

Training **MATTERS**



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We Want To Hear from You!

If you have questions or would like to comment about something that appears in *Training Matters*, please contact Teresa Turner, Program Administrator, Family Support and Child Welfare Services Staff Development, NC Division of Social Services, 2412 Mail Service Center, 325 N. Salisbury Street, Suite 735, Raleigh, NC 27699-2412, State Courier: 56-20-25, E-mail: Teresa.Turner@ncmail.net, Tel: 919/733-7672.

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Go to <www.trainingmatters-nc.org>.

This issue of *Training Matters* was produced by John McMahon of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work.

References for this issue can be found at <www.trainingmatters-nc.org>

Talking to Judges about CFTs

We believe that one of the ways agencies and social workers can maximize the positive impact of child and family meetings is to ensure that judges understand what they are and why they are valuable. To get ideas for the best way to do this, we spoke with Jamie Hamlett, an attorney for Alamance County DSS.

Do the judges you work with know about CFTs?

Because of System of Care, our chief district court judge in Alamance understands child and family team meetings. But that doesn't mean that all our judges automatically inquire about CFTs.

As an attorney, do you see CFTs as helpful to DSS?

In my experience CFTs definitely reduce the number of petitions we file. For example, I'm sometimes approached by a social worker saying the agency needs to file a petition requesting custody of a family's children. One of my first reactions is usually to ask whether a CFT has been held with that family. If the answer is no and there are no extenuating circumstances, I suggest that a CFT should be held. In most cases, I never see that worker about that family again—the CFT process helps the family and the community to identify a plan for the children that does not involve foster care.

Is it important for DSS agencies to follow CFT policy?

I'm not an expert on CFT policy, but I have learned that not doing CFTs right can negatively impact our work with families. If families see that we don't follow the model that we supposedly believe in, they can be further alienated from DSS.

What's your advice for communicating with judges?

Use your court testimony. This is the most effective way to communicate with judges. To make the most of this opportunity, talk with your DSS attorney before court. During testimony the attorney should make a point of asking the social worker to explain any jargon or terms. Social workers should be ready to explain concepts, practices, and how things work.

Never assume that people outside the child welfare system understand how the system works, our jargon, or the specialized language we speak. Judges don't need to know—and aren't highly interested in—our policies or the minutiae of our procedures. But they will benefit from basic definitions and concepts of the different aspects our work. For example, when MRS came to Alamance we gave a lunch where we explained MRS and what it meant.

Build a relationship. Agencies should develop a working relationship with the judge. Ask for one or more meetings with the judge outside of court. Make sure you are clear with the judge about why you are requesting these meetings and, most importantly, how he or she will benefit from them.

Keep at it. Education of judges (or anyone else) isn't a one-time affair. For people to really understand and buy in to child and family team meetings and the other, still relatively new aspects of MRS, education must be ongoing.

Build your skills. Ask your DSS attorney or another person with expertise in this area to provide social workers with additional training about testifying in court and talking to judges.



Jamie Hamlett, J.D.



Finding the Pieces for a Good CFT

From the Field: Practical Advice for CFT Facilitators

by Billy Poindexter

We want families to understand that CFT meetings, their social worker, and the agency as a whole are all there to help them build a base for their success after DSS is gone from their lives. As facilitators, we are in a great position to support workers as they help families see things this way.

How Can a Facilitator Do This?

1. Be Clear about Your Role. We are not taking over nor are we passing judgment on the social worker's casework. Workers should never feel that a facilitator is evaluating their performance.

As facilitator your job is to manage the meeting process. For you a good meeting is one in which all the participants—especially family members—are able to be a real party to the decision-making process. Decisions are the group's responsibility. Your role is to provide the process they need to make those decisions.

2. Be a Fresh Pair of Eyes. When you get a referral form, read it over. Look at the big picture. What stands out to you? Who is invited and who isn't? Are there safety risks for the meeting? What will be the dynamics of interactions? Asking questions such as these helps guide your pre-meeting discussions with the worker.

3. Confer Prior to the Meeting. I strongly urge you to have at least one face-to-face discussion with the worker before the meeting. Here you want to find out the worker's comfort level and how prepared he or she is for the meeting. Find out what the worker is concerned about for this meeting. Be a sounding board and partner. Brainstorm ideas to help workers prepare the family and themselves for this meeting.

4. Ask Key Questions. Help workers think about the things a family must discuss to make the meeting productive, positive, and efficient. I often do this by asking the following key questions:

- *What policy mandates are driving your work?* In other words, what got us legally involved with this family and what must be done to meet policy requirements?
- *What is your purpose?* Avoid arguments about low-priority issues by asking workers to really think about what they need the family to understand and achieve. This can reduce resistance on more important items.
- *What happens if the family tells the agency to "stuff it"?* What items are truly "nonnegotiable"?
- *What does the worker feel about this family?* Some families and situations stretch workers' professional "poise." Facilitators need to help the referring person understand that trying to "break through denial," pressuring a family in a certain direction (which

may be good but isn't what they can be made to do), or being closed to a family's ideas often creates tug-of-war and power struggles, not progress.

- *Does the family truly need a CFT right now?* Policy requires agencies to educate families about CFTs and invite them to hold meetings. However, the process is voluntary. If a family really isn't ready, sometimes it is best to wait until another point in their work with the agency.

5. Check the Guest List. Once you clearly understand the purpose of the meeting and why the agency is involved with the family, help the worker consider what information and what resource representatives may need to be a part of this meeting.

6. Be Direct. Discuss with the worker what you think the dynamics will be in the meeting. This is an opportunity for the worker to give you a "reality check" if you need one. It is also a way to identify areas or issues that haven't been addressed with the family and or professionals invited.

7. Think Documentation. Help workers consider the documentation that needs to be on hand at the meeting—for example, custody papers, domestic violence orders (DVOs) and warrants through Child Support, school and medical reports/recommendations, current safety plans or case plans, etc. Asking about these helps minimize "he said-she said" tangents. Looking into DVO and or Child Support warrants will help ensure a family member is not being set up for arrest by another family member. (It has happened.)

One of the best things we can do as facilitators is to help workers find and assemble the pieces needed to create a positive CFT experience. Depending upon the complexity of the family issues, the safety of children, and the load workers carry, we as facilitators want to support the good work being done and help prepare for a good, solid CFT experience for all who attend.

Billy Poindexter is a facilitator with Catawba County DSS and a trainer for the NC Family-Centered Meetings Project

Facilitator Forums

North Carolina offers an ongoing series of forums for CFT facilitators, with an emphasis on relaxed learning, sharing, and support. They are held quarterly in the Eastern, Central, and Western regions of the state and hosted by county DSS agencies. To learn more, contact the Jenny King (919/326-7463, jlking4@ncsu.edu) of the NC Family-Centered Meetings Project at NC State University.