Working with Challenging Families

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Purpose of this Webinar

• To identify barriers to successfully partnering with a family
• To self reflect on successful and unsuccessful connections with families
• To share some strategies that might help to improve these partnerships
• To consider use of these strategies with particular families
Potential Family Barriers

- Unsure of role of ECI
- Feelings of intrusion
- Feeling of guilt for child’s problems
- Denial that there is a problem
- Pressure from other family members
- Cultural issues
- Others just don’t understand what they are going through
Poll # 1

Which family barriers do you see most often?

1. Feelings of guilt for child’s problems
2. Pressure from other family members
3. Cultural issues
4. Denial that there is a problem
5. Others just don’t understand what they are going through
6. Other__________________________
Potential Staff Barriers

• Unsure of their role with family
• Uncomfortable with family
• Assume a “one up” position
• Overwhelmed with task at hand
• Feelings of being rejected by family
• Lack of empathy for family
Poll # 2

Which staff barrier is most common in your experience?

1. Unsure of role with family
2. Uncomfortable with family
3. Find it difficult to partner with the family
4. Overwhelmed with task at hand
5. Have feelings of being rejected by family
6. Lack empathy for family
7. Other ________________________
When it just doesn’t seem to work out......

- We blame ourselves
- We blame the family
- We feel inadequate
- We are perplexed
- We don’t feel we are effective
- We aren’t doing what we set out to do—help others
- We are frustrated
- We want to give up on this family
Poll #3

What other reactions might you have?
These are all very common responses!

- You are not alone!
- Reflect on the situation
  - What is going right with our connection with this family
  - What is going wrong?
  - Is there something about this family that pushes our buttons?
  - Is there a way to reframe the situation to improve the relationship?
Reframe Technique

• Think of a picture that looks just awful. Now put it in a new frame and look again—Voila!
• For example, a family is not at home when you arrive even though you’ve reminded them of the appointment. Instead of feeling rejected, look at it from their perspective. Perhaps they had something more pressing to do than your visit that day.
What’s wrong with this visit?

Other than the fact that we don’t drink with our families, that is!
Strategies

- Explain our role
- Explain what we expect of them
Strategies, con’t.

• Start where the family is
• Listen to their concerns before starting
Strategies, con’t.

• Notice something positive and comment
• Ask what their greatest success was. And greatest frustration.
Strategies, con’t.

• Change the location of the visit
Strategies, con’t.

• Find resources for what they want
• What are the parent’s goals for themselves?
Strategies, con’t.

- Work on something together--take turns feeding that fussy baby
Strategies, con’t.

• Acknowledge how hard it must be for that parent
Strategies, con’t.

• Acknowledge that sometimes other things must take precedence over the infant’s needs.
It’s OK to say.....

• What works best for you?
• Seems like we got off on the wrong foot—what can we do to make our visits better?
• I think I made a mistake when I first met you and want to apologize.
It’s OK to say.....

• I hear you say you are just overwhelmed with all you have to do each day. Let’s talk about how we can take some of the pressure off.

• It seems like today is not a good day for the visit. Let’s reschedule for next week.
Do something fun....
Like......

• Take a walk together
• Go for ice cream
• Meet at the park
• Meet at the mall
• Do a project together
• Fold laundry together
• Make something that involves the whole family
• Have the family dog be part of the team
It is OK to admit to a family that

- You are tired
- You have other families to serve
- You are having a bad day
- That sometimes you do run a little late, but will call to let them know
It is OK to admit to a family that

- You care about their child and family
- You want only the very best for them
It is OK to admit to a family that

• YOU are human, too!
If the relationship is not going well

• Speak with your supervisor early on
• Check with others on the team to see how they are doing
• Reflect with your supervisor and/or peers about what you might do differently
• Don’t be afraid to ask for the family to be reassigned to another staff—we can’t be expected to “click” with all families
Watch your body language!

60% or more of emotions are conveyed by body language, not by the words we speak.
Now it’s your turn to practice

- Think of a particularly challenging family
- What is it about this family that is a concern?
- What might you say to this family?
- What questions might you ask of them or yourself?
- What strategies might you try to make the relationship better?
- What do you need to be aware of in your own behavior that gets in the way?
Examples of Challenging Families

• You arrive at the home and the family is just leaving. This is their 3rd missed visit this month.
• You are trying to engage mom in learning a new way to communicate with her child and she does not put her cell phone down the entire visit.
• The family you are visiting uses swear words to describe everything. You are very uncomfortable.
• The home environment is very chaotic and your session is interrupted all the time.
More Examples of Challenging Families

• Mom does not follow through on the suggestions from the last visit.

• Mom avoids eye contact and stares at the TV. She states her child is doing much better now and does not need services any more. You notice no improvement in the child.

• Dad is argumentative and wants more direct services rather than learning activities for the family to do with his son.

• Mom seems distracted and is irritated with suggestions that the worker is making.
P.A.C.E.S.: a process for addressing challenges

- **Ponder**—review and think about your visits—what went right and what went wrong
P.A.C.E.S.: a process for addressing challenges

- **Assess** what the problem might be
P.A.C.E.S.: a process for addressing challenges

- Confer with your supervisor and team
P.A.C.E.S.: a process for addressing challenges

- Evaluate which strategies might work to improve the relationship
P.A.C.E.S.:

a process for addressing challenges

• Select one and try it. Repeat with another strategy if necessary
P.A.C.E.S.—Be a Winner!

• Partner with even the most challenging families
P.A.C.E.S.

- Ponder
- Assess
- Confer
- Evaluate
- Select
Practice P.A.C.E.S.

1. Find a partner to practice with. If there is no one to partner with, go through the steps yourself.
2. Briefly describe a challenging family to your partner or pick one from the list.
3. Apply the P.A.C.E.S. steps. Make up pertinent information if it is unknown.
4. Review how it went. Remember to look back at the strategies on prior slides.
Poll #4

Comment on how likely you are to use the P.A.C.E.S. technique in the future.
Always Remember:

Your ability to work successfully with families depends on you! You are an important person!

Remember to take care of you!
Be Kind to Yourself

• Take time to relax before you visit your challenging families
Be Kind to Yourself

• Breathe—it is free and easy
Be Kind to Yourself

• Have fun! Look for things the family enjoys and incorporate those things into your sessions.
Be Kind to Yourself

• Look for the successes, not matter how small, and celebrate them.
References

• Research Synthesis: Infant Mental Health and Early Care and Education Providers, The Center on Social and Emotional Foundation for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University, retrieved from www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel, 2/2010
• Interviews with Erin Jeffus, LCSW; Charny Beck, LCSW; Suzy Armstrong, MA, EIS; Pat Borgfeldt, The Parenting Center