

Supporting parent participation from the first point of contact

A resource for practitioners working with birth parents in contact with child protection

The Voice of Parents worked alongside birth parents with lived experience of child protection and child and family service contact. These parents told us that the initial contact they had with services, including child protection, could be fraught with difficulties and missed opportunities for building rapport and engagement. Together, we worked through solutions for making this initial engagement more supportive of parents, which is outlined in this resource.

Prioritising child safety is a critical part of this engagement and is ultimately most important. This resource recognises research that shows improved outcomes, including enhanced safety for children and young people, can be achieved when their parents are effectively engaged by services including child protection¹.

First point of contact with the family

There are many subtle ways that a practitioner's first contact with families can reinforce power hierarchies that are disruptive to relationships and contribute to a parent's feeling of intimidation and powerlessness in a service engagement. These feelings may be particularly present in engagements that threaten a parent's ongoing care of their child. This dynamic can also contribute to a sense of hopelessness about their situation which can demotivate parent behavioural change. We heard from parents this can happen if practitioners use overt displays of professional status, for example, by wearing overly professional dress, using formal "sector" language, appearing busy or hurried, and the use of lanyards and nametags (where alternative means of sharing this information can be used). Parents described first contact experiences such as being spoken to through their front doors in front of neighbours, practitioners arriving at their homes with little to no warning or having the police turn up with practitioners at their homes. Interactions like this can contribute to feelings of powerlessness, shame and stigma that some parents feel when services are involved, and it can make it difficult for parents to trust and engage with practitioners.

It can help to put parents at ease when practitioners:

- are mindful of their body language,
- practice from a place of unconditional positive regard,
- use a warm tone when speaking with families,
- stay curious about the experiences of everyone in the family,
- invite parent (and child) input and deeply listen,
- include parents' support people in important conversations,
- show children that their parents are worthy of respect in their home,
- avoid using judgemental language/tone,
- avoid undermining the parent's role in the family system and contributing to family stress.

¹Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare; University of Melbourne. (2020). A literature review of parent engagement and participation approaches in child protection: The Voice of Parents: A model for inclusion project in partnership with the University of Melbourne. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Centre-Voice-of-Parents-Literature-Review.pdf>.

Look for opportunities to connect over small, shared interests or experiences to level the imbalance of power within the relationship. Service contact in the home, especially from child protection, can feel invasive for families, who may feel more at ease if you can show them that you are a person as well as a practitioner.

Understand and acknowledge the family's experience

Be curious about the parents' experiences as well as the child.

The impact of service contact on families can be under-recognised and under-acknowledged by service providers. This is a crucial opportunity for connection and trust-building if steps are taken to understand the experience of parents, especially from the outset. Parents want their experiences of initial contact to be acknowledged and their feelings validated, as well as their child's feelings and experiences. Most parents naturally fear having a child removed when engaged by child protection, and may be unclear if other agencies have also this power. Try to understand a parent's reaction to your initial contact as a normal and healthy response to their fear of having a child removed by statutory authorities. As much as possible, provide clarity on the reality of child removal in their particular situation.

Keep in mind that parents' fear of child removal may also pose a barrier to seeking early help, particularly if they know practitioners have a mandatory reporting obligation (for example, a report may be triggered if a parent sought early help for substance use and disclosed that they had children in the home).

Show parents that you understand the initial contact can cause distress, with common feelings including fear, shame, anxiety, being alone, being judged, feeling unheard and misunderstood. By calling this out you can help to normalise their experience and reduce distress. Invite parents to share their concerns and explore support options that may be available (particularly culturally safe support options).

Acknowledge the impact of service contact on children as well, understanding that all family members may feel disrupted by the intervention. Help parents to support their children with the impact of the intervention, empowering them in their role as parents.

Build trust and rapport as a priority

Building trusting relationships with parents is a first step to their effective engagement with services. These relationships should take a partnership approach where possible, encouraging and enabling sustainable change. In a child protection intervention, practitioners should aim to build trust and rapport while always being clear about child safety as the bottom line. A practitioner's ability to be consistent throughout a service engagement (in practice, support, and availability) will help to build trust, preserve parent engagement, and can also promote hope for a positive resolution.

Talk respectfully with parents and try to be aware of unconscious biases that may be brought into the relationship (for example, different parenting paradigms, cultural or gender biases, ability biases). Remind parents you are there to support their child and family, and commit to being non-judgemental. Invite parents to have a support person present and welcome this person into the process. This can support parent engagement through improved comprehension, increased confidence in sharing their voice, and timely system navigation.

Explore and identify family and parenting strengths (for example, a strong connection to culture, displays of resilience, strong extended networks of support) and help families to build on this, increasing protective capacity for children within their family.

Allow parents to tell their story in their own way, for example, they might want to give a written version, a timeline, or a video. Ask for consent to share their version with other workers or services to reduce re-telling. Always be upfront about information sharing obligations you may have, so that parents can make informed decisions about what they share and what the expected consequences may be.

Provide options for having serious conversations, for example with the location and time, and being open to support people being present. Demonstrating flexibility in the engagement may help to support relationship building.

Parent suggestions for being flexible:

- Negotiate a meeting location that works for the family,
- Consider meeting over coffee to reduce the formal nature,
- Recognise distress in serious conversations and provide options for revisiting that topic so that a meeting can be productive.

Invite parents into the process

Parents need to feel welcomed into the processes and decisions that affect their families. Try not to assume that parents will know how to include themselves without an explicit invitation or without assurance that they will be listened to and respected. Talking them through the purpose and structure of meetings may help de-mystify and reduce fear of participation.

Do not forget to engage both parents when working to support a child, where possible and safe. Fathers are often under-engaged by services in conversations about their children, and their safe inclusion can help to strengthen the support available for their child and reduce the burden on responsibility on mothers. Evidence-based strategies for engaging fathers are available in research, for example, using a strengths-based approach, encouraging the fathering role, and collaborating with dads to strengthen their parenting capacity.

Be mindful of gender biases that exist in society, and in the child and family welfare sector, and make proactive attempts to overcome these.

Try to challenge the notion that a family's responsibilities can be solely assigned to mothers. For example, when a father uses violence in the home, there is evidence to show that services often hold mothers responsible for not changing the problematic behaviour of their current or former partner. This is despite research showing that mothers may be immobilised from effectively protecting their children due to family violence victimisation¹.

As well as fathers, practitioners should explore other important people in the child and parent's life and encourage their involvement and support throughout the engagement. This may help parents to feel more comfortable and supported in the engagement, and it can also help them to have a voice in decision-making processes. Encourage parents to take notes of your conversations and let them know you will be taking notes too and that these are available if parents want to access them. If your organisational policy prohibits this, ensure that parents are aware that this is the case and advise them of their alternative options (e.g., taking their own notes, having a support person take notes, whether recording the conversation is allowed).

Provide clarity and guidance

Parents need to be clear about purpose of your intervention, including your evidence of the child and family's risk. Try to be as transparent as possible, while also being kind. Invite parents to participate in this conversation and deeply listen to their perception of the situation, spending time on developing a shared understanding from which you can work together.

Provide useful information as early as possible, in multiple forms, and help parents to know their rights to legal support, and how you can help to connect them with this. It may be best to have a sensitive conversation about the potential for legal support to introduce an adversarial element to your relationships and that ideally you want to work in positive partnership with parents as much as possible, to achieve the best outcome for their child. (This conversation may not be as appropriate, for example, if parents have already had a child removed from their care). We heard from parents that legal support was often helpful in providing neutral and trustworthy information about their rights, what they could expect, what was required of them and how they could navigate processes. This was often sought due to a lack of available information elsewhere. Encourage parents to come to you with questions about their child and for general information about processes such as court, whilst being clear that you are not able to provide legal advice (which you can help them to access through appropriate channels). As much as possible, help parents to build confidence that you are being transparent and that they can trust you as a source of information.

Explore what is most accessible for parents and ensure culturally safe information is available. Parents need this to understand the processes that affect them and to know how and when they can contribute to decisions being made about their family. Help to provide clarity about the roles, expectations, and goals in your interactions to support their engagement and participation. Provide options for transparent processes, such as meeting agendas and minutes, your record of their story, and a clear plan of action.

Make sure families are given clear and realistic timelines and make every effort to stick to this, being clear when it needs to change. Parents experience many barriers to engagement that are outside their control, and require the support and understanding of a practitioner to overcome. This may be because of system issues (for example: high staff caseloads and limited time, disrupted relationships caused by staff turnover, delayed processes that can impact the parent-child bond) as well as not knowing how to navigate parts of the engagement and how to best support their children throughout. Provide parents with clarity about what they can and cannot do, what is and is not expected, and what parenting practices might support their child through a child protection investigation. They may also need practical support, which can be mitigated through the scheduling of meetings, support for transport, or financial assistance to attend services.

Practitioners could consider if any Voice of Parents resources for parents may be appropriate to share, for example:

- *Charter of Parent Participation*
- *Ten Tips for working with services*
- *Ten tips for supporting birth parents (for friends/family of parents)*
- *What does it mean? Child protection, child and family services, and Courts*
- *How to have a good meeting*