

# Engaging 101: Engaging with Children & their Families (Practice Guide)



## Audience

Caseworkers

## Outcome

Using the guidance provided here, caseworkers will develop every day strategies for engaging children and their families through the life of a case. This allows caseworkers to monitor and if needed, improve their interactions with family members and their networks, while also paying special attention to the skills needed to engage children. In addition, this outcome will meet the competency framework of the Child Protective Services Texas Practice Model.

## Why Do This?

Engaging allows the caseworker to focus their professional practice on a respectful and professional approach with children and their family members while still being skillful in the use of their authority, and working toward a cooperative relationship focused on the child's safety. Engaging lays the groundwork for a collaborative dialogue to identify issues families are facing, while expecting them to think about their roles as parents and actively be part of the decision-making process for what needs to change so that children can be “forever safe.”

Engaging with children means skillfully ‘hearing their voices.’ It also means allowing them to participate in the smallest or biggest way by providing a safe place for expression of their thoughts, ideas, or feelings to be heard and to have these same ideas acted upon if called for.

To engage means caseworkers actively develop partnerships with families and their children. Partnerships consist of **Developing Understanding** whereby everyone is clear *why* we are here, *what* we are trying to accomplish, and *how* we are going to do it. **Participation** which allows everyone’s voice to be heard and allows people to feel a sense of ownership and presence in the process and creating **Shared Commitments** for action and the outcomes.

## What Do I Want to Achieve?

The importance of engagement through partnerships is to develop constructive working relationships with children and parents that will build safety.

## General Guidance

Engaging families and their children means finding many ways to develop a partnership with children, their families and their extended network if needed.

You do this by:

1. The skillful use of your authority. This means you are clear about your role, why you are at their door, your bottom line/non-negotiables for child safety, but you are also clear you want to be fair and to work closely and constructively with family members to make every child safe.
2. Seeking to find a balance between danger and protective actions and family strengths knowing that each is going to be present to some degree.
3. Being a critical thinker through information gathering, analyzing your case, and reflecting on your professional judgment about how safe the child is at any given time. This also means asking family members and their networks questions that are intended to help them to think more critically about what or how they do things.
4. Minimizing personal judgment towards a parent and instead believing as well as finding examples they can change/be protective/show their strengths, even in the smallest way.
5. A detailed sense of trauma in the lives of family members has impacted them.

## Practice Tips for Building your Skills with Children

Every child's development will be different and knowing what you notice about that stage of development is critical. This might include language development, capability at understanding certain words/concepts, physical skills, understanding emotions, etc.

Always understanding how certain life events for children can be traumatic. Knowing how these events (e.g. exposure to family violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect) intersect with development can be a guide for how children will express themselves.

Knowing the specifics of trauma and children is critical but so is knowing about posttraumatic growth. With children, this means recognizing their **RESILIENCE** or capabilities they have to overcome hurdles, their **RECOVERY** or coping strategies you and others put into place with them, and **ENRICHMENT** or the things they do that are healthy and what works for them to move forward.



Developing a professional alliance and positive working relationships with children trumps almost much of what is done with and on behalf of children. An alliance will take time to grow. Acknowledgment and validation towards the child are essential.

- Focus on what the child wants, their goals. When you do this, you are likely to create hope.
- Ask them about their everyday lives.
- Get down to the floor level with a child-the floor is your friend.
- Break down language into words and questions a child can understand.
- Incorporate regular 'check in's with the child.
- Allow children to look away, fidget, wiggle away from you; that's their way of participating; be patient and take your time.
- Incorporate playfulness as much as possible; use toys, paper/markers, objects they are familiar with.
- Look for what works with children and do more of it.

Grow your QUACK\* skills.

1. Repeating Questions.

"I'm going to ask you lots of questions. If I ask you the same question, it does not mean you've answered it wrong."

2. Explain you are Uninformed.

"I don't know how or what happened. Can you tell me?"

3. Don't have to Answer.

"You don't have to answer my questions and you won't get into trouble. I just want to hear your side of things."

4. Let me know if you are Confused or don't understand.

"If I ask you anything that is confusing will you let me know?"

5. Ok to say you don't Know or don't remember.



“It’s ok to say you don’t know or remember.”

6. Speak up if I get something wrong.

“If I get something wrong, please tell me. You know the most about your family.”

*\*UC Davis ‘working with kids’*

## Critical Thinking Skills for Working with Children

Critical thinking is an active process of integrating, analyzing, and evaluating information about the everyday work we do with children. In the end critical thinking helps us get better information, be more analytical about the case and ultimately help us make better decisions about what we do.

- What am I doing well in my work with the child? What am I doing that is building safety for this child (ren) over the life of the case?
- What would the child say I do to engage them and build respect?
- What do I need to do to continue to sharpen my safety planning skills with the child?
- What questions can I bring to supervision about any confusion I have with the child?
- Do I continue to think how the safety network or shareholders can be helpful to keep the child safer?
- What do I say or do that attempts to build some hope and alleviate unintentional fear the child may have?
- What do I say that lowers the power differential between myself and the child?

## Practice Tips for Building your skills with Family Members

Parents need an ongoing understand why you are involved, especially what change is needed for you to be able to see the child is safe enough so the family’s case can be closed.

Take time to get to know the family network and to incorporate them into planning.

Asking questions that helps move the family towards change is always harder than telling a parent what they need to be doing. Finding ways to ask questions that will help a parent think more clearly about what they can do is likely to generate more cooperation and motivation on their part.

Asking questions means getting more detail about what you need to know. It also means asking questions and talking with parents in a way that is simple, clear, and without jargon.



Demonstrating respect towards family members as persons' worth doing business with-we build hope and the expectation that change is possible with each contact. A key task is to build a constructive partnership with each parent.

Noticing and honoring any small or big thing a parent does that is good for them or their child or builds safety is important. Most parents appreciate acknowledgment and validation, two ways of building further hope.

Families will cooperate with us even if we must be coercive-we use our skills to gain leverage in any case to make a child safer; but it is done in a way where the worker is honest and very clear about what needs to happen.

Throughout the life of any case we will see signs of safety; that means we notice the smallest things any parent does that promotes builds or does to create safety points for a child.

Asking about and monitoring what a parent's goals or needs are will be helpful. Parents can tell us what they want and we can be their guide towards the 'who, what, where, and when' in accomplishing these goals.

Give parents as many choices as possible.

When shared decision-making between a family and caseworker happens, the partnership between both is likely to grow.

Focus on small but sustainable changes. Big quick changes are always harder.

Using your skills at engaging with a family over the life of a case will be preferable to confrontation.

Minimizing your judgment about any parent means you keep open options for them to show you they can change.

Maximizing your sensitivity to traumatic symptoms.

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