Agencies & Courts
Putting Families Front and Center

Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

Activity and Discussion Guide

Family reunification is a primary goal when children must be removed from their families. Family-centered practice and multidisciplinary approaches are essential, interrelated strategies that support reunification. Agency and court staff must collaborate with one another and with other stakeholders to create a shared vision for child welfare and make reunification a priority. The videos and activities in this guide can be a vehicle to build mutual understanding and spark change across the child welfare system.

"Today we have our children back and all the confidence in the world to give our children the lives they deserve."

- Mississippi Parent

How to Make the Most of This Learning Experience

Assemble a team that can bring different perspectives to the table and set a course to put families front and center. Step up your engagement game by including child welfare system stakeholders, court and agency leaders, frontline staff, Court Improvement Program staff, parents' attorneys, parents, children's attorneys, and youth to discuss common challenges and develop solutions together. Modeling a multidisciplinary approach to the learning experience can help build an agency and court culture that puts families front and center.

Understand the content by reviewing the three components. Before you get started, read the research and examples to put this into context (appendix C).

1. **Videos** that offer multiple perspectives to describe a family's court experience in child welfare:
   - It Takes A Village: Collaboration Is Key to Supporting Families. Highlights the impact of a family court's compassionate and strength-based approach to supporting families. The mosaic includes the perspectives of a mother, father, child protective services worker, parent attorney, child advocate, program manager for a family services program, and judge in Mississippi.

- When a Team Partners With a Parent. Raises questions about how interactions with families shape outcomes and emphasizes themes of trust, respect, and a team approach. The mosaic features a New York agency's court interdisciplinary team and includes the perspectives of a mother, parent attorney, social worker, and parent advocate.

2. **Learning activities and discussion questions** that draw from both sets of videos and are designed to be used consecutively with the same group:
   - "Chutes and Ladders" (starting on page 3 of this guide) will prompt audiences to consider which actions and behaviors support parents in moving toward completion of their case goals ("up the ladders") and which ones may counteract intentions ("down the chutes").
   - "Wraparound Supports" will explore how coordinated, multidisciplinary support can help families and affect outcomes. The activities will encourage audiences to reflect on the various viewpoints presented in the mosaic and those that may be missing.
3. **Take action prompts** that help to move the conversation toward next steps for the team (see page 7 of this guide).

Other ways to use the guide:

- **Child welfare program managers or supervisors** can use the resources for one-on-one coaching and in team meetings, focusing on the impact of trusting relationships and team approaches. Teams can identify strategies that promote family-centered, strength-based practice and coordinated supports.
- **Court Improvement Program coordinators or court personnel** may use the videos and activities to gain insight into court strategies that emphasize offering multidisciplinary support to families.
- **Training managers** may integrate the videos and activities into preservice or inservice training for child welfare workers or cross-system training of court and child welfare personnel.

Activity 1:
Chutes and Ladders

Intended Use

This activity borrows its title and concept from the children's board game Chutes and Ladders. Use before Activity 2 or independently with small or large groups in meetings or trainings. This activity can help as an icebreaker with a new multidisciplinary team, break through barriers with an established team, or spark conversation and culture change with internal agency or court teams.

Materials

- Chutes and Ladders template (appendix A)
- Flip chart and markers (different color for each team)

Learning Objectives

After participating in the activity, learners will be able to:

- Explain how family-centered practices (or lack thereof) affect family well-being and family reunification
- Identify strategies for increasing collaboration and family-centered and strength-based practices in agencies and courts

Activity

Prepare to Watch

1. Tell participants that they will be watching two mosaic videos that present different perspectives of a family's experience in child welfare. The stories underscore the value of family-centered, multidisciplinary approaches.
2. Discuss what "family-centered" and "multidisciplinary" approaches mean to them.
3. Ask participants if they remember the children's game of Chutes and Ladders. If any participant is unfamiliar with the game, ask another to explain the game in which young children move game pieces up ladders in a race to get to the top of the game board while hoping to avoid the chutes (or slides) that slide them back toward the beginning.
4. Instruct participants to take notes (appendix A) as they watch each mosaic, reflecting on:
   - The ladders—actions and behaviors that represent a family-centered approach and support parents in moving toward completion of their case goals
   - The chutes—actions and behaviors that may counteract getting to the case goals

Watch

1. Watch the videos.
2. Debrief as a large group:
   - (Record on LADDERS flip chart) What ladders stood out in the videos (e.g., monthly court hearings)? How do the ladders support family well-being and contribute to family reunification? Let's think about the actions and behaviors that help the parents' progress in our own child welfare system. What do you see?
   - (Record on CHUTES flip chart) What chutes stood out in the videos (e.g., disrespect toward the parent)? How do the chutes undermine family well-being and deter family reunification? Let's think about the actions and behaviors that hinder the parents' progress in our own child welfare system. What have you observed?

Team Up

1. Assign participants to teams (if working with a multidisciplinary group, try to ensure a mix of agency, court, and family representatives on each team).
2. Ask teams to brainstorm:
   - Which chutes could we eliminate?
   - Which ladders are we using or could we add that could eliminate or improve the identified chutes?
3. Add blank flip chart sheets in between the CHUTES and LADDERS lists.
4. Instruct teams to record any new ladders to the list and draw arrows from the ladders to the chutes they can eliminate or improve.

Debrief and Discuss

Facilitate a large group discussion using some or all of these questions:

- What are some of the most common chutes and ladders in our system?
- What chutes can we eliminate? What ladders can we add?
- How can ladders counteract the chutes?
- How does a family-centered approach make a difference?
- How do the ladders support family well-being and contribute to family reunification?
- What system factors "hold up" the ladders (e.g., data sharing)?
- How do the chutes (e.g., perceptions of disrespect) work against shared goals?
- What might be some reasons that chutes are created?
- What can be done to turn chutes into ladders?
- How can you build more ladders in your agency or courtroom? What system supports do you need (e.g., policy, infrastructure, staffing changes)?

Activity 2:
Wraparound Supports

Intended Use

Use after Activity 1 or independently with small or large groups in meetings or trainings. This activity can help as an icebreaker with a new multidisciplinary team, break through barriers with an established team, or spark conversation and culture change with internal agency or court teams. Break groups of 20 or more into smaller groups for the activity.

Materials

- Large ball of yarn or string
- Slips of paper with role and quote (appendix B)
- Balloon or beach ball
- Flip chart and markers

Learning Objectives

After participating in the activity, learners will be able to:

- Explain how various court and agency roles provide support to families and the collective impact of coordinated support
- Identify opportunities for improving coordinated, multidisciplinary approaches and enhanced court-agency collaboration

Activity

Prepare

1. Discuss the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration and wraparound supports.
2. Ask:
   - How did the individuals in the mosaics work together and build on each other's efforts?
   - What perspective was missing from "When a Team Partners With a Parent"?
3. Assign participants a role and quote from the mosaic videos (appendix B).

Act*

1. Ask participants to stand in a circle (including the facilitator).
2. Explain what each participant will do in turn:
   - Loop the end of the yarn or string around your finger.
   - Read the role and the quote.
   - Comment on how the attitudes or behaviors expressed in the quote supported the family.
   - Toss the ball of yarn to someone across the circle.
   - Remind participants to hold tight to their end.

3. Begin activity by demonstrating step 2.
4. Each person in turn should catch the ball of yarn, loop it around a finger, read their role and quote, and comment. Prompt participants as needed.
5. As the ball unwinds, it creates a web of interconnection.
6. Continue until everyone has gotten the ball at least once and the yarn has formed a web.
7. Ask: What do these strings represent to you? (Possible answers: connections between agency, court, others; support to family; coordination of supports; communication, etc.)
8. Drop an inflated balloon(s) or beach ball(s) onto the web. Ask: What does this represent? (Answer: family)
9. Experiment: Ask people to alternately pull tightly on the web and then let it sag on one side. Ask: How does this relate to the real world? How does it affect the "family"?
10. Ask people in certain roles to let go of their strings and step back from the circle, while instructing the rest to keep supporting the "family." Continue asking role by role to drop their support until the web begins to collapse. Tell those remaining to pick up the loose strings to keep the "family" from hitting the floor. Ask the group: How does this relate to the real world?
11. Ask everyone to sit down and discuss what has occurred.

*Alternate version: write "Family" at the top of the flip chart and the roles in a circle below. Ask participants to stand, read the role and the quote, and comment on how the attitudes or behaviors expressed in the quote supported the family. As each participant shares, draw lines between roles.

Debrief and Discuss

Facilitate a discussion using some or all of these prompts:

- Reflect on the exercise and what the intersecting lines represent.
- What was the experience like for those of you dropping the support and stepping back from the circle? For those of you staying to the end? How does that relate to the real world?
- Explore whether the identified attitude or behavior helped others in performing their responsibilities and how.
- What are some shared interests among the following roles—judge, parent attorney, parent advocate, court appointed special advocate (CASA), court social worker, agency caseworker? How do their responsibilities differ?
- What role do trusting relationships play in supporting families?

Take Action

Select a few of the following questions to guide the conversation toward action, identify the next steps for the team, and identify who is taking the lead and how and when the group will follow up.

- What themes emerged from the team discussion?
- What gives you the greatest hope for collaboration in our jurisdiction?
- What is working in your current practice to offer coordinated supports? What gets in the way? What opportunities exist to expand and improve?
- What would it take to have an improved multidisciplinary collaboration and team approach?
- What is one thing you can do now to change? What else needs to happen to get it done?
- What can you do to improve practice immediately, without additional resources or authority?
- What can you do to improve collaboration immediately, without additional resources or authority?
- What data can we use to move the conversation forward?
- Who can contribute to achieving our purpose and must be included?
- How can the team operationalize these strategies?
- What recommendations does the group have for support? Who else needs to be involved?
- What short-term actions can the group or individuals take in the next 3 months and next 6 months?
- What long-term goals can the group identify?

APPENDIX A

Use as a template for Activity 1: Chutes and Ladders

LADDERS Actions and behaviors that represent a family-centered approach and support parents in moving toward completion of their case goals	Draw arrows from the ladders to the chutes they can eliminate or improve.	**CHUTES** Actions and behaviors that may counteract getting to the case goals

APPENDIX B

Cut out and distribute quotes for Activity 2: Wraparound Services

It Takes A Village: Collaboration Is Key to Supporting Families

Judge Favre
Family Court Judge

I understood the power I had over parents because I had their most valuable possession—their children. I knew I needed to connect with parents on the most basic human level.

Lauren
CASA

There were many times where [the parents] would refer to us as their "stalkers," because we always stayed on top of Kat and Bryan to encourage them to complete their tasks so the children could be reunified and be a healthy, happier family.

Judge Favre
Family Court Judge

Parents are broken, ashamed, angry, or frightened when they first come to court. They need to see a face that shows love and concern. To hear a voice that cares. Most of all, they need to hear from the judge that I am ready to help them restore their family.

Lauren
CASA

Every time there was a meeting at child protective services or with the court, all the parties involved would wrap around the family to make them feel supported.

Katherine
Mother

The day we stepped in Judge Favre's court, we felt a sense of peace. He had the warmest smile and soon he would become a part of our lives.

Katherine
Mother

When we weren't in court, we had relationships with CASA and many community agencies. They helped us adjust to being parents again.

It Takes A Village: Collaboration Is Key to Supporting Families (Cont.)

Katherine
Mother

We had monthly court hearings that showed him our progress. He never downed us for mistakes or belittled us. He made me feel "confident about being reunited with our children."

Alexis
Child Protective Services Worker

I wanted Kat to be successful and tried to gain her trust.

Lanie
Parent Attorney

I take a different approach—a collaborative one. This job is more than sitting in a courtroom. I make sure to go to every family team meeting, interact regularly with child protective services and CASA, attend special education meetings with parents, collaborate with other county resources, and travel to meet my parents at rehab, hospitals, work, or home.

Alexis
Child Protective Services Worker

Kat and I worked together to develop her plan and make it realistic for her to get the children back.

Lanie
Parent Attorney

After meeting with [Kat and Bryan], I knew they wanted their children more than anything and these children deserved them. I told them that I was 100 percent here for them and only them.

Judge Favre
Family Court Judge

Their caseworker, attorney, and CASA provided encouragement, as did the court. The monthly hearings allowed them to share their progress and be encouraged, giving them HOPE.

It Takes A Village: Collaboration Is Key to Supporting Families (Cont.)

Lisa
Family Services Program Manager

Although she was only seeking housing at that time, it soon became apparent that this family's needs were not going to be met through housing alone.

Lisa
Family Services Program Manager

Developing trust with Kat was crucial to helping her through this difficult time. Communication between Kat and me was open and candid. She wasn't always happy with me when I had to resort to tough love, but she always came around.

Lisa
Family Services Program Manager

Each time she accomplished a task, I could see her confidence grow a little more. She was starting to believe in herself.

Katherine
Mother

Today we have our children back and all the confidence in the world to give our children the lives they deserve. Knowing we can call any one of these wonderful people for help gives us hope for our future.

Bryan
Father

I realized no one was against me and they wanted me to succeed.

Alexis
Child Protective Services Worker

It was important for Bryan and Kat to figure out that they were worthy of their children.

Bryan
Father

Looking back on everything we went through reminds me that anyone can overcome anything with the right resources. I know all I have to do is ask.

Bryan
Father

Everyone involved in our case was on the same page.

When a Team Partners With a Parent

Anastasia
Parent Attorney

There are instances when the legal aspect of a case may take a back burner to the myriad of issues a parent is facing.

Anastasia
Parent Attorney

As Cherie's attorney, I had to find a way to change the court's perspective and persuade the judge that Cherie was an excellent mother who deserved to be with her boy. I was filing papers at least once a month and appearing in court just as much, if not more, to advocate for reunification. I was successful in persuading the judge to permit Noah to return to his mother while the remaining legal process played out.

Cherie
Mother

I was lucky to find legal representation that was passionate and determined to support me in getting my son back.

Robin
Parent Advocate

From the very beginning, I felt that my job was to help Cherie keep her eyes on regaining custody of her precious child. I walked a mile in her shoes with my children—and this fact helped us to connect on a deeper level.

Robin
Parent Advocate

I helped Cherie take the focus off the father and helped her to have the system acknowledge her concerns through our team.

Robin
Parent Advocate

Our team—myself, a lawyer, and a social worker—would have meetings about Cherie and how we could continue to help her present herself as the grieving, loving mother who she truly was.

When a Team Partners With a Parent (Cont.)

Wanjiro
Agency Social Worker

Anastasia, Robin, and I talked endlessly with Cherie about how her negative interactions with the agency matter. She was not always happy with us but eventually understood the connections between her behavior and the slow progress of the case.

Wanjiro
Agency Social Worker

After speaking with Cherie, we should have known that this case would take us on a roller coaster of emotions, from frustration and sadness to a place of hope and happiness.

Cherie
Mother

I would have never made it out of the madness without their support, guidance, and passion.

Cherie
Mother

There were times when I thought that everyone was out to get me. When I did what my team told me, I saw the bigger picture. I realized that letting my emotions out had a negative effect on my case.

Cherie
Mother

I believe we helped one another see things differently. Without my determination and motivation, we wouldn't be sitting here right now.

Wanjiro
Agency Social Worker

Cherie shifted how she interacted, but she stayed true to herself...She truly believed that her son was better off with her, and she fought hard to get him back. She reminded us every day to focus on what was most important: Noah.

APPENDIX C

Putting the Activities Into Context

Family-Centered Practice

Family-centered practice is grounded in the belief that "the most effective way to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being is to provide services that engage, involve, strengthen, and support families" (National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice, 2019). Family-centered practice embraces the following components (Lietz & Geiger, 2017):

- Focusing on the whole family and committing to preserve the family whenever possible
- Identifying and building on family strengths
- Empowering family voice in decision-making
- Building relationships that are characterized by trust and open communication and promoting change within the context of such relationships
- Providing individualized and culturally responsive services

Family-Centered Court Examples

- Family drug courts
- Trauma-based courts
- Courts that assess and rework their courtroom and buildings to be family friendly
- Courts with unique times for court to be available in evenings and weekends and avoid work or school schedules for families
- Courts with peer mentor programs for parents
- Local collaboration around data and services

Multidisciplinary Approaches

Multidisciplinary approaches can support family-centered practice and show promise for improving permanency outcomes (Guggenheim, 2019). In a study in New York City Family Court, when parents of children in child maltreatment cases were provided multidisciplinary representation—including a lawyer, court social worker, and parent advocate—their children spent an average of 118 fewer days in foster care as compared with children whose parents received more traditional, sole lawyer representation (Gerber et al., 2019). Less time in care helps reduce the trauma experienced by children and families.

Likewise, through cross-system multidisciplinary collaboration, courts and child welfare agencies can work toward the shared interests of reducing time spent in foster care and improving outcomes for children and families (Kelly, 2019). Supportive relationships and collaboration among parties involved in a case contribute to family engagement, assessment of family needs and strengths, identification of appropriate services and supports, and communication of consistent messages to families. Furthermore, surrounding the family with coordinated supports helps instill hope and encourages families to overcome setbacks. Hope-infused approaches align with a strengths perspective and can elevate opportunities for change (Counts, Gillam, Perico, & Eggers, 2017).

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