

Information Collection: Key Points

In terms of information collection, it is critical to remember that child welfare professionals must:

1) Be Engaging

The ability to establish rapport is critical to quality visitation. The ability to engage the client in the helping process is critical to positive client outcomes and change. Really, in the absence of rapport and engagement, the quality of information that is gathered is questionable or inaccurate therefore all decisions that flow from that information can be faulty. Engaging the client is dependent upon three main worker traits: genuineness, empathy, and respect.

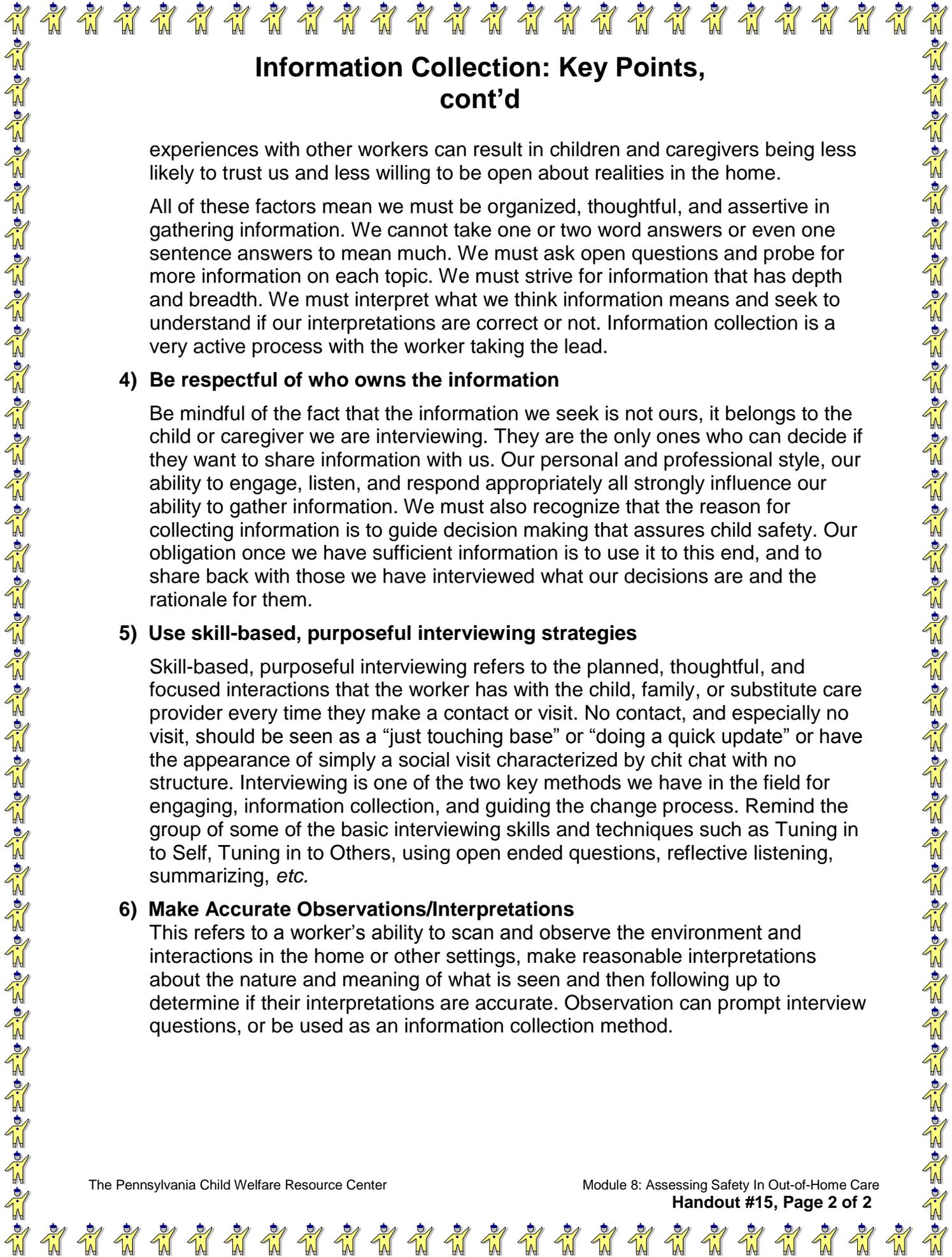
- *Genuineness* refers to being candid and sincere, having open and honest relationships with the children, family and substitute care providers.
- *Empathy* refers to the ability to identify with and understand someone else's feelings or difficulties.
- *Respect* refers to consideration, thoughtfulness, and appreciation for others as individuals. Engagement is an active process that requires the worker to consider how they interact with the child, family members, and substitute care providers and how these folks view the worker.

2) Be Neutral

That is, do not enter a home with decisions already made or opinions already formed. Even when we know a family, we only know them from our last set of contacts. Families change over time; placed children are unique and alter the family system in ways we must understand. Children change over time. Therefore, every visit requires an objective view and listening with "a third ear" for what is said and not said, and understanding not only what is observed but what is not.

3) Be proactive, not passive

It is unreasonable to expect that children and out-of-home care providers will tell us everything we need to know to assess safety in the placement. First, children in placement may have fears or dislikes about what is happening in the home but are afraid of consequences that might arise if they tell us....Will they be moved again? Will the next place be better or worse? Will they be blamed for what is happening in the home? Out-of-home caregivers generally want to put forward those things that make them look capable and competent (as we all do) and may be hesitant to discuss challenges or problems out of concern that they will be judged as not able to keep the child, or continue as a foster parent. In addition, they are often very busy with many demands on their time and may just want the visit over with so they can move on to the next task at hand. We also need to remember that all of our contacts with the children and caregivers are influenced by all of the workers that have preceded us. One or two negative



Information Collection: Key Points, cont'd

experiences with other workers can result in children and caregivers being less likely to trust us and less willing to be open about realities in the home.

All of these factors mean we must be organized, thoughtful, and assertive in gathering information. We cannot take one or two word answers or even one sentence answers to mean much. We must ask open questions and probe for more information on each topic. We must strive for information that has depth and breadth. We must interpret what we think information means and seek to understand if our interpretations are correct or not. Information collection is a very active process with the worker taking the lead.

4) Be respectful of who owns the information

Be mindful of the fact that the information we seek is not ours, it belongs to the child or caregiver we are interviewing. They are the only ones who can decide if they want to share information with us. Our personal and professional style, our ability to engage, listen, and respond appropriately all strongly influence our ability to gather information. We must also recognize that the reason for collecting information is to guide decision making that assures child safety. Our obligation once we have sufficient information is to use it to this end, and to share back with those we have interviewed what our decisions are and the rationale for them.

5) Use skill-based, purposeful interviewing strategies

Skill-based, purposeful interviewing refers to the planned, thoughtful, and focused interactions that the worker has with the child, family, or substitute care provider every time they make a contact or visit. No contact, and especially no visit, should be seen as a “just touching base” or “doing a quick update” or have the appearance of simply a social visit characterized by chit chat with no structure. Interviewing is one of the two key methods we have in the field for engaging, information collection, and guiding the change process. Remind the group of some of the basic interviewing skills and techniques such as Tuning in to Self, Tuning in to Others, using open ended questions, reflective listening, summarizing, *etc.*

6) Make Accurate Observations/Interpretations

This refers to a worker’s ability to scan and observe the environment and interactions in the home or other settings, make reasonable interpretations about the nature and meaning of what is seen and then following up to determine if their interpretations are accurate. Observation can prompt interview questions, or be used as an information collection method.