

# Developing Case Goals, Objectives and Service Activities

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## 1. Goals

Goals can be defined as comprehensive ends. They represent the desired outcome toward which all case activities are directed. Goal statements are broad, descriptive statements of desired ends. The achievement of a goal often requires the coordinated implementation of many activities. The goals of child welfare practice are derived from the profession's mission, which is to protect children and to strengthen families. At all times during the case planning process, we should be working toward one of the following goals for each child we are serving:

- The maintenance and enhancement of families' capabilities to care for their own children within their own home, community, and culture.
- The provision of the most effective and least disruptive out-of-home care option available, when placement is required.
- The reunification of children in placement with their families as quickly as possible.
- The provision of a stable and permanent alternative placement as quickly as possible for every child who cannot return to his own home.

The identified goal will determine the objectives, activities, and services that should be included in the case plan. The case goal may change during the time that a case is open. Initially, the goal for a child at high risk of harm may be to provide immediate safe placement to protect the child. Shortly thereafter, the goal may change to reunification of the child and family, as the problems that led to maltreatment are resolved. If it becomes evident the child will not be able to return home, the goal may change to the provision of a permanent, alternative placement for the child.

## 2. Objectives

Objectives are statements that describe a specific desired outcome or "end state." Objectives are more specific in scope than goals. An objective describes in measurable terms exactly what change is desired. The outcome described by an objective generally represents the elimination of the identified need or problem.

Case objectives are derived from, and must be consistent with, case goals. Achievement of an objective should represent a step toward achievement of the goal. For example, if the case goal is reunification of the child with the family, an objective of long-term placement in family foster care does not promote achievement of the goal. Objectives must have certain characteristics in order to function as criteria by which we measure success.

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- Objectives must be measurable. Objectives describe the very specific outcomes that we believe will result in goal achievement and, therefore, must include some easily discernible or observable criteria by which achievement can be measured. Objectives that contain the word “improve” (i.e., “will improve parenting skills”) are neither observable nor measurable.
- Objectives may need to reflect behavior change. In child welfare, many desired “end states” or objectives will reflect the elimination of harmful parenting behaviors. This case creates confusion for caseworkers in distinguishing between descriptions of parental behaviors that represent “end states” and descriptions of parental behaviors that represent “activities.” Activities are always written in behavioral terms because, by definition, they are statements of a person’s action. The differentiating factor is whether it is a means of achieving some other outcome. For example, “Sandra will address her AOD use in order that she will not hit her children and they can be maintained safely in the home” is a description of an objective. “Sandra will attend daily alcohol and drug day treatment at the drug rehabilitation center” is an activity through which she will achieve the objective.
- Objectives must be derived from the case assessment. Objectives should be related to the assessed problem, and not be developed from a “laundry list” of potential conditions that might improve parenting or care of the child. In addition, an objective should be formulated to address each significant contributing factor or problem identified in the case assessment.
- Objectives should be time limited. A time frame should be designated within which the objective can reasonably be expected to be completed.
- Objectives should be mutually determined whenever possible. If objectives are formulated by the agency for the family, they cannot be considered mutual. They are the agency’s objectives, not the family’s objectives. Within the broad goal parameters set by the child welfare agency, the greater the involvement of the parent in determining objectives, the more committed him/her will be to implementing them. Part of the caseworker’s responsibility is to engage and empower the parent to become invested in the objectives to the point of mutuality. To these ends, it is important in writing objectives to try to frame them in positive terms. For example: “Mother will stop physically abusing her children” is an objective that is written in negative terms. “Mother will understand age-appropriate behavioral expectations for children and will learn and use nonviolent discipline strategies” is stated in more positive terms.
- In families where AOD problems are present, denial may be a strong factor and the family may not admit to problems or engage in the case planning process. In these situations, AOD issues must still be addressed in the case plan.

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### 3. Activities

The case plan must specify all the *activities* necessary to achieve each stated objective. This may be defined as the “step-by-step implementation plan” that will structure and guide the provision of services. To ensure that activities are appropriately formulated, the following factors should be considered and some objectives may need to be formulated by the agency without the involvement of the family. Family members must understand the consequences of failing to comply with objectives and activities called for in the case plan.

- Activities should be written for each objective included in the case plan. The activity section should set forth the following information:
  - What steps or actions must be performed, in what order, to achieve the objectives?
  - Who is responsible for the implementation of each activity?
  - When is the activity to take place, including desired time frames for beginning and completing each activity?
  - Where is each activity to take place?
- Activities should be jointly formulated and agreed upon by the family and the caseworker. Disagreements should be negotiated before the action steps in the plan are finalized. The family’s commitment to following through with the case plan activities is related to their degree of “buy-in” and involvement in the development of the plan.
- The caseworker should ensure that the family members have the knowledge and ability to carry out assigned activities. If they do not, the activities should be reformulated.

