

**The Four Phases of Casework Practice**

Below are descriptions of the four phases of the Interactional Helping Skills Model as they apply over the life of the case and concerning individual contacts.

**Preliminary/Preparatory Phase**

Life of the Case:

- The child welfare professional attempts to sensitize her or himself to themes that could emerge during the work. A review of case records, speaking with previously involved co-workers, a review of any previous contacts, a review of information passed on by the family or others, or the identification of subtle patterns emerging in prior work can alert the child welfare professional to the family’s potential current concerns, as well as alert the child welfare professional to any personal feelings/beliefs, etc. that could impact their work.
- During this phase, the child welfare professional must develop some preliminary strategies for responding directly to indirect cues as well as strategies to overcome any barriers that the child welfare professional may bring to the helping relationship. This occurs prior to making contact.

Individual Contact:

- The efforts involved in an individual contact look identical to the efforts associated with the life of the case. The only exception is that the child welfare professional needs to make these efforts prior to each contact, thus ensuring that they are prepared and in the right frame of mind to effectively engage those with whom they will work.

**Beginning/Contracting Phase**

Life of the Case:

- During this phase, the child welfare professional is considering the family’s perception of the situation, assessing and assuring safety, and exploring resources. The child welfare professional, as well as the families that they work with, develop a better understanding of the situation and what they can expect from one another. Ultimately, they come to an agreement (contract) on the work to be done.
- It is important to note that this is a critical time as it is during this phase when the helping relationship is being established. Research (referenced in Shulman’s book, The Skills of Helping Individuals, Families, Groups, and Communities) shows that people achieve lasting change if they have a positive working relationship with the helper who assists in facilitating the change process. This is where trust and rapport are developed over time. It is not uncommon for families to offer a less significant problem to the child welfare professional in the beginning to test the child welfare professional. If they are comfortable with the child welfare professional’s

## The Four Phases of Casework Practice (Cont'd)

reaction, the individual may be willing to open up and share more significant problems.

- One of the most challenging issues in this phase is that there are often times when a case needs to be transferred from one child welfare professional to another (e.g. due to staff turnover, transfer of cases from intake to ongoing, etc). Rapport building must begin again with each change.

### Individual Contact:

- During this phase of any given contact, two of the primary goals are to establish the purpose of the contact and to define the roles of all involved in the contact as well as related expectations. In doing so, the child welfare professional is considering the family's perception/perspective of the situation in the here and now. In keeping with the title of this phase, the child welfare professional and family are "contracting" on the work that needs to be accomplished during that contact. This "contracting" must occur surrounding the purpose of the contact and may or may not occur surrounding the roles of those involved.
- It is important to keep in mind that the family's perceptions/perspective may have changed since the last contact, so the child welfare professional will need to be prepared to adjust what they believe the purpose of the contact to be, as well as their role during the contact to meet the needs of the family. In demonstrating this willingness to adjust to the situations and needs of the family, the child welfare professional is also helping to build rapport with the family.

### Middle/Work Phase

#### Life of the Case:

- This is where the work occurs. During this phase, the family and child welfare professional focuses on dealing with issues raised in the beginning phase or with new issues that have emerged since then (Shulman 2006, p 607). It is during this phase that the child welfare professional is constantly gathering information, conducting assessments, building upon previous assessments, and helping to facilitate change, within the family, that meets the mission of ensuring timely safety, permanence and well-being.

#### Individual Contact:

- As is the case when considering the life of the case, it is during this phase that the family and child welfare professional focuses on dealing with issues raised in the beginning phase or with new issues that have emerged since then (Shulman 2006, p 607). The child welfare professional's role is not only to gather information but also to share

## The Four Phases of Casework Practice (Cont'd)

information with families that may assist them in their efforts (e.g., planning, accessing services, etc.).

### Ending/Transition Phase

#### Life of the Case:

- It is during this phase that the helping relationship is brought to an end. It is equally as important as the other three phases, as it is during this time that the child welfare professional must make sure that the family is in a place that they are able to be self-sufficient. This does not mean that they must manage everything on their own; rather they have the necessary supports in place or means to obtain those supports, to be successful without the children and youth agency's assistance. This is a powerful time, as it is the ending of the helping relationship, but a new beginning for the family, hopefully one with a sense of fulfillment and empowerment and a more positive look to the future. Families will likely have discovered things about themselves that they did not know before, both areas of strength and areas of concern and hopefully how to use those strengths deal with the areas of concern.
- The child welfare professional's role during this period is to review the work that has been completed, the growth that has taken place, and identify any future work that remains undone. The child welfare professional must help the family identify or reinforce the natural supports and community supports in their life that will help them to continue in their success.

#### Individual Contact:

- The child welfare professional's role at the end of an individual contact is to review the work that has been completed and identify any future work that needs to be completed by both the child welfare professional and family members. This future work may be what must happen by the next visit/contact or in the more distant future. It is important to note that not every visit/contact is going to end neatly with next steps identified. There will be times when the ending/transition stage efforts are simply to come to consensus on the status of discussion. Although this may initially feel uncomfortable, it will at times be necessary to allow this ambiguity to occur and sort situations out later.

(Shulman, L., 2006)