

Parents' Perspectives on How Meetings Facilitate Case Progress and Other Positive Outcomes

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Parents said the following aspects of meetings were important to their ability to make progress on their case plans:

- 1 opportunities for parent voice
- 2 feedback and information
- 3 encouragement and support
- 4 communication and service coordination
- 5 mechanisms for caseworker and provider accountability

The scholarship on family group decision making conceptualizes meetings primarily as a means to increase families' influence or say in child welfare decisions. Findings from the evaluation of Oregon's Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project¹ suggest a broader conception of the ways in which meeting practice can facilitate meaningful collaboration and positive outcomes. Parents described a variety of ways in which monthly meetings were instrumental to their ability to make progress on the issues that brought them to the attention of child welfare.

¹ 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.

PARENT VOICE

Parents appreciated when meetings provided an **opportunity to have a say** in decisions about various aspects of the case. As one mother described,

“ We go to those meetings to discuss the decisions that are going to be made and we all have our own input. Sometimes I may not be happy with the final decision... but all in all, I've always had a say in it and I've always been heard. ”

Facilitators and parent mentors were able to help **amplify parents' voice**. A mother provided the following example, “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.”

Meetings can be a forum for **working through disagreements** between parents and members of the team. For example, a facilitator helped craft a compromise by offering alternatives and helping to find a solution acceptable to both the parent and the caseworker. One parent said of her meetings, “If we had any discrepancies that was a good time to address them.” Another parent reported that her caseworker explained to her, “If something comes up that I don't really like (the decision that is being made), I can bring it to the group to be discussed and see if there are other options.”

FEEDBACK AND INFORMATION

Parents also benefited from the chance to **regularly receive feedback** and advice, as described by a father who said that when he faced a challenge he would “bring it to the table and you have these people that are trying to help you and give you ideas of how to resolve it.” Other parents appreciated being able to **hear from a team** of people. A few parents described brainstorming and “bouncing ideas off of everybody;” as one father noted you “can't do that on the phone.”

Another crucial feature of the meetings was getting pointers and **advice about navigating the system**. One parent stated “It is not the requirements...that makes it hard. It is knowing where to start.” To-do lists or **action items for all** participants were generated at most meetings and parents found these quite helpful. For many parents, the **clarity regarding the agency and the court's expectations** was a primary benefit of the meetings.

ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Meetings provided **encouragement and hope** and helped parents feel “more supported and not so horrible.” Parents talked about the **positive tone** of the meetings. A mother described how being able to share about her progress “...helps me to 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.” Parents also appreciated having a team behind them; many felt like providers and caseworkers were at the meetings to **offer assistance and support** rather than to criticize. A parent shared, “It wasn't just, ‘Oh, this is all on you.’ It was, ‘How can we get to these goals together.’”

Most parents reported that they were able to be **open with the team about barriers** or problems. A father caring for three children with disabilities relied heavily on his team: “Just anything that comes up with my kids, instead of holding back and not telling anybody, I go to them, ask them for help or their opinion of what I should do.” Others described being **able to be honest** about what they could take on.

Opportunities for face-to-face communication over time helped forge closer relationships between parents, their caseworkers and providers. A father said of his meetings, “I feel more caring going on, and I feel like (team members) realize certain things that they didn’t in the beginning.” Other parents explained how conversations at meetings allowed them to **make personal connections**. For example, a parent said of her caseworker, “You do have a kid. Oh, okay. It is a big deal. Oh, you have a pet. These are things that people can relate to.”

COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

The **quality of the relationships** had an impact on what parents were willing to share during meetings. A parent described that she “felt open and not feeling like I had to wear armor coming into a room, or being ready for judgment every time.” Another mother described how the practice of regularly being asked, “Is there anything you need help with? Do we need to change anything?” and the supportive atmosphere made it possible for her to ask for help.

“If we didn’t have that, no one would really know. I could be completely overwhelmed and not want to say anything, because I wouldn’t want anybody to think I couldn’t handle it.”

A key benefit of meetings for many parents was being able to **communicate with their caseworker** given how difficult it was to get ahold of them otherwise. One mother referred to the “peace of mind” she got from **regular contact** with her caseworker at meetings. Not having to play phone tag with other key people on the team was another advantage.

Parents also believed that **communication among the team** was more efficient than what was likely to happen without the monthly meetings, and some said that because of this, cases made faster progress. Team members **received information on a timely basis**; as one parent commented, “I think it really helps to move things along because everybody was on the same page.” Sometimes meetings were able to spur a swift response from team members. A mother was convinced that being able to talk directly to her team helped her get into treatment when she needed.

“ (Without the meeting) I wouldn’t have had that chance to say, ‘Hey, I want to go to the mom’s program.’ Everyone in the room was, ‘Alright, we are on it’, and I was in there four days later. ”

Meetings also saved time by **reducing the need for phone calls and emails**. One mother commented, “[Meetings] definitely get the word out to everybody at once... Without that, I can’t imagine how they did things before.” Team meetings also assisted with **service coordination and planning** more generally, or as a parent put it, “[They] helped everybody be more in sync with each other.” A parent who routinely had upwards of 8 people at her meetings described, “It was everybody in one room talking, meetings where everybody knew what the other people were doing.”

CASEWORKER AND PROVIDER ACCOUNTABILITY

Finally, meetings provided a forum for **holding caseworkers and providers accountable**. Agency requirements for expanding visits, returning children, etc. were regularly reviewed at meetings, and if parents met the criteria, meetings were a place where they and their advocates could push the agency to respond in a timely way. A mother shared the story of a key meeting:

“It seemed like we were going in circles. Nothing was getting accomplished, and I was doing everything that I was supposed to be doing, but I wasn’t getting anywhere. So inviting the DA to the meeting I felt was really, really helpful because I felt like it kind of held her accountable... ‘You are saying you want these things from me. I’m here. Tell me what you want so we can move forward.’ I felt really good after that meeting.”

Meetings also encouraged caseworkers and providers to **follow through** on their efforts related to the case, because, as a mother explained, “If they needed to take care of something, they each had an action item.” Some parents believed that “having that designated time, where they are going to be held accountable” made a difference in their caseworker’s behavior. A father agreed, saying,

“[Providers] that might not have done the things that they do, that they are doing now, partly it is because they know there is this meeting going on, and they are not the head of. It makes for a different flavor Kool-Aid.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Together, these findings suggest an expanded understanding of what family team meetings can do to improve parents’ experiences and child welfare outcomes more generally. Specifically, meetings should be designed to:

- Provide opportunities for family voice in decision-making and case planning
- Make it possible for parents to speak openly about their needs and challenges
- Promote timely information sharing and problem solving by the team
- Provide encouragement and emotional support to parents
- Facilitate accountability for all participants – not just parents

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