

Empowering Parents of Children in Placement

Casework activities designed to engage the parents of children in placement should begin as soon as placement is imminent.

The caseworker should:

- Develop or strengthen the relationship with the parent; increase, rather than decrease, contacts.
- Allow the parent to verbally express anger, resentment and feelings of loss or fear.
- Explain that the child is being moved to assure his/her safety, not to punish the child or the parent. Provide specific information that describes the risk to the child of remaining at home.
- Reassure the parent of the worker's intent to reunite the family and that reunification will occur as soon as the child's safety in the home can be assured.
- State that acknowledging problems and needs, and working with the agency to strengthen the family members' ability to care for their child is the first step toward having the child returned.
- Encourage parents to become involved in the assessment of their own needs, problems and strengths and in the development of the case plan.
- Ask the parent to recommend relatives or family friends who may be able to care for the child as either an emergency or longer-term foster placement.
- Explain that the agency expects the parent to remain actively involved in the child's life throughout the placement period, to attend regular visits and to be involved in decisions about the child's welfare.
- Explain that the child will be frightened and that the parent can be of considerable help to the child by being supportive and reassuring during the placement.
- Ask the parent to accompany the worker and child during the move and to provide as much information as possible to the new caregiver.
- Acknowledge that the parent may prefer to fight the worker and agency, but that this may have potentially painful consequences for himself/herself and the child.

During the period immediately after the move, the parent's continuing involvement should be supported and maintained.

- The worker should increase contacts with the parent during and immediately after the move.
- The foster parent should be given opportunities to talk with the parent about the child's needs, routines and schedule. At times, exchanging phone numbers is useful. This maintains the parent's role as a primary source of information about the child.
- Scheduling regular and frequent visits between the child and the parent is critical. The first visit should occur within 48 hours of placement.
- Parents should be involved in making major decisions about the child. Parents should routinely be involved in agency staffings and case conferences.
- Encourage the parent to participate in planning and carrying out those activities necessary for the child to be returned home.
- It is extremely important that the agency make appropriate services available to parents to enable them to implement the activities in the case plan.
- If the agency does not involve the parent from the earliest stages of placement, we foster a sense of helplessness in the parent that ultimately works against successful reunification.
- A few parents may interfere with or sabotage the placement. In these situations, the worker's primary responsibility is to protect the child. With effective casework intervention, however, most parents can become responsible participants in the placement and casework process.