

Texas CPS Practice Model: Engaging

Hi everyone and welcome to the engaging with children and their families webinar. I'm Angela Pie, the CPS Practice Model Specialist here at State Office and I will be presenting the webinar today.

Today's webinar represents the first in a series of exciting discussions around building our core competency skills that are part of the CPS Practice Model. Today, we will be looking at the first of those core competency skills: engaging. Engaging is the heart and soul of what we do. As we grow our child welfare system over the next few years, where our outcomes are safety, permanency, and well-being, you might be asking yourself a few questions, "Can we do our work better than we already do?", and, "How can we really help make children forever safe from danger and risk no matter what stage of service we are working from?" Well, today's webinar represents a start on that journey that we are all on together here in Texas of growing our practice to ensure that children are protected and connected. As we get started, there are several objectives that I'd like to accomplish with you today. These objectives are on your screen and what we might see as the concrete takeaways. First, my hope in this webinar is that you will leave with some skills that will build your capacities at engaging with children, youth, and families. Second, I'd like to provide you with some ideas how engaging with all our clients can happen through the skillful use of our authority as well as through using your critical thinking skills.

To set the stage for this webinar, I want you each to take a moment to think about how you would define engagement. For many of you who have already seen the Texas Practice Model booklet or the Practice Model Overview Webinar, a simple yet clear definition of engagement was defined throughout. Defined, engagement means how we develop trust-based relationships with children, youth, families, and their safety networks for the purpose of driving positive change. In some ways, this is second nature to the work you already do but there is a science and skill base to engaging that we can adopt in our work. We want to ensure that we are doing more than just knocking on the door to discuss an intake or a case transfer from another stage of service. We want engaging to help us partner with our children, youth, and families to ensure forever safety. Now, let's look at the questions on your screen that are a key part of engaging.

These three questions that are currently on your screen should be familiar to all of you who have completed the Structured Decision Making Training. You might remember your trainers talking about three useful questions that we can use when interviewing children, youth, and families about safety. These questions are:

1. What are we worried about?
2. What is working well?
3. What needs to happen?

In many ways, these questions represent the importance of finding that balance in any assessment between the dangers and risk and the protective actions or the strengths of the family. These same three questions help each investigator think critically about the decision around any child being safe or not safe and what actually needs to be done. Yet there is more to it. For those of us not working in investigations, these same three questions represent the way we think of as a way of how to organize our thinking and questions with each child, youth, or family we work with. These three questions can and really should become the heart of how we organize all of our thinking, analyzing, and decision-making about safety and permanency. Perhaps a critical learning point for us is that these three questions can align with our work at every single stage of service. So for example, if you are an FBSS worker, and are working with the family network to build a set of rules for making a child safe, these three questions can actually be part of that process. Likewise, to those of you who are conservatorship workers, asking these same questions around reunification are going to help you think through or reflect on the how's, what's, or who's of moving a child back home.

So, many of you that have been trained using Structured Decision Making might wonder how engaging and using these three questions in the previous slide actually align with the SDM tool. Well our three questions and the SDM go hand-in-hand. The next few slides are going to help you better understand that.

So let's take a moment to look at how our danger indicators, household strengths and protective actions, and safety plan interventions actually align with our three questions. Those questions are:

1. What are we worried about?
2. What is working well?
3. What needs to happen?

So, when our staff are doing the SDM safety Assessment, how would we identify our danger indicators? So, if our staff are out in the field, and they are completing the SDM Safety Assessment, what question would we ask to identify the danger indicators? (Pause) What are we worried about? That would be the question. When we start to ask children, youth, and families, "What are we worried about?", that's how we identify our danger indicators. So, when we ask, "What is working well?", what are we able to identify? We are able to identify household strengths or protective actions. Now moving on to the third question of, "What needs to happen?", when we ask this question, we are able to identify the safety plan and interventions.

So, now we have seen how the safety assessment aligns with our three questions, let's take a moment to look at how the SDM Risk Assessment aligns with those three questions that guide our ability to effectively engage with children, youth, and families. So when we're asking children, youth, and families, "What are we worried about?" on the risk assessment, what would this help us identify- our scored risk, those items that we're worried about. So moving on to our second question, when we're looking at, "What is working well?" we are able to identify those unscored risk items. When we look at the third question of, "What needs to happen?" it guides us to open and close cases.

We hope the previous two slides gave you all a better understanding of how our three questions align with the Structured Decision Making tools:

1. What are we worried about?
2. What is working well?
3. What needs to happen?

As we continue through the webinar, we would like you to think of how these questions can help you make sense of, analyze, or expand on what each of the SDM tools tells us about what the danger, risk, or action that make children and youth unsafe or safe. These three questions are part of the engagement process. Engaging allows us to get really clear answers about child safety and when we get better at engaging, the three questions become a regular tool at reaching our practice model outcomes.

So let's continue on with engagement. We have a definition of what it is now, now let's discuss engagement in more detail. So let's imagine how you would start to see engagement taking place in your practice or your staff's practice. Engagement is the basic building block of child safety, permanency, and well-being. It's how we develop those trust-based relationships with children, families, and safety networks to drive positive change. Engaging is how we talk with families. We need to be skillful and respectful at using our authority to help families face what worries us about the child's safety and well-being. Engaging is also about building hope through describing the change process in a way that allows families to see possibilities and to see that we believe they can change. Engaging is also about asking those specific questions with a mix of what worries us as an agency, what worries the family, what the family does well, and the times their actions have protected their children. It's our organizing framework.

So if we want to help everyone involved think about what needs to happen, perhaps we can start by asking what already is working well. When we do this, we find ways to talk about solutions or say what's working. What are their past successes? We can quickly help children, youth, or families draw on behaviors that are already working or have worked in the past. Think about how this works for each of us. If we are doing something that works, we tend to keep doing it. So the question is as we engage with children, youth, and families, what are the positive outcomes for everyone involved?

As you think about what each of us does day-in and day-out to engage with families, what's the outcome? Does our engagement lead to an adversarial relationship or is it more likely to lead to what we might consider a partnership? One that is mutually respectful yet professional in every way. Well, we want to ensure that our relationship with children and families is one that's a partnership. So how do we do this? First, we develop understanding. This is where every family member knows why we are here, what our worries about safety are, but they also know what we need to accomplish, what our bottom line is- being transparent, open, and honest with the families we are working with. We increase participation meaning that every child, parent, and family member's voice is heard. We are involving them in the process and we're partnering with them to see change and to ensure forever safety. Third and last, we create shared commitments. This means we work hard to create a mutually agreed upon plan between the family, the safety network, and the agency that will demonstrate protective actions towards each child at all times. At this point, I want to emphasize that sometimes and with some families, the engagement process can be difficult and challenging. Sometimes this means that families might be so angry with our involvement that our best work at engaging doesn't get our foot in the door with families. So what then? Well, part of the engagement process is to not waiver from what is necessary for building forever safety but to recognize that everything we say and do is built around the professional use of our authority. This is a key skill that will sustain us through the duration of our work with families.

As you know from the Practice Model Overview, the practice model encompasses key values that we want to ensure are demonstrated throughout each of our core competencies but specifically engaging. These values are currently listed on your screen. We want to ensure that we're respectful with the families that we work with, that we show commitment, we're committed through the life of the case no matter what stage of service we're working from. We want to ensure that when we're engaging with families, we work with integrity- we're being open and honest as well as transparent. We want to ensure that our work is equitable- that we're treating families equally and fairly. We also want to ensure that our work is done with a sense of urgency.

So now let's focus on engaging with children. As you know, from our Practice Model Overview, our practice is child-centered and children are in the middle of everything we do including our core competency of engaging. Engaging with children should not be seen as a cookie cutter process. It's not prescriptive so that situation x demands an engagement skill of y. We have developed some practice tips for you to assist you and your staff with engaging with children. So let's take a look at these practice tips on your screen.

These practice tips represent some core behaviors and actions to notice as we engage. Engaging with children can be such a unique experience but it also requires us to develop almost a new mindset about what it means to talk with a child. Naturally, I think the first step is really making the child feel comfortable and understanding their view of the world is so much different from when we interact with their parents. So let's take a look at these practice tips. First, as I mentioned earlier, we need to know what makes a child feel comfortable. That means getting down on the floor and talking to the child. Keeping it simple, speaking in their language that they understand. But most of all, taking your time and being patient with children and youth asking questions and actually listening. When we take our time and sit and listen to the children, they'll often tell us about what they need or what they see. We want to use art and toys if possible to get them to better engage with us. We also want to connect with each child's racial identity to create goals. We want to find out what the child needs or what the child wants in his or her future. The way that we find this out is by giving the child lots of choices, not telling them but asking lots of questions so that we have choices. We want to be able to respond to trauma. We want the child to be able to share their worries with us in a manner in which we're making the child feel safe. We also want to pay attention to the impact that the caregiver's actions have on the child. When we're engaging, we want to build an alliance not only with the child but with the key people in the child's life. We do this by asking them about their everyday lives in their community, at school, and in their neighborhood. We're always checking in with the children and we're remembering to talk with each and every child that we work with about confidentiality and understanding that there's going to be sometimes that we have to share the information that they tell us but continuing to be open, honest, and transparent with the children as we engage with them.

So now let's move on to the practice tips when we're working with children and using our engagement skills while being trauma-informed. As we mentioned in the last slide, we want to help the children feel in control and this happens by giving them lots of choices. We also want to maintain safe connections for the child. We want to help the children and youth that we are working with identify their strengths and their resources. We want the child to also know that they can overcome obstacles and that we are there to help them overcome those obstacles. When we're engaging, we want to be able to tell safe, familiar people about the child's needs because connection to familiar people is a way to push more people to the table for a safety network. We always want to remember that engagement and children planning their safety go hand in hand. When we effectively engage with children, they'll oftentimes help us plan their own safety.

So now let's move on to how we engage families. As we discussed in the Overview, our work should also be family-focused. Effectively engaging with families allows us to ensure that this is our approach. Our engagement is meant to help caregivers and families be better critical thinkers and with the help of ourselves or their safety network we can help families critically think about what they need to be doing in their everyday life to ensure the forever safety of their children. Our work is always family focused and we really want to ensure that we are using a questioning approach when engaging with families.

So, we provided you with practice tips for working with children; let's look at the practice tips for effectively engaging with families. We want to ask families more questions. We shouldn't be telling our families what to do. We should be asking them questions about what they want to see, what they need to do to ensure the forever safety of their own children. We need to take time to notice a family's protective actions and we need to honor the smallest changes in a culturally responsive manner. We need to recognize that families do things well and we need to be able to point those things out to the families that we're working with. We need to deepen our collaboration and compassion with family members in relation to traumatic life events. We need to help the parents that we are working with feel safe by creating a forum that the family member doesn't get re-traumatized, that feel open and comfortable when talking to us. We want to create family goals by finding out what the family needs and continuing to give them lots of choices based off our responses to our questions. When we effectively engage with families, we want to partner with them in a way they always know what our worries about child safety are.

Let's now discuss how we can effectively engage with children, youth, and families when we develop the skillful use of our authority. There is no formal definition for the skillful use of our authority nor is it driven by a theory. Instead, it is a way of thinking and behaving that we demonstrate in relation to children, youth, and their families. In our work, we want to be in a position to influence decisions that help make children safe, not make the decisions. We really want our focus to be that we are influencing the decision that the parents make to ensure the forever safety of their children. The best description of this term comes from Susie Essex, a long time child protection worker who believes that our ability to use our skills with authority is to be firm but also hugely kind. So let's take a moment to talk about the importance of our skillful use of authority.

We use our skillful use of authority by being clear about our roles knowing that everyone understands our bottom lines. Setting limits of behaviors or actions and even letting others like caregivers know what we expect as an agency. So how do we do this, or set things in motion? Do we need to use a hammer to get our point across even if families are angry or defensive about what we need from them? The answer is no! Instead we need to use a number of hugely kind skills to get our point across. Workers at every stage of service can be hugely kind while still using their skillful use of authority. When you meet a family for the first time, what skills do you use to get in the front door while at the same time not overwhelming them? How do you use your skillful use of authority to let family members know what you would like to do or see happen in the future? Using your skillful use of authority and your engagement with families is critical. As we move forward over the next few slides, I'll provide you with some various skillful authority prompts help guide our engagement with families.

So what are some of the questions you ask to actually help family members think about what needs to happen and what needs to change? As you're thinking or writing down your answers to those responses, I want you to consider the prompts on the screen. "If this situation doesn't change, what's going to happen with the kids?" "If your child is going to feel safe around you, what would he or she say needs to happen?" "You want a different life, yes; your kids need the same thing. What do you picture this being, let's think about it?"

So let's do another question. How do you show respect to each family member from your very first point of contact? Let's take a moment and think about how we would answer that question or you can write your response down. On the screen now, are various prompts to help you consider how you should answer that question. "I see you are angry about me being here, and I will do what I can to help you understand my position." "I can tell you are going through tough times right now; I'm really sorry about this. Can we talk about that because I worry it might be affecting the kids?" "I get the feeling this is really tough on you. Can we keep trying to figure this out together?"

In the face of family members anger about you being in their home, what steps do you take to stay calm and safe or say what you need to say with a firm voice while being hugely kind? So, the prompts on your screen now are responses that will help you answer that question. Consider saying, "I need to talk to you about some of my worries, what do you need from me first, before we start?" "What can we do together so that we can begin to have a meaningful talk about why I'm really here?" "What do you think needs to happen so that you and I can talk about some of the good things but also some of the serious things?"

So another question that I might ask you as we look at our skillful use of authority prompts to guide your engagement with families is, "How do you compliment family members for what you see them say or do?" Think about that question for a moment. Some examples that you might do is to say, "I agree being this angry can be harmful, but I noticed you seem pretty sincere about this." "We all agree that the future has to be different. Hats off to you for letting me know this. That's great!" "So when things got tense, you sent the kids to their rooms. That's what I'd call being protective. Good for you to do this. That was excellent!"

So finally our last skillful authority prompt to guide your engagement with families is to talk to them about what will happen next. So, how do you let families know what will happen next? Now remember, we want you to be using your skillful use of authority when answering this question. Some examples would be, "Can I tell you what I'm going to do next?" "Now that you've helped answer some of my questions here is what we can do." "When I get back to the office, here are three things I'm going to do right away." Now, I just provided you with several examples; however, you can say what you feel you need to say with families when you're out there by just focusing on using your skillful use of authority and saying it in a manner that is hugely kind but also firm.

As you see, it's key when engaging to compliment family members for what they say or do. Yet it is important to ensure that when we are engaging we minimize the jargon that we use. A lot of families don't use the same terminology or the language that we use here at CPS. I want you to think of how you can minimize jargon; different responses that you can say instead of what's on the screen. For example, "Have you ever been in therapy?" Some parents don't understand that. So what you might want to say here is, "Have you ever talked to somebody when you've been sad? What does that look like?" Another example is telling a family member or parent, "Your psychological assessment says you are histrionic." Many of our families don't know what histrionic means and some of our staff may actually not know what that means. So it's a matter of you know, sending them to the therapist or the psychologist and having that psychologist may be explain or saying it in terms and in a language that they understand. The next one is, "Parenting programs focus on positive reinforcements." Some parents might say, "Well, what are positive reinforcements?" So what you might want to say here is, "A parenting program focuses on helping you identify ways that you can easily communicate with your child or easily talk to your child. A parenting program will help you identify ways to discipline your child."

So, let's move on a bit and introduce ourselves to yet another important area of need for growing our engagement skills especially with children who have been traumatized or may be showing some behaviors we would see as traumatic. Our capacity to be trauma informed is going to be a function in many ways of how we connect with children and youth as well as our assessment of what the safety versus danger/risk indicators and vulnerabilities may be in the child's life.

So what does it mean to engage and to be trauma-informed? Well, being trauma-informed means you notice the person's reaction to the trauma. What makes an event traumatic is the response. So, let's look at the trauma. It's often an overwhelming experience that a youth or child or family member experiences. It involves threat, results in vulnerability and loss of control. It leaves people feeling helpless and fearful and often interferes with relationships and fundamental beliefs. We want our staff to remember that there is a difference between a one-time trauma versus a repeated/prolonged trauma which is always more problematic. That one time trauma equals that car accident that that child or youth may have been involved in where they broke their arm. The repeated, prolonged trauma could be equivalent to a child experiencing domestic violence in the home. That's that traumatic event that they experience on daily or often frequent basis.

So, what behavior should we look for when looking at trauma? We want to look for behaviors like a child not sleeping or having nightmares, being agitated, looking on guard, telling us that they can't get what happened out of the minds, playing out specific parts of the trauma with toys or drawing pictures, acting jumpy or nervous, withdrawing, noticeable change in their schoolwork. Although these behaviors are not exclusive, they're the behaviors that we need to look for. We want to pay attention to development and behavior; and we also want to remember that children and their parents commonly have experienced trauma.

So, the next slide might help you put together two of our three questions: our worries and what's working well. As we work our way through the impact of trauma to children and youth, we've highlighted those worries and the strengths. Our worries represent what we will see and hear, what our assessments will tell us, or what foster parents, caregivers, or safety network members will disclose. These are the events, the pattern, the development, and the behaviors associated with the traumatic event. Our what's working well section asks us to dig into those exceptions; those behaviors that tell us children are coping well and rising beyond adversity as well as how parents or the safety network act in ways that protect children and youth. Here again, we can use these questions as a way of informing us of what's going on in the world of the child. This slide represents a balance of sorts- the notion that as worrisome as trauma can be, there is also a silver lining- that resilience, recovery, enrichment, and those protective actions are possible.

We've talked about how to engage with children, youth, and families. We've talked about using our skillful use of authority as well as minimizing jargon that we use in our language when working with children, youth, and families; as well as what it means to be trauma-informed. So, let's wrap up with the takeaways from engaging. We want to make sure that every child safe and in order to do that we must engage with every family. Everything we do builds upon our engagement. If we effectively engage with families, families will tell us their secrets and we'll be able to work with them in a more productive manner, like a partnership. Engaging includes our values and the three questions that we want you and your staff to use every day.

1. What are we worried about?
2. What is working well?
3. What needs to happen?

When we engage with children, youth, and families to assess safety, permanency, and well-being, we will be able to extend our skillful use of authority that we have discussed throughout today's webinar. Our work will be safety organized, child-centered, family-focused, collaborative, and sustainable. We will be able to see the caregiver's protective actions that address danger over time and the sustainability of the safety network. We will also have an increased awareness to being trauma-informed.

So, as we close today, remember that engaging with families, it improves our ability to assess safety and risk. It creates a pathway for change in families because it's our relationships with families that matter the most. Engaging and assessing are dynamic and integrated- we are always engaging and we are always assessing. The more effective we engage, the better our assessments will be. So engaging leads us into our next core competency of assessment. So we want to remember that engaging and assessing are dynamic and integrated. We are always engaging and we are always assessing.

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