

❖ Cultural Factors in the Casework Relationship ❖

Cultural differences between the worker and the family can sometimes present barriers to the development of trust, empathy, and a collaborative relationship between the caseworker and the family. Casework values stress respect for each family's individuality, the right of each family to self-determination, and mutuality in the casework relationship. Casework, therefore, provides a valuable framework within which to transcend cultural differences between the caseworker and the family, and to establish a mutual, constructive, relationship.

The following attitudes and strategies can help the caseworker engage families of different cultural backgrounds into a productive and mutual relationship. These strategies are particularly valuable during the initial stages of casework, but strengthening and maintaining a relationship across cultures is an ongoing process.

- The caseworker should understand the values, attitudes, traditions, and beliefs of the cultural groups served by the agency. Such an understanding can prevent the caseworker from inadvertently insulting or criticizing a family member, or misinterpreting the meaning of family members' communications and behaviors. However, the worker must remember that all generalizations about a cultural group must be "checked out" to determine their applicability to any individual family, or else there is the risk of stereotyping.
- The caseworker should become familiar with the rules of social behavior for a particular group and abide by them. It is important to tread gently until the culture is better understood. The caseworker should ask how each of the family members would like to be addressed, and what they would feel most comfortable calling the worker. The caseworker may request their guidance to help in understanding them and to avoid offending them.
- The caseworker should openly acknowledge cultural differences during the early stages of the relationship, and acknowledge that there may be misunderstandings as a result. The worker might suggest that many people find it harder to trust someone who is very different from them, and should encourage the family to point out when they identify differences, so they can better understand each other and avoid misunderstandings. If lack of cultural knowledge leads to a blunder, the caseworker should apologize and assure the family that no insult was intended. The worker should, similarly, not automatically assume that what is perceived as an insult or an affront was so intended by the family.
- The caseworker should know the cultural norms of the family's primary reference group regarding the involvement of outside persons or agencies in family problems. These norms will affect the family's view of the caseworker and the agency. What appears to be resistance may instead reflect feelings of shame or embarrassment because family problems have become public, or a pervasive distrust of institutional authority. Such feelings are typical when a family values privacy, self-sufficiency, and independence. In

some cultures, it is permissible to discuss problems within one's own family and community, but never with representatives of formal institutions. A caseworker who understands these issues can respond accordingly, and can establish a relationship that is comfortable for the family before addressing more sensitive issues. The worker might also utilize community leaders or extended family members to gain access to otherwise isolated or reluctant families. The worker's association with a person who is trusted by the family can speed up the establishment of a positive relationship. However, workers should not expect to be automatically accepted or trusted by members of the community. These relationships will also have to be developed and nurtured.

- The caseworker should communicate interest in the family and in understanding things from their perspective. A willingness to listen and to learn from the family can help the worker identify areas of commonality, and also communicates respect for the family's strengths and uniqueness. During the early stages of the relationship, workers should do a lot of listening. Ask gentle, clarifying questions to help family members explain themselves, their views, and describe their lives. For example, "It may be harder for me to understand what you mean, since I grew up very differently, but tell me about it. I'd like to understand better."
- The caseworker should use interviewing techniques which can clarify the subtleties of the family's communications. The caseworker should never assume what the family means, nor assume that the family understands the worker's intentions. The caseworker should clearly explain the meaning of his or her own responses and behaviors, and ask for feedback from family members to assure their understanding.
- Do not underestimate the barriers posed by language differences between workers and families. While basic communication is often possible, it requires considerable proficiency in a language to accurately express the subtleties and nuances associated with feelings, values, and beliefs. And, while it is possible for a worker to better understand a family's culture simply by asking the proper questions and listening carefully, if family members must explain or represent themselves in a language they neither speak nor understand well, the risk of miscommunication and misinterpretation is high. Families should normally be assigned workers who speak their language, and trained interpreters should be used when workers are not fluent in the family's language.

Source: *Field Guide to Child Welfare* by Judith S. Rycus and Ronald C. Hughes, CWLA Press, 1998.