

Strategies to Engage Families from Different Cultural and Ethnic Backgrounds

The following attitudes and strategies can help child welfare professionals to effectively engage the client into a productive relationship. These strategies are particularly valuable during the initial phase of casework.

Learn Values, Attitudes, Traditions, Beliefs

- Learn the values, attitudes, traditions, and beliefs of the cultural and ethnic groups served by the agency.
- This may prevent
 - insulting or criticizing a parent, or
 - misinterpreting the meaning of the client's behavior.

Recognize Cultural Norms

- Become knowledgeable of the cultural norms of the client's primary reference group regarding involvement of outside agencies in family problems. These norms will affect the family's view of the Counselor and the agency.
 - What appears to be "resistance" to becoming involved may be the result of feeling ashamed and embarrassed because family problems have become public.
 - An understanding of resistance helps counselors "slow down" and establish a better relationship before addressing more sensitive issues.

Listen and Learn from Parents

- Have a willingness to listen and to learn from the parent to
 - establish areas of commonality and
 - communicate respect for the family member's individuality.
- During the early stages of the relationship, listen actively.
- Ask questions to help family members talk about their differences, so they can better understand each other.
- Openly acknowledge cultural differences during the early stages of casework, and indicate that there may be misunderstandings as a result.
- Suggest that many people find it harder to trust someone who is very different from them.

Communicate about Cultural Differences

- Encourage family members to talk about cultural differences, so the counselor and family can better understand one another.
- Express an interest in getting to know the family member and in understanding things from his/her perspective. For example, "It may be harder for me to grasp what you mean, since I grew up very differently, but tell me about it, and explain it to me."
- Use interviewing techniques which can clarify the subtleties of the family members' communications.
- Never assume that parents understand what you mean and that you understand what the family member means.
- Clearly explain the meaning of your responses and behaviors.

Learn Social Rules of Behavior

- Become knowledgeable regarding the particular social rules of behavior for a particular cultural or ethnic group, and abide by them.
- It is important to "tread gently" until the culture is better understood. Ask what the family would like you to call them and what they would feel most comfortable calling you.
- Request their guidance to help you understand them and to avoid offending them.
- If lack of cultural knowledge leads to a blunder, apologize and assure the family that no insult was intended.