

STRENGTHS-BASED ASSESSMENT & ITS ROLE IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- Our dominant practice has focused on defining “problems” and giving “advice” – this weakens rather than strengthens people (empowers the problem, disempowers the person)
- Families must be strong to protect children
- Family partnership meetings promote ways to insure safety by encouraging use of resources & strengths of families, friends, relatives, and communities
- Looking for strengths generates cooperation, positive energy, creativity

UNDERLYING VALUES & BELIEFS:

1. **Families have strengths and can change**; they deserve respect; they are our allies and best resource
2. Strengths are what ultimately resolve issues of concern; we must **set up opportunities for families to show their strengths**
3. Building on strengths is an advanced skill; we’re all good at finding weaknesses (a national pastime.) Requires **a different set of skills**: listening, patience, not giving up on people, moving at others’ pace, not getting sidetracked by “problems,” connecting with people’s pain, giving credit, seeing crisis as opportunity to grow, willingness to step out of a one-up position. The need to control others weakens people
4. **Language reflects thinking**; must change it as our thinking changes. “Problem” = an energy drainer, carries shame, blame, guilt; leads to taking one-up positions, labeling, making negative assumptions when people are hesitant to share “problems.” Problem focus is a stuck position.
 - Try “issues of concern” rather than “problem”; it can take discussion to a more workable level and open avenues to the good will behind difficulties that families experience
 - “Options” rather than “advice”; options provide choices and choices empower (when families choose own solutions, they bring special energy and commitment)
 - “Families,” not “cases” or “clients”
 - Child,” not “ward” or “ACV” (alleged child victim); “alleged offender,” not “perp”
5. **Listening** is the centerpiece. Jung: “The first act of love is listening.”

6. **Respect is the active ingredient** in strengthening families. Ask “if this were my family, or my children, how would I like to be treated?”
7. Explore **reservoir of strengths in family, extended family, and community** to resolve issues of concern.
 - To discover strengths: we listen, observe, compliment, encourage, ask, talk about things going well & successes.
 - Talk about “exceptions” to concerns—instances when they are able to deal w/ concerns and can recognize they already have some skills.
 - Treat them as experts in their own lives. A respectful question is “What is your best thinking about how to make things better?” Listen to their ideas, support them when you can. Look for good intent in every idea and build on it.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS A TOOL TO FIND AND BUILD ON FAMILY’S RESOURCES

- Its purpose is to give family specific opportunity to share their best thinking about working out solutions; gives them opportunity to bring in their support systems (neighbors, relatives, friends) to help with solutions.
- Must prepare families for meeting—one of greatest challenges to use of this tool in public child welfare setting, with high caseloads and overburdened workers.
- Because safety is always of primary importance, must make plans that lessen risk, maximize protection for child, and offer support to family and social worker. Create strength oriented, visual agreement and share copies; make it simple and easily monitored. (A safety plan) Extend the circle of people who care, create partnerships of people who agree to help in specific ways, ensure family not being overloaded with services or obligations.
- Process can strengthen social workers as well as families: make job more pleasant and optimistic, families like having strengths acknowledged, credit for positive efforts goes to families, who often appreciate support of social worker.