

Ten tips for working with birth parents

For practitioners

Here are some tips put together by parents who have worked with child protection and child and family services in Victoria

1. Remember that parents are people, and they are important to their child's wellbeing.

Children need to have a relationship with their parents, for their developmental wellbeing and sense of identity. This relationship is also a child's greatest protective factor when it is healthy and positive. It is very likely that the parents you're working with love their child and are trying their best. Help the family to enhance a healthy parent-child bond wherever possible. Keep in mind that, even when they are not physically with their child, parents are still parents.

2. Emotions of parents need to be acknowledged and supported.

Parents can experience a range of emotions in response to a service intervention. They may be in distress, which can reduce a person's ability to clearly express how they feel or to take in new information. Take care to understand and attend to the primary emotions that underly any difficult or confrontational behavior (such as fear, shame). Enquire about the emotional experience of the parent, as well as the child, and normalise difficult feelings. Provide space for these feelings in your engagement with parents and guidance on how you might be able to help.

3. Consider an information pack for parents.

It is important for parents to have access to information that makes sense to them. This should be available in multiple languages for parents whose first language is other than English, and it should be culturally appropriate. Consider what self-care information could also be included for parents and families.

Parent suggestion:

An information or welcome pack should be accessible and delivered in multiple ways. This might include online or printed materials, videos, plain language or image-based information. This pack could include:

- Information about the service and processes
- What you will expect of parents
- Advocacy information
- Feedback mechanisms
- What parents can expect from you
- How you're going to work together
- Charter of Parental Participation
- Privacy information

The welcome pack provided by Your Community Health is a great example of accessible information: <https://www.yourcommunityhealth.org.au/get-involved/new-client-welcome-packs/>.

4. Connect parents with services ASAP.

Talk with parents about what other services they might want involved. If they are engaging with child protection, connect them with legal support as early as possible. Be careful not to over-subscribe

parents to services if it will cause them extra stress or logistical burdens. Consider ways that care team meetings can happen so that this burden is minimised, and everyone is working towards shared goals (for example: by meeting over Zoom).

“When services are included and communicating, it works super well. When they’re not on the same page it’s a nightmare.”
-Parent Advisor

Parent suggestion:

Parents may have a more positive engagement with services when they have an independent advocate. This could be a professional (for example: legal advocate, support worker), peer advocate (for example: a lived experience contact), or a trusted friend or family member. Encourage parents to have an advocate with them throughout your engagement, being mindful that this can help parents to feel more comfortable and that they are not alone. This can also help to build trust with practitioners.

5. Ask parents questions and explore their preferences.

All parents are different. They will have different goals, needs and histories, and they may have a different understanding of family and parenting to you. Enquire about their experiences and their expertise in their own lives as well as their children’s lives. Being flexible in accommodating their preferences can support their positive engagement. Empower parents to make good decisions for their family and give them room to rise to the occasion. Remember to stay curious.

Practitioner suggestion:

It can be useful to question your assumptions about “family”. Each family may understand this unit differently and include different people in their framework for raising children. Don’t forget that a child has two parents – wherever safe to do so, make an equal effort to involve dads as well as mums, particularly when working with parents to make positive changes. Ask who else is involved in the parenting role for that child – there may be grandparents, aunties and uncles, family friends or other people who help. All important people should be included in conversations about the ongoing care of the child.

6. Make proactive efforts to involve parents and other key people in decision-making processes.

Parents may need explicit invitations to be involved in decision-making processes. They might not be aware of the opportunities available to them, or they might not feel comfortable stating their preference for being involved. It can also be beneficial to have other key people in the child’s life present in these conversations, depending on parent preferences (such as a grandparent who assists with the parenting role). Help them to understand that they are not just welcome but wanted.

Parent suggestion:

To make meetings more parent-inclusive, consider:

- planning ahead and sharing an agenda,
- being flexible on the location according to parent preferences,
- offering phone or video options for those who can’t make it in person,
- being warm and welcoming,
- providing clarity on who will take notes and when these will be shared after the meeting,
- committing to the next meeting, checking parent availability and reminding ahead of time,
- recapping actions and expectations at the end of the meeting,
- providing follow up details so parents can ask questions or confirm details if needed,
- communicating with, or responding to, parents in a timely and robust way.

7. Interventions need to be time sensitive.

Some service interventions can be very disruptive to families, particularly if there is a separation between a child and their parents. It is important to minimise delays in processes as much as possible, while also providing realistic timeframes for families to make progress. Like the expectations placed on parents, practitioners should be accountable to timeframes provided and transparent when changes are made.

“If other services were involved prior to children being removed it could benefit the families’ situation in time for children not to be removed at all.” –Parent Advisor

8. Invest in long-term relationships.

The most effective support is long-term and genuine. Be mindful of parents’ and families’ needs that don’t fit into funding and service constraints and help to link them in with other appropriate services.

9. Allow space for the parent to advocate for themselves.

Supporting parents to ‘fight’ constructively for their children (rather than against themselves or the system) can have positive benefits for their child’s social and emotional wellbeing, development and functioning¹. Encourage and recognise parents’ strengths and progress, and acknowledge behaviors that are self-advocating.

10. Treat parents with respect.

“If you cancel with very short notice, it can be incredibly triggering and stressful.” –Parent Advisor

Respecting parents means that their feelings, wishes and rights are listened to and understood. Respect is an important part of building trust and connection, and can help to develop an environment where parents feel safe, comfortable and seen. This is essential for parents to engage with services in a meaningful way.

Parent suggestions:

- understand how parents want to tell their stories.
- share contact information and be available for support, questions and clarification,
- give parents opportunities to review information being used in their case,
- make every attempt to be on time,
- provide clarity and reassurance,
- remain transparent and accountable throughout the engagement.

Bonus tip: Parents’ lives are affected by systemic barriers to inclusion; this negatively affects parents with service contact and makes engagement difficult. System issues like high worker turnover, high worker caseload, inflexible practice, and time pressures on practitioners can have a serious detrimental impact on the relationship with parents and contribute to their exclusion. Some parents have had previously unhelpful contact with service providers. The fear of having their child removed can also be a significant barrier to reaching out for help. It may be helpful to acknowledge this with parents, and to consider how you can help them to overcome these barriers as much as possible.

¹ Salveron, M., Paterson, N., Price-Robertson, R. (2020). [Engaging with parents who have children in out-of-home care](#). Adelaide, SA: Emerging Minds.