

Promoting Help-Seeking Behaviors Among Families

Lessons from Within Our Reach

Many families involved in child welfare have valid reasons to fear or avoid formal systems. To encourage help-seeking, practitioners must shift the focus from “fixing families” to building on strengths and reducing fear through relationship-based, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practice.

Strategies to Encourage Help-Seeking

Start with Trust and Empowerment

- **Use a non-judgmental strengths-based approach:** Start from a position of curiosity, not accusation. Acknowledge the family’s fears and experiences. Frame services as support to enhance existing family capacity, not as a cure for failure.
- **Provide concrete supports first:** Address immediate, tangible needs (housing, food, transportation, utility assistance). Overwhelming stress from poverty is often misinterpreted as neglect; meeting these needs is a direct form of help-seeking that builds trust for future engagement.
- **Co-design solutions:** Approach the interaction as a partnership. Ask the family what kind of support they need, not what service you think they should have. They are the experts on their child and family

Center Culture and Community

- **Know the community’s history:** Understand the specific historical, social, and political traumas that shape the community’s distrust of specific institutions
- **Use community-based supports:** Refer to resources that are community-driven, like faith-based organizations, peer support groups, or cultural healers before moving to formal, clinical services
- **Invest in a diverse and trained workforce:** Hire and develop workers and peer coaches who share lived experience and cultural backgrounds with the families. Ensure all staff receive ongoing training in cultural humility and trauma-informed practice.

Offer Multiple, Low-Barrier Pathways to Help

- **Provide as many choices as possible:** Phone, text, in-person, after-hours services, services in multiple languages, etc.
- **Follow through with referrals:** Make sure referrals are warm handoffs, not just a number, but a guided connection
- **Consider hours and locations that are most convenient:** When appropriate, co-locate or embed services in trusted spaces (schools, churches, libraries, community-based organizations)

Understand the Barriers

For families that have experienced inter-generational trauma and systemic oppression, seeking help is often seen, not as strength, but as a risk to safety and family integrity.

Help-seeking is often inhibited by:

- Mistrust and/or fear of child welfare organizations because of historical, systemic harm
- Stigma and shame associated with needing support
- Cultural norms that value self-reliance or discourage disclosing family challenges
- Fundamental obstacles such as language barriers, lack of transportation, lack of time, and financial strain

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Reflection & Action Worksheet for Practitioners

Understanding Barriers and Biases

What barriers do families have about asking for help?

(List 2-3 barriers you've observed or heard from families.)

Reframing & Repair

How can you normalize and validate help-seeking in your behaviors?

(Write 1-2 phrases you could use.)

e.g. "It takes courage to reach out for support. That's a strength."

Providing Pathways

What are two practical ways you can reduce barriers to help-seeking in your daily work?

e.g. Warm handoffs, using plain language, partnering with trusted community organizations, offering flexible contact options, etc.

Discuss with Your Team

Use these discussion questions to deepen the conversation with your team about encouraging help-seeking behaviors.

- What messages about help-seeking do we send (verbally and nonverbally)?
- How might we be unintentionally reinforcing fears or power dynamics that create barriers to help-seeking?
- How can our organization model "asking for help" internally?
- What systemic barriers can we advocate to change? What trusted organizations can we partner with to advance these advocacy efforts?
- What is one action we commit to this month to reduce barriers to help-seeking?