Engagement in Child Protective Services: Parent Perceptions of Worker Skills


Recent reforms in child protection systems in several countries have placed an increased emphasis on engaging parents in the initial assessment and service planning process. Child protective caseworkers face multiple barriers to successful engagement with parents, including parents' preconceived notions of CPS and their subsequent fearful or angry responses to the initial visit.

This qualitative study sought input from 40 parents involved in child protective services regarding the strategies that workers used to successfully engage them in the child protection intervention. Three major themes about worker skills emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Parents were more positively engaged with CPS workers who:
1) they perceived as competent;
2) utilized positive communication skills; and
3) provided them with either emotional or concrete support.

Two additional themes emerged from the interviews regarding the context surrounding the first visit:
1) parents' negative expectations about CPS and its workers; and
2) parents' strong negative emotional reactions to the initial CPS visit.

During data analysis, it became evident that child protective services operates within a very different social context than the other types of human services and that context inhibits the process of engagement with families. Before the workers arrived at the households, many of the parents had formed negative opinions about CPS workers and assumed they would be rude and disrespectful. CPS workers need to overcome these negative stereotypes and expectations in order to engage parents and develop a positive working relationship.

Engagement at the initial phase of CPS intervention requires worker skills that can overcome the parents' fears of child removal, shame at being labeled a bad parent, and negative expectations that surround the role of a CPS worker.

Parents were more likely to be accepting of a CPS intervention when they felt that their worker had heard all sides of the story and talked to everyone who had relevant information. Conversely, parents were angered when they perceived that their worker failed to collect information that might alter their case outcomes.

Since parents often have little factual knowledge about CPS processes, one of the most important things for parents to have was clear understanding about what was going to happen during their initial visits. From the parent’s perspective, a critical part of communication with their CPS worker involved the worker’s accessibility for additional discussion or questions after the initial visit.
Engaging parents in child welfare services is challenging, and child protective caseworkers who make the initial contact with parents have the especially difficult job of engaging them when the parents’ fear is at its peak (Diorio, 1992). Most parents, even if they have never interacted with child protective services, hold negative stereotypes of workers and what might happen during the assessment and intervention. The current results confirm previous findings that parents feel strong negative emotions of fear, anger or shame in response to a visit from a CPS worker.

Many of the worker behaviors and skills that parents found most engaging were respecting parents’ views and opinions, communicating honestly and openly about the CPS process, and exploring strengths as well as needs. These attributes are very similar to those described in “family-centered” or “empowerment” approaches to social work practice.

Child protective services in the United States has an image problem. Although current reform efforts in many countries are attempting to change the public perception of these services, recent studies have shown that these efforts have not been enough to diffuse the “negative and inevitably intimidating image of child protection workers as hostile, powerful, and to be avoided if possible” (Buckley et al., 2011, p. 104). These feelings were echoed in the current study as many of the parents held negative assumptions about child protective services prior to their first interaction with their worker.
