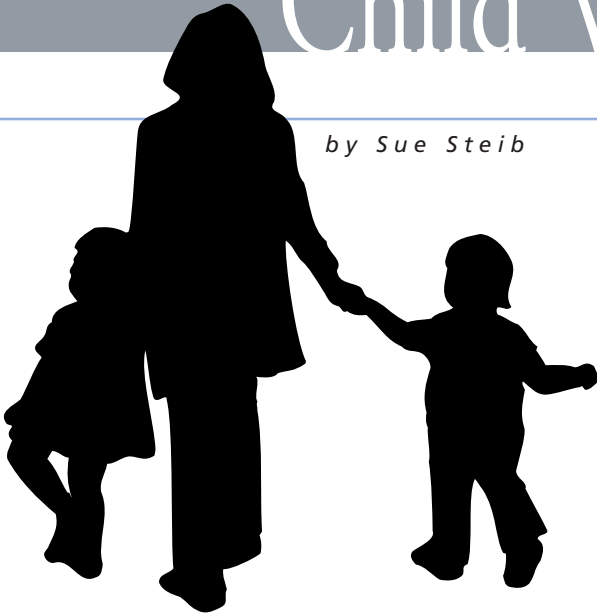


Engaging Families in Child Welfare Practice



by Sue Steib



Angela smiles as she watches her children, 6-year-old Pete and 5-year-old Melissa, get on the school bus and wave good-bye. As she returns to the house to clean up the breakfast dishes before leaving for her part-time job, she thinks about how much better things are for her family now. Two years ago, she had thought things just couldn't get any worse.

She and her husband, Russ, were fighting. He had lost his job and was staying away most of the time. Pete and Melissa were always fussing and whining and driving her crazy. She had some cousins and friends in the area but was embarrassed to call them for help. Finally, she started making Pete and Melissa just go outside and leave her alone so she could have some peace and quiet.

That was when a neighbor called county social services and Nick, a child protection caseworker, showed up at her door. That was just the last straw! She was angry, but more than that, she was scared. She knew it would make things worse with Russ, and she feared they would lose the children.

But now, two years later, Russ has a good job, the kids are in school, and Angela even brings in a little extra money working part-time. Sure, they still have their problems, but Russ comes home from work now, the kids seem to be doing okay, and the future looks a lot brighter than it did. She never would have expected that having a child protection worker show up at her door would have been the first step in changing things for the better.

No parent wants to think about being reported for suspected child abuse or neglect. After all, everyone knows child protection agencies are staffed with people who just follow rigid policies and don't really understand or care to listen to the

struggles parents face. You had better do things their way or face the consequences. Right?

Wrong! Child welfare workers have always cared and understood about parental hardships. But too often, they haven't had the skills, resources, or agency support to approach parents in the most helpful way. Increasingly, though, both researchers and practitioners in child welfare are concerning themselves with something called *engagement*.

Engagement is often synonymous with *involvement*. Involvement of families in child welfare services is important, but real engagement goes beyond that. Families can be involved and compliant without being engaged. Engagement is about motivating and empowering families to recognize their own needs, strengths, and resources and to take an active role in changing things for the better. Engagement is what keeps families working in the long and sometimes slow process of positive change.

Research on client participation in family preservation services distinguishes between compliance and collaboration. Compliance includes cooperation, completing tasks, and keeping appointments, whereas collaboration is associated with agreeing with service plans and participating in treatment.

A long history of research in the helping professions, especially in therapeutic services, suggests that many clients withdraw before completing treatment. Dropout rates in therapeutic services are estimated as high as 70%, with higher rates among clients who are referred to services involuntarily, as is often the case in child welfare. Further evidence suggests that uncooperative parents are less likely to be offered services and are more likely to face child welfare court proceedings.

Federally mandated timeframes that require parents to show progress within 12 months or risk permanent loss of their children make it urgent that parents participate actively and as early as possible in problem solving and the process of change. Although some evidence suggests that families can make significant changes in such a short time, most of this research has been conducted with families who sought services themselves rather than having been assigned to treatment involuntarily.

Seeking to identify more clearly the components of engagement and to measure the extent to which caregivers are engaged as recipients of child welfare services, one recent study showed that, although caseworkers may interpret compliance as

See, *R2P*, page 16



R2P, From page 14

an indicator of engagement, from the client's perspective engagement is more closely linked to investment in the change process.


In addition, contrary to assumptions, most parents involved in the study recognized the inadequacies in their children's care and were receptive to help. This receptivity did not, however, always translate into a strong helping relationship, as many parents expressed fear and mistrust of their caseworkers and the child welfare system.

Such mistrust is understandable, given the of power child welfare authorities. In the legalized environment of child protective services, caseworkers often are required to present evidence in court about the extent of parents' compliance and progress. This sometimes results in parents losing custody of their children and in other legal sanctions.

So how do caseworkers build the trust necessary to successfully engage families? Research suggests that engagement in a helping relationship may be related to spending time with clients, communicating clearly, providing positive reinforcement, and emphasizing client strengths. In child welfare, mitigation of clients' mistrust appears to be a fundamental prerequisite to engagement. This may be best accomplished by open and honest disclosure of rights, responsibilities, alternatives, and possible consequences.

Fortunately, a number of emerging practices in child welfare are consistent with the implications of engagement research:

- **Concurrent planning**, which emphasizes early consideration of all reasonable permanent placements for children foster care, rests on early and full disclosure to parents about expectations and alternatives.
- **Family group decisionmaking** (see "Letting the Family Decide," *Children's Voice*, November/December 2003) empowers families and those to whom they are connected by inviting them to come together to resolve concerns about children's safety and well-being.
- **Mediation**, which some courts and agencies are also adopting, allows families and agency representatives to work with a neutral facilitator to arrive at a mutually acceptable plan.

The growing understanding of engagement as a key factor underlying the success of child welfare services is encouraging. Further research will have to determine the effectiveness of new approaches like these and better explain the key features of engagement and the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that enable caseworkers to forge helping alliances with families more consistently. 

Sue Steib is a Senior Staff Consultant for CWLA's Research to Practice Initiative (R2P). For citations of the supporting research described here, see the online version of this article on R2P's website at www.cwla.org/programs/r2p.