

Parent Engagement— Reflections From the CFSR: 2015–2017



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Introduction

The purpose of the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) is to help states improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families who receive services through the child welfare system.¹ The CSFRs enable the Children’s Bureau to (1) ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements; (2) determine what is actually happening to children and families receiving child welfare services; and (3) assist states in enhancing their capacity to help children and families achieve positive outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being.²

The federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96–272) requires the development of a written case plan for any child receiving foster care assistance. The case plan must be developed jointly with the parents of the child.³ All states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico require a case plan when a child welfare agency places a child in out-of-home care and more than half also require a case plan when a child and his or her family are receiving any kind of in-home services to prevent placement.⁴ To jointly develop the case plan with parents, state child welfare practices must support caseworkers effectively engaging parents in the process. Data and information collected during the CSFRs provide some insights into specific areas of child welfare practice, including opportunities for states to engage and work collaboratively with parents to improve child welfare outcomes.

This report presents results from CSFRs conducted in the 38 states that were reviewed during the first 3 years of Round 3 of the CSFRs (2015–2017).⁵ It focuses on how agencies engage parents to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system.

¹ Criteria for determining substantial conformity, 45 C.F.R. § 1355.34 (2012). Available from the U.S. Government Publishing Office at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2012-title45-vol4/pdf/CFR-2012-title45-vol4-sec1355-34.pdf>

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau. (n.d.). *Children’s Bureau Child and Family Services Reviews fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr_general_factsheet.pdf

³ 45 C.F.R. § 1356.21.

⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2018). *Case planning for families involved with child welfare agencies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau.

⁵ For purposes of this report, “states” includes the District of Columbia. The 38 states reviewed in FYs 2015–2017 were Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.



Parent Engagement

Parent engagement is a strength-based approach in which caseworkers partner with parents to build and strengthen relationships and set and achieve goals.⁶ Through this partnership, parents have a voice in all aspects of service delivery and decision-making and are treated as experts in determining what is best for themselves and their children.⁷

Parent engagement is foundational for improving safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. Evidence suggests that effective parent engagement may reduce incidents of removal of the child from the home,⁸ may increase the likelihood of family reunification,⁹ and may

reduce the recurrence of maltreatment.¹⁰ Moreover, the early involvement and engagement of parents, as well as kin, extended family, and fictive kin, can expand placement and permanency options for the child.¹¹ Finally, when parents are included and able to participate in the decision-making process, they tend to be more likely to commit to working toward case goals,¹² and services are more likely to be appropriately targeted to meet the needs of the family.¹³

Caseworkers must work in partnership with parents to set goals and develop case plans aimed at strengthening families.¹⁴ Caseworkers can promote parent engagement by using honest and respectful communication with parents and recognizing that families have the ability to address and solve problems arising from their own particular situations.

Building from the standpoint that parent engagement is essential, beneficial, and sometimes potentially challenging to establish and support, this report addresses two questions: (1) What does CFSR data indicate about how well agencies successfully engage parents in the child welfare process? (2) What are the perceptions and experiences of parents involved with state child welfare systems? Answering such questions helps to identify agencies' strengths and challenges

⁶ Definitions of Family Engagement. (n.d.). In *Family Engagement Inventory*. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/fei/definition/>; McCarthy, J. (2012). *Guide for developing and implementing child welfare practice models*. Retrieved from <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/practicemodel/PMguide.pdf>

⁷ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Family engagement: Partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.; Gladstone, J., Dumbrell, G., Leslie, B., Koster, A., Young, M., & Ismaila, A. (2014). Understanding worker-parent engagement in child protection casework. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 56–64.

⁸ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Family engagement: Partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

⁹ Corwin, T. (2012). *Strategies to increase birth parent engagement, partnership, and leadership in the child welfare system: A review*. Casey Family Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/media/BirthParentEngagement.pdf>

¹⁰ Fuller, T., & Zhang, S. (2017). The impact of family engagement and child welfare services on maltreatment re-reports and substantiated re-reports. *Child Maltreatment*, 22(3), 183–193.

¹¹ Landsman, M., Boel-Studt, S., & Malone, K. (2014). Results from a family finding experiment. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 36, 62–69.

¹² Kemp, S. P., Marcenko, M. O., Hoagwood, K., & Vesneski, W. (2009). Engaging parents in child welfare services: Bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare*, 88(1), 101–126.

¹³ Bossard, N., Braxton, A., & Conway, D. (2014). Meaningful family engagement. In G. Mallon & P. Hess (Eds.), *Child welfare for the 21st century: A handbook of practices, policies, and programs* (pp. 70–85). New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Family engagement: Partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

when engaging parents in the hope that results will yield strategies to engage effectively with parents to strengthen families and improve child welfare outcomes.

Methods

The CFSRs evaluate states' performance in ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being for children by reviewing at least 65 cases in each state and interviewing case participants, such as youth, parents, resource families, and caseworkers. A team of federal and state reviewers uses the federal CFSR Onsite Review Instrument and Instructions (OSRI) to rate cases. Reviewers look at cases of children served in their homes and cases of children in foster care. For foster care cases, a target child is identified, and the case ratings focus mainly on that specific child. For in-home cases, ratings focus on all of the children in the household. This report presents the OSRI ratings for items most relevant to parent engagement. The results show how well agencies:

- Engage parents in case planning
- Assess parents' needs and provide services
- Conduct frequent and quality caseworker visits with parents
- Ensure parent-child visitation is of sufficient frequency and quality
- Promote, support, and maintain positive relationships between children in foster care and their parent(s)

This report presents CFSR results on the 3,142 foster care and in-home cases reviewed from 2015 through 2017, the first 3 years of Round 3 of the CFSRs. To determine item ratings, reviewers looked at practice during a specified recent time range in each state called the "period under review," usually the most recent 12 to 18 months. They examined case records and

interviewed case participants, such as parents, children, resource families, and caseworkers. The reviewers then rated each item as either a Strength or an Area Needing Improvement (ANI). In this report, the sample sizes (i.e., n sizes) provided for each item represent the total number of applicable cases reviewed for each item.¹⁵ Reviewers also wrote a Rationale Statement to explain the basis for each rating. This report identifies themes from these Rationale Statements, organized into "Challenges" from cases rated as an ANI, and "Strengths" from cases rated as a Strength. Taking a closer look at reviewers' reports on parent engagement practices provides a better understanding of state practices affecting parent engagement.

To represent parents' voices on how child welfare agencies are performing at a broader level, this report also presents results from the 40 stakeholder interviews held in the first 3 years of Round 3 with parents involved in the child welfare system. It is important to note that while the case ratings reflect individual cases, stakeholder interviews with parents could cover broader perspectives on child welfare practice and systemic issues. Qualitative findings are not directly comparable to the case item ratings.

Results

These results of the 2015–2017 CFSRs with respect to parent engagement represent performance from data collected on a small sample of cases and stakeholder interviews from each state. Information presented in this report does not imply that any one data element had an effect on another.

Engaging Parents in Case Planning

Family choice, conceptualized as families making decisions about needs and services, is a key element of family-centered practice¹⁶ and parent engagement.

¹⁵ There are two exceptions. For the pattern of caseworker visits with parents and the pattern of visits between parents and children in foster care, the sample sizes (i.e., n sizes) represent the number of parents who experienced each outcome of interest.

¹⁶ Epley, P., Summers, J. A., & Turnbull, A. (2010). Characteristics and trends in family-centered conceptualizations. *Journal of Family Social Work, 13*(3), 269–285.

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When caseworkers involve parents in case planning, they are engaging parents by recognizing parents as key decision-makers for their families.

The CFSRs revealed practice concerns in involving both mothers and fathers in case planning. Mothers were involved in case planning in 66% of cases (n = 2,581). Fathers were involved in case planning in 50% of cases (n = 1,968). (See Figure 1.)

Strengths: Cases that received a Strength rating were more likely to have caseworkers who focused on building rapport through an open exchange and full explanation of the child welfare process. They were intent on ensuring that parents helped develop and understood the case plan, with the goal of empowering the parents to make positive changes for their families. These caseworkers monitored progress comprehensively in partnership with the parents. They sought out feedback from parents on whether services were meeting their needs and what parents thought of the direction the case was taking. In some cases, caseworkers effectively used certain practices, such as Family Team Meetings and Motivational Interviewing, to emphasize parents' strengths. They discussed potential future scenarios and how to handle them. Caseworkers openly discussed difficult topics such as termination of parental rights (TPR) and adoption. Furthermore, they continued visits with the parents after case goals changed and even

Figure 1. Efforts Made To Involve Parents in Case Planning



after TPR. They assisted parents with concrete needs such as help with bill-paying and transportation. They also communicated with parents in the parents' primary language and had one-on-one conversations with them to gather their input and engage in case planning.

Caseworkers who effectively engaged parents also involved other members of the community, including professionals, in the case planning process. They maintained contact with family members as conduits to parents when they were unable to locate parents. Caseworkers used in-home service providers, held family team meetings, and enlisted attorneys and providers to effectively engage parents in meeting the safety, permanency, and well-being needs of their child(ren) and achieve case goals.

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Areas Needing Improvement (ANI): In some cases, reviewers described circumstances where the agency developed the case plan without parental input and then provided it to the parent for signature. Some parents saw the plan for the first time in court. Reviewers also noted that in some cases, caseworkers focused on how to get parents to comply with a case plan rather than addressing the parents' issues or concerns.

Caseworkers sometimes faced communication issues, which affected the degree of engagement with parents who did not speak English or parents with mental or cognitive impairments. Finally, in some cases, the physical location or particular circumstances of the parents presented challenges for caseworkers in engaging parents. For example, some parents lived outside of the state or county and the distance limited



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opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Other parents were homeless or living in transient housing, which made it difficult to locate and involve them in case planning.

Parents' Perspectives on Engagement in Case Planning

Many parents reported that they were not involved in the case planning process. Rather, they were handed a completed case plan and expected to follow it. In some cases, parents who were asked if they involved in case planning answered yes, however interviewers learned that the parents only thought they were involved simply because they signed the case plan (i.e., these parents did not actually participate in the case planning process). Other parents said they often felt that the case plans outlined what the caseworker thought was best, rather than what the parent thought was needed or the team decided on. Some parents said that even if they attended case planning meetings, they did not feel the meetings were collaborative. Instead, parents felt talked over and judged, and the case plan seemed like a general checklist that parents were required to follow. In other words, though some parents were technically involved in case planning, it was, at best, pro forma. As three parents explained:

[The] plan is bestowed upon us [as] is and contains what [the] worker thinks the interventions should be. The choice the parent has is whether or not they will work the plan.

The case plan is completed by the caseworker and supervisor and it is already complete when we see it. The agency has already written the plan and this is the plan we must follow. We really did not have [a] choice; we either follow the plan or get our kids taken away.

When we were presented our first case plan it was scary and we could not say anything. The plan was done within days after our children were removed and we were shocked and didn't know what we could or could not do.

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While some parents said they felt that it was better to include the family unit in the case planning process, other parents noted that the Family Team Meeting, the forum in which many case plans were developed, was not a forum that facilitated communication or parent engagement. For example, one parent said:

[They] took it as an opportunity to say what [I] had done wrong.

Another parent said:

You go in and you are completely powerless. You are told what you can and can't do. They are using terms that you don't understand.

Some parents said that if caseworkers got to know the parent, it would help to increase parents' engagement in case planning, and others noted the importance of effective caseworker communication and caseworker

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support for parent involvement in case planning. For example, one parent explained:

In my case they were awesome and I learned a lot. What helped me the most [was that] when I needed something I could call my caseworker and she would get me going.

Some parents who noted challenges to their involvement in case planning mentioned that they did not understand expectations or the process very well. Some parents noted a power imbalance between themselves and caseworkers and the courts, and, relatedly, some expressed feeling vulnerable when faced with the unfamiliar language and processes that accompanied legal and court involvement. For example, a parent explained:

The court process was very confusing to begin with. The process wasn't explained. You are at the very lowest point in your life and they come in and hit you where it hurts and you don't have a leg to stand on. Court intervention was good for me but I can understand how you could throw your hands up and give up. Not knowing the legal terms was hard and you had to figure it out on your own.

For the parents who did feel involved in case planning, this led to more positive outcomes. For instance, some parents reported that their case plans were appropriate and allowed them to receive services to address their needs because they were able to provide input. Other parents said that being involved in case planning allowed them to be self-advocates. Some parents also benefited from having a parent advocate who helped them navigate case planning. Two interviewers noted:

One parent said that her worker helped her remember the goals she had set for herself earlier in life and helped her to set new goals. She was allowed to give input into her case plan. The worker helped her to pursue what she wanted to do for herself and her children.

The advocate...has been exceptionally sensitive to the situation; very empathetic, and talks to [the

parents] like human beings. The father indicated he wants to be an advocate for parents like him in the system. He wants to see what he can do to help people in the same situation and make it better for parents like him.

Sometimes, parents became more involved in case planning over time as caseworkers developed a stronger rapport with them, or after parents received treatment for mental health and/or substance abuse issues. Similarly, some parents said that they were unsure of what was happening at first, that they were “in denial” at the beginning of the case, or that they “went in blind,” which limited engagement initially. This highlights the importance of caseworkers not only making efforts to engage parents initially but also continuing with those efforts on an ongoing basis.

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A recurring theme among many of the parents—whether they felt included in case planning or not—was that they would agree to the case plans, even if the goals kept changing or if tasks continued to be added, because it meant a chance to have their children returned to them. As one interviewer noted:

One [parent] indicated that her case plan was personalized and it was developed with her input. The worker in her case was willing to work with her. Her plan was also modified as goals were achieved. That being said, if she did not agree with the plan, she would have signed the plan anyway because it was [Child Protective Services] and she wanted to get her children back.



Spotlight Section: Challenges and Solutions to Engaging Parents

Parents engaging with caseworkers during case planning may be challenging for some parents for a number of reasons. First, parents may have a history of negative experiences with other institutions and public agencies. This institutional mistrust, along with the complex issues that may have led to involvement with the child welfare system (e.g., substance abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence, and/or challenges in meeting basic needs), can create challenges to the engagement process. Second, there may also be practical challenges to successful engagement, such as a lack of transportation and child care or competing demands such as employment.¹⁷ Third, parents' fear of losing their children can easily foster an adversarial relationship between the parents and the agency, resulting in resistive or even aggressive responses from parents. Finally, it is important for caseworkers to recognize that before parents can take full advantage of services to address their family issues, they may need help meeting basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and transportation or for ensuring their own safety.¹⁸

Information from parent interviews suggests that parents' understanding, attitudes, and perceptions of the child welfare system also can affect parent engagement. Most parents reported a general lack of understanding of the child welfare system. For example, two interviewers wrote:

[Parents] feel that no one is in their corner [and there is] no one to explain what just happened.

Parents don't know the process, how the agency really works, and what to expect.

This lack of understanding, coupled with the strong emotions parents experience upon becoming involved with the child welfare system, seems to have an effect on the degree of engagement. One parent said:

When you initially become involved with the department you are emotional, in shock, confused and just want your kids back.

Additionally, one interviewer wrote:

Parents do not feel supported at all because they [are] scared because they either have had their children taken away or there is the chance [that] they will have them taken away.

Similarly, the results from case rating rationales suggest that caseworkers faced challenges when parents were resistant and difficult to engage. In some cases, parents had substance abuse or mental health problems that created challenges to engagement. Sometimes parents were resistant, even hostile, to caseworkers and refused to meet with them.

On the other hand, parents who possessed knowledge of the child welfare system, understood the process of how to achieve case goals, and were able to effectively communicate seemed to be able to better engage with caseworkers. A number of parents reported having positive experiences with advocates and mentors, who helped parents learn how to improve the exchange of information between themselves and their caseworkers. One interviewer wrote:

Having the worker in the home and a parent mentor with a shared experience helped [the parent] navigate the [child welfare] system. As a result of having the mentor, the parent started communicating with [the] caseworker better.

Other parents stated that they were able to engage with their caseworkers upon receiving services for underlying challenges, such as substance abuse. One parent said:

[I am] very involved with [the] worker now that I am in recovery.

¹⁷ Corwin, T. (2012). *Strategies to increase birth parent engagement, partnership, and leadership in the child welfare system: A review*. Casey Family Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/media/BirthParentEngagement.pdf>

¹⁸ Id.

In summary, these results underscore the need for child welfare agencies to train and support caseworkers in how to approach parents using a trauma-informed lens. It is important for caseworkers to recognize that while some parents may seem uncooperative, their behavior is likely a symptom of traumatic stress from having their children removed from the home. Further, given the effects of traumatic stress on the brain,¹⁹ it is important for caseworkers to recognize that parents may experience a reduced ability to process and/or remember information under such circumstances. To promote engagement, it is important that caseworkers understand and normalize parents' reactions and perspectives²⁰, be empathetic to parents' situations, and provide parents with information that is easy to understand. For instance, giving parents repetitive information may be helpful because being in an overwhelming situation may mean parents need to hear information more than once. Finally, it is important for caseworkers to be solution-focused in their practice with parents, which will support parents in addressing individual and family needs.

Needs and Services

One aspect of effective parent engagement includes caseworkers and parents collaborating to jointly assess needs and identify services to achieve case goals. Through this process, caseworkers can build a relationship with parents that encourages active participation, open communication, and respect for parents as experts on their own lives.

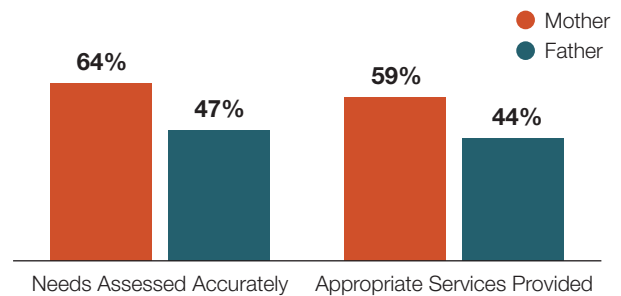
In 42% of cases (n = 2,697), agencies made concerted efforts to assess the needs of parents and provide

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appropriate services. Overall performance in this area was affected by the lower ratings for work with fathers as compared with mothers.

Figure 2 shows that mothers' needs were accurately assessed in 64% of cases (n = 2,614), and that in 59% of cases (n = 2,488), mothers received appropriate services. Fathers' needs were accurately assessed in 47% of cases (n = 2,125), and in 44% of cases (n = 1,885), fathers received appropriate services.

Figure 2. Efforts Made To Assess Needs and Provide Services for Parents



Strengths: Cases that received a Strength rating show that caseworkers consistently followed up with parents to explore their needs and ensure that parents followed through with their services. Caseworkers also worked with parents to eliminate difficulties in accessing services e.g., lack of transportation. In many cases, caseworkers relied on varied sources of information to inform assessments and service needs (e.g., interviews with family members, health records, criminal records).

Areas Needing Improvement (ANI): Some cases that received an ANI rating did not have comprehensive initial or ongoing assessments. As a result, the services provided to parents were either focused on treating symptoms instead of underlying issues or were “cookie cutter” in nature (i.e., families were offered similar services regardless of their underlying needs). As examples, in some cases, parents who may have benefited from a

¹⁹ Van der Kolk, B. A., McFarlane, A. C., & Weisaeth, L. (Eds.). (2012). *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. Guilford Press.

²⁰ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2011). *Birth parents with trauma histories and the child welfare system: A guide for child welfare staff*. Retrieved from <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/birth-parents-trauma-histories-and-child-welfare-system-guide-child-welfare-staff>

referral to domestic violence services were instead told to attend anger management classes, and some parents were sent for substance abuse assessments when there were no signs of substance use. As a result, even though some parents may have received services, they may not have been comprehensive or targeted to address underlying issues. Other cases that received an ANI rating show that some parents did not receive comprehensive assessments or appropriate services because of language challenges. Agencies can be hindered by a lack of interpreters and a lack of services that are appropriate for non-English speaking parents or parents for whom English is a second language. Relatedly, these cases often lacked culturally appropriate considerations and services, as well.

Many cases that received an ANI rating reflect circumstances in which agencies struggled to help families with their financial needs. Parents struggled with providing housing, clothing, transportation, or other household necessities such as beds, and agencies struggled to connect families to resources to meet those needs.



Parents' Perspectives on Needs and Services

Across all of the stakeholder interviews, about half of the parents said their needs were met and/or they were provided appropriate services. When parents' needs were met, these parents felt that the services they received were individualized and that caseworkers did not take a “cookie cutter” approach with them. Parents often reported receiving services such as parenting

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classes, help with child care, substance abuse treatment services, mental health services, domestic violence services, and help with transportation.

Additionally, some parents reported receiving help with recreational activities for their family, such as swimming passes, zoo passes, and help with other extracurricular activities. One interviewer wrote:

The worker was very helpful and worked with the family both day and night...During the unsupervised visitation, the agency obtained passes for the child to go swimming.

However, some parents who reported their needs were met also said that it was not until another caseworker was assigned that this happened. One parent said:

[We] needed therapy for our family and these services were never provided until 6 months down the line when the third caseworker was assigned. We were left with nothing for the first 6 months the case was opened. Our third worker is an angel. She made sure that our child had everything she need[ed]. Family therapy was offered by the agency after the third caseworker took over.

Another group of parents stated that their needs were not met and appropriate services were not provided. These parents cited challenges such as delays in initiating services, a lack of treatment options (e.g., few resources for substance abuse treatment), difficulty accessing services on their own, struggles to pay for services, and difficulty scheduling appointments around work. For example, one parent said:

One thing that could be better would be to have services after work hours so that we don't have to juggle work and services.

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A number of parents reported gaps in services related to housing, substance abuse treatment, and general help in understanding the child welfare system. Two interviewers wrote:

[The] housing waitlist is preventing permanency. Affordable housing [is] hard to locate.

Another barrier is a lack of treatment beds. Parents go through a long journey to get to “I am done and I want treatment,” only to be told “there are no beds” [for substance abuse treatment].

Some parents felt that the assessments for services they received, both initially and on an ongoing basis, were not comprehensive, individualized, or accurate. As an example, one interviewer noted:

One [parent] indicated that he did not feel that he was asked to do the right type of services. He indicated that there was not a good assessment process but rather the worker made assumptions about his needs and there was a lot of stereotyping going on.

Inaccurate or uncomprehensive assessments, coupled with the power differential between parents and caseworkers, sometimes led to parents participating in services they viewed as unnecessary because they perceived that there would be negative consequences (e.g., having children removed or having parental rights terminated) for noncompliance. Moreover, this sometimes contributed to parents feeling too overwhelmed to know where to begin in the process, or how to move forward, given the seemingly conflicting demands. For example, some parents reported difficulty in trying to juggle all of their services while maintaining employment. One interviewer wrote:

The father had to go 5 days a week for 3 hours a day per case plan for drug services. He said he did not have time to work because there were so many services to complete in the case plan. It seemed like 99% of [the] time they were participating in services and if they did not complete them, they feared losing their children.

SOME PARENTS REPORTED DIFFICULTY IN TRYING TO JUGGLE ALL OF THEIR SERVICES WHILE MAINTAINING EMPLOYMENT.

To address these challenges, parents said it was important that caseworkers visited with them frequently, individualized the assessments, and treated the family as a unit. One parent commented:

It is not possible to do good assessments when the worker only comes to the house once a month. They can't really assess what is going on in the house.



Spotlight Section: Needs and Services for Fathers

Case rating Rationale Statements and stakeholder interviews revealed that agencies faced more challenges in assessing needs and providing services for fathers than for mothers. For example, the case rating rationales frequently noted that:

- Fathers were more likely to not be living in the home and not engaged in services
- Fathers were more likely to be incarcerated
- When a parent's whereabouts were unknown and the agency did not make efforts to locate the parent, it was more likely to be the father
- Fathers' engagement was sometimes affected by delays in establishing paternity

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- In either two- or single-parent cases, contact (e.g., face-to-face visits, phone calls) with parents was almost always with the mother, or with both parents, rather than with the father alone, which limited needs assessment and service provision for fathers
- Cases involving single mothers were more likely to be rated as a Strength for efforts to assess the needs of parents and provide appropriate services than cases involving single fathers, suggesting that an area of improvement for agencies is assessing needs and providing services to single fathers

IN EITHER TWO- OR SINGLE PARENT CASES, CONTACT (E.G., FACE TO FACE VISITS, PHONE CALLS) WITH PARENTS WAS **ALMOST ALWAYS WITH THE MOTHER**, OR WITH BOTH PARENTS, RATHER THAN WITH THE FATHER ALONE, WHICH LIMITED NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND SERVICE PROVISION FOR FATHERS.

In both the stakeholder interviews and case rating rationales, it was reported that some fathers mentioned not being engaged at all or being engaged separately from the family. Further, some parents who were interviewed noted that communication was particularly poor with the child's father. As an interviewer noted:

[The] husband was totally discounted and he wasn't given options to schedule appointments for him that would meet his work schedule. [He] asked for services for him and they were not given. The case plan seemed to keep the husband and wife separate rather than being a family plan.

A common theme from the stakeholder interviews was that fathers being incarcerated resulted in difficulties in receiving services. For example, a mother explained:

The father of my children is incarcerated and he has had difficulties with services for him. I do share the things I have learned with him from parenting classes and the things that I am taught by the parent aid. He also has read books in prison but there are no services in prison for him. The case plan for reunification has been with me and the children because he is in prison but once he is released I am not sure what will happen...while in prison there [have] not been any services to accommodate his service needs.

In some cases, fathers noted that caseworkers engaged them after their paternity had been established. As an interviewer noted:

The father said the department work was focused with the mother initially, but once he established paternity through DNA testing, he became involved.

In summary, it is important that child welfare agencies work to improve fathers' involvement by creating a culture of engagement that fosters positive behavior change, objectively involves fathers (rather than relying on mothers' perspectives of fathers), and clearly communicates the value that fathers have in the lives of their children. It is imperative that agencies and caseworkers work to ensure that fathers are involved in goal setting, given feedback on their progress, and invited to provide feedback on services. It is also important that services are accessible to working fathers, deliver content specific to issues related to fatherhood, and underscore the value of both father-child relationships and mother-child relationships.²¹ Finally, caseworkers may need to be creative in their efforts to engage fathers. For example, caseworkers can use technology to facilitate contact when fathers are incarcerated and organize social events for fathers and their children.²²

²¹ Martinez, K., Rider, F., Cayce, N., Forssell, S., Poirier, J., Hunt, S., Crawford, G., Sawyer, J. (2013). *A guide for father involvement in systems of care*. Washington, DC: Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health. Retrieved from <http://www.tapartnership.org/COP/CLC/publications.php?id=topic1#content1>; Administration for Children and Families. (2018). Integrating approaches that prioritize and enhance father engagement. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/acffatherhoodim_final.pdf

²² Martinez, K., Rider, F., Cayce, N., Forssell, S., Poirier, J., Hunt, S., Crawford, G., Sawyer, J. (2013). *A guide for father involvement in systems of care*. Washington, DC: Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health. Retrieved from <http://www.tapartnership.org/COP/CLC/publications.php?id=topic1#content1>



In 42% of cases (n = 2,687), caseworker visits with parents were of sufficient frequency and quality to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of their children and to promote achievement of case goals.

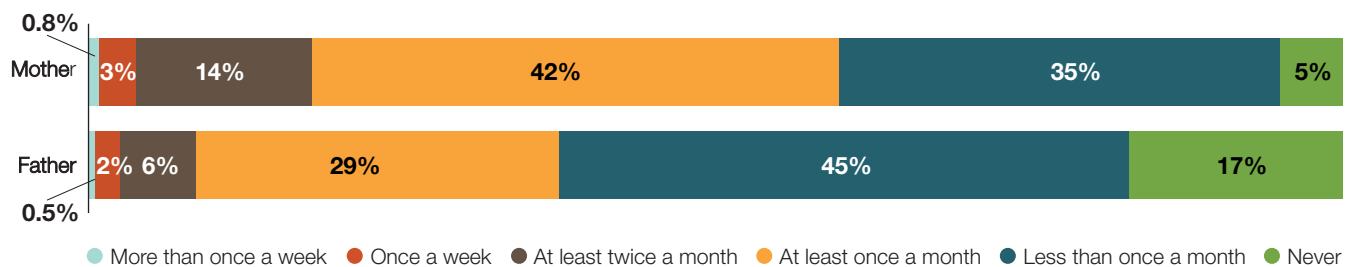
IN **42%** OF CASES (N = 2,687), CASEWORKER VISITS WITH PARENTS WERE OF SUFFICIENT **FREQUENCY AND QUALITY** TO ENSURE THE SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL BEING OF THEIR CHILDREN AND TO PROMOTE ACHIEVEMENT OF CASE GOALS.

Caseworker Visits With Parents

A characteristic of effective parent engagement is a strong caseworker-parent relationship,²³ which can be developed through frequent and high-quality caseworker visits with parents. The hallmarks of a good caseworker-parent relationship include open communication and frequent contact,²⁴ including parents as partners in collaborative problem-solving,²⁵ and recognizing that parents have the right to be central participants in decision-making.²⁶ Frequent and high-quality visits between caseworkers and parents supports parent engagement by providing opportunities for building rapport and trust. Furthermore, caseworker visits with parents provide an opportunity for honest conversations about progress toward case goals.

When looking at visitation patterns for mothers and fathers separately, as Figure 3 shows, mothers were more likely to receive visits from caseworkers. There were 2,588 applicable cases involving mothers. Less than one percent (n=20) of mothers saw their caseworkers more than once a week. Three percent (n=80) of mothers saw their caseworkers once a week. Fourteen percent (n=80) of mothers saw their caseworkers once a week. Fourteen percent (n=362) of mothers saw their caseworkers less than once a week, but at least twice a month. Forty-two percent (n=1,081) of mothers saw their caseworkers less than twice a month, but at least once a month. Thirty-five percent (n=916) of mothers saw their caseworkers less than once a month. Five percent (n=129) of mothers never saw their caseworkers. There were 1,965 applicable cases involving fathers. Less than

Figure 3. Pattern of Caseworker Visits With Parents



²³ Altman, J. C. (2008). Engaging families in child welfare services: Worker versus client perspectives. *Child Welfare, 87*(3) 41–61.

²⁴ Lee, C. D., & Ayón, C. (2004). Is the client-worker relationship associated with better outcomes in mandated child abuse cases? *Research on Social Work Practice, 14*(5), 351–357.

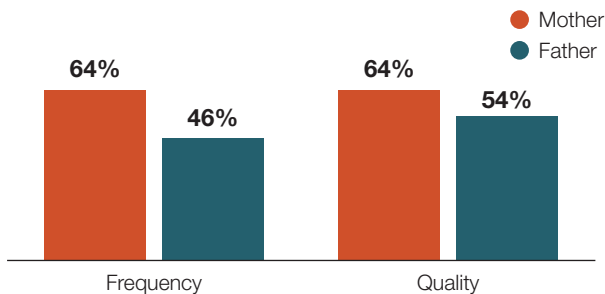
²⁵ Platt, D. (2012). Understanding parental engagement with child welfare services: An integrated model. *Child & Family Social Work, 17*(2), 138–148.

²⁶ Pennell, J., Burford, G., Connolly, M., & Morris, K. (2011). Taking child and family rights seriously: Family engagement and its evidence in child welfare. *Child Welfare, 90*(4), 9–16.

one percent (n=9) of fathers saw their caseworkers more than once a week. Two percent (n=35) of fathers saw their caseworkers once a week. Six percent (n=123) of fathers saw their caseworkers less than once a week, but at least twice a month. Twenty-nine percent (n=572) of fathers saw their caseworkers less than twice a month, but at least once a month. Forty-five percent (n=891) of fathers saw their caseworkers less than once a month. Seventeen percent (n=335) of fathers never saw their caseworkers.

The frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and mothers and fathers followed a similar pattern, as shown in Figure 4. Mothers' visits with caseworkers were sufficiently frequent in 64% of cases (n = 2,588), and in 64% of cases (n = 2,441), mothers' visits with caseworkers were of sufficient quality. Fathers' visits with caseworkers were sufficiently frequent in 46% of cases (n = 1,965), and in 54% of cases (n = 1,618), fathers' visits with caseworkers were of sufficient quality.

Figure 4. Sufficient Frequency and Quality of Caseworker Visits With Parents



Strengths: Cases that received a Strength rating were more likely to have caseworkers who met consistently with parents, seeking them out and meeting them at convenient locations, including in the family home. When parents were unavailable (e.g., their whereabouts were unknown), caseworkers made varied and repeated efforts to locate and contact them, including maintaining contact with family members as conduits to parents. Many visits approached an hour or more in length, and meeting duration varied according to need.

CONSISTENTLY SEEING THE SAME CASEWORKER WAS IMPORTANT IN BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CASEWORKER AND THE PARENT.

Consistently seeing the same caseworker was important in building a supportive relationship between the caseworker and the parent and fostering parent engagement. It was also important that caseworkers were responsive to case dynamics, that is, adjusting their engagement strategies and practice as family circumstances evolved, and continuing to work with parents when reunification was no longer the permanency goal.

Areas Needing Improvement (ANI): Cases that received an ANI rating had fewer or less frequent visits with caseworkers. In some cases, caseworkers' efforts to locate or meet with the parent were insufficient. Additionally, sometimes caseworkers interpreted parents' lack of engagement as lack of interest. In other cases, caseworkers did not adjust their practice in response to changes in family circumstances or situations. For example, sometimes caseworker visits with parents decreased or stopped when children were placed with relatives. The agency would visit with the relative and rely on the relative to pass on information to the parents. In many cases, the lack of contact with a parent who was incarcerated was due to a lack of effort by the caseworker or resulted from prison policies that restricted the agency's contact with the incarcerated parent or that continually moved the parent to different facilities within the correctional system, making it challenging to keep track of the parent. In other circumstances, there were too few caseworker visits when the parent (most often the father) was not living in the same home with the child or was not living in the same home from which the child was removed. There was a similar pattern among cases where children had multiple people who met the definition of parent, and caseworkers did not engage all the parents. Again, those left out were most likely to be fathers.

Spotlight Section: Structure and Location of Caseworker Visits With Parents

In many of the cases, the structure and location of the visits were reasons for the cases being rated as an ANI for *Sufficient Frequency and Quality of Caseworker Visits With Parents*. In some cases, caseworkers did not accommodate parents' schedules, or the visits were too brief and held in a location that limited private discussion. At times, caseworkers replaced face-to-face meetings with phone calls, emails, and text messages, which did not support quality interaction. Reviewers also noted that some caseworkers only visited parents at formal case planning events (e.g., Team Decision Making [TDM], Family Group Decision Making [FGDM]), at or after court hearings, or at or after parent-child visitation.

Cases that received Strength ratings involved caseworkers who accommodated parents' schedules and identified convenient meeting locations (e.g., some visits were held in the community). Additionally, caseworkers used alternative forms of contact (e.g., telephone, Skype, letters, postmail, email, and text messages) to supplement, rather than replace, face-to-face contact. Finally, some caseworkers held visits in locations that were responsive to certain family dynamics (e.g., if necessary, visits were held in locations designed to provide services to families with a history of domestic violence to promote safety).

Parents' Perspectives on Caseworker Visits With Parents

Parents stressed the importance of having good communication with their caseworkers. Parents spoke highly of caseworkers who kept them informed about the case and about their children and who spent time with parents going over paperwork. The use of multiple communication methods (e.g., email, telephone, and face-to-face contact) can also support communication between parents and caseworkers. Overall, these actions facilitate engagement by building trust and rapport between parents and caseworkers. One parent said:

We were able to talk about challenges and solutions. She understood what I was dealing with and I could trust her.

Additionally, one interviewer wrote:

[A parent] stated the best service she received was her amazing caseworker. Her caseworker went over and above what was required to advocate for her in a criminal court in another jurisdiction. This was a support that [the parent] had never experienced in her life.

THE USE OF MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION METHODS (E.G., EMAIL, TELEPHONE, AND FACE TO FACE CONTACT) CAN SUPPORT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND CASEWORKERS.

However, some parents also described several challenges related to visiting with their caseworkers that limited engagement, including "being talked down to," "being judged," and not being treated as individuals. When parents experienced these circumstances, they reported feeling "attacked," "guilty," and "forced to participate" in visits/services. Two parents noted:

Getting to know family is [a] very important piece that seems to be missing.

[Caseworkers] seem to treat every parent who comes through the system as a drug addict when not all parents are drug addicts.

Given the benefits of engaging parents and treating them as experts on their own lives, it is important that agencies help caseworkers learn how to build strong caseworker-parent relationships.

GIVEN THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING PARENTS AND TREATING THEM AS EXPERTS ON THEIR OWN LIVES, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT AGENCIES HELP CASEWORKERS LEARN HOW TO BUILD STRONG CASEWORKER-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS.

 **Spotlight Section: Parents' Perspectives on Caseload Size and Staff Turnover**

Additional information from stakeholder interviews with parents suggests that agencies face challenges in engaging parents especially when caseloads are high. Specifically, parents reported that high caseloads resulted in a lack of information-sharing and communication, infrequent contact, and insufficient assessments. There was an overall feeling that caseworkers did not have sufficient time to devote to parents to help them achieve goals due to high caseloads. One interviewer wrote:

[Parents said] some of the caseworkers have high caseloads and don't have the time to give parents [the help] that they require to achieve their goals.

Additionally, parents who were interviewed reported that staff turnover had a negative impact on engagement. Parents felt that changing caseworkers led to things getting lost in translation and to caseworkers only understanding their history from reading the case file. Moreover, parents said that staff turnover was akin to the loss of an important relationship, thus increasing their feelings of mistrust toward new caseworkers and frustration with having to start the process over. While some parents reported that getting a new caseworker ultimately resulted in getting their needs met, these findings suggest there is value in agencies working to preserve and enhance parent-caseworker relationships. One parent said:

I didn't know what to say; what to talk about; who to trust. The whole relationship was an issue—I got to know [the caseworker,] then they'd change and [I would] have to start over with another worker.

Similarly, one interviewer summarized:

[The] barriers are having to start all over because of caseworker turnover and parents feel like they are starting at the beginning again and again.

However, some parents who had a continuous relationship with the same caseworker (or parents who experienced minimal changes) perceived their caseworkers as “attentive,” “helpful,” “empathic,” and “available.” These parents said they felt engaged because their caseworkers “listened to their viewpoints,” “helped them in identifying their needs,” and were responsive to their needs. In some cases, this included caseworkers coming to the parent’s home and scheduling visits with parents in the evening. One interviewer wrote:

A parent said a worker went to her house and sat and listened to her. She made sure [the parent] knew she was available if [she] needed any support.



Parent-Child Visitation

Caseworkers can promote parent engagement by supporting parent-child relationships²⁷ and recognizing parents as collaborators in determining what is best for themselves and their children.²⁸ How caseworkers facilitate parents’ visitation with their children in foster care provides context for assessing caseworker efforts to engage parents by supporting family relationships.

In 75% of cases (n = 1,228), visitation between mothers and their children in foster care was of sufficient frequency to maintain or promote the continuity of

²⁷ Gerring, C. E., Kemp, S. P., & Marcenko, M. O. (2008). The connections project: A relational approach to engaging birth parents in visitation. *Child Welfare, 87*(6), 5–30.

²⁸ Gladstone, J., Dumbrill, G., Leslie, B., Koster, A., Young, M., & Ismaila, A. (2014). Understanding worker-parent engagement in child protection casework. *Children and Youth Services Review, 44*, 56–64.

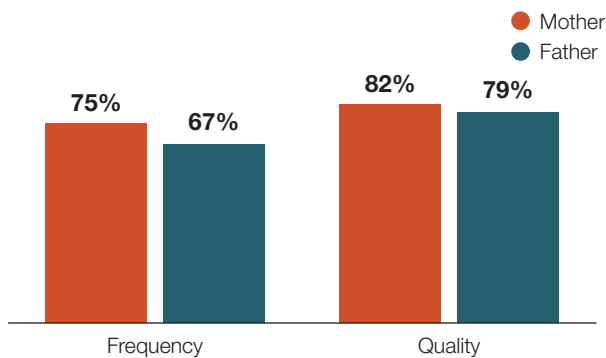
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their relationships. In 67% of cases (n = 735), visitation between fathers and their children in foster care was of sufficient frequency to maintain or promote the continuity of their relationships.

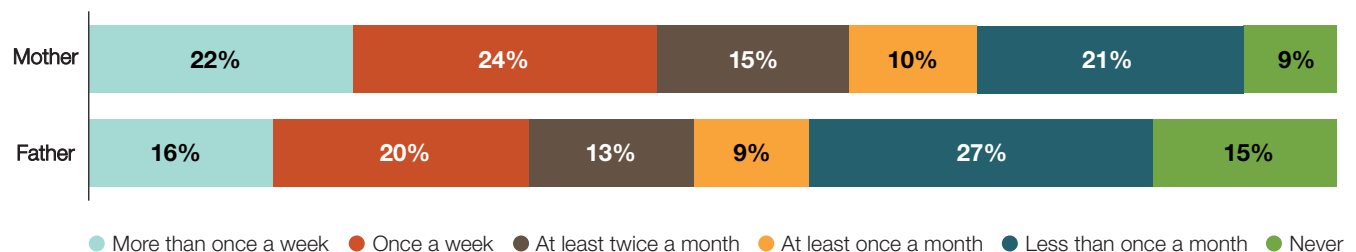
In 82% of cases (n = 1,116), the quality of visitation between mothers and children in foster care was sufficient to promote the continuity of their relationships. In 79% of cases (n = 619), the quality of visitation between fathers and children in foster care was sufficient to promote the continuity of their relationships. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5. Sufficient Frequency and Quality of Caseworker Visits Between Parent and Child



When looking at visitation patterns for mothers and fathers separately, as Figure 6 shows, mothers were more likely to have frequent visits than fathers, and fathers were more likely never to have visited with their children in care. There were 1,228 applicable cases involving mothers. Twenty-two percent (n=271) of mothers saw their children in foster care more than once a week. Twenty-four percent (n=299) of mothers saw their children in foster care once a week. Fifteen percent (n=181) of mothers saw their children in foster care less than once a week, but at least twice a month.

Figure 6. Pattern of Visits Between Parent and Child in Foster Care



Ten percent (n=117) of mothers saw their children in foster care less than twice a month, but at least once a month. Twenty-one percent (n=254) of mothers saw their children in foster care less than once a month. Nine percent (n=106) of mothers never saw their children in foster care. There were 735 applicable cases involving fathers. Sixteen percent (n=120) of fathers saw their children in foster care more than once a week. Twenty percent (n=146) of fathers saw their children in foster care once a week. Thirteen percent (n=93) of fathers saw their children in foster care less than once a week, but at least twice a month. Nine percent (n=66) of fathers saw their children in foster care less than twice a month, but at least once a month. Twenty-seven percent (n=200) of fathers saw their children in foster care less than once a month. Fifteen percent (n=110) of fathers never saw their children in foster care.

IN 75% OF CASES (N = 1,228), VISITATION BETWEEN MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE WAS OF SUFFICIENT FREQUENCY TO MAINTAIN OR PROMOTE THE CONTINUITY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS. IN 67% OF CASES (N = 735), VISITATION BETWEEN FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE WAS OF SUFFICIENT FREQUENCY TO MAINTAIN OR PROMOTE THE CONTINUITY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS.

MOTHERS WERE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE FREQUENT VISITS THAN FATHERS, AND FATHERS WERE MORE LIKELY NEVER TO HAVE VISITED WITH THEIR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE.

Parents' Perspectives on Parent-Child Visitation

Parents ability to visit with their children in foster care was an important topic for the parents who were interviewed. Overall, many parents reported having regular visitation with their children. Some parents noted that as they made progress on their case goals, their visitation schedules progressed, meaning visits moved from supervised to unsupervised and from shorter lengths of time to longer visits. For example, interviewers indicated:

The [parents] see the kids on Wednesday nights and twice on Sundays at the church of the foster parents. The [parents] are now having unsupervised visits 8 hours a week.

OVERALL, MANY PARENTS REPORTED HAVING REGULAR VISITATION WITH THEIR CHILDREN. SOME PARENTS NOTED THAT AS THEY MADE PROGRESS ON THEIR CASE GOALS, THEIR **VISITATION SCHEDULES PROGRESSED**, MEANING VISITS MOVED FROM SUPERVISED TO UNSUPERVISED AND FROM SHORTER LENGTHS OF TIME TO LONGER VISITS.

The parents have been told that the visitation will go to overnight visits, then to weekend visits, then to placement back in the home.

However, other parents reported that they had to advocate for visitation to occur or increase, and that “there should be checks put in place [for the caseworker] to ensure that the required visits are occurring.” One parent said:

[My son] went to foster care 3 months ago. Since then there haven't been any visits with him. I have had some phone calls but no face to face. I am concerned about the loss of relationship because I don't have the ability to see [him].

Parents reported several challenges related to visitation, including transportation (especially in cases where the children were placed several hours away or in different counties), having to pay for visitation, difficulty scheduling visitation outside of typical work hours, and

a lack of staff to supervise visits. For example, one interviewer noted:

Visits are usually held during [the] caseworkers' work schedule, so parents must leave work early.

A parent said:

There is a huge need for supervised visitation. The lack of this service results in us not seeing our children.

Some parents received help in overcoming these challenges when their caseworkers arranged or provided transportation to and from visits; provided gas cards; set up phone visits when face-to-face visits were not possible; or arranged for family members, resource families, or third-party agencies to facilitate or supervise visits. One interviewer noted:

The agency provided transportation to the location [of the visit] or provided gas cards to use for transportation.

Similarly, one parent said:

I was able to visit regularly with my child; my father was in charge of supervising contact.

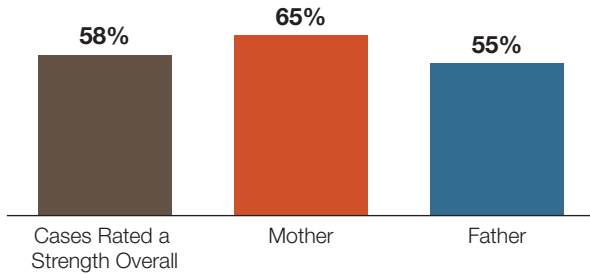
Hence, caseworkers may be able to enhance parent engagement by ensuring that frequent and high-quality visits between parents and their children in foster care occur.

CASEWORKERS MAY BE ABLE TO **ENGAGE PARENTS** IN THEIR CASE BY ENSURING THAT FREQUENT AND HIGH-QUALITY VISITS OCCUR BETWEEN PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE.

Parent-Child Relationships Beyond Visitation

Caseworkers can also engage parents by supporting and enhancing their relationships with their children through activities and efforts beyond parent-child visitation. By supporting the parent-child relationship, caseworkers can promote parent engagement by demonstrating a commitment to joining with parents in their efforts to strengthen their families.

Figure 7. Efforts Made To Promote, Support, and/or Maintain Positive Parent-Child Relationships Beyond Visitation



In 58% of cases (n = 1,266), concerted efforts were made to promote, support, and/or maintain positive relationships between children in foster care and their parents. (See Figure 7.)

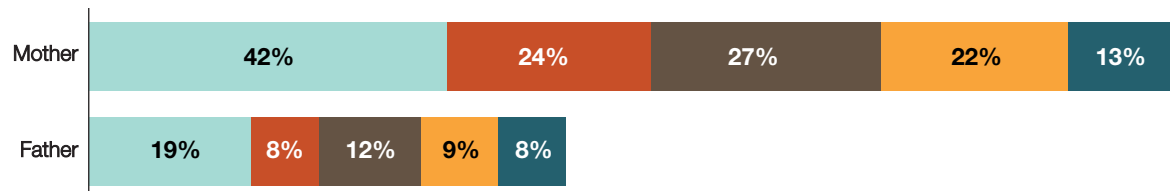
As Figure 7 illustrates, in 65% of cases (n = 1,228), concerted efforts were made to promote, support, and/or maintain positive relationships between children in foster care and their mothers. In 55% of cases (n = 729), concerted efforts were made to promote, support, and/or maintain positive relationships between children in foster care and their fathers.

Additionally, Figure 8 shows the types of support caseworkers provided to parents with children in foster care to encourage them to build and strengthen their relationships with their children. These categories are not mutually exclusive; each bar shows the percentage of cases (n = 1,284) in which parents were offered each type of support. Individual parents may have received

CASES THAT RECEIVED A **STRENGTH RATING** SHOW THAT CASEWORKERS PROMOTED CONTACT BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN USING METHODS SUCH AS PHONE CALLS, LETTERS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THAT PARENTS WERE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN **“EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES”** WITH THEIR CHILDREN OUTSIDE OF REGULARLY SCHEDULED VISITATION. CASEWORKERS ALSO ASSISTED PARENTS WITH TRANSPORTATION TO ENCOURAGE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LIVES. IN OTHER CASES, CASEWORKERS ENCOURAGED RESOURCE FAMILIES TO HAVE A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS, AND THE RESOURCE FAMILIES HELPED MENTOR PARENTS.

more than one type of support. Forty-two percent (n=545) of mothers were encouraged to participate in activities. Twenty-four percent (n=302) of mothers were provided transportation support. Twenty-seven percent (n=350) of mothers were provided support for therapeutic opportunities. Twenty-two percent (n=277) of cases involving mothers had resource families who were encouraged to provide mentoring or serve as role models to the mothers. Thirteen percent (n=171) of mothers were encouraged and had support to remain in contact with their children who did not live in close proximity. Nineteen percent (n=238) of fathers were encouraged to participate in activities. Eight percent (n=108) of fathers were provided transportation support.

Figure 8. Types of Support Given to Parents



- Encouraged participation in school activities and case conferences, attendance at doctors' appointments with the child, or engagement in the child's after-school or sports activities
- Provided or arranged for transportation or provided funds for transportation so that the parent could attend the child's special activities and doctors' appointments
- Provided opportunities for therapeutic situations to help the parent and child strengthen their relationship
- Encouraged the resource families to provide mentoring or serve as role models to the parent to assist them in appropriate parenting
- Encouraged and facilitated contact with a parent not living in close proximity to the child

Twelve percent (n=152) of fathers were provided support for therapeutic opportunities. Nine percent (n=117) of cases involving fathers had resource families who were encouraged to provide mentoring or serve as role models to the mothers. Eight percent (n=108) of fathers were encouraged and had support to remain in contact with their children who did not live in close proximity.

Strengths: Cases that received a Strength rating show that caseworkers promoted contact between parents and children using methods such as phone calls, letters, and social media, and that parents were encouraged to participate in “everyday activities” with their children both during, and outside of, regularly scheduled visitation. Caseworkers also assisted parents with transportation to encourage their participation in their children’s lives. In other cases, caseworkers encouraged resource families to have a good relationship with parents, and the resource families helped mentor parents.

In some cases, caseworkers arranged for therapeutic visitation between parents and their children, which helped to support and reinforce the development of positive parent-child relationships.

Areas Needing Improvement (ANI): In cases that received an ANI rating, caseworkers were less likely to use a variety of methods to promote and/or maintain relationships between parents and their children or re-engage parents who were previously involved in their children’s lives. Caseworkers faced challenges in supporting parent-child relationships beyond visitation if

a parent was incarcerated. In other cases, caseworkers visited with parents or provided them with updates on their children, but they did not make concerted efforts to arrange participation in their children’s appointments or activities. Reviewers also noted that, in some cases, caseworkers did not encourage or facilitate effective working relationships between resource families and parents.

Summary and Implications

The information detailed in this report identified some overarching themes reflecting practices and strategies used to engage parents in their cases. First, the information points towards the importance of caseworkers working to establish effective relationships with parents. This may imply, looking beyond information in the current report, that parents might engage with their case and their children as a result. Second, information contained within this report demonstrates the need for broad, responsive efforts on the part of caseworkers to engage parents, and the need to make these efforts consistently throughout the case. In particular, it is important to support or improve efforts to engage fathers, as data indicates caseworkers engage them less compared to mothers.

The ratings for items and item questions related to how caseworkers engaged parents are summarized in the figures below. The figures detail that, overall, the ways in which child welfare agencies and caseworkers support, promote and strengthen parents’ engagement should be improved.

The evidence suggests that the casework practice, parent relationships, contacts, and visits of caseworkers who made concerted efforts to engage parents exhibited two specific practices:

- An *intentionality*, i.e., substantive communications and visits that demonstrated care, preparation, and a focused drive to engage parents in jointly meeting the safety, permanency, and well-being needs of their children; and

Figure 9. Percentage of Cases Rated as a Strength on Items Related to Parent Engagement

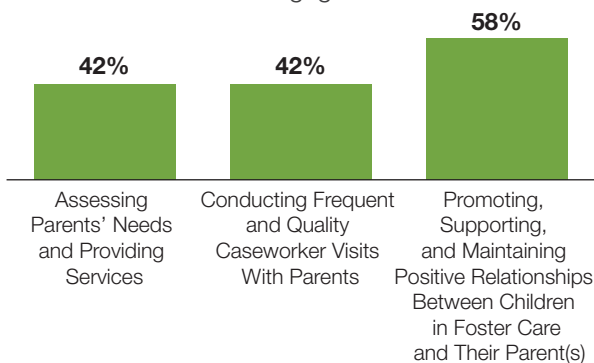
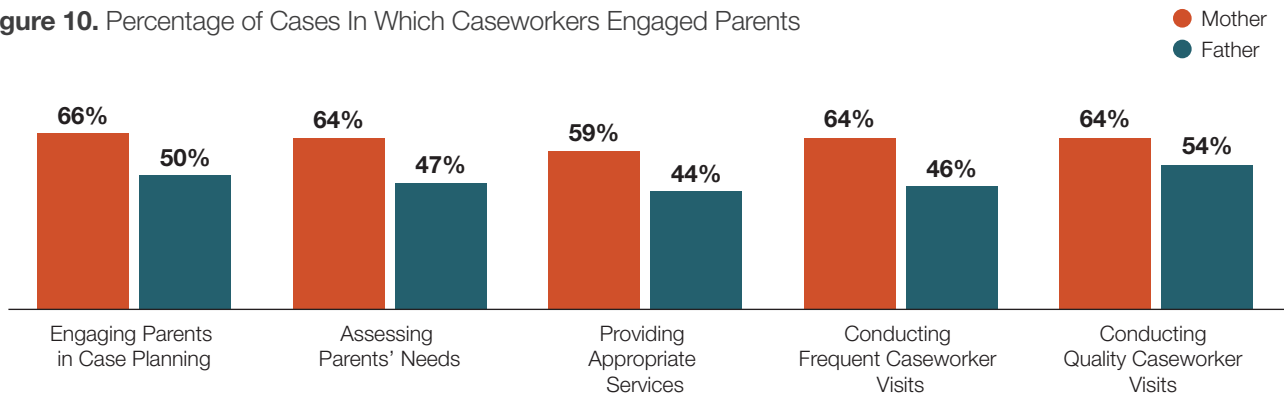


Figure 10. Percentage of Cases In Which Caseworkers Engaged Parents



- A *responsiveness* to case dynamics. Caseworkers' practice was not static or "pro forma"; they adjusted their work and approach as the case circumstances evolved.

The report indicates a need to strengthen a number of areas needing improvement. Based on case rating rationales and stakeholder interviews with parents, the following list provides potential considerations for future improvements related to agencies and casework practice:

- Developing a strong rapport with parents (i.e., developing and maintaining relationships with parents, in part by sharing information, using good communication skills, and spending sufficient time with parents to help them achieve their goals)
- Completing comprehensive initial and ongoing assessments

- Focusing on addressing the parents' issues or concerns rather than on how to get parents to comply with a case plan
- Ensuring that case plans are individualized and address what the parent thinks is needed rather than solely what the caseworker thinks, or using a "cookie cutter" plan
- Increasing the frequency and quality of visits with parents, especially fathers

Figure 11. Percentage of Cases In Which Parent-Child Visitation Was of Sufficient Frequency and Quality

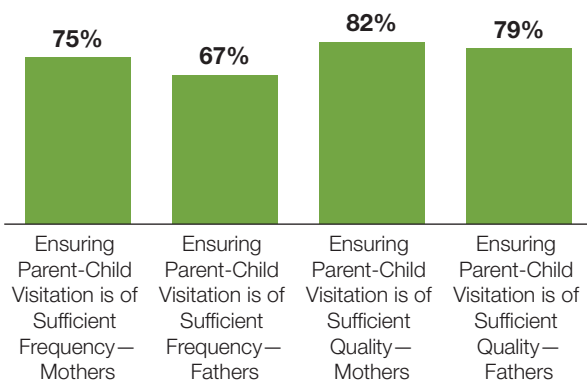


Figure 12. Percentage of Cases In Which Efforts Were Made to Promote, Support, and Maintain Positive Relationships Between Children in Foster Care and Their Parent(s)



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- Assessing needs and providing services for fathers
- Facilitating frequent and high-quality visitation between parents and their children in foster care, especially for fathers
- Making concerted efforts to nurture parent's relationships with their children while they are in foster care and arranging parents' participation in their children's appointments and activities
- Making efforts to engage parents initially and continuing with those efforts on an ongoing basis (e.g., recognizing that parent engagement is a process)

At the same time, the report implies a list of strategies that agencies might use to foster and support positive practices to promote parent engagement, including (but not limited to):

- Reducing caseload size to allow caseworkers sufficient time to meet with parents, get to know them, and build positive working relationships with them
- Increasing efforts to retain staff to provide parents with continuity in their relationships with caseworkers and opportunities to build trust
- Training and supporting caseworkers in how to approach parents using a trauma-informed lens (e.g., normalizing parents' reactions and perspectives, helping caseworkers to understand the challenges parents face and providing caseworkers with the skills to address those challenges)
- Helping caseworkers learn how to build effective caseworker-parent relationships (e.g., encouraging various communication strategies and methods, teaching caseworkers to meet parents where they are and to treat parents as experts in their own lives; visiting with parents frequently, individualizing assessments, and treating the family as a unit; treating parents as joint decision-makers and collaborators in case planning)

Moreover, the report implies the following list of effective caseworker practices for improving parent engagement, as they emerged from Strength rating rationales from various CFSR items and stakeholder interviews with parents:

- Ensuring that parents help develop and understand the case plan, with the goal of empowering the parents to make positive changes for their families
- Seeking out feedback from parents on whether services are meeting their needs and what parents think of the direction the case is taking
- Consistently following up with parents to explore their needs and ensure that parents follow through with their services
- Meeting consistently with parents (e.g., seeking parents out, accommodating parents' schedules, and meeting them at convenient locations, including in the family home)
- Using alternative forms of contact (e.g., telephone, Skype, letters or postal mail, email, and text messages) to supplement, rather than replace, face-to-face contact with parents
- Arranging or providing transportation to and from visits; providing gas cards; setting up phone visits when face-to-face visits were not possible; or arranging for family members, resource families, or third-party agencies to facilitate or supervise visits
- Promoting contact between parents and children using methods such as phone calls, letters, and social media, and encouraging parents to participate in "everyday activities" with their children both during, and outside of, regularly scheduled visitation

In summary, the results in this report suggest that staff representing the child welfare system must address a number of challenges to improve parent engagement. This report also outlines multiple areas where focused improvement to establish and sustain parent engagement can be made by implementing the strategies outlined in this report.

Additional Resources on Parent Engagement

Building Bridges From One Family to Another: Parent, Kin, and Foster Family Perspectives

The story of one family's journey from foster care to reunification. A family shares their experiences working together to build meaningful, enduring relationships. Associate Commissioner, Jerry Milner, leads this panel discussion with the family and the County of San Diego Child Welfare Deputy Director.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/about/virtual-event/>

Child Welfare Information Gateway: Engaging Families

Includes publications, tools, and resources on parent engagement along with links to other related resources such as podcasts, webinars, and training videos.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/engaging/>

Court Improvement Program (CIP) Talks

CIP talks provide inspiration on how the legal community can work with partners to better serve vulnerable families and help improve child welfare outcomes.

<https://www.ncsc.org/ciptalks>

Family-Centered Casework Practice

Information and resources for caseworkers to provide culturally competent services and to improve skills and processes for working with families in a way that identifies and builds upon strengths.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/caseworkpractice/working/>

Family Engagement Inventory

Practice strategies to enhance or achieve parent engagement, including effective caseworker and agency behaviors for parent engagement.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/FEI/practice-strategies/>

Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

September 2016 Bulletin for Child Welfare Professionals with information on benefits of family engagement, strategies for engaging families at the practice and system level, and program and state examples.

https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_fam_engagement.pdf

Growing and Sustaining Parent Engagement: A Toolkit for Parents and Community Partners

A guide that includes information and examples of how to collaboratively develop, support, and sustain parent engagement, along with a checklist to assess progress on parent engagement.

<https://cssp.org/resource/growing-and-sustaining-parent-engagement-a-toolkit-for-parents-and-community-partners/>

A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care

This guide provides information about the importance of fathers in the lives of their children and identifies potential consequences if they are not involved. It also offers strategies for systems and families, especially those who are involved in systems of care, to help fathers become more involved.

https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/AIR_Fatherhood_Guide_061413_0.pdf

Integrating Approaches That Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement

This memorandum highlights research findings that demonstrate the value of father involvement in the lives of children and families and identifies promising practices to promote and sustain meaningful father engagement.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/acf-acf-im-18-01-integrating-approaches-that-prioritize-and-enhance-father-engagement>

National Fatherhood Initiative

Provides resources and training to staff to facilitate fathers' engagement.

<https://www.fatherhood.org/>

National Foster Care Month 2019 - Real-life Stories

Foster Care as a Support to Families, Not a Substitute for Parents

Features first-person perspectives from children, youth, families, and professionals with child welfare system experience. The narratives focus on this year's National Foster Care Month theme. "Foster Care as a Support to Families, not a Substitute for Parents," and highlight the concept of supportive relationships as key factors in achieving family stability, individual success, and maintaining family connections. These narratives can help connect real life to important issues and can be used as tools for training new child welfare professionals, recruiting and training foster parents

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/reallifestories/narratives/>

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

Includes resources for fathers and professionals, such as a blog on fathers' perspectives on engagement and a toolkit for professionals looking to launch fatherhood programs.

<https://www.fatherhood.gov/>

The Power of the Parents' Voice

Three members of the Parent Advisory Council share their stories and provide guidance on engaging and involving parents.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-welfare-podcast-the-parents-voice>