

## Suggestions for Engaging Families:

### Strategy

#### Preparing for the conversation:

- Review any available background material about the child and family
- Imagine the general direction of possible family responses
- Reflect on your own feelings and any discrepancies between your beliefs and the goal of a family-based alternative

#### Setting up the discussion:

- Determine optimal place and time for conversation
- Prepare opening remarks
- Offer something personally relevant to establish a connection
- Have possible “scripts” in mind but do *not* follow set interview questions
- Establish safety

#### Construction your explanation:

- Present as an opportunity rather than as mandated policies, procedures or legislation
- Acknowledge that the system is evolving and reflect awareness of a historical perspective
- Anticipate possible fears or worries but do not assume you know the family’s feelings
- Assure parental authority to make decisions but emphasize being well-informed
- Present benefits of a family-based alternatives as compared to the residential facility’s best attributes
- Do not denigrate residential facility

#### Stating your expectations:

- Preview what you want from the present conversation and what future conversations you expect
- Layout time frames
- Explain how things will proceed

#### Opening a space for reflection:

- Use open ended questions to elicit reflections
- Engage in active listening
- Balance listening and informing

#### Describing alternatives:

- Reunification
- Support family
- Shared parenting
- Make distinction between foster care and support family
- Offer personal experience or awareness of other families’ experience

#### Addressing feelings and imagination:

- Validate the family’s feelings
- Inquire about expressed and unexpressed reactions
- Speculate about possible unspoken feelings
- Reassure

#### Preparing a conversation closure strategy:

- Review the discussion with the family to date
- Confirm issues of mutual agreement
- Identify *your* next steps
- Identify the *family’s* next steps
- Finish on a positive

### Comments

Each contact is an engagement encounter. The objective is to forge trust and alliance. Consider:

- Trustworthiness of offer
- Trustworthiness of “offerer”

The first contact is critical as first impressions can set the stage. Attend to : ♦ stance ♦ tone ♦ pacing

Adopt a style that is: ♦ genuine ♦ enthusiastic ♦ inviting ♦ respectful

The stance should be about offering new opportunities that may not have been available to the family in the past. While it may be counterintuitive, it is not useful to suggest institutional deficits. Allow the family to raise them. Your role is to point out family-based benefits.

- Assume skepticism as a likely response
- Do not assume family’s current view are unchangeable, but that they are based on the best information they have had
- Suggest you have some new information to offer and they have nothing to lose by hearing about options
- However good the current arrangement, explore how a family-based alternative could improve it

Be realistic about how much can be accomplished in one conversation.

Be prepared to:

- Adjust the scope dependent on the parents’ response
- Adjust in increments fitting their response

Listen for opportunity to inject ideas into conversation as context as content allows

Be prepared to:

- Attune to the parent’s feelings
- Adjust your approach

Find supplemental information or experience to bolster your presentation based on honest self-reflection about:

- Your personal familiarity with family-based options
- Your personal feeling about family-based options

Use family-friendly language, not “system speak”

- Avoid acronyms
- Use people first language

The idea is to gain access to the parent’s fears and understand their imagined alternatives.

- Listen for clues
- Follow leads
- Contain anxiety
- Instill hope.

Summarizing can bring a sense of concreteness that can be comforting when discussing emotional issues.

- Set out incremental movement in steps toward the permanency goal
- Gain approval for at least one next step, if only to talk again