This information is available in alternative formats to individuals with disabilities by calling your agency at (651) 431-4671. TTY users can call through Minnesota Relay at (800) 627-3529. For Speech-to-Speech, call (877) 627-3848. For additional assistance with legal rights and protections for equal access to human services benefits, contact your agency’s ADA coordinator.
Table of contents

Introduction................................................................................................................. 2
Making the initial outreach contact................................................................. 3
Special considerations for drop-in visits....................................................... 4
Worker still cannot reach the family – what to do now? .......... 4
The family declined services – should worker try again? .......... 5
The benefits of asking permission................................................................. 5
Cultural competency in family engagement.......................... 6
The family has accepted services – how do workers
    keep them engaged until their goals are reached? .......... 6
Closing summary .............................................................................................. 8
Introduction

An essential practice skill for social workers in voluntary child welfare programs is the ability to effectively engage families in services. Because of the stigma attached to being involved with government social service agencies, families may be reluctant to participate in voluntary child welfare programs. Therefore, strong engagement skills are crucial for working with these children and families in the child welfare field.

Over the last decade, child welfare systems have been making a philosophical shift in practice toward strengths-based, collaborative work with families, and away from the interventionist, expert approach that was more common in the past. The Minnesota Child Welfare Model reflects this shift in practice. The Parent Support Outreach Project (PSOP) is an example of a program that the Minnesota Department of Human Services has developed in conjunction with this philosophical and cultural shift in child welfare practice. Not all counties and tribes offer PSOP, but many do offer voluntary child welfare services to families experiencing stress, often as an effort to prevent future maltreatment.

It is widely understood in the social service field that most families referred to voluntary child welfare programs are living under a variety of stressful conditions. Many are struggling financially, living below the poverty line. Others face issues such as housing instability, domestic violence, chemical dependency, mental health issues, have chronic physical health issues, have children with developmental delays or behavioral concerns, are single parents, and may experience isolation from family and community networks. Some parents likely grew up in similarly stressed families and communities, and may have had contact with child welfare systems, either as a child or as an adult.

This practice guide is intended to provide social workers involved with voluntary child welfare programs with strategies for engaging families during an initial outreach contact, as well as provide suggestions to help workers maintain family engagement and partnership after a family has agreed to accept services. Many of these strategies can apply when working with families referred to child protection and other social service programs, as well.
Making the initial outreach contact

The first contact with a family is often the best chance to engage them in services. It is important to approach families in a thoughtful and respectful way. Consider taking the following steps in making that first contact:

■ Start with a phone call, if possible, rather than a letter.

■ If sending a letter as the first step, try calling the family on the day the letter is expected to arrive. Also, consider sending a letter that will not arrive on the weekend. It can be frightening to receive mail from a social service agency, and not be able to contact the worker until the next business day.

■ If sending a letter, be brief in explaining why the agency is writing, focusing on ways the worker might be able to support or provide resources to a family, and include a program brochure, if available.

■ Develop a clear description of the program and services the agency can provide to the family. Let families know that the worker can help them navigate the complicated systems they are involved with, assist them in accessing resources in their community, and help them meet most identified family needs.

■ If the initial reason for a call is based on a screened-out child protection report, consider using language such as “we received a concern about your family, and want to see if there is anything we can do to help.” Make clear that the worker is not calling from child protection, and that there is no child protection concern that needs to be assessed at this time.

■ When discussing ways the agency can assist the family, explore a variety of topics such as child care, housing, finances, utilities, health insurance, parenting issues, relationship concerns, worries about a child’s health or development, Head Start/kindergarten enrollment, etc.

■ If available, consider mentioning a flex fund or small financial assistance as an “in.” Remember that if workers are able to provide some concrete assistance to a family, they might be more willing to open up about other topics of concern – and sometimes relieving financial stress can help alleviate other risk factors.

■ Suggest that the family invite relatives or friends to the initial visit as a way to help the family feel more comfortable, and to encourage the building of a family support network.

■ If the family has no phone, and there is no response to a letter, try a drop-in visit.
Special considerations for drop-in visits

Remember that making an unannounced visit to someone’s home can be disruptive and frightening to a family. Consider the following when making such a visit:

■ Workers should put themselves in the parents’ shoes – imagine what it would be like if a social worker appeared at their door, and think about what might be calming or reassuring in such a situation.

■ Workers should immediately identify themselves and explain why they are there, and show identification.

■ Ask permission to speak with them for a moment about the program.

■ Be respectful of a family’s time. After a brief explanation of the reason for the visit, ask the family if they would be interested in meeting now, or at a later date that is convenient for them.

■ If no one answers the door, consider leaving a note with a business card – but think about the circumstances before doing so:

  ■ Does the worker know the parent lives there, or is the address uncertain?

  ■ What day of the week is it – will the parent have to wait through the weekend before being able to contact the worker?

  ■ Will the note/envelope fit under the door so that neighbors will not see it?

Worker still cannot reach the family – what to do now?

In the event that a worker is unable to make contact with a family via phone, letter or drop-in visit, consider the following options:

■ If the initial referral source was another service provider, such as a public health nurse, financial worker, or shelter staff person, ask that person if they are willing to tell the parent about the child welfare program and allow agency staff to join them at an appointment.

■ If a worker is able to attend a meeting, show respect to the client upon arrival by identifying themselves, explaining why they are there, and asking permission to stay for the appointment.

■ If the parent requests that the worker not stay, leave a brochure or other written information with them, along with a business card.
The family declined services – should worker try again?

The answer to this question depends on the nature of the initial contact with the family, and how they responded. Consider the following:

- Some families state that they want to think about the program, and agree to let a worker call back at a later date.
- Some families may seem hesitant about accepting services, and end up declining.
- For these families, consider sending a follow-up letter with a brochure and additional information about how agency services can help the family. Acknowledge in the letter that the parent declined services, but are sending them information in case they change their minds.
- If a family does not respond to the follow-up letter, it is probably time to give up.

The benefits of asking permission

Asking permission of a family in a variety of circumstances can have a positive impact on families, and may increase the chances of a parent/guardian accepting services. Asking permission both demonstrates respect for the family, and leads to greater empowerment for them, as it gives them a choice whether or not to grant a worker the requested permission. Consider asking permission in any or all of the following situations with families:

- At a first contact, ask if this is a convenient time to talk.
- If family declines – but seems hesitant or uncertain – ask permission to contact them again by phone or letter in a week or so.
- If the first contact is during a drop-in visit, ask permission to meet with them now, or at a later date.
- When arriving at a home visit, ask permission to enter, ask if they would prefer that shoes be taken off, and ask where to sit.
- Ask permission to contact any collaterals, including other professionals in the family’s life (this also involves getting signed Releases of Information).
- Ask permission to hold a parent’s baby on a home visit – do not assume a parent would be comfortable with that.
- Ask permission to do more than typical interaction with children – e.g., ask if it is okay to give them paper and pencil to keep them busy during a visit; to read them a book; to model a parenting skill; to assist with discipline or intervening when a child is acting out.
Cultural competency in family engagement

Cultural competence is essential in a program that works with families from diverse backgrounds. This diversity encompasses race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, family composition, immigration status, religious background and more. The following are suggestions that will demonstrate to families that they are respected, as well as their cultural background:

- Come from a place of “not knowing” – be honest about lack of knowledge of someone's life circumstances and culture, and be open to learning from the family about their cultural norms and expectations.
- Ask the family about cultural traditions (e.g., discipline styles, communication between men and women, norms for school attendance).
- Always use a certified interpreter when making the first call to a family for whom English is not their first language, as well as at all subsequent calls and appointments.
- Offer an interpreter if it becomes clear that language is a barrier when first speaking/meeting with a family. Never use children for interpretation during visits.
- Provide written information in the parents’ first language, when possible – but understand that some people cannot read even in their first language.
- Be aware of local resources in the community that serve culturally specific groups, as well as missing links in the community for culturally specific needs; be open with families about these missing resources.

The family has accepted services – how do workers keep them engaged until their goals are reached?

Through demonstrating respect and a sincere interest in partnering with a family, workers will be able to build trust. The combination of respect and trust will be the best tools in maintaining a positive working relationship with a family. The following are strategies to achieve this:

- Always maintain a respectful, non-judgmental, supportive tone and behavior.
- Approach a family from a stance of “not-knowing,” as opposed to presenting as an “expert.” Remember, a family is the expert in their own lives.
Keep the process as transparent as possible – let the family know what is being done and why, who should be contacted and why, why specific questions are being asked, etc.

Use strengths-based techniques to learn more about a family, including:

- Asking about past successes.
- Pointing out exceptions to difficulties or failed efforts.
- Illuminating strengths observed in a family, especially when a family struggles to do this on their own.
- Asking about positive supports in a family’s life.
- Using scaling questions to help families recognize ways they can take small steps toward goals.
- Asking a family about what their “best hopes” are to help them develop a vision of positive changes in their lives.

Remember to “start where the family is.” A family will have greater motivation to make changes on goals that they identify themselves.

Acknowledge how hard it is to make changes, and offer whatever possible to support a family in reaching their goals.

Write a case plan with a family, rather than developing one for them.

If there are concerns that a family does not identify as needs, talk with them about this respectfully and honestly – and in a non-threatening way, help them to see possible consequences of not addressing the concerns.

Support a family in building relationships with relatives/kin and other informal supports (if available, use Family Group Conferencing or similar engagement strategies).

If a family starts to miss appointments, does not return calls, or generally seems to be avoiding their worker, continue to make efforts to re-engage. This could involve leaving a voicemail or sending a letter expressing concern about them, or making a drop-in visit.

Regularly evaluate the case plan and progress being made toward the family’s goals, as well as potential new goals the family is interested in working on.

Plan with the family for case closure. Be intentional in the closing process through:

- Evaluating what progress was made and what goals were met during the time a case was open.
Be intentional when preparing for case closure. Develop a plan for how the family can address future needs. Ensure they are connected with community resources and informal supports.

- Developing a plan for how the family can address future needs or issues.
- Ensuring a family is aware of and connected with community resources and informal supports.
- Pointing out successes and strengths that a family showed while working with them.
- Clarifying what, if any, role the worker can play for a family in the future.

**Closing summary**

This practice guide highlights crucial skills and qualities that a social worker must have in order to work effectively with families who are voluntarily involved in the child welfare system. It suggests practical strategies to use to engage families in services and meet family-identified needs and goals. Some key skills and strategies to keep in mind include:

- Be respectful and non-judgmental
- Be transparent
- Actively listen to the family’s story
- Inquire about and honor each family’s culture
- Seek to develop a partnership with the family
- Support the family in identifying its own goals
- Provide concrete assistance to meet basic needs
- Recognize and build on family strengths
- Assist the family in building informal support networks

Workers who embody these qualities and embrace these strategies will have greater success in engaging families in voluntary services. They may also see better outcomes for families, including prevention of child maltreatment and improvements in child and family well-being. The overarching goals of all child welfare services, voluntary and otherwise, are to maintain or achieve safety for children, enhance the well-being of children and families, and support families so that they can meet the needs of their children on their own and in partnership with support systems.