

Unit V: Decision-Making: Family Empowerment

Overview

This unit focuses on engaging families in a collaborative decision-making process. It stresses skills in engaging the kinship network in the development of a plan to ensure the child's safety, permanence, and well-being. This planning process requires caseworkers to help families assess the different permanency options available to the child and family. It is important to explore these permanency options and their implications for the child and the family with the kinship network. Family meetings are presented as effective and efficient tools for facilitating timely decision-making and assisting families in redefining their roles to support permanency for the child. The process of conducting a family meeting is described.

This training manual and the videotape that accompanies it do not include the detailed information describing the local policies that define permanency options for children in kinship foster care. For example, some states are able to provide subsidized guardianship for some of their cases but not others. It is important that caseworkers understand the policies that define both adoption and guardianship, for example. The videotape that accompanies this manual provides an example of how to discuss different permanency options and the consequences of pursuing these options for the extended family members. However, caseworkers will need to become very aware of the policies in their state, to provide families the specific information they need to make informed decisions.

Goals for Unit V: Decision-Making: Family Empowerment

This unit is intended to assist child welfare caseworkers in gaining:

1. skills in collaborating with families in decision-making;
2. skills in engaging the kinship network in a plan to ensure the child's protection/safety and well-being;
3. skills in conducting family meetings;
4. skills in exploring with the kinship network permanency options and their implications for the child and the family;
5. skills in facilitating the family's (re)definition of relationships;
6. skills in facilitating timely decision-making regarding safe and permanent care of the child.

UNIT V DISCUSSION: **Decision-making: Family Empowerment**

Effective permanency planning requires caseworkers to engage the kinship network in a process of developing a plan to ensure the child's safety and well-being. It is also important to help the family identify the permanency options that have the highest degree of legal permanence yet are most comfortable for the family. A family meeting is a mechanism for exploring different permanency options with the kinship network and helping family members think through the implications of each of these options for the child and for each member of the family. When a relative adopts or assumes legal guardianship of a child, relationships between several members of the family change. It is important to help the family redefine relationships in the family in many cases. The meaning that families attach to adopting a related child or assuming legal guardianship are unique to each family and need to be thoroughly explored to facilitate well-informed decision making.

Caseworkers should begin meeting as a group with those in the kinship network that are most accessible. Then, using the questions from Figure V-A as a guide, caseworkers can discuss and explore with the family their views of the decisions that need to be made, who needs to be involved

Figure V-A: COLLABORATIVE PROCESS IN DECISION- MAKING

Discuss/explore the following *with* the kinship network:

- ! How did the child welfare system become involved in your family's life?
- ! What problems need to be resolved to get the child welfare system out of your family's life?
- ! How did these problems come to be?
- ! What needs to be done to resolve the problems?
- ! What decisions need to be made to ensure the child is safe and to determine where the child should live permanently?
- ! Who should be involved in making these decisions?
- ! What needs to happen to bring relevant parties together?
- ! Where should the children be to be protected? For how long?
- ! Where should the children live permanently?

in the decision-making process, what needs to be done to bring the relevant parties together, and build from there to convene the next level of decision-makers.

Facilitating Family Decision Making

Family meetings can be helpful in addressing a variety of critical decisions and situations. When the purpose of the meeting is to determine what permanency option is the best plan for the child, it is important that the caseworker provide information to members of the child's kinship network about the differences between options, as well as the relative benefits and limitations of each option. For example, the legal differences between adoption and guardianship must be distinguished. Whereas adoption requires an irrevocable surrender or termination of the biological parents' rights, legal guardianship does not (IDCFS & Human Services Technologies, 1996). Adoptive parents have the right to determine the type of relationship that the child will have with the biological parents. Under guardianship arrangements, biological parents have the right to visit the child and this right can be enforced by the court. Adoption is a permanent life-long relationship. Guardianship lasts until the child is 18 years of age, 21 under special circumstances, or until the caregiver can no longer care for the child (IDCFS & Human Services Technologies, 1996). Adopted children have the same rights to survivors benefits and life insurance as children born to the adoptive parents. Children have no rights of inheritance from the guardian unless they are included in the guardian's will. However, like adoptive parents, legal guardians are able to consent to the child's travel out of state, school field trips and other school matters, medical treatment, release of liability, drivers license and permit, enrollment in Job Corps, enlistment in the armed services, and marriage. Both adoption and legal guardianship allow the kinship caregiver to raise the child without the monitoring of the child welfare system.

Specific policies differ by state, therefore it is essential that caseworkers become knowledgeable about the policies that define adoption and guardianship in their state. Since it is not possible to remember all of the details of these policies, it is important that caseworkers acquire up-to-date written policies and procedures for all permanency options. These documents are essential reference tools for helping families make informed decisions. It is also important to consult with peers and supervisors that have specialized knowledge regarding each of the permanency goals and a steps toward achieving each.

The decisions that families are being asked to consider can be upsetting and create ambivalent feelings. Joseph Crumbley and Robert Little (1997) discuss the clinical issues experienced by kinship caregivers and other members of the extended family, when adoption or guardianship are considered. Family members should be expected to raise questions and to express concerns about the various options. If the caseworker cannot answer a specific question that is raised during a meeting, it is important to research the question and respond with an answer in a follow-up contact with the family.

For many families, the caseworker's openness, respect for the family, provision of information, and clarification of misunderstandings, will allow the family to make decisions that are compatible with child welfare policy and agreeable to the child welfare system and the court. Other families will require more intensive involvement in mediation or family counseling services than is possible for the caseworker to undertake; and in these cases referrals to specialized services are recommended.

For many child welfare caseworkers, meeting with several members of a family is an intimidating experience. With practice, caseworkers become comfortable conducting family meetings and they become more skilled at doing so. One of the challenges in conducting family meetings is balancing the instrumental tasks that need to be accomplished, such as making decisions about the future of a child, with the affective tasks such as expressing interest, responding empathically, genuinely, and with warmth

and acceptance of the family members as persons. While each meeting with members of the child's kinship network is defined by its specific purpose, some common practices apply across meetings. These practices are listed in Figure V-B.

Summary

Permanency planning for children in kinship foster care cannot be effectively accomplished by the child welfare system alone. Collaboration with members of the child's kinship system is essential to develop plans that are relevant and acceptable to the persons who will implement them. Family meetings are effective and efficient ways of collaborating with members of the child's kinship network. Family meetings facilitate decision making by identifying obstacles to permanency and understanding the meaning that family members attach to different permanency options.

Figure V-B: Conducting Family Meetings

- ! Introduce yourself and greet each person, welcoming them to the meeting. If the meeting is being conducted in the home of family members, thank these family members for allowing you to meet with them in their home.
- ! Define the purpose of the meeting and your role.
- ! Ask family members if they understand the purpose of the meeting and clarify any misunderstandings.
- ! Explain that you would like to hear from each person attending the meeting; and during the meeting ensure that you ask the opinions of each person in the room.
- ! Ensure that persons are able to speak uninterrupted.
- ! If differences of opinion emerge between family members, ask them to discuss their different points of view.
- ! Respect the opinions of every person participating in the meeting and ask family members to attempt to understand and respect the opinions of persons with whom they disagree.
- ! If disagreements become heated, ask family members if they believe it is possible to resolve the disagreements and what steps need to be taken to do so.
- ! Attempt to develop a common goal. If a common goal is not reachable in one meeting, develop a plan for subsequent meetings to develop a common goal.
- ! Identify with family members, the obstacles that must be overcome to achieve the goal.
- ! Develop with family members a plan for overcoming these obstacles, specifying each participating family member's role, tasks to be completed, and time lines for accomplishment.
- ! Develop a plan for evaluating whether tasks have been completed, obstacles overcome, and the goal achieved.
- ! Work with family members to revise the plan when necessary.
- ! Engender hope in the family, being as positive and hopeful as is truthful in discussing the likelihood of accomplishing their goals, and involving the family in discussing their strengths from their perspective and your own.

References for Unit V: **Decision-making: Family Empowerment**

Compton, B. & Galaway, B. (1989). *Social work processes* (Third Edition). Chicago: Dorsey.

Crumbley, J. & Little, R. L. (1997) *Relatives raising children: An overview of kinship care*. Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America.

Haley, J. (1976). *Problem-solving therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

IDCFS & Human Services Technologies (1996). *Subsidized guardianship training manual*. Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Learning Activities and Resources for Unit V

1. The Training Videotape: Segment Three
2. Kinship Foster Care Initial Family Meeting Role Play

Learning Activity #1 The Training Videotape: Segment Three

In the third segment of the training videotape, *Facilitating Family Decision Making*, the caseworker conducts a meeting with the caregiver, the child's mother, a maternal aunt, a paternal aunt, and a maternal uncle. The meeting is conducted in the caregiver's home (maternal grandmother). The caseworker has had prior conversations with the biological mother and the maternal grandmother indicating that it is not likely that the child will return home because of the mother's inability to complete the substance abuse treatment that all parties agree is a necessary step for reunification in this case. The caseworker shares this message with the family members participating in the meeting and helps them consider the permanency goal for the child, determine which family members will assist the caregiver in rearing the child, and begin to discuss changes in family roles which are likely to occur if the child is adopted or legal guardianship is transferred to the caregiver.

The caseworker continues to demonstrate a broad view of family, a commitment to principles of family preservation and permanency planning, and works to engage the family in a decision-making process.

Learning Activity #2: Kinship Foster Care Initial Family Meeting Role Play

For many child welfare caseworkers, meeting with several members of a family is an intimidating experience. With practice, caseworkers become comfortable conducting family meetings and they become more skilled at doing so. One of the challenges in conducting family meetings is balancing the instrumental tasks that need to be accomplished, such as making decisions about the future of a child, with the affective tasks such as responding empathically, expressing interest, responding genuinely, and with warmth and acceptance of the family members as persons. It is helpful to practice conducting family meetings with other child welfare caseworkers and supervisors through role play.

The following page contains a short case scenario that can be used to role play the initial family meeting interview. It briefly describes the case, the characters, and the purpose of the meeting. The page that follows the role play scenario is a checklist that can be used to provide feedback to the persons who plays the role of the caseworker. This feedback can be provided by the person who played the roles of family members and by other “peer consultants” who observed the role play.

To use the checklist, place a check mark in front of each instrumental task that is completed during the role play interview. It is not necessary or appropriate for all of the tasks to be completed during each interview. It is helpful to the persons playing the caseworker to receive feedback telling them what instrumental tasks others did and did not observe. The checklist also allows persons playing family roles and observers to rate the degree of interest, genuineness, warmth/acceptance, and empathy displayed by the person playing the caseworker role. Brief comments can be documented on the lines next to these affective tasks, which are referred to as “relationship variables.”

It may be even more productive to create role play scenario’s that are similar to the specific families and situations on each caseworker’s caseload. Caseworkers can develop brief descriptions of their cases and each character in the family. Caseworkers can practice conducting family meetings in this way, receiving helpful feedback from supervisors and peers.

KINSHIP FOSTER CARE INITIAL INTERVIEW ROLE PLAY SCENARIO

CASEWORKER: You are conducting your initial interview with a young mother, her ten year old child, the maternal grandmother and the maternal grandfather. The interview is being conducted in the grandparents' home. The grandparents are the kinship caregivers for the ten year old child. The child was removed from the mother's home due to a finding of neglect, after the mother repeatedly left the child unattended while going to the local tavern until 2 or 3 in the morning. You have been working with the grandmother and the child. You met the biological mother once several months ago. At that meeting she indicated that she was willing to work toward having her child returned home. Since that meeting, the biological mother has not responded to your phone calls or letters. The child is included in the beginning of the meeting. You will need to decide whether the child should participate in the entire meeting or only part of it. You could conduct the role play with the child and another one without the child and decide which was the most appropriate for the specific child, family, and issues discussed.

TEN YEAR OLD CHILD: You are very confused. You love your mother and grandparents but feel as if they are fighting over you. You are not sure why you have to attend this meeting to talk to a stranger about problems which have been in your family ever since you can remember.

MOTHER: You are angry with your mother for reporting you to the child abuse hotline and for "taking your child away from you." You resent insinuations that you drink too much and that you do not take care of your child. You see no reason for a child welfare agency to be involved in your business.

MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER: You are angry with your daughter for "not taking care of her child." You "always knew that your daughter would end up a failure, just like her drunken father." You feel that you must intervene to protect your grandchild. You made several calls to the child abuse hotline to report that your grandchild was left unattended.

MATERNAL GRANDFATHER: You do not want to be at this meeting. You are tired of the fighting between your wife and daughter. Your daughter has always been special to you and you can see no "real harm" that she has done. However, you do not want to confront your wife and tell her to stay out of your daughter's business.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR ROLE PLAYERS: *Read your character's role and that of the other characters listed. Try to identify with the character you will play. Get into the role play and feel free to develop the role as you play it. Do not make the interviewer's job impossible. While you may be difficult at times, display some degree of cooperation. Do not play "stump the interviewer."*

Initial Family Interview Process

- ___ Social stage (meet and greet each person)

- ___ Define the purpose of the meeting
 - ___ ask each family member if she/he understands the purpose
 - ___ clarify misunderstandings

- ___ State the ground rules for the meeting
 - ___ confidentiality, informed consent, limits to confidentiality, etc.
 - ___ respect each person's point of view but agreement is not required

- ___ As facilitator of the meeting:
 - ___ give each person opportunity to voice her/his perspective
 - ___ prevent interruptions
 - ___ facilitate interaction particularly if perspectives differ

- ___ If disagreements become heated ask family members:
 - ___ if they believe it is possible to resolve the disagreements
 - ___ what steps need to be taken to resolve them

- ___ Attempt to develop a common goal engaging family members in:
 - ___ definition of the goal (e.g. determine permanency goal, develop safety plan for the child, etc.)
 - ___ determining if all family members agree with the goal
 - ___ identifying other alternative goals if the family is not in agreement or if the family's goals and the child welfare system's goals are incompatible
 - ___ identification of obstacles that must be overcome to achieve the goal(s)

- ___ If a common goal is developed:
 - ___ develop a plan for pursuing the goal, overcoming obstacles to the goal
 - ___ begin to specify each person's role
 - ___ begin to define tasks that each person agrees to accomplish
 - ___ develop a plan for future meetings with the family to refine the plan
 - ___ develop a plan with the family for evaluating implementation and effectiveness of the plan

- ___ If no common goal is developed, schedule subsequent meetings to negotiate a common goal

- ___ Engender hope in the family
 - ___ prognostic statement (as positive and hopeful as is truthful)
 - ___ statement of strengths (family's perspective and your own)

Low	High	Relationship Variables
1 2 3 4 5 6 7		interest _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7		genuineness _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7		warmth/acceptance _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7		empathy _____

Notes on giving feedback: First, identify and praise a specific strength displayed by the interviewer. Second, make specific recommendations for improvement

Notes on receiving feedback: Different people will receive you differently. Use every opportunity for receiving feedback to learn about how you are perceived and received by others.

Handouts and Overheads for Unit V

- ! Goals for Unit V

- ! Figure V-A: Collaborative Process in Decision-Making

- ! Figure V-B: Conducting Family Meetings

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