

# Components of Engagement Skills

Tuning in to Self: The worker's efforts to get in touch with actual and potential feelings/ concerns/beliefs/values that the worker him/herself brings to the helping encounter.

**NOTE:** This skill can be used *in preparation* of an encounter with a client (or with a supervisor), and used "live" while interacting with the client during any phase of the relationship.

## Steps

- (1) Pause and reflect. Ask yourself, "*What are my emotional, physical and cognitive reactions to this situation or family?*" ("I'm nervous about being in this neighborhood, I think that's what's causing my upset stomach—or it could be the smell of garbage in this alley.")
- (2) Ask yourself, "*How will this reaction likely affect my actions?*" ("I might get angry with the client or rush my contact so I can get out of here.")
- (3) Ask yourself, "*What is the primary outcome that I want right now in working with this client?*" ("I want the client to know that I am here to help with her situation and that I have skills and resources that can help. I want her to be able to trust me as a helper.")
- (4) Ask yourself, "*What do I need to do with my reaction?*" ("I need to be aware of my pacing and not rush through things. I need to calm myself so I can focus on her situation and not my upset stomach. Maybe taking a few minutes to think about a pleasant situation will help me to relax and focus on her.")
- (5) Implement your answer to Step 4 without any verbal discussion about your feelings, or verbalize an "I-feel" message as needed. ("Ms. James, I'm feeling a little worried about us getting off on the right foot today.")

Tuning in to Others: The worker's effort to get in touch with the primary feelings and concerns that the client brings to the helping encounter.

### Steps

- (1) Use of **focused listening** encourages the client to talk so you can identify the primary (or most basic) part of the client's message. Focused listening requires:
  - Paying attention to, and analyzing, the client's verbalizations and non-verbal behaviors;
  - Using facial expressions and body language that reflect interest, concern and respect;
  - Blocking out all other distractions from your mind;
  - Centering your attention on the client's words, behaviors and feelings; and
  - Avoiding interruption of the client with questions.
  
- (2) Display your **understanding of the client's feelings** by:
  - Reflecting, or asking for clarification of, what you identify as the client's primary feelings and thoughts. ("You sound fearful of child care workers." "You believe that I think just like your last caseworker?"); and
  - Ensuring that your words, voice tone, gestures, facial expression, physical posture, and touch (when appropriate) all match and communicate respect and concern for the client and the client's situation.

Reaching inside of silences: Being able to explore the meaning of a client's silence by putting possible feelings into words.

### Steps

- (1) Being comfortable with silence.
  
- (2) Offering non-verbal support in posture (leaning in slightly toward the client without violating personal space needs) and facial expression to indicate that you are listening and want the client to continue talking.

- (3) Encouraging the client to share their thoughts and articulating what the silence may mean. (“You are very quiet. Could you tell me what you are thinking? I’m not sure what you’re thinking about right now... could you share your thoughts with me in words?” “I can see that this is hard for you to talk about; Many mothers in this situation have felt angry, frightened, sad, etc.; Does your silence mean that you’re having a hard time finding the right words to tell me what you are thinking?”)

Clarifying Worker’s Purpose & Role: Simple (without jargon) opening statements by the worker regarding (a) her role/function at the agency, specifically as it relates to the stated problem or issue at hand, and (b) the general purpose of the meeting/encounter.

### **Steps**

- (1) State your name, job title, and the name of the agency you represent.
  - Show identification as needed.
  - Use words rather than initials (Child Protective Services instead of CPS, Family Service Plan instead of FSP, Children & Youth Services instead of CYS, etc.).
- (2) State the reason why you are making the contact.
  - Use clear, simple sentences without jargon or technical terms.
  - Respond to questions as needed.
- (3) State the purpose/outcome of the contact.
  - Clarify what you will be doing (asking questions, talking to relevant others, looking at the home environment, etc.) and approximately how long you expect the contact to last.
  - Clarify, as needed, what will happen if you are not able to accomplish the purpose of your contact.

Managing Protective Authority: Using the least amount of protective authority required to achieve the legally mandated outcomes of safety, permanence and well-being for children. This means dealing with issues, raised directly or indirectly, about the worker's (and agency's) authority, such as requiring the acceptance of mandated services or the client's past and possibly negative experiences with authority figures or social workers.

## Steps

- (1) Invite and clarify expressions of confusion, dissatisfaction, resistance, and complaints about you as the worker, the helping process, or prior experiences with protective authorities. ("You sound doubtful about what I am saying. Is there something you disagree with?")
- (2) Tune into and assess the client's understanding and cooperation with your purpose. ("I can hear that you both have strong feelings about talking to me.")
- (3) Tune into self as a way to manage your own defensiveness, anger, fear, etc. ("I'm feeling increasingly defensive the more he sounds angry and suspicious about my visit here today.")
- (4) Realistically and simply clarify what is, and what isn't, within your role and the authority of your agency. ("If you're unwilling to meet with me and agree on a safety plan for your daughter, then my agency will ask the court to legally force you to participate.")
- (5) Clarify your purpose and mission in working with the client. ("My agency works really hard to help keep families together whenever possible, and removing children from home is only a last resort to keep them safe.")

Reaching for Feedback: Encouraging clients to explain their perception of the problem and the areas in which they want to receive help. Verbal comments or direct questions may not be needed, but just be open to client's questions and responses about your role and the role of the agency.

### **Steps**

- (1) When asked, answer the client's questions and address her/his expressed concerns.
- (2) Verbally reflect what you see the client displaying and encourage the client to disclose his/her perceptions. ("You look anxious whenever we discuss investigating the allegation, and I'm wondering what you're thinking about this process?")
- (3) Reinforce this level of communication by the client through acknowledgement. ("I know that wasn't easy and appreciate your telling me; Thanks for sharing your thoughts/feelings about that.")

Questioning: The skill of making requests for more information related to the problem or situation so that you have a fuller picture of the concern that's been expressed. There are 5 types of questions used for interviewing.

- (1) **Closed-ended questions** are useful for eliciting specific, yes or no, information. ("Was the child hurt while playing?")
- (2) **Open-ended questions** are used for the purpose of stimulating conversation. ("Can you describe what you saw when the child got hurt?")
- (3) **Probing questions** are used when an issue needs clarification at progressively deeper levels. ("Tell me, what did you do immediately after Jessica was hurt?")

(4) **Directive questions** are used to tell the other person what information is needed, without being authoritarian or bureaucratic. (“We can best help Isaiah if we know some specific information. I will ask you some questions, and I’d like for you to answer them as best you can.”)

(5) **Redirection questions** are used to interrupt if the information being given is unproductive or not relevant. (“What I need to hear more about is the specific way that the child was hurt.”)

Communicating Information: Imparting important information or clarifying issues about the casework process, including mutual expectations, goals and services, legal issues, timelines, court processes, and next steps.

## Steps

- (1) Provide information (facts, outcomes, deadlines, reports, diagnoses, values, beliefs, etc.) that the client needs in order to manage the task at hand. (“The first visit is scheduled for Saturday the 15<sup>th</sup>, and we’ll need to arrive at the jail by 9:00 am. So we need to leave here by 8:15.”)
- (2) When possible, information is provided in a manner that leaves it open to challenge by the client. (“Dan does have the right to see his children and it’s important that the kids stay connected with him, wouldn’t you agree?”)
- (3) Give the client an opportunity to ask questions and express feelings about the provided information. (“Please be sure to check in with Justin and Sara periodically to see how they’re feeling about visiting their dad and any questions they have. Are you comfortable doing that?”)

Summarizing & Identifying Next Steps: Reviewing important information or clarifying issues about the casework process (including mutual expectations; goals and services; legal issues; timelines; court processes) and next steps, while giving others the opportunity to ask questions and express feelings.

## **Steps**

- (1) Be specific, clear, and to-the-point when reviewing the main themes of the meeting. (“We spoke about what can happen if you get help for this problem, and what will happen if you don’t, right Ms. Pruitt?”)
- (2) Ask the client if s/he has any questions or strong feelings about these themes. (“Do you have any other thoughts, feelings or questions about our meeting today?”)
- (3) Articulate the next steps and timelines to be taken by both the worker and client. (“So your next steps are to first, contact the detox center by tomorrow and find out what they may be able to do to assist you. Second, call your AA sponsor and let her know what’s happened recently. And third, you know it’s always important to be sure that all of the kids are in school on time in the morning.”)
- (4) End the encounter by asking the client if they understand and agree with the next steps. (“That wraps up our meeting for today. So, you know what is expected of you and will do these things as we agreed, right?”)