

# Training **MATTERS**



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- N.C. Division of Social Services
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- BIABH Study Center at Appalachian State University
- Children and Family Services Association-NC
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- UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work (Jordan Institute for Families)
- UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine
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## **We Want To Hear from You!**

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

## **The Family-Centered Approach**

If you work in child welfare in North Carolina, it may seem as if every time you turn around you run into the term *family-centered*. Attend training? You'll hear it. Read work-related literature? There it is again. Walk in the door at work? They're asking you to be it, do it, use it.

So by now you probably know that *family-centered* refers to an approach to child welfare social work in which the family is seen as the primary unit of attention. Respecting, strengthening, and supporting the family—while guaranteeing child safety—are the hallmarks of this method.

Yet despite its familiarity, for many people the reason for the current, almost overwhelming emphasis on family-centered practice is a mystery. Others, though they can describe and may even embrace the beliefs and principles underlying the family-centered approach, are still unclear on how to put these concepts into practice with actual families.

### **Why Emphasize Family-Centered Practice?**

Today's emphasis on family-centered practice is rooted in the desire to improve outcomes for families and children. On a national level, the federal government wants to help the child welfare system in the U.S. do a better job

ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children.

One of the U.S. government's most important tools in this effort is the child and family services review (CFSR), an intensive evaluation of every aspect of child welfare social work. In working with North Carolina and other states during the CFSR, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has made it quite clear they see family-centered practice as the core strategy for building effective, ethical, consistent child welfare practice.

Jerry Milner, one of the chief architects of the CFSR, expresses their position this way: "As we look for systemic and true lasting change in child welfare programs, we have focused *continued* →

## **Family-Centered Beliefs**

1. Safety of the child is the first concern.
2. Children have the right to their family.
3. The family is the fundamental resource for the nurturing of children.
4. Parents should be supported in their efforts to care for their children.
5. Families are diverse and have the right to be respected for their special cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious traditions; children can flourish in different types of families.
6. A crisis is an opportunity for change.
7. Inappropriate intervention can do harm.
8. Families who seem hopeless can grow and change.
9. Family members are our partners.
10. It is our job to instill hope.

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on family-centered practice” (NCW RCFCP, 2002). This focus is epitomized by the attention the CFSR pays to how well workers engage families in the case planning process and promote visitation.

North Carolina, too, sees family-centered practice as a vehicle for improving the lives of its families and children. One manifestation of this is the dual approach component of North Carolina’s new MRS pilot, which changes the way participating child welfare agencies respond to reports of child maltreatment. By enabling agencies to tailor their responses—launching more traditional investigations of serious reports of abuse and neglect and more supportive, assessment-oriented responses to less serious reports—the MRS pilot should make it easier to work with families in a family-centered way.

North Carolina also plans to encourage family-centered practice through its training of supervisors and line social workers. The N.C. Division of Social Services and its partners are currently developing a series of training courses to promote respectful, supportive interactions between workers and families. Although these courses will not reach classrooms until some time in 2003, workers and supervisors can get a preview by reading this newsletter. Beginning with this issue, *Training Matters* will explore practical ways to apply family-centered principles and beliefs in your daily work.

## The Importance of Questions

One of the core the principles of family-centered practice is the notion that *It is better to ask questions than issue commands and threats.*

Although on the face of it this may seem to be nothing more than common sense, something along the lines of the old adage, “You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar,” this idea bears examination.

For **child welfare workers**, questions come quite naturally. Indeed, even if they are not verbalized, questions are always there—in investigations, in ongoing assessments of safety, strengths, and well-being, and in work with your peers. Useful for gathering information, questions are also incredibly helpful because, when asked skillfully, they can be received as genuine expressions of supportive interest. Asked the right way, questions can lead families to embrace and own positive change.

Asking questions provides you with several options, such as which thread or comment to pick up, and when, and how, and which one to set aside until another, more appropriate time. Listening to the client’s answers provides further information on what and who is important to a client (BIABH, 2002).

Yet when families do or say things to challenge and resist us, our natural impulse may be to fall back on our authority. Rather than engaging families, we make demands.

When you demand something from a client, you expect that the client will do what you want. The more you issue threats, the more you are compelled to follow up on all the things you demanded. This not only jeopardizes your chance to build cooperation, it increases your work load (BIABH, 2002).

**Demands for compliance cannot achieve lasting, positive changes.**

This notion that questions are better than demands also applies to interactions between **child welfare supervisors** and the social workers they supervise.

When a worker is struggling with a practice or a performance issue (such as failure to complete paperwork in a timely manner), a supervisor may choose to issue a command or threat to that worker. Certainly this is within the supervisor’s authority. Given time and workload pressures, it may seem to be the most expedient course to take.

Yet parallel process teaches us that because patterns repeat across systems, the way a supervisor interacts with her subordinates has a lot to do with how these social workers interact with families.

Thus, if supervisors want workers to be family-centered, they should take care to apply family-centered principles when interacting with their workers. Before issuing ultimatums, they should consider engaging workers with questions to find out why the error or problem is occurring and to see if the worker can contribute to a solution.

Demands for compliance cannot achieve lasting, positive changes. Whether you are dealing with a worker or a family, common sense tells us that all people like to feel respected, supported, and that they are following through on their own decisions, not someone else’s (BIABH, 2002).

## References

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