

Breaking Down the Barriers

Below are general concepts that you can incorporate into your efforts to approach and engage families that will assist you in having a better chance in lowering the amount of protective authority necessary when engaging families.

Engaging the Family

- Be clear, honest, and direct. Child welfare professionals should maintain a non-defensive stance.
- Acknowledge the involuntary nature of the arrangement. The child welfare professional should explain the structure and content of intervention to the children and family.
- Be matter-of-fact and non-defensive in explaining the legal authority that permits intervention. Child welfare professionals should not get into a debate about authority; instead child welfare professionals should state what their authority is and what legal recourse the children and family may have to challenge the authority.
- Contact children and families in a manner that is courteous and respectful, and assess strengths as well as risk factors and safety threats.
- Elicit the parent's concerns and wishes for assistance and convey understanding of the parent's viewpoint, including reservations about child welfare involvement.
- Reduce the children's and family's opposition to contact by clarifying available choices – even when choices are constrained – by emphasizing freedoms still available and by avoiding labeling.
- Earn the respect of the children and family by being a good listener who strives to understand their point of view.
- Respect the right of the children and family to express values and preferences different from those of the child welfare professional.
- Establish feasible, small steps to help build in early success in order to recognize family efforts and progress.
- Acknowledge difficult feelings and encourage open and honest discussion of feelings.
- Reframe the family's situation. This is particularly useful when the children and family are making arguments that deny a problem or risk; it acknowledges their statements, but offers a new meaning or interpretation for them. The children's and family's information is recast into a new form and viewed in a new light that is more likely to be helpful and support change.

Breaking Down the Barriers(Cont'd)

Techniques for Handling Hostile and Angry Situations

One form of resistance that is particularly difficult for child welfare professionals to manage is anger and hostility. The following are some techniques for deescalating anger:

- Remain calm; try not to show fear or anxiety;
- Be firm without raising one's voice;
- Make statements simple and direct;
- Recognize and address feelings and do not take hostile statements personally;
- Offer the person a choice between positive alternatives;
- Be alert for the possibility of aggression;
- Attempt to have the person sit down, and distract him or her from the source of anger;
- Give the person lots of space; do not touch them;
- If the person attacks, use only enough force to protect yourself or restrain him or her;
- Remember it takes a person 30-40 minutes to calm down physiologically;
- After the visit, do not sit in front of the house to write notes;
- Carry a cell phone, whistle, or personal alarm and use it, if appropriate; and
- Pay attention to intuition or "gut instinct," and leave if warranted.

(DePanfilis, D., Salus, M. K., 2003)