

## Our Mission:

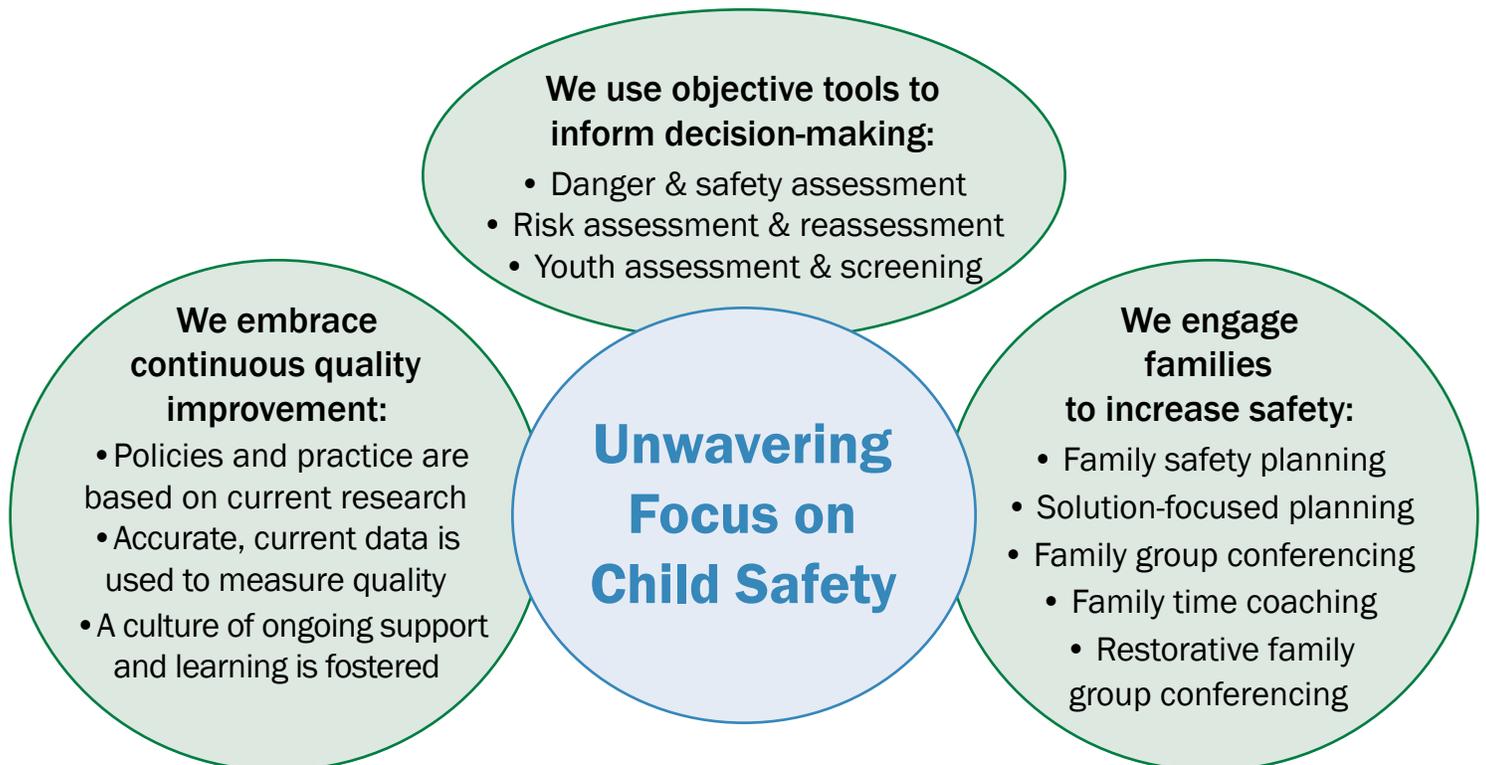
We work with families and communities to make sure children and youth are safe from abuse, their basic needs are met, they abide by the law, and their families are supported to achieve these goals.

## This Practice Model:

- ⇒ Communicates the values and practices we use in the work we do with children, youth and families;
- ⇒ Provides a framework for staff to think about the work we do; and
- ⇒ Guides the development of policy and practice guidance.

## We Achieve Our Mission By:

1. Safely stabilizing and preserving families; *and if that is not possible;*
2. Safely caring for children/youth and reunifying; *and if that is not possible;*
3. Safely supporting the development of permanency and lifelong connections for children/youth.



## The Values & Principles That Guide Us:

- ⇒ Children have the right to be safe.
- ⇒ Families have both strengths and challenges (*safety & risk factors*).
- ⇒ Everyone can grow and change with support and adequate resources.
- ⇒ Families know their situations best.
- ⇒ Children should only be separated from their parents (or guardians) when it's necessary to keep them or their communities safe.
- ⇒ When children need out-of-home care, we first consider extended family members and friends.
- ⇒ Success is more likely when we involve extended family members & friends in the process, early on.
- ⇒ For real change to occur, we must work cooperatively with families, share responsibility, and hold each other accountable.
- ⇒ Each family's cultural, ethnic, and spiritual diversity deserves respect.

WE WANT CHILDREN,  
YOUTH AND FAMILIES TO BE  
BETTER OFF AS A RESULT  
OF OUR INVOLVEMENT.

## The Outcomes We Want To Achieve:

- ⇒ **Safety:** Children are safe from abuse, neglect, and risk of harm.
- ⇒ **Permanence:** Children have nurturing relationships that sustain them throughout their lives.
- ⇒ **Well-Being:** Children do well in their families, schools, & communities.
- ⇒ **Law Abidance:** Youth are free from delinquent behavior.



## **Safety** Children are safe from abuse, neglect, and risk of harm.

*Safety is a condition in which children and adults are safe from serious harm — now and in the near future — and the protective capacities of individuals, families and communities are sufficient to protect children and community members.*

- Keeping children safe is our primary concern; we address it in every intervention, plan, and contact.
- Safety is a collaborative effort; we engage families and community members to develop safe solutions for families.
- We strive for ongoing safety through frequent, meaningful contact with children and their caregivers.
- We assess safety over time as a child's vulnerabilities change based on age, development, and other factors.
- We use research-based tools to inform risk and safety planning with families.

## **Permanence** Children have nurturing relationships that sustain them throughout their lives.

*Permanence refers to those family and community connections that contribute to healthy physical, social, and emotional development. The highest level of permanence is achieved when a child or youth is living in a nurturing family setting that offers legal commitment and continuity of relationships.*

- The need for permanence for children and youth is considered at every stage of decision making.
- When children cannot safely live with their parents/guardians, we first consider other family members and friends who are capable of providing safe, nurturing homes.
- We strive to promote and preserve family and community connections for all children and youth. Lifelong connections are critical for children and youth.
- Permanence is best achieved through a legal relationship, such as reunification with parents, adoption, or guardianship.

## **Well-Being** Children do well in their families, schools, and communities.

*Well-being is a blend of abilities, skills, and education in four areas: behavioral and emotional functioning, school and activity experiences, health and health care, and caregiver well-being.*

- We recognize that all families have strengths and deserve a voice in decisions about their children.
- We serve families from diverse backgrounds in a responsive manner.
- We recognize that families and individuals have the capacity to make positive changes in their lives.
- We engage family members and state and community partners to inform case planning and service delivery to maximize the opportunities for successful outcomes.
- We use strength-based assessments and research findings when making plans with children and families.

## **Law Abidance** Youth are free from delinquent behavior.

*Law abidance means engaging in behaviors that are in keeping with society's laws.*

- We provide youth on probation with professional and consistent services based on best practice, collaborative family-based approaches, balanced and restorative justice principles, and progressive responses.
- We commit to working in partnership with communities and families and to enhancing connections between families and the communities in which they live.
- We work with the entire family to help keep youth free from delinquent behavior.
- We strive to improve community safety by:
  - Decreasing risk;
  - Providing supervision levels that match the risk; and
  - Matching placement and services to meet the needs of families and youth.

## **Learning Culture** Staff are supported, valued, and receive ongoing training.

*A learning culture supports staff to continually learn together — where new and expansive patterns of thinking are encouraged and collective aspiration has the potential to be realized.*

- We create and maintain a supportive working and learning environment — with adequate resources and open communication and accountability at all levels.
- Training is focused on building specific skills for engaging families, building safety, and creating permanence, because children and families deserve trained, skilled staff to engage and assist them.
- We learn from children, youth, and families to improve our practice.

## **Engaging for Positive Change**

The primary tool we have to help children and families is our positive and respectful engagement with families to help them make positive changes in their lives.

Children's most fundamental needs (e.g., safety, nurturing, and belonging) cannot be addressed without recognizing and, at times, attending to the family's immediate needs.

Our day-to-day work practice must be:

- Child-focused, family-centered, and tailored to meet the specific needs of children and families;
- Collaborative, community-based, culturally responsive, and outcome oriented; and
- Focused on enhancing parents' capacity to care for their children and developing and sustaining lifelong connections.

We work in partnership with families using family-centered strategies to motivate children, youth, and families to envision a better future and become increasingly motivated to achieve it.

These strategies seek to help children, youth, and families think differently about their behavior and ultimately consider what might be gained through change.

# Effective Interventions with Children, Youth, and Families

These four principles provide a research-based lens through which we can examine and reflect on the work we do with children, youth, and families. These principles should be visible in the direct work we do and in the services and supports we offer children, youth, families, foster parents, and other caregivers.

- 1. The Risk Principle.** Resources should be directed to children, youth, and families who are at higher risk. The intensity of the services we provide should match the level of risk. The higher the risk, the more intensive the services.
- 2. The Need Principle.** Our work should be directed at the needs of the children, youth, and families that most contribute to risk and danger. Children, youth, and families present with a variety of needs. Effective interventions identify and affect change in the areas that directly contribute to danger and risk. Our work supports parents in learning to make the best short and long-term choices for their children.
- 3. The Responsivity Principle.** Our work needs to respond to the individual temperament, learning style, motivation, culture and gender of the children, youth, and families we serve. We strive to work with youth and families where they are, individualizing our response and using a skill set in family engagement. We also strive to match the people and programs that are delivering interventions to the needs and abilities of the children, youth, and families with which we work. We serve children and families of all cultural backgrounds and should provide services and casework that are relevant and sensitive to the needs of a diverse population. Services need to be timely and targeted at the risk and need.
- 4. The Program Integrity Principle.** Our interventions and the services we refer children and families to need to adhere to model fidelity, be evidenced based, and be proven to work on the particular risk or danger identified. Programs need to be evaluated periodically for their effectiveness.



# Assessing Readiness to Change

Social workers work in partnership with children, youth, and families to promote positive behavior change. We recognize that children, youth, and families who need to make changes in their lives may be at different levels of readiness.

In situations of domestic violence, the perpetrator's behavior and not the victim's behavior should be the focus of change. The preferred way to protect children, in most cases, is to:

1. Hold the offender responsible for the risk his/her violent behavior poses to the children; and
2. Work in partnership with the non-offending parent to access needed resources, decrease risk, and increase safety.

We recognize the following stages of change as a fluid continuum of readiness. The pace and sequence varies from individual to individual.

1. *Pre-contemplation*: lacks awareness that life can be improved by changing behavior.
2. *Contemplation*: recognizes the problem, considers behavior change, and gathers information about possible solutions and actions.
3. *Preparation*: acknowledges and communicates the decision to change behavior and reaffirms the need and desire to change.
4. *Action*: takes observable, perceptible steps to change behavior — for fewer than 6 months.
5. *Maintenance*: maintains positive behavior change — for at least 6 months.

Our approach to working with children, youth, and families as they do the difficult work of changing behaviors and building safety:

- Is direct and transparent, yet non-confrontational;
- Is insightful, yet non-judgmental; and
- Strives to resolve disagreement and conflict in a non-adversarial manner while keeping the best interests of children at the forefront.

Our work attempts to increase awareness of the potential problems caused, consequences experienced, and risks faced as a result of the behavior in question.

# Social Work Process

The following casework process attempts to capture all the steps necessary to effectively engage with children, youth, and families to effect lasting change. We recognize that children, youth, and families are each unique and have their own complexities. In working with a family, we may cycle through some of the steps many times or need to pay attention to several steps at once; effective casework, however, requires paying attention to all parts of the process.

## 1. Respond, Engage, and Assess

- *Prepare* - review any information you have been provided about the child, youth, or family without forming biases regarding the potential outcome. Plan your approach based on the purpose of the visit/intervention.
- *Introduce* - orient the children, youth, and family to the process you are about to engage in together. Respect and trust should be displayed to the family, and the family's point of view should be used whenever possible. Do this by seeking to understand the values, beliefs, and meanings family members perceive in their stories.
- *Assess* - engage the family in the assessment process in as open a way as possible so they understand safety, risk, needs, and protective factors. This offers the best opportunity for a comprehensive perspective. Explore exceptions to the danger, harm, and risks that may be creating safety for the child, youth, or family.

## 2. Plan

Families, their extended support networks, and other caregivers are essential to effective planning for safety and sustainable change.

- *Engage* - work with children, youth, family, and other caregivers to acknowledge areas of danger and develop ways to build safety and mitigate risk by building on protective factors and identifying areas for change. Understand and acknowledge steps the family has already taken prior to involvement with the agency.
- *Prioritize* - prioritize targeted danger/safety, risks, needs and protective factors. Work collaboratively to set goals, tasks, and responsibilities. Acknowledge when there is evidence-based research that supports prioritizing one risk over another
- *Assess* - explore confidence, willingness, motivation, and readiness to change.

### 3. Coordinate

- *Intervene* – our interventions pay attention to the safety of the whole family with the goal to do no harm. Be specific regarding which risks are being addressed through the intervention and steps taken by the family, extended support network, and other caregivers. Develop a case plan that directly relates to the needs identified by the family and the social worker. Communicate targeted case plan goals to all stakeholders and service providers.
- *Enhance supports* – incorporate and build the family’s natural support network and foster long-term and permanent connections. Referrals to effective programs and services may be appropriate.
- *Collaborate* – integrate kin, foster parents, and providers to support parents and primary caregivers in addressing safety and risk and to create mutual accountability for outcomes and plans.

### 4. Support and Reassess

This should be accomplished with the help of the family’s team.

- *Monitor and evaluate progress* – identify successes and obstacles to change. Use natural family supports when appropriate to provide monitoring and feedback regarding progress.
- *Adjust safety/case plan* – modify plan(s) consistent with immediate presenting danger, risks, and needs. Risks in this context should specifically relate to the existing danger and harm.
- *Reinforce and reassess* – reward even small, positive changes and develop strategies to sustain positive changes made.

### 5. Transfer or Closure

- *Transfer* – purposeful, deliberate process to assist in understanding risk, safety, and protective factors in the context of permanence, well-being, and law abidance.
- *Termination* – purposeful, deliberate process to assist in understanding the experience (i.e., where you started and came to) and prepare for moving beyond the current relationship to the next.

# Tools for Engagement

To successfully implement the Family Services Practice Model, each district will incorporate into practice:

## Engaged Staff, Engaging Families

Staff are able to use strategies associated with motivational interviewing, solution-focused skills, and appreciative inquiry to:

- Assess an individual's readiness to change and partner with families to enhance their willingness, confidence, and motivation to change.
- Elicit statements from family members stating where, when, and how they will accomplish next steps towards success and/or case plan goals.
- Help families and youth identify their strengths.
- Use scaling questions, miracle questions, and other forward-thinking inquiry methods to engage families and youth to partner in targeted case planning.

## Family Finding

- The purpose of family finding is to develop and strengthen positive connections for children, youth, and families over the life of a case.
- This can be an informal widening of the circle of support available to children, youth, and families through discussions with family members and the use of tools such as ecomaps and genograms. Social workers should do this in their initial meetings with family members.
- This can also be a data base search, with subsequent attempts to engage and assess as many potential supports as possible.

## Family-Centered Meetings

- These are meetings of as many extended family and natural supports as possible, facilitated by independent facilitators.
- The initial family meeting (usually a Family Safety Planning Meeting) occurs as soon as possible after initial contact with the family, but during the assessment/investigation phase. A family team is formed through this first meeting, and the family meeting leads to the initial case plan.
- Ask "Why wouldn't we hold an external FSP"?
- The initial child and family support team meeting should not, in most cases, be delayed if a Family Group Conference (FGC) is being considered.

- An FGC is especially useful when family relations are so tense that an immediate FSP would not be safe, there is a need to repair harm, or long-term decisions need to be made. *Until further guidance, we will not use FGC when there has been sexual abuse or serious physical abuse and the family is not fully acknowledging the abuse.*
- A formal family meeting should occur anytime a major crisis or decision point arises (e.g., new youth or parent offense, escalating patterns of risky behavior, a placement or permanence decision, case closure).
- Case closure meetings are recommended when a young person will soon be transitioning out of custody, a youth with sexually offending behaviors is aging out, and there is ongoing risk and a need for a safety plan and/or a plan for ongoing support for the youth/family post FSD involvement. Case closure meetings provide an opportunity to celebrate a family's growth and success.

**Note:** Federal and state statutes require us to develop transition plans before youth exit care.

## Family Time Coaching

- Shared Parenting Meetings occur in all cases where children are removed or when a placement changes (within five working days of the placement change). They then occur every 3 months to discuss changes, progress, and the plan for the future.
- The social worker attends one family time and post-family time meeting a month to allow the parents an opportunity to demonstrate and discuss their ability to meet their child's needs.
- Family time typically occurs in the most normal (to the child) and natural setting possible and only rarely occurs in an office setting.
- Progress in family time coaching is formally assessed every three months with the parent(s), coach, and social worker. If the parent's ability to meet their child's needs is not progressing, a family meeting to discuss the child's needs should be considered.

When a child or youth is placed out of home, family time coaching includes:

- A pre-family time meeting of the coach and parent(s) to discuss the child's needs and strategies the parent will use to meet these needs (and the coach will support).
- Family time with the coach in the room, actively coaching and assisting the parents.
- A post-family time meeting with the coach and parent(s) to assess how family time went and to plan for the next time.

## Danger, Safety, and Risk Assessment

Assessment and decision making occur with child, youth, and family participation.

SDM - all instruments are completed with input from the family.

- A danger and safety assessment is completed during the first home visit. A family safety plan is developed if danger is identified.
- A risk assessment is completed with the family at the closure of the assessment/ investigation (within 45-60 days).
- A risk reassessment is completed with the family every 90 days the case is open.

YASI - all YASI instruments are completed after engaging the youth and family in the assessment process using a motivational style interview. Results are shared with the youth and family. The social worker clearly states, and explores with the family, their strengths and protective factors as well as danger, harm, and risk factors.

- The pre-screen may be completed before *preliminary hearings*, but must be completed before *merits*.
- The full assessment is completed between *merits* and *disposition*.
- The reassessment is completed every 6 months or when a new charge, escalating pattern of risky behavior, or case closure for moderate/high risk occurs.

### Each district will use teaming or other specific plans to ensure they have:

- Regular, planned, and safe opportunities for reflection and learning, and a culture that encourages an openness to giving and accepting feedback;
- A staff that feels supported, empowered to try new ways to improve their practice (little tests of change), and involved in decision making within the office;
- Opportunities for families, parents, and young people to participate in planning and provide practice feedback;
- A case transition process that seems seamless to families when they have to experience a change in workers; and
- Consistent, cohesive practices throughout the office, aligned with practice guidance and policy.

<http://www.dcf.vermont.gov/fsd>

**Be the change you want to see!**