

UNDERSTANDING ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS: CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE TIPS



National Center on
Substance Abuse
and Child Welfare



Parents with substance use disorders (SUDs) face many obstacles in the treatment and recovery process. Family engagement is critical to improve outcomes and support the pathway to family recovery. There are many strategies that child welfare workers can use when working with families:



Acknowledge family voice in defining their family and support systems: Extended family, friends, and supportive individuals viewed as family can improve a parent's willingness to participate in services, help preserve existing connections within the family, and help ensure meaningful connections for children outside of the home.



Learn about the beliefs, values, and traditions of families: Ask families open-ended questions to learn how they function as a family. For instance:

- How do they interact with each other and celebrate major life events like birthdays and holidays?
- What activities do they do as a family?
- What is important to them?
- What values and beliefs do they want to pass down to their children?



Engage in open, honest, and respectful conversations: Parents may feel immense shame and guilt about how their substance use affects their children. Responding to parents with empathy, honesty, respect, and compassion can help them in their work of recovery and reconnection to their children, support systems, and communities. Empathy begins by examining and acknowledging one's own attitudes and biases. Understand there are different responses to stigma or shame and use a strengths-based perspective while focusing on what is going well and celebrating achievements. Communicate with the parent about observations or concerns using an approach that is supportive and not stigmatizing or judgmental. Use "person first" language and avoid using labeling terms such as "addict."

Use a conversational approach with open-ended questions such as the following:

- "What has been going well?"
- "What did you find helpful about...?"
- "What is different today from the last time?"
- "Tell me more about..."
- "As part of our work with families, we ask all families about..."
- "What are the concerns from your point of view?"
- "How can I help you with...?"



Link to peer or recovery support: Recovery support services help people navigate systems of care, remove barriers to recovery, and achieve and maintain recovery. Peer or recovery support roles are often held by persons in recovery from SUDs and with child welfare involvement, or by professionally trained recovery specialists. Refer to peer and recovery support programs to address barriers and facilitate receipt of treatment services.



Support the children: Help children develop an understanding of SUDs that is supportive and nonjudgmental. Convey information about their parents' substance misuse in a way that defines the disorder, not the person, and is appropriate to the children's developmental stage and age. Child welfare workers can use these talking points to help guide supportive discussions:

- "Substance use disorders are a disease. Your parent is not a bad person. He/she has a disease. Parents may do things you don't understand when they drink too much or use drugs, but this doesn't mean that they don't love you."
- "You are not the reason your parent drinks or uses drugs. You did not cause this disease. You cannot stop your parent's drinking or drug use."
- "There are a lot of children in a similar situation. In fact, there are millions of children whose parents struggle with drugs or alcohol. Some are in your school. You are not alone."
- "Let's think of people who you might talk with about your concerns. You don't have to feel scared or ashamed or embarrassed. You can talk to your teacher, a close friend, or a trusted family member."



Provide access to resources: Families may have difficulty trusting supports and service providers or accepting referrals. Ineffective referrals to treatment can effect treatment access. Misperceptions and misinformation about substance use disorders, mental health, and involvement in child welfare can also lead to bias. Talk with the parent and family members about what to expect in the referral and treatment process and throughout their child welfare case to address any concerns they may have.



Provide support in early recovery: SUDs may affect cognitive functions and result in behavior often perceived as "resistant." Conduct ongoing assessments to ensure a lack of basic needs doesn't affect engagement in treatment. As parents focus on their recovery, help them connect to SUD treatment, peer support services, court, visitation, and parent strengthening programs. Help parents make and keep appointments by marking their calendars/schedules and providing reminders and incentives. Identify barriers to making an appointment (e.g., lack of transportation) and work together to create solutions. Collaborate and coordinate with providers to minimize competing priorities.

LEARN MORE

The National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare (NCSACW) developed this tool as part of a series of tip sheets for child welfare workers who serve families affected by SUDs. For more information and practice tips on working with families affected by SUDs and child welfare, read:

[Understanding Substance Use Disorders – What Child Welfare Staff Need to Know](#)

[Identifying Safety and Protective Capacities for Families with Parental Substance Use Disorders and Child Welfare Involvement](#)

[Understanding Screening and Assessment of Substance Use Disorders – Child Welfare Practice Tips](#)

[Child Welfare and Planning for Safety: A Collaborative Approach for Families with Parental Substance Use Disorders and Child Welfare Involvement](#)

[Understanding Substance Use Disorders, Treatment, and Family Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals](#) is a self-paced and free tutorial that provides specific information about SUDs and the treatment and recovery process for families affected by SUDs. Continuing education units are available upon completion.

[Working With Adolescents: Practice Tips and Resource Guide](#) from NCSACW provides information for child welfare, substance use treatment providers, healthcare, and other community agencies serving adolescents at risk of misusing substances. The guide examines adolescence as a unique stage of development—one that requires professionals to take a tailored and collaborative approach. It also provides a comprehensive array of services, terminology, policy considerations, and practice strategies to support those working with young adults through a family-centered lens.

NCSACW's brief, [Disrupting Stigma: How Understanding, Empathy, and Connection Can Improve Outcomes for Families Affected by Substance Use and Mental Disorders](#) supports cross-system collaborative teams in their work to reduce stigma in interactions, expectations, and policies affecting families. It provides several strategies to fight stigma and facilitate engagement with parents and family members affected by SUDs.

[American Indian & Alaska Native Grandfamilies: Helping Children Thrive Through Connection to Family and Cultural Identity](#) is a toolkit designed to give resources and tips to child welfare agencies, other government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. This resource explores unique strengths and challenges of grandfamilies to provide culturally appropriate supportive services.

[Standards for Social Work Practice with Clients with Substance Use Disorders](#) the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines the scope of services that social workers provide to clients with substance use disorders, including co-occurring mental health issues, that clients and their families should expect, and that program administrators should support. The standards are also designed to enhance awareness of the skills, knowledge, values, methods, and sensitivities that social workers need to work effectively within systems dedicated to serving clients with substance use disorders.

The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) and the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) websites offer comprehensive information about treatment for SUDs, mental health, and [treatment location services](#).

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