

# Suggestions for Working Respectfully With Families

- Use family-friendly, everyday language, a soft tone, and neutral words and phrases. Listen for the way the family talks, the words they use to describe their problems. If they say their son is “too rowdy in school,” use their terms instead of professional jargon or “proper language.” Try to match the language of the family when appropriate.
- Give honest, factual answers. Be up-front about what you and the department expect from the family. Tell them what requirements you will make of them and give them timeline estimates for completion. If you do not know the answer, say so, but also agree to find out the answer.
- Acknowledge upfront that no matter why they have come in contact with CPS (whether voluntarily or not), they may feel very uncomfortable about being involved. Assure them that you will do everything in your power to minimize their discomfort.
- Inform the family of the policies regarding consent and confidentiality, have them sign appropriate release forms, and assure them you see confidentiality as a high priority.
- Be willing to apologize to the individual for any mistake or misunderstanding on your part or on the part of a worker who preceded you. It takes strength and confidence to apologize. Paradoxically, apologizing gives you power in the relationship. You can be a powerful role model by accepting responsibility and apologizing for a mistake.
- If a person becomes agitated, acknowledge his or her feelings, maintain a polite and respectful attitude, don’t take angry statements personally, and ask for the person’s recommendations for answers or changes.
- If you work with a family from another culture, try to learn about their beliefs, values, customs, rituals, approaches to parenting, and so forth. Show respect by asking them to teach you. You can also ask co-workers to educate you and read pertinent literature to strengthen your knowledge and help you avoid alienating someone.
- Be aware of whether an individual maintains eye contact. In some cultures it is disrespectful to look someone directly in the eye. Give a person an opportunity to turn away.
- Ask the family for their opinions, their description of the problems, and what they would like to change or improve. Ask them for possible solutions, what has worked in the past, and so forth.

## **Respect Specific to Home Visiting**

- When you schedule an initial home visit, ask: “When would be the most convenient time to meet between now and \_\_\_\_\_ (indicating your time frame)?”
- Set the tone of the home visit so that it is friendly, positive, polite, and supportive. Assume you are accepted; be casual and relaxed. Family members will likely take their cues from you.
- Enter the family’s home as a guest and show the same respect and courtesy you would want guests in your home to show. Introduce yourself in a friendly manner and ask to be introduced to every person in the home.
- Use individuals’ names to personalize and humanize the interaction, but do not use the caregivers’ first names unless they invite you to do so. Try to begin building a positive, supportive relationship with everyone in the family.
- Ask where they want you to sit. Avoid taking someone’s favorite chair. Observe the seating arrangement of the family members—this may give you some insight into family relationships, roles, and hierarchy.
- Be aware of physical proximity to individuals, especially when an individual is anxious. Being too close may escalate the individual to aggression. Also, be sensitive about physical distance and body language with people from other cultures.
- While it is tempting to try to control such distractions as TV, telephone, children, or neighbors coming in and out, these elements can reveal much about the family routines, relationships, and the home atmosphere. It is always important to respect the family’s choices regarding the operation of their own home.
- Find something in the home to compliment (such as the children’s pictures on the wall, positive behavior from the children, or parenting skills). Let the family members be the expert on something you see in the home, such as the family pet, a woodworking project, knitting, puzzles, or any awards or plaques showing a family member’s accomplishments.
- Join with the family by acknowledging their strengths. Ask the family members to tell you what they like about one another, what they do well, and so forth.
- Pay attention to the parents as well as to the children. Many parents tend to be isolated and lonely, and can become easily threatened when you pay a great deal of attention to their children.

Source: White, P., Comer, D., & Williamson-Hardy, C. (2011). *Partners in change: A new perspective on child protective services*. Statesville, NC: Barium Springs Home for Children.