

EVIDENCE SUMMARY

Child protection: engaging with parents

KEY FINDINGS

- Strategies for engaging birth parents include having a service culture that supports engagement; being supportive and focusing on parents' strengths; being flexible; resourcing agencies appropriately; creating a good first impression; and demonstrating respect.
- A combination of several engagement strategies may be needed for effective engagement of birth parents.
- Services need to acknowledge the history of trauma Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have experienced with child protection and work with communities toward culturally appropriate engagement.
- The effectiveness of engagement strategies has not yet been established.

How can engagement with parents involved in the child protection system be improved?

This evidence summary was based on a scoping review conducted in March 2017 by the Parenting Research Centre and funded by the New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services. Contributing authors were: Gina-Maree Sartore, Michelle Macvean, Ben Devine and Annette Michaux.

CONTEXT

Child protection services ideally aim both to protect children and to strengthen families so that they are able to care for their children. They provide a range of services from prevention to intervention and treatment. They also provide temporary and permanent out-of-home care (OOHC) for children when families are unable to care for them.

Legislation guiding child protection and the principles underlying it vary across Australia and are undergoing widespread reform. In New South Wales, the objective is to ensure the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people, to ensure the capacity of people caring for children, and to ensure safe and nurturing environments. Promoting good parenting and, where possible, keeping families together are key objectives.

To achieve these objectives, it is essential to work effectively with birth parents and a key part of this is engaging with parents to help them to take up, remain in, and successfully complete programs that are often needed to ensure children are safe and families remain intact or are restored.

FINDINGS

Engagement strategies

Fourteen strategies for engaging parents were identified. Most of the strategies could be considered good practice for working with any family. However, because parents do not choose to become involved with the child protection system, these strategies are likely to be even more important to help engage with these parents. These strategies may also be used by incidental services that parents involved in the child protection system may need to access.

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The strategies are:

Ensure service culture supports engagement

A clear overall approach to engagement that all workers follow may improve parents' engagement.

Use supportive and strengths-based behaviours

Supporting parents may help child protection workers build a partnership and engage with parents. Focusing and building on the strengths, skills and resources that parents have may help them build on them to make changes to their parenting behaviours.

Be flexible

Being flexible may increase the opportunities for parents to engage with child protection services, for example, by considering families' other commitments when arranging meetings.

Resource agencies appropriately

Having appropriate funding means services can provide for parents. Resources can also include support for staff development.

Go where the parents are

Contacting parents in places where they gather in the community as well as in their homes may help improve engagement. This may be particularly relevant when parents are engaging with non-mandated services.

Demonstrate respect

Showing respect by keeping appointments, remembering concerns raised by parents, being honest, and showing empathy for their circumstances may help develop trust.

Address parents' practical needs

Supporting parents' immediate practical needs, such as free child care during programs, or transport to programs, may remove barriers that might stop them from taking part.

Communicate clearly

Being open and honest about the role of child protection and what is expected may help develop trust and reduce anxiety parents may feel about being involved with child protection. Communicate in plain, clear language and adapt communication styles to suit individual parents.

Empower parents

Involving parents in choices, decisions and case planning may help empower parents.

Create a good first impression

Having a welcoming and supportive approach when first contacting a parent is important.

Be non-judgemental

Listening to a parent's perspective and letting them know they're not the only person to have that experience, rather than judging them for the problems they're experiencing, may help to keep parents engaged with services.

Provide sufficient time for engagement

Building trusting, engaged relationships with parents involved in child protection might take longer due to their complex needs. This needs to be balanced with the requirements for parents to demonstrate change in a reasonable timeframe.

Streamline service provision

Reducing the number of services and people parents need to deal with may help parents develop relationships with workers.

Adopt culturally appropriate practices

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ families and culturally and linguistically diverse families requires an understanding of culture.

¹Referred to as Aboriginal in remainder of summary, as NSW is Aboriginal land.

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Additional strategies for engaging with specific groups

Engaging with Aboriginal families

Additional strategies for engaging better with Aboriginal families include: employing Aboriginal workers; consulting with community and Aboriginal representatives; and developing an understanding of family and kinship networks.

Engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families

Strategies for engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families include: working with interpreters; employing representatives from parents' culture; and developing an understanding of culture.

Engagement between birth parents and foster carers

Birth parents' engagement with foster carers may be improved by carers contacting the birth parents and going with the children on contact visits with birth parents.

Engaging perpetrators of domestic and family violence

Workers need to engage perpetrators of domestic and family violence without excusing or enabling the abusive behaviour. Strategies include: allowing time for the perpetrator to share his' story and past experiences; conveying a belief that he can change his behaviour; and focusing on the child's needs.

Barriers to engagement

Some of the key barriers to parents' engaging with services are: parents' mistrust of child protection services; perceived negative or stereotyped roles of parents; and complex personal circumstances. Other barriers include: workers' concerns for their safety; bias against some families; and low expectations of non-resident fathers being involved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

There are several factors to consider when implementing these strategies in New South Wales.

Building engagement needs leadership by decision-makers in the child protection system to resource services adequately and support services to adopt a culture of

parent engagement. High-level leadership will also help agencies work together to streamline services.

A multi-strategy approach that involves engaging with families as soon as they become known to child protection services, and recognises that all family members need support to engage may be the optimal approach.

There are additional things to consider when working with Aboriginal families. Aboriginal families have a history of trauma regarding child protection, particularly the forced removal of children. Workers need to consult and collaborate with Aboriginal community members to find out their preferred ways of engaging and participating.

Workers need an understanding of the cultural history, customs and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Families' diverse circumstances also need to be considered. Parents whose children are in OOHC need different support as they will have limited time with their children to work on changing parenting behaviour with their children. Where there has been family violence it might not be possible to engage with both parents at the same time and some parents might not want their partner or former partner involved.

When implementing the strategies described in this summary, services need to be aware that some of these approaches might be new to both parents and workers. Training and coaching in new practices and how to implement them with parents may be required to sustain change.

This review did not look at how effective these strategies are at improving engagement. More work might be needed to test which strategy or combination of strategies works best. Further research is also needed to understand how to engage with parents during the process leading up to their child permanently living in someone else's care.

The strategies presented here may help parents to take up, remain in or complete programs, but engagement is only one part of effective service provision. The programs that parents take part in also need to be suitable and effective.

¹We acknowledge that, although much less common, women can also be perpetrators of domestic and family violence. However, the strategies identified in this review related only to male perpetrators.

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MORE INFORMATION

Engaging with parents involved in the child protection system

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METHOD

A scoping review methodology was used to identify strategies for engaging parents involved in the child protection system. Scoping reviews map the elements of a practice, policy or research area and indicate the main sources and types of evidence available; they do not usually evaluate the strength of that evidence.

The reviewers identified published and unpublished Australian and international frameworks, policies, practice guides and literature reviews of strategies to engage birth parents and families who are involved in the child protection system.

The reviewers included engagement with child protection workers and personnel from other services that work with parents who are involved in the child protection system. They also included other adults acting in the parenting role such as grandparents or other family members. The review also included engagement between birth parents and foster carers. They used this broad definition to find as many relevant engagement strategies as possible.

The documents were sourced from three academic databases (PsycInfo, MEDLINE and Social Work Abstracts), twenty-three organisation websites and via colleagues. All the documents were screened against a set of predetermined criteria to check they were suitable to include in the review. The reviewers identified themes across the strategies and grouped them into categories.

Disclaimer

The material in this summary and in the original report is the responsibility of the Parenting Research Centre and does not necessarily reflect the views of the NSW Government. This review of the evidence was conducted in March 2017, and readers are advised to consider new evidence which may have arisen since the preparation of the original scoping review.