



# Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

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## Family Engagement

Family engagement is the foundation of good casework practice that promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system.

Family engagement is a family-centered and strengths-based approach to partnering with families in making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes. It is founded on the principle of communicating openly and honestly with families in a way that supports disclosure of culture, family dynamics, and personal experiences in order to meet the individual needs of every family and every child. Engagement goes beyond simple

### What's Inside:

- The Benefits of Family Engagement
- Ways to Achieve Meaningful Family Engagement
- Specific Strategies That Reflect Family Engagement
- State and Local Examples of Family Engagement Strategies



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involvement by “motivating and empowering families to recognize their own needs, strengths, and resources and to take an active role in working toward change” (Steib, 2004).

Key to building a productive caseworker-family relationship, family engagement is the foundation from which change occurs. It is important throughout the life of a child welfare case—from screening and assessment; through case planning and decision-making; to service delivery, case reviews, and ultimately case closure. To build on a family’s resources and kinship connections, family engagement activities focus not only on the immediate family but also on the active involvement of both parents, extended family, and the family’s natural support systems. Beyond specific cases, engaging families as key stakeholders must extend to policy development, service design, and evaluation.

To help State child welfare managers improve family engagement across program areas, this brief offers information on:

- The benefits of family engagement
- Ways to achieve meaningful family engagement
- Specific strategies that reflect family engagement
- State and local examples of family engagement strategies
- Additional resources

For an indepth guide to the practice of family engagement, see *Family Engagement: A Web-Based Practice Toolkit*, developed by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections: [www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/fewpt/index.htm](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/fewpt/index.htm)

## The Benefits of Family Engagement

More and more evidence suggests that family engagement has many benefits, including:

- **Enhancing the helping relationship.** A family’s belief that all its members are respected and that their feelings and concerns are heard strengthens their relationship with their caseworker. This positive relationship, in turn, can increase the chances for successful intervention.
- **Promoting family “buy-in.”** When families are part of the decision-making process and have a say in developing plans that affect them and their children, they are more likely to be invested in the plans and more likely to commit to achieving objectives and complying with treatment that meets their individual needs. A qualitative analysis of findings from the three top-performing metro sites in the 2007-2008 Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) found that child and family involvement in case planning was correlated with (1) active engagement of noncustodial and incarcerated parents, (2) family-centered

and strength-based approaches (e.g., team meetings, mediation) effective in building working relationships, and (3) strong rapport developed between workers and parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2009).

- **Expanding options.** Inclusion of family members—including fathers and extended family—early in a case provides a greater opportunity to explore the use of relatives as a placement/permanency option for children.
- **Improving the quality and focus of visits.** The partnership developed between the family and social worker through family engagement strategies strengthens the assessment process and leads to more appropriate service provision.
- **Increasing placement stability.** The CFRs found that States with high ratings for developing case plans jointly with parents and youth also had high percentages of children with permanency and stability in their living situations (HHS, 2004). Research on family group decision-making (FGDM) also points to improvements in creating stability and maintaining family continuity (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003).
- **Improving timeliness of permanency decisions.** Research also suggests that parental involvement is linked to quicker reunification and other forms of permanency (Tam & Ho, 1996; Merkel-Holguin, et al., 2003).
- **Building family decision-making skills.** By being involved in strength-based decision-making processes and having appropriate problem-solving approaches modeled, families are more comfortable

communicating their own problem-solving strategies and exploring new strategies that may benefit themselves and their children.

- **Enhancing the fit between family needs and services.** Working collaboratively, caseworkers and families are better able to identify a family's unique needs and develop relevant and culturally appropriate service plans that address underlying needs, build on family strengths, and draw from community supports. A better fit in services often leads to a more effective use of limited resources (Doolan, 2005).

## Ways to Achieve Meaningful Family Engagement

Many child welfare agencies struggle with engaging families on a daily basis. There are challenges inherent in working with families that have experienced or are at risk of abuse and neglect, and additional challenges are posed by high caseloads, resource limitations, and reliance on traditional practices. Changing how child welfare agencies interact with families is difficult work, but it can be done.

Agencies can minimize the challenges and prepare for effective and sustainable engagement strategies by incorporating family engagement into the agency's child welfare practice model and implementing key elements at the systems and casework practice levels.

## Child Welfare Practice Models

Many child welfare agencies are encouraging practice improvement and systems change through the use of practice models that emphasize family engagement as a cornerstone of achieving positive outcomes. The practice model, which builds from a clearly defined vision and set of core values, contains definitions, explanations, and expectations of how the agency will operate and how it will partner with families and other stakeholders in child welfare services (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement & National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, 2008).

States that have implemented a practice model over multiple years, such as Utah ([www.dcfhs.utah.gov/practice\\_model.htm](http://www.dcfhs.utah.gov/practice_model.htm)) and Alabama (<http://dhr.alabama.gov/page.asp?pageid=245>), have focused on practice as the core of their reform efforts. These States have organized their worker training to follow the process of working with families, beginning with engagement and building trusting relationships. Utah also has translated its practice framework into written staff performance expectations. One such expectation examines the worker's ability to effectively use engagement skills that include active listening (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2008). Additionally, many States are developing practice models as an overarching strategy in their Program Improvement Plans as part of the CFSR.

Family engagement strategies are a foundation of the practice model and, together with other evidence-based practices ([www.childwelfare.gov/management/service/improving\\_practices](http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/service/improving_practices)) can produce important gains for children and families.

To learn more about practice models, see *An Introduction to the Practice Model Framework: A Working Document Series* from the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement and the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning: <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/practicemodel/PracticeModelWorkingPaperIntro.pdf>

## Key Systems Elements

Elements relating to child welfare systems and infrastructure have been identified through research and State experiences as important to achieving meaningful family engagement. Not every element will be feasible in every instance, and many elements will evolve over time. They include the following:

- **Agency leadership** that demonstrates a strong commitment to family-centered practice and champions family engagement as a priority
- **Organizational culture** that models desired behaviors, actions, and communication among managers, supervisors, and frontline caseworkers
- **Systems change initiatives and Program Improvement Plans** with detailed strategies for achieving family and youth involvement
- **Policies and standards** that clearly define expectations, identify requirements, and reinforce family engagement in case practice
- **Trained supervisors** who explain agency policies that apply to family engagement, offer coaching to caseworkers, and provide support and feedback

- **Manageable caseloads** and workloads allowing caseworkers to attend to the time-consuming efforts of building rapport, engaging families, actively participating in team decision-making meetings, and maintaining frequent, meaningful contact with children and families
- **Defined roles for planning and facilitation of team decision-making meetings** to ensure that the meetings are timely (with reasonable notice to all parties), well facilitated, focused on the family and children's strengths and needs, goal directed, and inclusive of all team members
- **Skillful facilitation**, which in some agencies is carried out by external facilitators or coordinators who guide engagement activities such as family group conferences and make sure that all points of view are heard
- **Availability and accessibility of diverse services** that can respond specifically to the family's identified needs and conditions
- **Identification of service gaps** and new ways to develop the community services that families need
- **Training and coaching** to build family engagement skills among child welfare caseworkers and supervisors, and to help birth families, foster families, caseworkers, administrators, and other helping professionals work together effectively
- **Systematic documentation** of caseworker/family interaction and communication, and family involvement
- **Individualized performance review systems** that reward staff for family

engagement efforts and provide ongoing feedback regarding performance

- **Quality assurance and case review processes** that monitor effective implementation of family engagement and measure its effects on safety, permanency, and well-being
- **External assistance** in the form of training, consultation, and technical assistance from recognized family engagement experts
- **Monitoring** of family engagement activities and family progress against mutually agreed-upon goals

## Key Casework Elements

Research underscores the crucial role caseworker interaction plays in engaging families, particularly through the development of a supportive and trusting relationship (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Yatchmenoff, 2005; Rooney, 1992; Wells & Fuller, 2000). Elements that foster such a relationship and support family engagement practices include:

- **Clear, honest, and respectful communication** with families, which helps set a foundation for building trust
- **Commitment to family-centered practice** and its underlying philosophy and values
- **Sufficient frequency and length of contact** with families and their identified formal and informal supports
- **A strengths-based approach** that recognizes and reinforces families' capabilities and not just their needs and problems
- **Shared decision-making and participatory planning**, which results in mutually agreed-

upon goals and plans reflecting both the caseworker's professional training and the family's knowledge of their own situation

- **Broad-based involvement** by both parents, extended family members, informal networks, and community representatives who create a web of support that promotes safety, increases permanency options, and provides links to needed services
- **Understanding of the role of confidentiality** and how to involve partners in case planning in a manner which is respectful of the family, but which also enables partners to plan realistically to protect the child and work toward permanency
- **Recognition of foster and adoptive parents as resources** not only for the children in their care, but for the entire birth family
- **Individualized service plans** that go beyond traditional preset service packages (e.g., parenting classes and counseling) and respond to both parents' identified needs, specific circumstances, and available supports
- **Concrete services** that meet immediate needs for food, housing, child care, transportation, and other costs, and help communicate to families a sincere desire to help
- **Praise and recognition of parents** who are making life changes that result in safe and permanent living situations for their children (including reunification, adoption, kinship placement, or guardianship)

## Specific Strategies That Reflect Family Engagement

Family engagement strategies build on the foundation of agency commitment and caseworker skills. State agencies have adopted various strategies for engaging families at case, peer, and systems levels, frequently adapting existing models to meet their own needs. Family engagement strategies include but are not limited to:

- **Frequent and substantive caseworker visits.** Workers must have frequent and meaningful contact with families in order to engage them in the work that needs to be done to protect children, promote permanency, and ensure child well-being. States where caseworkers have regular and well-focused visits with the child and parent have demonstrated improved permanency and well-being outcomes in the CFSRs. Frequent visits with parents also are positively associated with better client-worker relationships; better outcomes in discipline and emotional care of children; timely establishment of permanency goals; timely filing for termination of parental rights; and reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives (Lee & Ayón, 2004; HHS, 2004).
- **Family group decision-making (FGDM)** ([www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making](http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making)) is an effective and increasingly popular case-level strategy for engagement in the United States and around the world. FGDM is an umbrella term for various processes in which families are brought

together with agency personnel and other interested parties to make decisions about and develop plans for the care of their children and needed services. FGDM strategies differ in meeting format, the stage during case meetings when they are held, the extent of family preparation, the extent of family privacy time, and other characteristics. The models are known by a variety of names and include:

- o Family group conferences
  - o Family team conferences
  - o Family team meetings
  - o Family unity meetings
- **Motivational interviewing** (<http://motivationalinterview.org>) is a directive counseling method for enhancing intrinsic motivation and promoting behavior change by helping families explore and resolve ambivalence. This technique, which relies heavily on listening reflectively and asking directive questions, has shown positive results in working with child welfare populations with substance abuse issues (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare).
  - **Collaborative strategies** emphasize working in partnership with families in a strength-based way to support achievement of case goals and objectives. Examples include Collaborative Helping ([http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0AZV/is\\_200903/ai\\_n32319390/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0AZV/is_200903/ai_n32319390/)) (Madsen, 2009), the Signs of Safety approach ([www.signsofsafety.net/signsofsafety](http://www.signsofsafety.net/signsofsafety)) (Turnell & Edwards, 1999), and solution-focused practice (Berg & De Jong, 2004; Antle, Barbee, Christensen, & Martin, 2008).
  - **An active and meaningful role for families** can be achieved by involving them in case planning and checking in with them during visits about their understanding of and progress toward the plan. Involvement of the family in case planning is correlated with greater engagement of noncustodial and incarcerated parents, family-centered/ strength-based approaches, and stronger rapport between workers and families (HHS, 2009).
  - **Father involvement** ([www.abanet.org/child/fathers/](http://www.abanet.org/child/fathers/)) recognizes the importance of fathers to the healthy development of children. Agencies are increasingly reaching out to fathers and working to enhance their positive involvement with their children. Fatherhood programs vary greatly. Some are outreach efforts to include fathers in assessment and case planning processes; others help fathers address stressors or behaviors that affect their ability to support their children.
  - **Family search and engagement** ([www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/family-search.html](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-search.html)) encourages broad-based participation in family decision-making to leverage kinship connections and increase placement/ permanency options.
  - **Mediation**, adopted by many agencies and courts, allows agency representatives and families to work with a neutral facilitator to arrive at a mutually acceptable plan.
  - **Parent Partner Programs** engage parents who were once involved with the child welfare system to serve as mentors to currently involved parents, providing support, advocacy, and help navigating the system. Parent Partner Programs also use

the birth parent experience to influence changes in policy and protocol, encourage shared decision-making, strengthen individualized plans, and educate the community.

- **Foster family-birth family meetings** encourage birth families and foster families to share information, help model parenting skills, and support participation of foster families in placement conferences that contribute to reunification efforts.
- **Parent and youth involvement in agency councils and boards** is a proactive way for State and county agencies to gather and use parent and youth input in program and policy development, service design, and program evaluation.

## State and Local Examples of Family Engagement Strategies

State and local agencies throughout the country are at various stages of implementing and strengthening family engagement efforts. Following are selected examples of family engagement initiatives. The examples are presented for information purposes only; inclusion does not indicate an endorsement by Child Welfare Information Gateway or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

- California: Parent Partners Program
- Iowa: Family engagement tools and programs
- Maine: Practice model
- Massachusetts: Father engagement
- Minnesota: Court-initiated family case planning conferences
- New Mexico: Foster and birth parent icebreaker meetings
- North Carolina: Multiple response system
- Texas: Family group conferencing
- Virginia: Birth, foster, and adoptive family relationships

### Contra Costa County, California: Parent Partners Program

In Contra Costa County, parents who have experienced child removal, child welfare services, and reunification are trained as parent advocates to mentor and support other parents new to the child welfare system. Parent Partners help other parents navigate the child welfare system and access services with the goal of moving families toward reunification.

The Parent Partners Program was implemented as part of Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Systems of Care grant ([www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative](http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative)). The County hired two full-time Parent Partners as contract staff and additional part-time Partners on an hourly contract basis. When feasible, Parent Partners were trained alongside child welfare staff.

While each partnership varies with the circumstances of the families involved, Parent Partners generally:

- Share their own stories and experiences and offer encouragement and hope



- Provide information on the child welfare system in everyday language and help parents understand their rights and responsibilities
- Coach families on how to act appropriately in court and at meetings
- Connect parents with formal and informal community resources and services
- Attend court hearings and team decision meetings, as requested by parents
- Provide ongoing emotional support, often during nights, weekends, and holidays

Research on the Parent Partners Program suggests that the parents' common experiences help inspire trust and hope, which in turn promotes engagement and may facilitate the change process (Anthony, Berrick, Cohen, & Wilder, 2008; Cohen & Canan, 2006). Findings from a process study reflected positive responses about the benefits of the program from parents, Parent Partners, and social workers. Moreover, preliminary results of an outcome study revealed that reunification may be more likely for children whose parents were served by Parent Partners (Anthony, et al.).

For more information, contact Danna Fabella at 925.335.1583, or Linda Canan at 925.335.7100.

### Iowa: Family Engagement Tools and Programs

The State of Iowa champions engagement as the "primary door through which we help families change" (Munson & Freundlich, 2008). Iowa strives to engage the family in case planning, case management, and case

closure processes. The State's commitment to family engagement efforts is reflected in and enabled by:

- The State's child welfare **practice model**. ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/docs/IOWA\\_CW\\_Model\\_of\\_Practice.pdf](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/docs/IOWA_CW_Model_of_Practice.pdf)) One of its four guiding principles states: "We listen to and address the needs of our customers in a respectful and responsive manner that builds upon their strengths." Specific standards of frontline practice specify: "The child and the child's parents are actively engaged and involved in case planning activities."
- Regularly held **family team meetings**. These are used to assist the family network in building a common understanding of what is pertinent to the case and in developing a plan that will protect the child and help the family change.
- A published set of **practice standards** ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/docs/DHSfamilyteamstandards05.doc](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/docs/DHSfamilyteamstandards05.doc)) for family team decision-making. The standards present values and beliefs that support family teams and are intended to guide daily practice; they also include indicators of effectiveness.
- An **online toolkit** ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/family\\_team](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/family_team)) that offers resources, checklists, and handouts for planning, preparing for, and following up after family team meetings.
- An **evaluation handbook** ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/policyanalysis/PolicyManualPages/Manual\\_Documents/Forms/Comm283.pdf](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/policyanalysis/PolicyManualPages/Manual_Documents/Forms/Comm283.pdf)) for family team decision-making that provides policies, guidance, and assessment support.

- A **Parent Partner Program** ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent\\_Partner\\_Program](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent_Partner_Program)) that trains, coaches, and supports parents who have been safely reunified with their children to serve as mentors for parents currently involved with child protective services. In addition to working one-on-one with other families, Parent Partners are involved with policy, program, and curriculum development in collaboration with child welfare staff. As a result, the experiences and insights of Parent Partners have been integrated into birth parent orientation and support groups, foster and adoptive parent recruitment and training, new child welfare worker orientation, local and statewide steering committees and conferences, and community partnership participation.
- **Parent and youth involvement on advisory councils** that is tracked annually ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/service\\_reviews](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/service_reviews)). Online surveys and toolkits support the recruitment and retention of advisory council representatives ([www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/networking](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/networking)).

For more information, visit the Iowa Department of Human Services website: [www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/family\\_team](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/family_team)

### Maine: Practice Model

Maine's Bureau of Child and Family Services (BCFS) began developing a new vision in 2001, including a detailed strategic plan for the Bureau. This ongoing reform initiative incorporates goals and strategies that address many of the findings of the State's 2003 CFSR and support greater family engagement. One of the stated goals of Maine's strategic plan

was to "broaden family involvement from report to best outcome for child and family."

More recently, the BCFS expanded its initial statement of beliefs and values into a practice model. This practice model was developed with the thoughtful input of caseworkers, supervisors, and managers at all levels of Child and Family Services from every district. In addition, BCFS asked for input from approximately 20 stakeholders, most of whom had helped to develop the Program Improvement Plan after the first Federal CFSR.

The practice model is stated in plain language intended to be accessible to parents, foster parents, community providers, teachers, students, new employees, and any other members of the community. Bureau staff are responsible for giving these statements life, through practice at all levels of the organization. All policies and trainings are also under review to ensure adherence to the practice model.

The key principles of the model include:

- Child safety, first and foremost.
- Parents have the right and responsibility to raise their own children.
- Children are entitled to live in a safe and nurturing family.
- All children deserve a permanent family.
- How we do our work is as important as the work we do.

Each of these principles is supported by statements that emphasize family involvement and a strength-based approach.

The practice model philosophy and principles are provided on Maine's website at [www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/cw/practicemodel.shtml](http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/cw/practicemodel.shtml)

### Massachusetts: Father Engagement

Recognizing the significance of a father's involvement to the well-being of his children, the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families is working to counteract the tendencies of social workers to overlook fathers in child protection practices. To create a culture of father engagement, the agency:

- Conducted a **policy and regulation review** to clarify that caseworkers are required to work with both parents, including parents out of the home, in all phases of case practice.
- Established **Fatherhood Education Leadership Teams** in seven area offices throughout the State. The teams meet once a month and are composed of social workers, supervisors, area directors, and representatives of community agencies that work with fathers. The teams identify gaps in practice, develop procedures for improving practice, train caseworkers in engaging fathers, and collect data on father engagement in different phases of case practice.
- Developed a **systematic framework for engaging fathers**. The framework calls for routine engagement of fathers in all phases of case practice, beginning with a diligent search for fathers early in the case. It also includes methods for measuring progress.

- Established a **differential engagement** approach that calls for working with fathers in different ways, depending on their strengths and risk profiles.
- Implemented **staff training** on working with men, enhancing caseworker skills in respectful, culturally informed, and strength-based approaches to developing positive relationships with fathers, including those who are initially avoidant, angry, or hostile.
- Developed **tools and resources** to support implementation and help caseworkers integrate practice changes. For caseworkers, there are tip sheets on topics such as co-parenting issues when parents are not together, the basics of respectful father engagement, what to say when the father has been physically abusive to the mother, and helping fathers re-engage when they have been out of the home a long time. For fathers there are tip sheets on a variety of topics, such as being a good role model, playing with children, disciplining appropriately, and caring for crying babies.

For more information, contact Fernando Mederos at [fernando.mederos@state.ma.us](mailto:fernando.mederos@state.ma.us)

### Olmsted County, Minnesota: Court-Initiated Family Case Planning Conferences

Family engagement is a key feature of Olmsted County's Parallel Protection Process (P3). Begun in 2002 as part of a Children's Justice Initiative, P3 offers an alternative justice intervention for juvenile court cases involving children at high risk of child maltreatment. P3 has been highlighted as a

promising approach on the Children’s Bureau website:

[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/promise/states.htm#MN](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/promise/states.htm#MN)

For up to four cases a month in which a petition is contested, the court can order a family case planning conference (FCPC). The FCPC has two primary goals:

- Negotiate a settlement on the admission or denial of the Child in Need of Protective Services petition
- Develop the immediate next steps in the child protection or agency case plan

Judges order all parties to the case planning conference, which is a facilitated process that includes the family, extended family, community supports, social workers, supervisors, court attorneys, family attorneys, guardians ad litem, and other relevant parties. The conference begins with introductions and the family’s presentation of their family system. Next, everyone participates in information sharing on the incidents that brought the family to the attention of social services, risk to the child or children, complicating factors (i.e., conditions or behaviors that contribute to difficulty for the family), family strengths and protective factors, and ideas to build safety. Efforts are made to develop a balanced view.

The next step is a deliberate match between the legal language in the filed petition and the information shared at the meeting. Negotiations aim to determine one or more areas of agreement among the family with their attorneys, social services, and the county attorney. Once a settlement agreement is reached, the full group then discusses the immediate next steps (i.e., case plan) to

address the family’s needs in the context of the identified risk.

In the first 2 years, more than 90 percent of the P3 conferences resulted in settlement agreements that were accepted by the court. Initial findings from participant surveys reported positive responses among families, social workers, and attorneys involved in the process. Early indicators suggest that the program:

- Encourages less adversarial and more meaningful involvement of families in a court-ordered process
- Reduces court processing time and hastens family access to supports through “front loading” of services
- Leads to individualized case plans for children based on family needs and risks
- Safeguards children from repeated maltreatment
- Contributes to child permanency (Lohrbach & Sawyer, 2004)

For more information:

- Read *Creating a Constructive Practice: Family and Professional Partnership in High-Risk Child Protection Case Conferences*: [www.co.olmsted.mn.us/upload\\_dir/cs/creatingaconstructivepractice.pdf](http://www.co.olmsted.mn.us/upload_dir/cs/creatingaconstructivepractice.pdf)
- Contact Rob Sawyer, Director, Olmstead County Child & Family Services, at [sawyer.orb@co.olmsted.mn.us](mailto:sawyer.orb@co.olmsted.mn.us)

### **New Mexico: Foster Parent and Birth Parent Icebreaker Meetings**

Among New Mexico’s family engagement efforts is an innovative child welfare practice of

using “icebreaker” meetings to bring together foster parents and birth parents. The meetings promote information sharing about a foster child and are intended to encourage easier adjustments for the children in care, as well as for the parents.

Across the State, the icebreaker meetings are held soon after a child’s placement, ideally within 2 days. Discussions are focused on the child. Birth parents share information that will assist the foster parent in caring for the child, for example, their likes and dislikes, bedtime routines, and favorite pastimes. The foster parents, in turn, offer information about the child’s new environment and daily activities in the foster home. The meetings are facilitated, generally by a trained former foster or adoptive parent, who ensures that the discussions remain focused on the child’s needs. In some cases, there may be additional facilitated meetings and contacts.

In addition to making it easier for the child to adjust, the meetings help the foster and birth parents recognize their common concern for the child. As a result, the foundation for a respectful relationship can be formed.

For more information, contact Maryellen Bearzi at [maryellen.bearzi@state.nm.us](mailto:maryellen.bearzi@state.nm.us)

### **North Carolina: Multiple Response System**

North Carolina’s Multiple Response System (MRS) is an effort to reform the entire continuum of child welfare throughout the State, from intake through placement and permanency services. The reform is based on the application of family-centered principles of partnership through seven strategies:

- Collaboration between Work First (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and child welfare supports can prevent the involvement of child protective services (CPS) and helps prevent recidivism by providing financial, employment, and community services to families.
- A strengths-based structured intake focuses on family strengths as well as needs.
- A choice of two responses to reports of child abuse, neglect, or dependency protects the immediate safety of children in the most severe cases while engaging some families in services that could enable them to better parent their children.
- Coordination between law enforcement and CPS ensures that those who harm children are held accountable while minimizing the number of interviews children experience, thereby reducing retraumatization.
- A redesign of in-home family services allows caseworkers to engage families in the planning process and provide the most intensive services to families with the greatest needs.
- Child and family team meetings during in-home services acknowledge the birth family to be experts on their own situation and encourage the support and buy-in of both parents, extended family, and community in the planning and assessment process.
- Shared parenting meetings during the first 7 days of out-of-home placement keep the birth family actively involved in their role as parents and cultivate a nurturing relationship between the birth parents and foster parents.

A report to North Carolina's General Assembly in June 2006 found that families in counties implementing the MRS reform were receiving needed services more quickly. There was no evidence that children's safety was negatively affected by the reforms (Center for Child and Family Policy, 2006).

For more information, visit the North Carolina Division of Social Services website:  
[www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs](http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs)

### Texas: Family Group Conferencing

Working toward a more family-centered approach to child welfare, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services introduced a family group decision-making (FGDM) initiative. Texas' approach, which incorporates family group conferencing, promotes group discussions among CPS, family members, relatives, friends, and others in the community and also provides private family time for case planning.

Texas' implementation of FGDM has evolved and expanded over time. Attempting to address deficiencies identified in the State's 2002 CFSR, Texas began to lay the groundwork for increased family engagement. Staff participated in information exchange during a meeting with other States using FGDM models, received technical assistance and support from Casey Family Programs, obtained legislative permission to redirect some foster care funds into support services for kinship care, and hired five district FGDM specialists and a State liaison. In 2003, FGDM specialists began using the new approach in five cities as a pilot program targeted primarily to families experiencing the removal of a child. In later years, family conferencing

services were expanded throughout the State and additional family team meetings were introduced to engage families during the investigation stage of services.

An evaluation of FGDM ([www.dfps.state.tx.us/Documents/about/pdf/2006-10-09\\_FGDM\\_Evaluation.pdf](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Documents/about/pdf/2006-10-09_FGDM_Evaluation.pdf)) was conducted for the period March 2004 to July 2006, reflecting a total of 3,625 conferences. Findings revealed that, compared to children receiving traditional services, children involved with FGDM:

- Were more likely to be placed with relatives immediately following a family group conference
- Experienced shorter stays in care
- Were more likely to return to their families
- Were reported to be less anxious and better adjusted, particularly when placed with relatives

In addition, parents were more satisfied with family group conferences than traditional services (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2006).

For more information:

- Visit the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services website:  
[www.dfps.state.tx.us/child\\_protection/about\\_child\\_protective\\_services/fgdm.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/child_protection/about_child_protective_services/fgdm.asp)
- Read Casey Family Program's *Focus on Foster Care: Family Group Decision-Making: How the State of Texas Adopted a Family-Centered Approach to Child Welfare*, available through the Information Gateway library:  
<http://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/SimpleSearchForm>

## Virginia: Birth, Foster, and Adoptive Family Relationships

Northern Virginia's Bridging the Gap program is a self-driven collaboration of public and private child-placing agencies with a unified vision for child welfare practice. Bridging the Gap refers to the process of building and maintaining relationships and communication between birth and foster families involved in a youth's life, with the goal of supporting family reunification or another permanency plan. The bridging process is sometimes extended to other families involved in the child's life, such as extended birth family, relative caregivers, and adoptive parents.

Facilitated icebreaker meetings held within 7 days of placement provide an opportunity for birth parents and foster parents to meet and share information about the child's needs. Plans for ongoing communication and contact between the families are individualized, and may include opportunities for the foster family to support, help, teach, and/or participate with the birth family in a variety of ways.

Although Bridging the Gap is not a new strategy, the cooperative effort in Northern Virginia seeks to standardize this process as part of foster care practice.

For more information, contact Claudia McDowell at [Claudia.McDowell@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:Claudia.McDowell@fairfaxcounty.gov)

## Additional Resources

### National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections

(formerly, the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning)

Provides training and technical assistance and information services to help States, with an emphasis on family-centered principles and practices.

[www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp)

### National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement

Offers technical assistance, training, teleconferences, and publications to assist States with strategic planning, quality improvement, evaluating outcomes, facilitating stakeholder involvement, and improving training and workforce development.

<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids>

### National Center on Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)

Helps build community capacity to implement high-quality, effective FGDM processes by sharing resources, advancing family-driven practices, creating knowledge, and building links to improve the implementation and evaluation of family group decision-making, both in the United States and abroad.

[www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/national-center](http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/national-center)

The National Center on Family Group Decision Making also offers *A Compilation of*

*State and Provincial Laws, Policies, Rules and Regulations on Family Group Decision Making and Other Family Engagement Approaches in Child Welfare Decision Making.* The paper identifies and provides brief descriptions of relevant laws and policies for 16 States, the District of Columbia, and 3 Canadian provinces:

[www.americanhumane.org/assets/docs/protecting-children/PC-fgdm-leg-chart.pdf](http://www.americanhumane.org/assets/docs/protecting-children/PC-fgdm-leg-chart.pdf)

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