BECOMING A
Family-Focused System

Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

Strategies for Building a Culture to Partner With Families

An organizational culture that prioritizes families is vital to improving family engagement in child welfare. When agencies have a culture and climate that support engaging families, staff seek out, hear, and respect family voice and recognize parents as experts on their children. When agencies value and recognize the importance of continuity of relationships, staff strive to maintain parent-child and sibling connections. When agencies celebrate the diversity of families and operate from a position of cultural humility, staff engage with the intention of honoring families' beliefs, customs, and values.

This publication provides strategies, tips, and examples for building and sustaining a well-aligned culture and climate to partner with families and support continuity of relationships. These strategies are organized under three subdimensions of culture and climate (see exhibit below).

Exhibit. Subdimensions of Organizational Culture and Climate[1] and Related Strategies

Leadership Vision and Commitment

The view provided from the top. This includes agency leaders' commitment to a new practice or program and their communication of intended change to stakeholders. How agency leaders prioritize a practice or program, align it with other ongoing initiatives, and dedicate resources to support it also will reflect leadership commitment and dedication to the practice or program. Strategies to support partnerships with families include:

◆ Establish, communicate, and demonstrate expectations.
◆ Model family engagement through inclusion of family voice in policy development, practice initiatives, and communication.
◆ Embed family-focused approaches into policies and practices.
◆ Encourage and reward staff and stakeholder creativity.

Organizational Norms, Values, and Purpose

Written and unwritten guidance and expectations for how people behave and how things are done in the organization. This includes an agency's stated mission, values, and goals as well as how a new program or innovation fits within the overall mission, values, and goals. Strategies to support partnerships with families include:

◆ Become a learning organization.
◆ Practice cultural competence and cultural humility.
◆ Understand and manage implicit bias.

Workforce Attitudes, Morale, Motivation, and Buy-in

Staff perceptions of the agency environment, programs, and practices. This includes workers' commitment to the organization, their motivation and buy-in for desired practices, and their perception of the importance and sustainability of a practice or an innovation. This subdimension also reflects staff clarity on their expected roles and responsibilities and their openness to change. Strategies to support partnerships with families include:

◆ Get staff buy-in.
◆ Support your workforce.

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1. These subdimensions of organizational capacity are presented in the Capacity Building Center for States (2017), based on work done by James Bell Associates, Inc., and ICF International (2015). For more information see Guide to Five Dimensions of Capacity at https://capacity. childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/cqi/organizational-capacity-guide/organizational-culture-and-climate/subdimensions/

When considering which strategies best meet the agency's needs, it is helpful to understand the agency's current culture and climate. By assessing the agency culture and climate, an agency can identify areas of strength and alignment and areas in need of improvement. (For more information on assessment, see "Becoming a Family-Focused System: Assessing Culture and Climate" at https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/family-focused-system/assessing-culture-and-climate-brief/)

How to Build Culture and Climate to Partner With Families

The strategies, tips, and examples below can help agencies build a culture and climate to partner with families. Many of the strategies relate to more than one subdimension.

Leadership Vision and Commitment

Leadership sets the tone of the organization and determines the expectations of how the work is done. Agency leaders can foster the culture and climate necessary for effective partnering with families by communicating, modeling, performing ongoing integration, and rewarding creativity. These strategies help to establish, model, embed, reinforce, and invest in practices that support partnering with families.

When considering leadership, remember agency leaders are not the only ones who can demonstrate leadership within an agency. Leaders can come from anywhere in the organization.

Establish, Communicate, and Demonstrate Expectations

Effective communication is critical to the success of any change process. When building agency culture to partner with families, keep family engagement at the forefront.

◆ Communicate the **agency's commitment** to family engagement and continuity of relationships when children are placed in out-of-home care. Set clear expectations about how the agency engages families at all levels of the organization.

◆ **Recognize staff** who are engaging families in effective ways. Share stories of success and positive outcomes. When possible, draw clear connections between family engagement strategies and improved outcomes for children and families. For example, a caseworker supported open communication between a family and resource family, leading to better connections for children in care with extended family and improved continuity of relationships.

◆ Include family engagement articles in routine agency communications such as **monthly newsletters and internal and external communications**. Family engagement becomes part of the fabric of the organization when it is regularly highlighted, held up as an important part of the work, and valued.

Definitions

Culture – shared behavioral expectations and norms in a work environment, or the collective view of "the way work is done" (Glisson, 2015). Indicators of culture include policies, priorities, mission and vision, and practice model.

(Organizational) climate – staff perceptions of the impact of the work environment on the individual, or "how it feels" to work at the agency (e.g., supportive versus stressful) (Glisson, 2015). Examples of organizational climate include perceptions, beliefs, and prevailing attitudes among staff.

Engagement – active, ongoing collaboration of families, youth, and other stakeholders with the child welfare system in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in effecting practice and system change.

Model Family Engagement Through Inclusion of Family Voice in Policy Development, Practice Initiatives, and Communication

Modeling is a powerful tool when working with a group around a change initiative. Modeling at the highest levels of the organization sends a clear message to all agency staff that this is a change in the way the work is done. Leadership can do this in several ways.

◆ Include parents, youth, and relative caregivers on **workgroups and committees,** such as strategic planning sessions and workgroups on the Child and Family Services Plan and Program Improvement Plan. They provide valuable perspectives on the work of the agency and can provide "out-of-the-box" strategies and solutions.

◆ Ask parents to **participate in staff training** on family engagement to share their lived experience with child welfare services and review and comment on training content and related materials.

◆ Include expectations about family engagement in **requests for proposals and contracts** with service providers. For example, require that contractors partner with families in the development of a treatment plan, survey families and include questions on engagement, etc.

Embed Family-Focused Approaches Into Policies and Practices

Building a culture to partner with families is not a "one-and-done" activity. Agencies must focus on growing the culture to partner with families on many fronts, embed these approaches in a variety of ways, and revisit these over time. Leadership can do this in many ways, such as:

◆ Include family engagement as part of *everyone's* **job description**, from receptionists, to child protective service staff, managers, and leadership. Treating families with respect, dignity, and compassion is everyone's job.

◆ Include measures for family engagement in **continuous quality improvement (CQI)**. Measures may include the timeliness of initial case-planning meetings, inclusion of parents in decisions about services, or inclusion of fathers in case planning and visitation schedules.

◆ Include family engagement as part of the **metric for staff performance**. For example, include family engagement as a regular part of coaching and supervision and include family engagement measures on annual performance review self-assessments, supervisory assessments, and learning plans.

Encourage and Reward Staff and Stakeholder Creativity

Welcoming creativity at all levels of the organization is an indicator that agency culture and climate are well aligned to partner with families. When encouraged to think outside the box, staff bring new ideas and solutions to the work.

◆ Invite staff to **think creatively** about engaging families at all levels of the organization.

◆ **Reward creativity** through recognition and opportunities for professional development.

◆ Encourage or invite staff, accompanied by family members, to **present their work at conferences** and community events. In doing so, leadership recognizes the value of the work, rewards staff with opportunities for continued professional growth, and demonstrates its commitment to partner with families in creative ways.

Family Empowerment
LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

This set of e-learning modules can help child welfare agency staff, family leaders, and community partners build shared understanding in these key areas:

◆ Collaboration with families to create sustainable change in the child welfare system

◆ Agency and family leader roles in developing collaborative partnerships

◆ Peer-to-peer support for families currently receiving child welfare services

This e-learning series is available at: https://learn.childwelfare.gov

Organizational Norms, Values, and Purpose

To partner effectively with families, agency staff need to understand the underlying assumptions, norms, and values of their organizational culture (Milhauser, 2015).

Traditional child welfare practices tended to be authoritative and deficit based. As agencies move to a strengths-based approach and a broader perspective that views families as partners, staff and family members need to adopt new perspectives and take on new roles, roles that are less adversarial and more collaborative (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2011a). With that understanding in place, agencies can then develop and reinforce those norms and values.

To help promote family-supportive norms and values, agencies can become learning organizations and practice cultural competence and cultural humility.

Become a Learning Organization

Each family is unique, and each set of circumstances that brings a family to the attention of child welfare is unique. Likewise, each staff person brings a unique perspective to his or her work. It stands to reason, then, that approaches to child welfare need to be able to adapt to emerging needs and new evidence of what works. A culture and climate that encourage organizations to continually learn and grow can support innovation and improve service effectiveness (Glisson, 2015). An organization with a growth mindset (Schwartz, 2018):

Continuity of Relationships

When children are placed in out-of-home care, every effort must be made to maintain the continuity and integrity of family and community relationships whenever possible. Supporting these relationships can decrease a child's stress, minimize the trauma of placement, ease parents' fears, and increase the likelihood of timely reunification. Consider connections with:

◆ Parents

◆ Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins

◆ Siblings

◆ School friends, coaches, teammates

1. Has an environment where staff at all levels feel free to take calculated risks and make mistakes while keeping child safety at the center of all decisions
2. Supports continuous learning
3. Provides continuous feedback across all levels of an organization that is grounded in a shared commitment to growth

An agency that values learning and growth and has a commitment to engaging families at all levels of the organization must lead by example. An agency that values the inclusion of family voice and input should also value the inclusion of staff voice and input. Frontline staff provide an essential and timely perspective of the field. Demonstrating these values also allows the agency to model strategies for engagement and partnership that bridge the power differential, often a challenge when engaging families. The following strategies can help sustain a growth-focused organizational culture for family engagement:

◆ Leaders can seek out and actively listen to new ideas.

◆ Supervisors can encourage staff to learn from each other and share insights and experiences, both positive and negative.

◆ The agency can use CQI approaches to collect data on successes and areas in need of improvement.

Practice Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility

Cultural competence and cultural humility are similar concepts with important distinctions. Both play an important role in the work of child welfare.

Cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with people of various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, and social groups. Working toward cultural competence is an ongoing process, one often tackled by learning about the patterns of behavior, beliefs, language, values, and customs of particular groups (Soundscaping Source, n.d.).

The National Center for Cultural Competence (n.d.) explains that to become culturally competent, organizations must:

◆ Have a defined set of values and principles

◆ Demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable staff to work effectively cross-culturally

◆ Have the capacity to value diversity, conduct self-assessment, manage the dynamics of differences, acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve

◆ Incorporate the above in all aspects of policymaking, administration, practice, and service delivery

Cultural humility is an ongoing process of self-exploration and self-critique combined with a willingness to learn from others. It means entering a relationship with another person with the intention of honoring the person's beliefs, customs, and values. It means acknowledging differences and accepting that person for who he or she is (Soundscaping Source, n.d.). Organizations that embrace cultural humility encourage child welfare staff to:

◆ Critically **self-assess** perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs that form the filter through which they view the world

◆ **Learn** from each individual and family they meet

◆ **Stay curious** and open

◆ **Check assumptions** as they arise

◆ Recognize that **"family" means different things** to different people and may include relative and fictive family members

◆ **Partner** with families to identify strategies and solutions that work for them

Role of Resource Parents

Partnering with families goes beyond the parents. Resource parents play a vital role in the health and well-being of children in out-of-home care and their families. Resource parents are not replacement parents. An agency culture that supports partnering with families establishes clear expectations for the role of resource parents. This includes:

◆ How resource parents are recruited

◆ How resource parents are trained and supported

◆ How resource parents engage and partner with families

The agency recognizes resource parents as:

◆ Valuable members of the team and includes them in meetings

◆ Knowledgeable on effective parenting strategies and a resource for parents

An agency culture that supports family engagement celebrates resource parents.

Understand and Manage Implicit Bias

"Bias" is a word with many negative connotations and can be harmful in child welfare. However, it is important to differentiate between *explicit bias* (conscious beliefs people hold about individuals or groups) and **implicit bias** (the unconscious result of learned associations and social conditioning). Implicit bias is part of a unique filter through which each individual views the world—formed and informed by every life experience the individual has had (Berghoef, 2018).

To help staff recognize and address their implicit biases:

◆ Give staff permission to own their biases. Provide safe spaces to talk about thoughts or feelings that come up when they work with a family or group. Help them explore what is at the root of the reaction. This is a great role for coaching.

◆ Help staff members develop a plan for how to recognize when implicit bias may be influencing their thinking and how to change it. What triggers, thoughts, and assumptions come up? What strategies can they use to interrupt and refocus their thinking? Implicit bias is about their filter; question assumptions and generalizations.

◆ Invite staff to check assumptions they may be making about a family or individual with whom they are working and address them.

◆ Encourage staff to stay curious and ask questions. Staff can learn a wealth of information from families when they keep an open and curious mind.

The good news is that implicit bias can be managed, and its effects mitigated when people give themselves and others permission and an opportunity to shine a light on it. Most biases do not survive the light of day.

Workforce Attitudes, Morale, Motivation, and Buy-in

Staff perceptions of the agency environment, programs, and practices are one of the most important factors in achieving better outcomes for children, youth, and families (Goering, 2017). Research has shown that staff at organizations that value staff motivation, morale, and buy-in are much more likely to engage with families in productive ways (Goering, 2017).

Get Staff Buy-in

The following strategies and tips can help child welfare agencies leverage the depth and breadth of staff expertise (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2011b):

◆ Build a **shared understanding** of family engagement and continuity of relationships by integrating related language in the agency's mission, vision, and strategic plan that aligns with family engagement.

◆ Make staff **part of the solution** by highlighting the exemplary work of staff and ensuring that frontline staff have a voice and are routinely included in discussions and decisions about family engagement.

◆ Make family engagement part of the **agency's training plan** *for all staff*—professional and administrative. Include training on the importance of maintaining familial relationships when children are in out-of-home care and the importance of supporting parent-resource-parent relationships.

◆ Encourage **supervisors and middle managers** to include family engagement as part of regular clinical supervision, coaching, and peer-to-peer support. Include family engagement in job descriptions and as part of the metrics for performance reviews.

Support Your Workforce

The following strategies can help build and sustain the motivation and morale of the child welfare agency workforce:

◆ **Invest in supervisor training and the development of positive supervisor-supervisee relationships.** Supervisors are key to helping child welfare workers develop the knowledge and skills they use on the job, as well as providing organizational support and recognition for their work (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Landsman, 2007). Supervisory support also works to sustain and reinforce staff morale and encourage a professional sense of worth among staff (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Strong supervisory support is a positive factor in facilitating agency collaboration with families (Haksoon, Keyser, & Hayward-Everson, 2016).

◆ **Use coaching as a strategy to build family engagement skills and mastery.** Specifically, coaching provides the following opportunities (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016):

  ◆ **Improve transfer of learning** from training to practice. Use coaching to identify opportunities to apply skills learned in family engagement training with the families the agency serves.

  ◆ **Reinforce new strategies** when staff are just beginning to use new practices and may easily become frustrated. Help staff identify the small successes and celebrate these. Change does not need to be dramatic to be celebrated. Often a series of small successes leads to sustainable change both for families and for staff.

  ◆ **Build skills** to support workers in developing family engagement skills and building competencies that lead to desired outcomes. Tailor coaching to individual staff whenever possible. Use an individual's strengths as a tool to build new skills and competencies.

  ◆ **Develop problem-solving** skills and process challenging situations through reflection and exploration. Every challenge is an opportunity to hone skills and improve practice.

  ◆ **Model behaviors** to demonstrate engagement and partnership approaches that workers can then use with families to support behavior change and manage implicit bias when it arises.

◆ **Provide opportunities for group supervision.** Child welfare staff benefit from opportunities to learn from each other. Group supervision allows staff to share their challenges, seek and provide support, and offer unique perspectives to their peers. This type of supervision helps staff to feel part of a larger community invested in the well-being of children and families.

◆ **Celebrate staff and family successes**. Recognize the good work child welfare staff are doing in partnership with families. Celebrate reunification and the hard work it represents. Share stories of success and perseverance that embody family engagement. The hard-fought successes are what keep everyone connected to and invested in the work.

Strategies: Building a Culture That Welcomes Fathers

There are myriad reasons why child welfare agencies have difficulty engaging fathers. For example, fathers may be hard to locate or incarcerated, mothers may be reluctant to provide caseworkers with the father's name or may not have current contact information, or parents may have an acrimonious relationship. Whatever the reason, it is not surprising that Child and Family Services Review findings from the first 2 years of Round 3 (fiscal years 2015–16) showed fewer than one-half of the fathers whose children's cases were reviewed were interviewed about the child's case (Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

An agency may do a good job of engaging families but still not engage fathers consistently and effectively. Agencies interested in engaging fathers can do the following:

◆ Start by looking at the language in policy and training. Are fathers clearly noted along with mothers? If not, include them. Language matters—when agencies include fathers and underscore the importance of engaging fathers, it becomes part of daily practice.

◆ Provide specific training (preservice and ongoing) on the unique needs of fathers and include discussions in supervision and coaching. The more often, the better.

◆ Routinely interview fathers as part of the case investigation and actively encourage fathers to attend case-planning meetings. Use supervision, coaching, and CQI measures to track the frequency and quality of father engagement.

◆ Ensure that materials and brochures include photos, graphics, and information specifically targeted to fathers.

◆ Identify staff who are doing a good job of engaging fathers and ask them to share their success stories with others.

◆ Encourage fathers with closed child welfare cases to provide candid feedback to the agency on their experiences. What worked, what didn't? What recommendations do they have for how child welfare staff can improve engagement with fathers?

Conclusion

Child welfare agencies can use the strategies described here individually or in combination to improve their culture and climate after conducting an assessment. Teams or workgroups can also use them as a starting point to generate ideas and begin a conversation about culture and climate with families and community partners.

Agencies may find addressing culture and climate related to family engagement and continuity of relationships daunting—the topic has many moving parts and may seem too big to take on. However, agencies can start small by working on one aspect of culture and climate at a time. Agencies will often find that, like the families with whom they work, far more is going right than wrong. Collect those examples of how the agency is already engaging families. Celebrate the work that is already happening and begin by doing more of that. Identify gaps in training, coaching, policy, and address these together. Model the partnership the agency wants to see in working with families when working within the organization to address gaps. Just as families are the experts on their children, frontline staff are the experts in the realities facing the child welfare field. When the expertise of leadership and supervisors meets the experience of frontline staff, the solutions that emerge are collaborative, thoughtful, and well informed.

Becoming a Family-Focused System Series

Culture and climate affect the way child welfare practice is carried out in an agency.

Becoming a Family-Focused System is a series of resources designed to support program managers, child welfare leaders, CQI and evaluation staff, training managers, and other agency staff in assessing, building, and sustaining positive organizational culture and climate change. Resources include briefs, tip sheets, learning experiences, and podcasts focused on culture and climate affecting family engagement, continuity of relationships, and service array development. Additional series resources can be accessed at https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/family-focused-system/.

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