

# The Value of Monthly or ‘Multiple’ Meetings

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Much of the research and practice literature on family meetings concerns one-time meetings or meetings that happen in concert with particular case events. However, findings from the LIFE project<sup>1</sup> suggest that monthly meetings have a positive impact on short, medium and longer-term outcomes. It is important to note that meetings have to be high quality- that is, be firmly grounded in the following values — parent driven and youth guided, strengths based, trauma informed and culturally responsive — and include the following:

## KEY FEATURES OF HIGH-QUALITY MEETINGS:

- Meetings occur approximately monthly until permanency achieved
- Facilitator is a non-case carrying child welfare staff
- Parents, youth, kith and kin, other supports, attorneys, therapists, other key providers are invited and encouraged to participate
- The membership of the team, especially among key participants, is mostly stable
- Preparation happens prior to every meeting for parents, and ‘preparation light’ is provided for other participants
- Support staff person coordinates and takes notes
- An agenda structures the meeting

<sup>1</sup> Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare (DHS-CW) developed an intervention focused on reducing the time to permanency for children likely to have long-term stays in foster care. Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) has four key components: monthly case planning meetings, enhanced family finding, peer parent mentoring, and team collaboration. LIFE staff include a trained meeting facilitator, administrative support staff, and a paid peer parent mentor. The LIFE practice values are strengths-based, trauma-informed, parent-directed/ youth-guided, and culturally responsive.

## WHY MULTIPLE MEETINGS?

A single meeting or even a handful is unlikely to have the positive impact on a child welfare case that a series of meetings – happening approximately monthly, until permanency is achieved – can have. This is because many of the dynamics that are so impactful develop (mostly) over time. For example, the following features of strong LIFE teams nearly always emerged after a stable group had met at least 5-6 times.

- Team members shared information and engaged in conversation which allowed them to **‘get to know each other’** and develop an understanding and appreciation of each other’s roles, responsibilities, limitations, talents and personalities.
- The team worked together, celebrated successes and confronted challenges, and these shared experiences helped to build a **sense of connection to the team**.
- **Norms** emerged within the context of on-going team work – reflecting the values base of the LIFE project and became ‘the way the work is done’.
- Shared effort and repeated exposure in the context of (emerging) relationships fostered the development of **trust**.
- **Information** was shared with parents (and other members of the team) **multiple times** and in different ways, with many opportunities for questions, and team members became more adept at **accommodating different communication styles**.

In addition, MONTHLY meetings meant that

- Teams received **information about barriers and challenges** as well as successes **within a few weeks** rather than months and could respond accordingly.

## THE BENEFITS OF MULTIPLE MEETINGS

Parents, facilitators, caseworkers and providers identified a number of ways in which monthly meetings were useful for parents and helped them make progress on their case plans.

### Having a say in decision-making and planning.

Many parents reported that they felt heard by the team and had a voice in decision-making although it often took some time for parents to trust that caseworkers actually listened to and considered their input and requests. When meetings happened monthly, parents were able to have a say in a variety of topics, such as placement changes or services for their children, as issues emerged over the course of the case. On occasion, meetings served as a forum for working through disagreements that arose between parents and members of the team.

“If there is something I am trying to get my caseworker to understand... (the facilitator) will stay on point until we come to an understanding. I love that.”

### Transparent child welfare decision-making.

Parents appreciated that they and their supports were able to ask questions and request clarification during meetings which meant they were much more likely to understand why decisions were made as the case evolved.

The fact that information was shared more than once helped ensure that the whole team become familiar with child welfare's requirements. As a result, team members could encourage or push the child welfare agency to respond when parents made progress.

**Timely information, problem-solving, and advice.**

Meetings were described by many parents as a place where they came to feel comfortable asking questions and seeking input and advice. As one parent explained, *"It's not the requirements that makes it hard, it's knowing where to start."* In addition, since meetings were held monthly, barriers were surfaced earlier and problems got resolved in a more timely fashion. A few parents commented on the advantage of getting information from a variety of sources. A father explained that it is *"better to hear from a team of people rather than just my caseworker."*

**Encouragement and emotional support.**

Over time and as more providers attended meetings, many parents came to feel like they had a 'team' of supporters cheering them on. Highlighting parents' progress and celebrating even small successes helped build parents' confidence. One parent described that meetings *"Helps me realize that wow, I really am doing this. I'm actually doing the things that I set out to do. I haven't done that in a long time."*

**Better communication, coordination and follow through.** Regular meetings helped ensure that everyone was on the same page which was very useful to parents. They also felt like action items helped team members stay organized and on track,

and encouraged follow through by their caseworkers as well as other providers. As one father said, holding caseworkers and providers accountable in this way *"makes for a different flavor Kool-aid"*

**Re-engaging is easier and more likely.**

Meetings frequently were on-going even when parents failed to make progress or disengaged from working with child welfare for a while. For some parents, meetings served as a familiar and relatively comfortable space for them to re-engage which may have made that more likely. In addition, parents who wanted to reconnect had multiple team members to choose from, and meeting facilitators, caseworkers and other team members worked together to facilitate re-engagement.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings argue for the value of on-going and frequent meetings between caseworkers, parents, providers, extended family and others, particularly meetings that incorporate the key features outlined above, and that are focused on case planning, problem solving and providing a range of supports to parents and families. Meetings should also be viewed as opportunities to promote relationship building among team members, and parents and other family members.