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Family Engagement in Child Protection Social Work

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Family engagement is key to the success of child protection interventions. Families can only benefit from the social work interventions they are committed to being involved with, and a multitude of factors act as barriers to effective family engagement with child protection interventions. Despite the importance of family engagement as a practice value there is a lack of specificity in the field regarding how we build engagement, how we identify when it is present, and how we concretely identify its positive results. This article first reviews successful family engagement strategies and examines facilitators of and barriers to effective engagement. A model is then presented that can guide social workers, supervisors, and evaluators by operationalizing the process of family engagement. The model first details actions child protection social workers can take to build engagement and proposes indications that effective engagement has been established. The model then details the increases in information, resources, and empowerment that result from family engagement. This model supports efforts of social workers and their supervisors to enhance engagement with families and assists evaluators in identifying whether engagement is present and has been applied in child protection, kinship, and wraparound practice settings.

KEYWORDS *engagement, child protection, family*

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Effective child protection social workers build meaningful, productive relationships with families. Building these connections gives workers access to the data on which sound protective decision making is based and supports the family commitment that is essential to successful family-centered protective interventions. Despite its importance, adequate family engagement has been found lacking in child protection social work. Workplace demands and the authority that rests with the child protection system work against building effective alliances between social workers and families and account, in part, for this failure. This article discusses efforts to enhance family engagement in child protection practice, considers the challenges involved in these efforts, and proposes a model for enhancing family engagement in child protection social work.

Family engagement has been the focus of significant attention in the child protection literature (Broadhurst, Hurt, & Doherty, 2011; Gladstone et al., 2014; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009; Marcenko, Brown, DeVoy, & Conway, 2010; Roose, Roets, Van Houte, Vandenhole, & Reynaert, 2013; Schreiber, Fuller, & Pacey, 2013; Yatchmenoff, 2005). There is limited empirical data regarding either the efficacy of particular models in enhancing engagement (Yatchmenoff, 2005) or the impact of effective engagement on fundamental child welfare outcomes, including safety and permanence (Gladstone et al., 2012).

Social workers can practice in ways that enhance family engagement. Research regarding voluntary community and behavioral health interventions indicates that clarifying roles and developing collaborative relationships with parents (McKay & Nudelman, 1996) and strengthening relationships with youth (Garcia & Weisz, 2002) all contribute to the continuity and efficacy of these interventions. But involuntary participants in interventions frequently comply with required tasks while not truly engaging or collaborating in the work. Positive relationships between families and child protective (CP) social workers have been found to build engagement and support family openness to, hopefulness about, and commitment to protective interventions (Yatchmenoff, 2005). Gladstone et al. (2014) list protective social worker actions that enhance parent engagement, including not ignoring problems important to the parent, not asking the parent to do things the parent felt were not helpful, locating useful services, and being reliable in making and returning telephone calls. Engagement is enhanced when parents believe their social workers are skilled, as evidenced by the workers appearing competent, utilizing positive communication skills, and providing the parents with emotional or concrete support (Schreiber et al., 2013).

Yatchmenoff's (2005) modeling of engagement posits that engaged child protection relationships are characterized by family buy-in to the intervention, receptivity to help, a positive working relationship, and a lack of

mistrust. Developing shared goals, a sense of hopefulness, respect for cultural issues, respectful and honest communication, and worker diligence and persistence in task completion have all been found to support successful family engagement in child welfare services (Altman, 2008).

The purpose of family engagement is to increase the efficacy of child protection interventions, yet there is limited empirical evidence regarding the effects of enhanced engagement strategies. Commitment to the intervention increases, and the risk of out-of-home placements may decrease, with enhanced engagement (Hess, McGowan, & Botsko, 2003), and parents may be more likely to contact protective workers in the future when they feel more engaged with their social workers (Gladstone et al., 2012). Still, it is not clear whether there is a direct relationship between enhanced engagement and broad issues of safety, permanence and well-being.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT—PROTECTIVE AUTHORITY AND THE DECLINE OF RELATIONAL CASEWORK

A federal review process found that in the first 3 years of this century not one state successfully involved families in long-range planning for their children's care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Why is it so challenging for social workers to engage and empower families involved in the child protection system? There are two primary barriers to successful family engagement. The first is the inherent tension between engagement and authority in the work, and the second is a systemic issue, the clash between casework and case management goals and methods in social work practice.

The Necessary Perils of Protective Authority

Child protection social workers support families and are also charged with holding family members accountable for their behavior. Family involvement in this work is most often involuntary. Although workers offer support, services, and compassion, they also demand compliance with specific behavioral expectations. Child protection staff work to ensure that certain forms of severe and chronic maltreatment do not recur, either by helping home environments become less dangerous or by removing children from unacceptably unsafe homes.

The authority component of the family-worker relationship can be useful to families, helping them accept that they must make changes and allowing social workers to gain access to and monitor conditions in their homes. But authority also inherently undercuts social workers' abilities to practice from a strengths-based perspective that genuinely engages and

empowers families (Bell, 1999; Oliver & Charles, 2015). Families do not choose to be involved with this system, and it is difficult to build genuine engagement in an inherently intrusive and involuntary process. Authority is essential to the relationship, yet without engagement families lack the motivation and commitment to contribute to and benefit from the work.

The puzzle is not that families are so often hesitant to engage in child protection interventions. The striking phenomenon is that families and workers often address these challenges honestly and directly and, as a result, find ways to work together effectively. Despite the tension between authority and engagement inherent in the work, many social workers and families have found ways to surmount this barrier.

Case Management and the Decline of Relational Casework

The second barrier to successful family engagement is the conflict between casework and case management goals and methods in child protection social work (CPS). Casework emphasizes building relationships that allow workers to elicit data and provide support. Case management focuses on using assessment tools to objectify family safety and need, making service referrals, and monitoring compliance with these referrals. Case managers primarily sit at screens whereas caseworkers primarily sit with families.

Contemporary child protection work requires competency in case management and casework, and the necessary time to pursue each. Although casework dominated practice in past decades, often in unorganized and poorly monitored ways, contemporary practice is marked by the ascension of data-driven case management and a diminished role for relational casework. Case management has grown exponentially as the computerization of the workplace increasingly allows social workers to elicit and analyze a seemingly infinite range of data points about safety, permanence, and well-being. Although some of this data is crucial to tracking families and better understanding the work, there may be a cost to this emphasis on data collection, and the cost may be the time diverted from engaging with families.

Contemporary child protection practice is increasingly driven by a risk management, mechanized perspective that may not be consistent with a relational approach to the work (Murphy, Duggan, & Joseph, 2013). Case management models decrease the actual time social workers spend with families and thus inherently work against genuine family engagement. Although few would argue that casework practice and building relationships is unimportant, the sheer time demands of computer-driven case management models relegate relational casework to a diminished role in CP practice. We need to track our efforts with families, and we need data to describe and analyze our work, but data and analytic systems must demonstrate discipline and avoid the tendency to create jobs where screens, not families, are the main focus of staff attention. The relational casework that invests social worker

time in engaging with family members is lost when social workers spend more time in front of screens than they do talking with families. Restraint in the tendency to endlessly expand data collection efforts has the potential to create the space that social workers need to effectively engage families in CP interventions. Tipping the balance toward relational casework practice, by again investing in the time it takes to do this work, would give families a better chance to know and engage with their workers and the CPS process.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Empirical findings do not yet support the notion that enhanced family engagement increases the efficacy of child protection social work (Gladstone et al., 2014), and the complexity of these interventions suggests that developing an evidence base may prove to be a difficult task. Yet we continue to help families become more engaged in the work, knowing we lack empirical support, and knowing that the need for authority in CPS relationships has a corrosive effect on engagement and empowerment. Why, then, proceed in this challenging quest without empirical support for its efficacy?

The values, laws, and ethics underlying the need for family engagement are compelling even if empirical support for the practice is lacking. From a humanistic perspective it is of value to respect people by engaging them in interventions designed to assist them. The importance of respecting and engaging families is also supported by ethical and legal mandates that guarantee every family the right to meaningful engagement in all decisions that affect them, even when family involvement in the intervention is involuntary.

In the United States, federal guidelines require that state child protection systems engage families in the work, and Child and Family Service Reviews monitor state compliance with this requirement and mandate Performance Improvement Plans when states are not in compliance with family engagement expectations (Social Security Act, 1980). Additionally, the National Association of Social Workers' (2008) *Code of Ethics* dictates that social workers have a responsibility to promote family self-determination, regardless of an evidence base that supports the efficacy of this practice. Although we may not be able to determine whether increased family engagement enhances child safety, permanence and well-being, it is still needed in child protection work (Altman, 2008), and values-driven, legal, and ethical thresholds direct that engagement is important and that families have a right to be meaningfully engaged in the work.

Our values, laws, and ethical mandates demand that we build family engagement in child protection practice. The nature of CP authority can pose a barrier to engaging families, yet often families and social workers succeed in building relationships that help them overcome this barrier. Excessive case management demands limit the time available to build these relationships,

but if case management demands are to be restrained, if social workers are allowed more time to practice relational casework, we need to clearly delineate how this time is to be utilized. The task is to define the actions social workers can take to build family engagement, establish the indicators that families are meaningfully engaged, and demonstrate the effects of enhanced engagement on child protection practice.

We are lacking tools to help us describe what CP practice looks like when a family is optimally engaged, what social workers do to enhance engagement, and the benefits of engagement to the intervention process. We can agree with the principle, but we cannot yet define a practice that allows us to support and enhance progress toward this goal. The model presented in this article emerged from a training and coaching practice designed to help CP social workers more effectively engage with families and their extended networks of informal supports. The model has been used to help social workers and supervisors design, implement, and assess efforts to strengthen relational casework practice and has implications for government efforts to monitor family engagement in child protection systems.

MODEL

Child protective social workers take actions that build family engagement in the intervention process, and there are observable indicators that families are engaged with the work and that this engagement has an effect on the intervention. This model details (1) the actions that support engagement, (2) the indications that engagement has occurred, (3) the particular effects of enhanced and engagement, and (4) broad child protection outcomes that may flow from these effects (see [Figure 1](#)).

ACTIONS



INDICATORS



EFFECTS



OUTCOMES

FIGURE 1 Family engagement model.

Social Worker Actions That Facilitate Engagement

Social workers take a wide range of actions in their work with families, and some of these actions are more likely than others to build family engagement. Other necessary, more authoritarian, social work activities do not build family engagement and may at times diminish engagement. The goal is not to avoid necessary, authoritarian acts but to balance them by also taking actions that work against the authoritarian tide of the work and open the doors to increased family involvement in and ownership of efforts to assist their family. Social worker self-assessment, supervisory oversight, and family reports can determine whether these actions are being taken.

CLARIFYING AGENCY CONCERNS

Paradoxical though it may seem, the best way to lessen the untoward impact of state authoritarian concerns is to be direct and thorough about the concerns and the state's intent and power in addressing them. Although protective social workers are trained experts at delivering difficult information, often workers are less than clear about the bottom-line expectations of the agency and the unwanted interventions that may occur if these expectations aren't met. This lack of clarity can occur because social workers fear losing connection with a family if they are blunt about a situation, or because the worker and often the protective system are not clear about what is a bottom-line expectation, what is negotiable, and what the response to noncompliance might be. But delivering a clear message, however negative the message may seem, can begin an honest process and lead to a strong, empowering alliance despite the potential undesired outcomes (see [Table 1](#)).

ELICITING THE FAMILY VIEW

Protective social workers are most often uninvited guests in the life of a family and, of necessity, rely on data from many sources outside the family in developing a formulation of family strengths, challenges, and needs. There

TABLE 1 Social Worker Actions That Facilitate Engagement

| |
|---|
| Social worker actions that facilitate engagement |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarity about state concerns and non-negotiables ● Eliciting the family view ● Identifying concrete needs ● Assistance in meeting these needs ● Expanding the family circle of support ● Exploring barriers to positive change ● Conveying a strengths-based attitude ● Treating family members with dignity |

is so much data, and often so much initial distrust, that it is easy to overlook the family view of what is working, what is not, and what might help. In the context of what are often antagonistic relationships, with judgment hanging in the air about parental failures and offenses, the family view is often not elicited. Eliciting the family view is an important and ongoing step toward understanding, empowering, and engaging families.

IDENTIFYING AND MEETING CONCRETE CONCERNS

Social workers often focus on important psychological and relational dynamics in building an understanding of family life. Although this perspective can be of great use, it is also important to work with a family to identify their own view of concrete family needs. Identifying these needs, and helping the family meet these needs, supports the family and builds family empowerment and worker credibility (McKay & Nudelman, 1996).

EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

Resilient families rely on extended networks. Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) interventions have been used to enhance child protection efforts by family expanding social networks (Rauktis, Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Jung, & Pennell, 2013). A key premise of FGDM is that decisions and support are most effectively provided by kinship networks, and that agency decision making and supports should be relied upon only when natural networks are not up to the task (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003). This approach is also consistent with the philosophy and work of wraparound approaches to work with children and families. Family engagement efforts should extend beyond a household to relatives, neighbors, and friends, all of whom can assist a family in building an effective extended network. Although many CP services have developed the skills and procedures to reach to extended networks when out-of-home placements are needed, building extended networks can also be the most effective path toward meeting less pressing needs, thus increasing positive family functioning and lowering the likelihood that placements and other protective involvements will be needed.

EXPLORING BARRIERS TO PROGRESS

Child protection plans contain elements families may support and others they neither agree with nor intend to comply with. All aspects of a plan usually demand compliance. Once a plan is in place there can be a tendency to document noncompliance instead of addressing barriers to progress. In successful interventions worker and family members keep a vigilant eye on identifying and addressing barriers to progress on required plan goals.

CONVEYING A STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Families do not come to CP service attention because of their strengths. Acute and chronic stressors and deprivation combine to push family behavior below a threshold that triggers involuntary state intervention in family life. Thus it is understandable that at the start of a child protection intervention there is a tendency to focus on deficits and needs, not on strengths. But an ongoing focus on deficits does not build the sense of efficacy and empowerment essential to successful intervention, and a deficit-based perspective does not tap the hope and commitment needed to move forward in family life. A strengths-based, affirmative, forward-looking perspective, one that is positive without ignoring the reality of family difficulties and challenges, builds family empowerment and engagement (McKay & Nudelman, 1996; Yatchmenoff, 2005).

TREATING FAMILY MEMBERS WITH DIGNITY

Child protection casework relationships are inherently marked by tension and conflict. Social workers often rise above the pale and treat family members with kindness and compassion despite their frustration with children being maltreated and being the recipients of family members' anger or even abusive behavior. Treating family members with dignity and respect can enhance engagement and collaboration in the most conflictual and trying circumstances.

Family Indicators of Meaningful Engagement

Social worker actions intended to build family engagement should result in indications that a family is engaged in the intervention. These include indications of active, positive connections between family members and social workers. Social workers, supervisors, and family members can all assess whether it appears that family members are engaged with the social worker and the intervention (see [Table 2](#)).

TABLE 2 Family Indicators of Engagement

Family indications of engagement

- Belief that the social worker is trying to be of use
 - Belief that the social worker and the family share common goals
 - Appreciation of the intervention
 - Family members are accessible to the social worker
 - Family members reach out to the social worker
-

POSITIVE CONNECTION BETWEEN FAMILY MEMBERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

What does an engaged family look like? Despite the negativity associated with involuntary involvement with social workers, many families have strong working relationships and positive experiences with child protection staff. Engaged family members believe that their social worker is trying to be of use despite the involuntary nature of the relationship. They are personally committed to some of the goals in the protective plan and genuinely appreciate aspects of the intervention.

ACTIVE CONNECTION BETWEEN FAMILY MEMBERS AND SOCIAL WORKER

A key variable in relations between families and child protection social workers is whether they are readily connected to each other. More engaged families actively reach out to their social workers for information, assistance, and support, and engaged families are accessible when their social worker needs to be in touch with them. Each of these factors increases the likelihood of success in child protection interventions.

Effects of Family Engagement

The model variable that most fully indicates whether families are engaged with the intervention, and that could motivate social workers to become more effective at family engagement, is the effects of engagement. When the effects of family engagement are present social workers have better data and resources with which to protect children and support families. Information to assist in assessment and planning, resources to support family members and family empowerment can all be expected to increase when family engagement is strong. Increased information, resources, and empowerment most often make the social worker's tasks easier to complete and more effective. The presence of these variables can be assessed by workers, supervisors, and family members, and they are also amenable to case review analysis (see [Table 3](#)).

INFORMATION

Meaningful engagement with families provides social workers with a broader, deeper range of data to support more informed views and decisions in the child protection casework process. Although the truth of this may be apparent, it is common, for a range of reasons, for reports to be written about and decisions made affecting families with little or no information coming from family members themselves. Strong family engagement helps social workers elicit more thorough, meaningful historical information about the families.

TABLE 3 Effects of Engagement

Effects of engagement

Increased information

- Thorough, meaningful social history
- Open reporting about current functioning
- Meaningful identification of strengths
- Broad, specific, relevant identification of needs

Increased resources

- Broad range of ways identified for family to rely on each other
- Identification of and outreach to more kin supports
- Effective service utilization

Increased empowerment

- Greater sense of efficacy
- Increased engagement in activities to improve circumstances
- Increased self-esteem
- Relational healing

Greater engagement also supports more open reporting about current functioning, which is key to monitoring child safety and helping families access the right supports and services at the right moment. Accurate and relevant identification of family strengths and a broad, specific, relevant identification of family needs are all enhanced by greater engagement between social workers and the families they serve.

RESOURCES

When family members and their extended networks of family, friends, neighbors, and other social connections are engaged in a child protection intervention process more options are available for families to connect with needed supports and services (Pennell & Anderson, 2005). Be it child care, respite, transportation, financial assistance, or a friendly ear, kin are capable of providing the most essential support to families. Engaged families are more likely to allow social workers to also engage with their kin networks, helping the networks focus their attention in directions that will address core child protection challenges. Social workers engaged with families and kin can help networks develop more focused ways of supporting families, be it through direct use of kin supports or enhanced use of professional services.

EMPOWERMENT

No one can effectively address personal challenges without a sense of empowerment. In child protection intervention the very fact of authoritarian state involvement can understandably undercut a family's sense of empowerment. To protect children the state takes a certain amount of power away from parents. Although this is necessary it creates a barrier to the very

sense of empowerment families need to succeed, and it is the job of social workers to empower families despite the power that has been taken from them.

Strong family engagement in protective casework builds a family's sense of empowerment. Motivation, commitment to the intervention process, and a powerful personal sense of involvement and investment are enhanced by increased engagement. Engagement leads to a greater sense of efficacy to address challenges and greater involvement in activities that will increase family functioning. In the context of an involved and engaged relationship with the social worker, it is possible to achieve enhanced self-esteem and relational healing despite the authority that colors the bond.

Child Welfare Outcomes

The primary focus of this model is to identify (1) social worker actions that build family engagement, (2) observable indicators that engagement is present, and (3) the immediate effects of engagement. These immediate effects of enhanced engagement may also be associated with the range of factors that comprise federal child welfare outcome indicators. The increased information and collaboration that come with greater engagement may be reflected in the quality and relevance of federally monitored intervention plans. The expected relevance of these plans and the enhanced family commitment to achieve plan goals may result in higher rates of compliance with the terms of these plans. Finally, there may also be an improvement in indicators of risk and safety among families who are more engaged in child protection interventions.

Development and Use of the Model

Family engagement is an aspect of child protection practice that is difficult to define and to identify. This model contributes to our ability to identify actions, indicators, and effects of engagement and thus contributes to our understanding of how to engage families and how to determine if families are engaged in child protection interventions.

The next step in development of the model is to operationalize model elements and then test the hypothesized relations between them. This would allow testing of the premise that the social worker actions detailed above facilitate family engagement and result in the indications and effects of engagement discussed in this article. A validated model could then be used to help establish whether increased family engagement supports progress toward federal outcomes of safety, permanence, and child well-being. Developing the model and pursuing this line of inquiry would make a positive contribution toward building an evidence-based child protection practice.

Social workers, supervisors, case reviewers, and state and federal monitors need to ensure that family engagement is being pursued even though the evidence base for its efficacy has yet to be established. Although social workers and their supervisors may value the notion of family engagement, they are often left with the questions “What do we do to build engagement?” and “How do we know when a family is engaged in our work?” This model provides a concrete guide to answering these questions that can be utilized by practitioners, supervisors, and monitors to support efforts to effectively engage families in child protection interventions.

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