

Understanding Engagement of Families Affected by Substance Use Disorders – Child Welfare Practice Tips



National Center on
Substance Abuse
and Child Welfare



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Engage in conversation. Parents may feel overwhelming shame and guilt about how their substance use affects their children. Engage the parent about observations or concerns using an approach that is supportive and not stigmatizing or judgmental. Use “person first” language and avoid using labeling terms such as “addict.” Use a conversational approach with open-ended questions such as the following:

- ▶ “Tell me more about ...”
- ▶ “As part of our work with families, we ask all families about ...”
- ▶ “I’m noticing that ...”
- ▶ “How can I help you with ...”
- ▶ “I’m concerned about you because ...”

Provide active support in early recovery. Substance use disorders (SUDs) may affect cognitive functions (e.g., memory) and result in behavior that is often perceived as “resistant.” Examples include lack of follow-through with services and missed appointments. Provide active support to help engage parents to attend SUD treatment, court, visitation, and parent strengthening programs. Help the parent make and keep appointments by marking their calendar/schedule and providing reminders and incentives. Identify barriers for making an appointment, such as competing service priorities or lack of transportation, and work together to formulate solutions.

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Link to peer or recovery support. Recovery support services help people enter into and navigate systems of care, remove barriers to recovery, and stay engaged in the recovery process. Peer or recovery support roles are often held by persons in recovery from SUDs and with child welfare involvement, or by professionally trained recovery specialists. Refer to these types of programs to address barriers in engaging parents and to facilitate receipt of treatment services.

Support the children. Help children develop an understanding of SUDs that is supportive and nonjudgmental. Convey information about their parents’ substance misuse in a way that defines the disorder, not the person, and is appropriate to the children’s developmental stage and age. Child welfare workers can use these talking points to help guide supportive discussions:

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- ▶ “Substance use disorders are a disease. Your parent is not a bad person. He/she has a disease. Parents may do things you don’t understand when they drink too much or use drugs, but this doesn’t mean that they don’t love you.”
- ▶ “You are not the reason your parent drinks or uses drugs. You did not cause this disease. You cannot stop your parent’s drinking or drug use.”
- ▶ “There are a lot of children in a similar situation. In fact, there are millions of children whose parents struggle with drugs or alcohol. Some are in your school. You are not alone.”
- ▶ “Let’s think of people who you might talk with about your concerns. You don’t have to feel scared or ashamed or embarrassed. You can talk to your teacher, a close friend, or a trusted family member.”

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Provide warm hand-offs and maintain ongoing communication. A warm hand-off is a strategy to actively engage and link parents to treatment and other needed services. A warm hand-off reduces miscommunication and ensures that parents understand the process and have adequate information and support to engage in services. Warm hand-offs also involve following up with the parent and provider to ensure that the referral was successful. Follow-up communication with SUD providers during the child welfare case can also support parent engagement in the assessment, treatment, and recovery continuum of services.

TO LEARN MORE

The **National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare** has many technical assistance resources including publications, webinars, and tools that child welfare workers, court professionals, and communities can use to better serve families affected by SUDs. These are available at: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov>

Understanding Substance Abuse and Facilitating Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Workers helps child welfare workers understand SUDs and how to support and facilitate treatment and recovery. To access this guide, please visit: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/files/Understanding-Substance-Abuse.pdf>

Understanding Substance Use Disorders, Treatment, and Family Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals is a self-paced and free tutorial that provides specific information about SUDs, engagement strategies, and the treatment and recovery process for families affected by SUDs. Continuing Education Units are available upon completion. To take the tutorial, go to: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/tutorials/tutorialDesc.aspx?id=27>

The **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** and the **National Institute on Drug Abuse** websites offer comprehensive information about treatment for SUDs. To learn more, visit:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/substance-use-disorders>

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/treatment-approaches-drug-addiction>



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