Mothers, fathers and other relatives are being involved right from the start in discussing what's best for the child who has been abused or neglected, the services needed for the family, and the goals that parents should achieve to keep the child at home or reunite with a child.

This whole-hearted commitment to family-centered practice as the best approach to child welfare is new for the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Protecting children remains the Department’s topmost priority. When children must be removed from a home because of dangerous circumstances, we won’t hesitate. Even so, removing children from parents is the exception, not the rule, and happens in only 1 of every 20 cases.

Listening to family members with respect, and reassuring them the state is more interested in helping them create a safe home environment than taking away a child, is what family-centered practice is all about.

Family-centered practice starts with the child protective investigator, whose investigation of abuse or neglect of a child includes involving the family in identifying its strengths and coming up with the steps to improve the safety of the home. Getting families to talk about issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health and poverty that may be contributing to their child’s abuse or neglect can empower parents, especially if they are given a chance to shape the solutions.

After the investigation, the case manager, who is knowledgeable about resources in the communities he works in, will focus on connecting both the child and family with the help they need to heal and prevent further harm.

Family-centered practice goes beyond a standard to-do checklist. It requires the case manager to become engaged in knowing a particular child and family and suggesting individualized answers to stabilizing their lives. It may mean helping a parent get food assistance, a job, an education, parenting lessons or even a bus pass. It may be finding child care, a football uniform, music lessons, summer camp or an internship for a child or youth. If asked, people, businesses and organizations in your community often will make a special effort to do something to help out abused and neglected children and their families.