



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Partnerships

Engaging Families When There Is Child Welfare Involvement



Acknowledgments

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement would like to acknowledge the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center for leadership in developing this resource. We recognize and value the role of parents and programs in making a difference for children, families, and communities.

This document was developed with funds from Grant #90HC0014 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care, by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

**For more information about this resource, please contact us:
PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481**

Suggested citation: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2020). *Engaging Families with Children in the Child Welfare System.*



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Engaging Families When There Is Child Welfare Involvement

Head Start and Early Head Start programs and staff can use this resource to explore strategies for partnering with families when there is child welfare involvement. Managers may use this guide in training, team conversations, and coaching and supervision for individual staff and teams.

Using strengths-based attitudes and a trauma-informed approach in Head Start and Early Head Start programs can help to build and strengthen trusting relationships with families when there is child welfare involvement. These practices can guide programs and staff to focus on families' strengths in everyday interactions.

Use this resource to partner with families in these situations:

- Speaking for the first time with enrolled families about their involvement in the child welfare system
- Reporting suspected child abuse or neglect for a family currently enrolled in the program
- Supporting families of children who are placed in out-of-home care

Explore other resources in the Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Agencies Partnerships series available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

- Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies: An Overview
- Strategies for Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies

Using a Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach is a way of working with families. This approach:

- Recognizes the strengths of families first
- Respects and learns from differences
- Is open to other practices based on a family's wishes
- Shares decision-making
- Approaches families as equal partners in support of their child

Using a strengths-based approach recognizes that parents want the best for their children and family. A strengths-based approach embraces a family's expertise and efforts in overcoming challenges and achieving their goals.

We can use strengths-based approaches in our work with all families to support trusting, goal-oriented relationships.

The **child welfare system** aims to promote children's safety, permanency, and well-being by strengthening and reunifying families and achieving safe, stable, and permanent homes for children when reunification is not possible (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2013).

When there is child welfare involvement, parents may experience these interactions as times of crisis. Many parents who are involved with the child welfare system have their own histories of trauma and child welfare involvement. Some may also struggle with related health and mental health challenges (Cao, Hoffman, Bunker, Maguire-Jack, & Robertson, 2019).

It may be challenging to build trusting relationships with families who are experiencing strong and uncomfortable emotions. Families may experience anger, fear, grief, and helplessness. During these times, you may see parents' emotional struggles more clearly than their positive intentions to care for their family.

For many staff, it may be difficult to see parents' strengths when they know that a child is experiencing harm. However, focusing on parents' strengths can help build or maintain the kind of relationships that staff and parents need to have to work through difficult periods. Strong relationships with families can promote family well-being and other positive outcomes.

Using a strengths-based approach can support parents' sense of agency (Kemp, Marcenko, Lyons, & Kruzich, 2014). Sense of agency is the feeling that individuals have the power to shape their own lives. Approaches that focus on strengths may also help families to access important health and support services (Fusco, 2019; Kemp et al., 2014).

Trusting, respectful, and **goal-oriented relationships** between staff and parents are essential to ensure the healthy growth and development of young children and to strengthen family well-being. These relationships develop over time through multiple interactions.

Explore the **Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework** to learn about building positive, goal-oriented relationships using a strengths-based approach.

One way to use a strengths-based approach is to adopt these strengths-based attitudes in your work with families:

- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.
- Families are our partners and play a critical role in their family's healthy development.
- Families have expertise about their children and family.
- Families' contributions are important and valuable.

Learn more about these Strengths-based Attitudes in the **Building Partnerships with Families Series available on the Head Start ECLKC website.**

Using a Trauma-informed Approach

Trauma-informed approaches rely on these principles (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014):

- Promoting physical and psychological safety
- Building trustworthiness and openness in your relationships with families
- Drawing on the strengths of peers (such as a child's extended family members) who have survived trauma and who can play key roles in supporting a child's and family's recovery from trauma
- Emphasizing collaboration with families and recognizing that "everyone has a role to play"
- Building on families' unique strengths and self-advocacy skills
- Acknowledging and responding to families' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities and needs

Using a trauma-informed approach in your work can support your partnerships with families.

Families involved in child welfare have likely experienced ongoing traumatic events that negatively impact their relationships and well-being (Bunting, Montgomery, Mooney, MacDonald, Coulter, Hayes, & Davidson, 2019).

Trauma is defined as the experiencing or witnessing of events in which there is actual or threatened "death, serious injury, or violence" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271).

Trauma occurs when frightening events or situations overwhelm a child or adult's ability to cope or deal with what has happened. Traumatic events include child abuse and neglect, community violence, and homelessness (NCTSN, n.d.).

A trauma-informed approach recognizes the role that trauma may play in the lives of children and families. This approach is used to try and prevent them from becoming re-traumatized (SAMHSA, 2014). A trauma-informed approach involves asking children and families, “What happened to you?” rather than, “What’s wrong with you/” or “What did you do wrong?” This approach can help to promote healing and recovery from trauma.

Explore the **Understanding Trauma and Healing in Adults Series** available on the Head Start ECLKC.

When you encourage parents to share their knowledge and values with you, your relationships with their families grow stronger and promote healthy outcomes (HHS, ACF, OHS, 2020).

Reflecting on Your Perspective

Reflecting on your cultures and experiences helps you understand the perspectives you bring to your work. Think about how these factors might influence your relationships with families. Consider whether you have personal biases or judgments that may be affecting how you see families. Working with families requires us to set aside biases and work to create shared understanding with families.

Reflect on how families’ cultural beliefs, values, and traditions might influence caregiving practices and your relationships with them. Consider how parts of your identity, such as your age, race, or country of origin, might affect your interactions with families, especially if there are differences. Be aware that, as a result of racial biases, abuse is more often wrongly suspected for children of color. Unjustified mandated reports are more likely to be filed on their behalf as compared to their peers who are white (CWIG, 2016).

As a professional, you bring your own histories to your work—this may include your own experiences of trauma. Families’ experiences may remind you of personal trauma, or you may feel traumatized by learning about the family’s or child’s experiences.

You may experience vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is an emotional reaction to the helplessness, fear, and hopelessness that people who have experienced trauma often feel. You may have similar feelings. Your interactions with children and parents may trigger upsetting memories for you. You may have doubts about how to work with families who have similar histories.



It is normal to have these thoughts and reactions in this difficult work. It can be helpful to talk with other trusted staff and/or supervisors. Find out what workplace resources and support services are available to help you process your feelings. Talk with your supervisor about opportunities for reflective practice and supervision, self-care, and/or mindfulness. Be sure you know how and where to get support for yourself. Reaching out to others and getting what you need can help you be ready to give your best to families.

Partnering with Families When There is Child Welfare Involvement

You can partner with families in many phases of child welfare system involvement (CWIG, 2013). Explore how to apply the approaches and strategies for these three common situations.

As you prepare to meet with families, consider the setting for your conversations. Think about the physical and emotional environment. Keep in mind privacy, comfort, and safety—for the family and yourself. Where there are safety risks, you may need to consider a location that you can easily and quickly exit and where other staff who can help contain the situation are readily available.

Situation 1. Speaking for the First Time with Families Newly Enrolled in Your Program About Their Involvement in the Child Welfare System

Your first meeting with parents is an opportunity to build a positive connection with them. It is important for you to be clear and direct and to communicate the purpose of the conversation. It is also important to show that you respect parents' expertise, values, and goals.

You can help parents feel comfortable by giving them space to tell you why they think they were referred to the program. For example, you might say:

- “I am so glad to meet you and your family. I look forward to working together.”
- “I understand that you are currently working with the child welfare agency [and name the family’s case worker, if you have that information]. Do I have this information right?”
- “I would like to make sure we have the same information about your referral to the program. Would you be willing to share your perspective?”
- “I am interested in hearing about what you want for your family. I’d like to understand more so I can share what our program might be able to offer.”
- “I understand that this is a stressful time for your family. What are your hopes during this process? What are your concerns?”
- “We find it works best to work with the agency so we can both partner with you to meet your goals. We would like to find the best way to support you and your family. Do you have any ideas about the best way to do that? Do you have questions for me?”

Another way to build a relationship with a family is to focus on the relationship that the parents have with their child. You can comment on specific positive behaviors that you observe to show that you recognize their connection. For example, “I noticed how quickly you responded to comfort her when she started to cry.” You can also tell parents that they know their child best. “You knew she wanted to find her favorite stuffed toy and to be held.” Parents may respond by feeling more confident in their parenting and see new strengths in their relationship.

Recognizing parents’ expertise can also encourage parents to open up about their challenges. They may be more willing to ask for guidance and share what they want or need. This conversation can help you form a strong foundation for a positive and ongoing relationship with families.

Situation 2. Reporting Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect

It is possible that you might suspect child abuse or neglect while working with a family. You may need to notify child welfare services. It is important to remember that you are not alone in this process. You can talk with supervisors and other staff about your questions, concerns, and feelings. Review your program policies and procedures for reporting abuse or neglect and maintaining family confidentiality.

All Head Start and Early Head Start staff are mandated reporters and are legally obligated to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate state child protection agency (HHS, ACF, OHS, 2015).

If, together with your supervisor and co-workers, you decide that you need to notify child welfare services, it is best practice to inform the parent in advance about your concerns and the need to file a report.

You may want to avoid the discomfort of telling a parent that you need to file a report. However, telling a parent in advance shows respect and may protect your relationship. You can be direct with families and avoid placing blame. It may be helpful to bring a mental health consultant into the conversation. Staff and family safety need to be carefully considered when deciding if, when, and how to conduct this conversation.

If there is domestic violence, issues of safety for both the parent and child also need to be carefully considered when filing a report. If appropriate, you can support children and their families by making available to parents information about domestic violence hotlines and support (HHS, ACF, OHS, 2014).

Situations requiring reports may be caused by other adults related to the child and not the parent who is the program's primary contact. In these cases, part of your role is to support the parent's intention to help the child. Discuss the situation with the parent and determine together what to do to protect the child from further abuse or neglect (CWIG, 2013). To learn more, visit the **Partnering with Families to Address Domestic Violence** page on the Head Start ECLKC website.

Your choice of words is very important during this time. Be prepared for parents' emotions. Parents may be upset, defensive, angry, anxious, and/or scared. How you speak with them will impact your relationship, now and in the future. For instance, consider saying words like:

- “As a mandated reporter, I need to share this information with child welfare services. I would like you to know that I will do everything I can to support you through this process.”
- “I would like you to be here when I make the call, unless you don't feel that you can be.”

Statements like these will give parents information and show you intend to continue your relationship with them. You may choose to share information about the child welfare process and ask if they have questions. Practical information about the report, your role, and next steps may be helpful.

In contrast, a statement like “I need to report you to child welfare” can sound punishing. Statements that assign blame or negative intent may increase a parent's negative reaction. It may be helpful to have additional staff, such as supervisors or co-workers, present when you need to make a call to child welfare services. In the best of situations, the parent may want to make the call with your support.

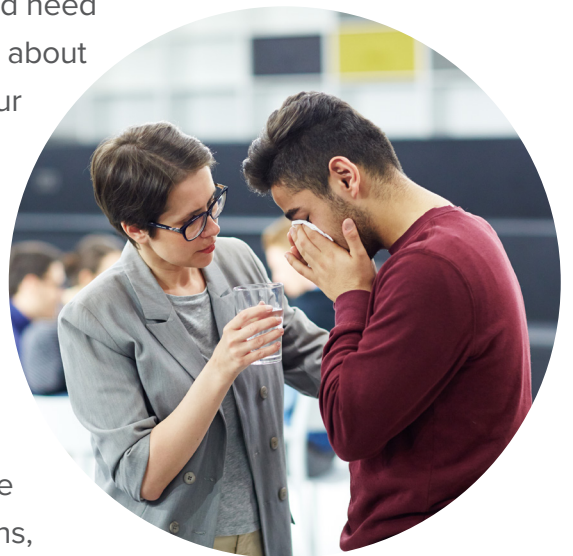
Parents may feel you have betrayed their trust when you tell them that you need to notify an agency about your concerns. This feeling can threaten your relationship. In response, you might say the following: “I want to be very clear that I know there are many strengths in your family. I know you care about your child, and I have seen loving interactions.” You might then ask:

- “What are the kinds of things that you know I have seen and that we have talked about that you would want me to share with the child welfare worker?”
- “What would you want the child welfare worker to know about your child and family? Are there things about your child's experience at the program or goals that you have that you would like me to share?”
- “Would you like to talk about what this is like for you? Do you have ideas about what might make things better?” (CWIG, 2013)

During this process, it is important to be mindful of any personal biases or judgments that might negatively impact your relationships with families. Consider questions for self-reflection, such as:

- “How does this experience make me feel?”
- “Does it remind me of previous personal or professional experiences?”
- “How can I manage these feelings so that they do not interfere with my ability to support this family?”

Be aware of your protective feelings for a child, and how these feelings may make you angry at parents. These feelings are common and understandable but can make your work more difficult and less effective. We are all human and need opportunities to examine our thoughts and emotions about families. Get support to sort through and manage your emotions from other staff or supervisors. Consider mentor coaching if it is available in your program. Coaching is a relationship-based process that is led by someone with specialized knowledge and skills who can provide guidance or training to a protégé, or someone with less experience in a given area (See Related Resources to learn about mentor coaching). Mentor coaching can help you to feel more skilled and self-confident in handling difficult situations, including working with families involved in the child welfare system.



Situation 3. Supporting Families of Children Who Are Placed in Out-of-Home Care

While working with a family, the child may be placed outside of the home in protective, foster, or adoption services. During this stressful period, it may be difficult for you to preserve a relationship with the family.

You can still provide a sense of continuity for children and be an important resource and emotional support for parents. You can let parents know that you are available as a resource. For example, in situations where family reunification is the plan, you can partner with the child welfare worker to keep parents informed of steps towards reunification or ways to be involved with their child.

With permission from the child welfare worker, families can participate in school and other activities with their child. If parental rights are being terminated and adoption or alternative permanency plans are being considered, family involvement and supports may look different. Next steps can be discussed and determined by the child welfare worker and Head Start or Early Head Start staff.

It is important to understand both the challenges and opportunities for a family's reunion. Examples of questions you might ask parents include:

- “How can I support you during this process?”
- “What kinds of support do you have right now to help you work through this challenging situation?”
- “Are there specific obstacles or barriers that you're concerned about?”

These obstacles may include challenges related to health and mental health, unemployment, and homelessness. Your offer of support may be the most powerful resource that you can offer at this time. You can help parents focus on how they can achieve their goals. Reminding them of the strengths in their relationship with their child can help promote their resilience. Resilience can be thought of as the ability to “bounce back” from challenging events or experiences and “keep rolling.”

As an Head Start or Early Head Start professional, you are a valuable resource to families of children who are involved with the child welfare system. Families can overcome their challenges. You can partner with parents in this process. You can focus on their strengths and positive intentions to promote healthy parent-child relationships and family well-being.

There is no blueprint or one-size-fits-all approach to working with families. Just as parents know their children best, you are the expert in your professional role. You can use strategies for building strengths-based partnerships with families that focus on their goals.

Related Resources

To access the resources listed below, visit the Office of Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Building Partnerships with Families Series

The goal of parent and family engagement is to work with families to build strong and effective partnerships that can help children and families thrive. These partnerships are grounded in positive, ongoing, and goal-oriented relationships with families. The relationships are based on mutual respect and trust. They are also developed over time, through a series of interactions between staff and families. Use the following resources to build, strengthen, and sustain family engagement and partnerships:

- Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families
- Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices
- Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes
- Partnering with Families of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners

Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices

Find out how family engagement and practice strategies are key to building relationships with families. Learn how to use strengths-based attitudes to work with families toward building a positive relationship—despite the challenges that may come up.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

Explore this resource to learn about the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework, a research-based, organizational guide for implementing Head Start Program Performance Standards for parent, family, and community engagement.

Introduction to Mentor Coaching

Explore this resource to find explanations of the mentoring relationship and its importance in their programs. It provides definitions and describes how to use the guide's unique features to optimize the learning experience.

Starting with Strengths in Challenging Times (Simulation)

Learn about these five strategies to partner with families going through a challenging situation. Understanding Trauma and Healing in Adults Series

Understanding Trauma and Healing in Adults

Explore this series to learn about trauma and how traumatic events can impact families and staff. It offers information that may help guide your conversations with families. You may use these resources to promote healing and resilience and contribute to increased family well-being. When families know they are understood, they can be more responsive to engagement and support. The five briefs in this series explain trauma, and offer strategies for self-care and healing, and building knowledge and skills for a program wide, trauma-informed culture.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5)*. American Psychiatric Pub.
- Bunting, L., Montgomery, L., Mooney, S., MacDonald, M., Coulter, S., Hayes, D., & Davidson, G. (2019). Trauma informed child welfare systems—A rapid evidence review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*, 2365.
- Cao, Y., Hoffman, J. A., Bunger, A. C., Maguire-Jack, K., & Robertson, H. A. (2019). Identifying and addressing parental trauma and behavioral health need: The role of the child welfare system. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *13*(3), 265–284.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG). (2013, February). How the child welfare system works. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cpswork/>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG). (2016, November). Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial_disproportionality.pdf
- Fusco, R. A. (2019). Perceptions of strengths-based child welfare practices among mothers with drug use histories. *Journal of Family Issues*, *40*(17), 2478–2498.
- Kemp, S. P., Marcenko, M. O., Lyons, S. J., & Kruzich, J. M. (2014). Strength-based practice and parental engagement in child welfare services: An empirical examination. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *47*(1), 27–35.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014, July). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (nd). Trauma types. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF). (nd). Secondary traumatic stress. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/secondary-traumatic-stress>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start. (2014, October 27). Helping children and families experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence, ACF-IM-HS-14-06. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/im/acf-im-hs-14-06>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start. (2015, September 18). Mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect ACF-IM-HS-15-04. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/im/acf-im-hs-15-04>



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement