NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Division of Social Services

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals

Participant Workbook
Module Four: Family Centered Practice

June 2026

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE®

222 E. 18th Street, Unit C
Cheyenne, WY 82001
www.pubknow.com

info@pubknow.com
(800) 776-4229

This curriculum was developed by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services, and revised by Public Knowledge® in 2026.

Table of Contents

Instructions

This course was designed to guide child welfare professionals through the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to engage with families in need of child protection services. The workbook is structured to help you engage in the lesson through reflection and analysis throughout each module of training. Have this workbook readily available as you go through each module to create a long-lasting resource you can reference in the future.

If you are using this workbook electronically: workbook pages have text boxes for you to add notes and reflections. Due to formatting, if you are typing in these boxes, blank lines will be “pushed” forward onto the next page. To correct this when you are done typing in the text box, you may use the delete key to remove extra lines.

Training Overview

STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals is designed to strengthen and refine the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of child welfare professionals through structured, practice-focused learning.

Training sessions are intentionally designed to support active engagement, reflection, and application. Each module includes a combination of lecture, guided discussion, individual practical application, and collaborative debrief. This structure allows participants to connect new learning to their existing experience and apply concepts directly to their daily practice.

Attendance and participation are essential to the learning experience. If an emergency prevents attendance, participants are responsible for notifying the trainer and their supervisor as soon as possible and developing a plan to address missed content.

Learning Expectations

STEP Up builds on prior experience in child welfare practice. Participants are expected to:

- Engage actively in discussions and activities
- Reflect on their current practice and identify areas for growth
- Apply learning to real-world scenarios
- Collaborate with peers to strengthen practice and shared understanding

Transfer of Learning

A core component of STEP Up is the application of learning to practice. Throughout the training, participants will engage in structured reflection and practical application activities designed to support transfer of learning.

Participants will:

- Reflect on how new concepts align with their current work
- Identify specific actions to strengthen their practice
- Apply learning between sessions, when applicable

- Engage in peer discussion and collaborative problem-solving
- Supervisors and ongoing professional supports play a critical role in reinforcing learning and supporting continued development in the workplace.

All matters as stated above are subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances, and with approval.

STEP Up Module Four Learning Objectives

Module 4
Family-Centered Practice
Upon completion of this course, learners will be able to: • Identify and define the core values and characteristics of family-centered practice as outlined in North Carolina child welfare policy. • Analyze how family-centered values show up in real-life casework decisions and family interactions. • Describe key engagement strategies that foster trust and collaboration with families. • Discuss communication and relational skills that empower families as decision-makers in assessment, planning, and service coordination. • Identify common barriers to engagement and discuss strategies to overcome them while maintaining safety and accountability. • Identify signs of resistance in child welfare interactions and interpret them through a trauma-informed, strength-based lens. • Demonstrate strategies to reduce opposition and increase cooperation, including motivational interviewing, reflective listening, and transparent communication. • Practice techniques for maintaining engagement and partnership when conflict or mistrust arises.

Module Four Agenda

Welcome

Section 1: Family-Centered Practice through Lived Experience and System Level Insight

Section 2: Building Trust with Families Facing Complex Challenges

Section 3: Section 3: Reflective Strategies to Navigate Resistance

Section 4: Individual Practice and Application

Section 5: Section 5: Debrief and Collaborative Practice

STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals Module Four: Family-Centered Practice

STEP Up Course Series Outline and Structure

Section 1: Family-Centered Practice through Lived Experience and System Level Insight

Our Child Welfare Core Values

Notes

Key Elements of Family-Centered Practice

Engaging with the entire family unit to ensure safety and well-being, including children and youth.

Strengthening family capacity by focusing on solutions and providing direct assistance with challenges identified by the family.

Partnering with families in decision-making and goal-setting.

Building relationships with families based on mutual trust, respect, honesty, and open communication.

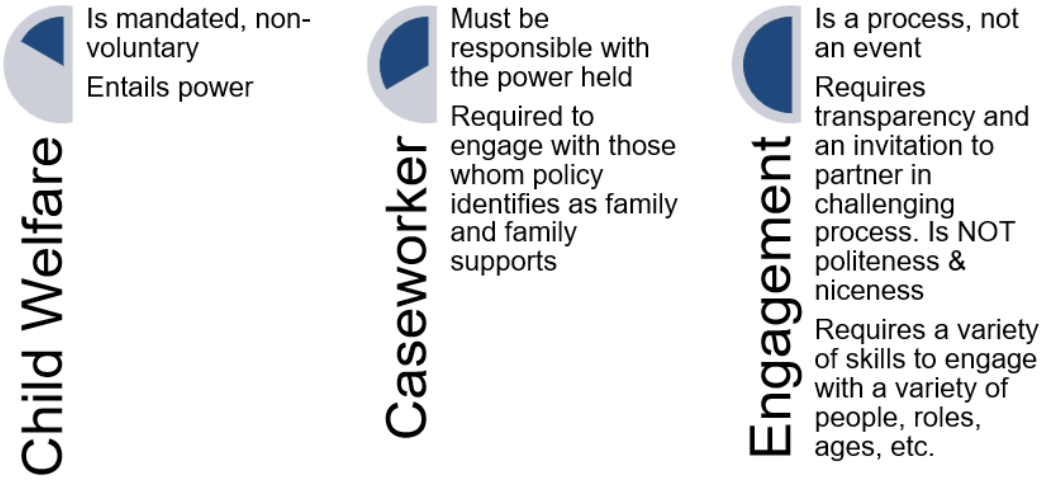
Offering individualized, flexible, and relevant services.

Connecting families to collaborative, community-based supports.

Conducting ongoing assessments of family strengths, needs, and progress—with the family actively involved.

Notes

Engaging Family in the Child Welfare Process



Family-centered engagement is a dynamic process, not an event. Engaging families in a process for which they don't have a direct choice in participating requires knowledge and skill.

Notes

Family Centered Versus Family Friendly Practice

Family Centered

- Priority: Ensuring family remains together whenever possible and invites family into challenging work of safety, permanency, and well-being

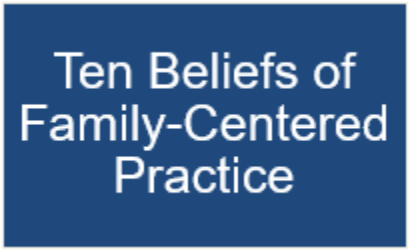
Family Friendly

- Priority: Maintaining family preferences and comfort

Family-centered practice is about collaboration and shared responsibility for outcomes. In contrast, family-friendly practice emphasizes convenience and accommodation without necessarily addressing the core issues that impact a family's stability and future.

Notes

Ten Beliefs and Six Principles of Family-Centered Practice



Handout: Ten Beliefs and Six Principles of Family-Centered Practice

Ten beliefs of Family-Centered Practice:

- Safety of the children is the first concern
- Children have a right to their family
- The family is the fundamental resource for nurturing children
- Parents should be supported in their efforts to care for their children
- Children can flourish in different types of families.
- A crisis is an opportunity for change
- Inappropriate interventions can do harm
- Families who seem hopeless can grow and change
- Family members are our colleagues
- It is our job to instill hope

The six principles of partnership are:

- Everyone desires respect
- Everyone needs to be heard
- Everyone has strengths
- Judgments can wait
- Partners share power
- Partnership is a process

Notes

Using Family-Centered Practice to Engage Families

- Throughout the life of a case
- Interviews and information gathering
- Development of plans and planning
- Quality caseworker contacts
- Child and family team (CFT) meetings
- Facilitating the parent-child relationship

Family-centered practice occurs throughout the life of the case. Each encounter with the family is an opportunity to practice family-centeredness.

Notes

Impact of Family-Centered Practice on Outcomes: Tying it All Together

Family preservation. Involving family members early in the casework process may eliminate the need for a child to be placed outside of the home or return home sooner.

Improved interpersonal relationships. A family's belief that all its members are respected strengthens your relationship with the family. This creates confidence in the process, which increases the chances for a successful intervention.

Increased family buy-in. Families are more likely to commit to achieving goals when they are involved in making decisions about a plan that affects them and their children.

Creating a sense of belonging and family connectedness. Including kin and extended family members in safety and case planning expands placement and permanency options for children when in-home care is not feasible and can nurture a child’s sense of belonging during what is often a tumultuous and unsettling time.

Improved quality of caseworker visits. The engagement of families through empathy, genuineness, and respect leads to quality, purposeful interactions between families and caseworkers. In turn, quality contacts provide caseworkers with opportunities to make an improved assessment of the child's safety, risk, and needs, enabling them to support the family better.

Youth empowerment. Including youth in safety and case planning processes supports adolescent brain development, fosters the development of leadership skills, enhances self-esteem, and promotes the formation of critical social connections.

Notes

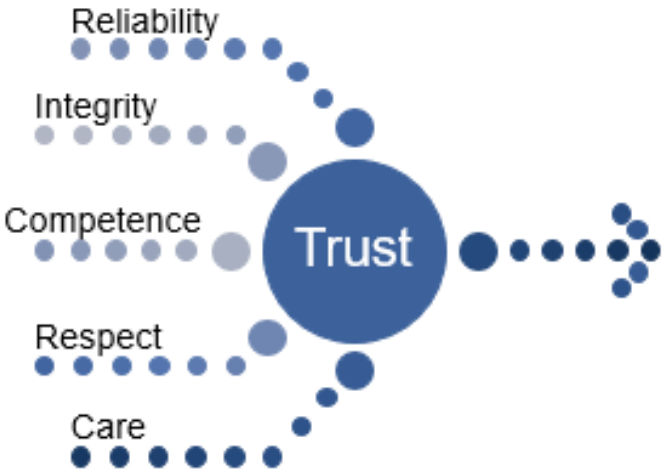
Section 2: Building Trust with Families Facing Complex Challenges

Trust

Trust is a critical foundation for effective child welfare work, enabling support, protection, and empowerment of children and families. Building trust in child welfare requires intentional effort within the context of trauma, historical harm, and power imbalances.

Notes

Five Components of Trust



Reliability means doing what you say you will do. Keeping promises, following through, and being consistent are reliable casework behaviors.

Integrity means being honest and transparent and acting ethically, even when it is hard.

Competence means demonstrating your skill and knowledge in ways that resonate with families.

Respect means valuing families' voices, choices, and identities.

Care is the emotional component of trust. This means supporting families to feel genuinely cared for and that their well-being matters.

Notes

Trauma, Systems, and Trust

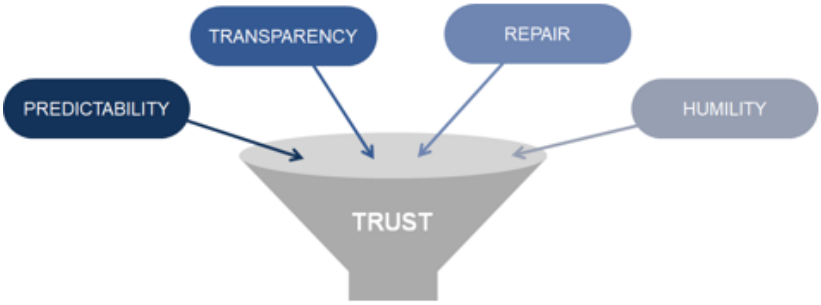
From a trauma perspective, trust is not just an emotional issue; it's a biological one. When people experience trauma, especially ongoing or complex trauma, the brain's alarm system, the amygdala, stays on high alert. The body learns to expect danger, even in neutral situations.

For parents who experienced violence, poverty, or child removal, safety isn't something they can assume; it is something they must constantly evaluate.

"So, when a worker knocks on the door, even with compassion and good intentions, that family's nervous system may already be saying: Be careful. Don't trust too easily. This isn't defiance, it's protection."(van der Kok, 2014; Perry, 2006; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

Notes

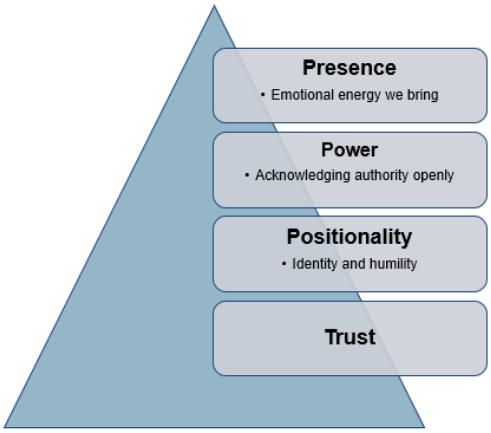
Strategies to Build Trust



Building trust isn't a single conversation; it's a pattern of behavior. Predictability, transparency, repair, and humility are the daily signals that indicate to families, "you are safe here."

Notes

Presence, Power, and Positionality



Presence is more than physical; it's the emotional energy we carry. Families can sense when you are rushed, anxious, or judgmental, just as they can sense when you are

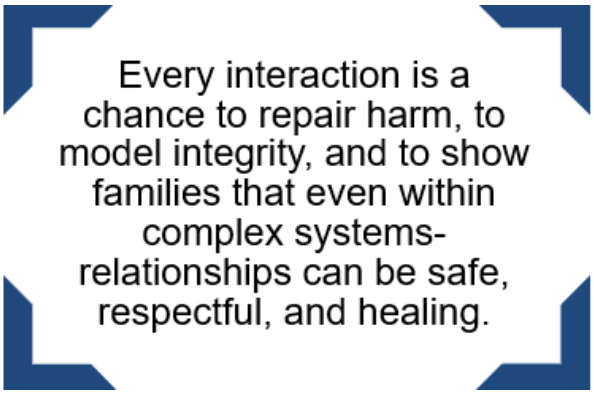
grounded and fully present. Before entering a conversation, take a pause. Breathe and ask yourself, “Am I showing up with curiosity or control?”

Power is built into child welfare roles, and ignoring can increase fear.

Our identities shape every interaction, and humility asks us to notice how identity shapes trust without defensiveness.

Notes

Sustaining Trust Over Time



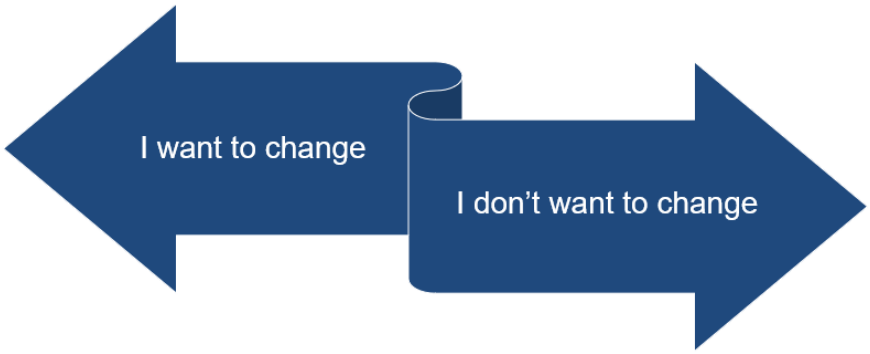
Three anchors keep trust-building sustainable over time: Reflection, Repair, and Relationship.

- Reflection means pausing to ask, “What might this parent’s behavior be protecting?”
- Repair rebuilds trust through acknowledgment and accountability
- Relationship, the steady human connection, creates space for healing and growth

Notes

Section 3: Reflective Strategies to Navigate Resistance

Ambivalence



Having feelings of *wanting to change* and *not wanting to change* at the same time.

What are some examples of ambivalence you have seen?

Why do you think we struggle to change?

Notes

Handout: Recognizing Ambivalent Behaviors

Ambivalence is predictable and natural; it's an emotional reaction to feeling forced to change or when facing complex issues. Ambivalence occurs as a response to feeling vulnerable, out of control, and threatened. When people feel ambivalent, it is as if two parts of the same mind are at odds, with one side wanting to change and the other part not allowing it. Or when you feel that someone wants you to change, you find yourself doing the opposite without knowing exactly why, even if you didn't really care to begin with. When there is no pressure, there is less ambivalence. Ambivalence is highest when you realize there is a problem.

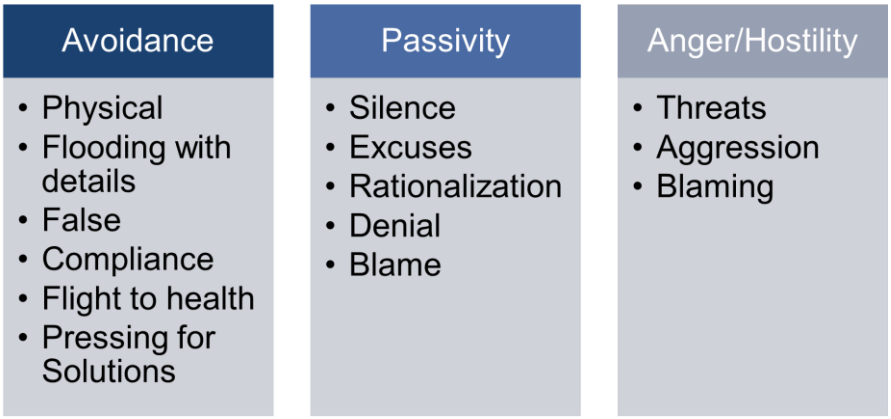
Examples of Ambivalence

- Setting a date to quit smoking, then continuing to smoke
- Deciding to eat healthy, then eating junk foods
- Deciding to quick drinking alcohol, then buying more beer
- Buying a gym membership, then never going to the gym
- Deciding to get more sleep, then staying up late scrolling social media

Many people spend a great deal of time, often years, struggling to change, even after they recognize the need for change. Ambivalence is what keeps a person stuck. People who are struggling with substance abuse or other problematic or harmful behaviors understand the risks and the pain associated with the problem.

Ambivalence is predictable and natural; it's an emotional reaction to feeling forced to change or when facing complex issues. Ambivalence occurs as a response to feeling vulnerable, out of control, and threatened. When people feel ambivalent, it is as if two parts of the same mind are at odds, with one side wanting to change and the other part not allowing it. Or when you feel that someone wants you to change, you find yourself doing the opposite without knowing exactly why, even if you didn't really care to begin with. When there is no pressure, there is less ambivalence. Ambivalence is highest when you realize there is a problem.

Recognizing Ambivalence



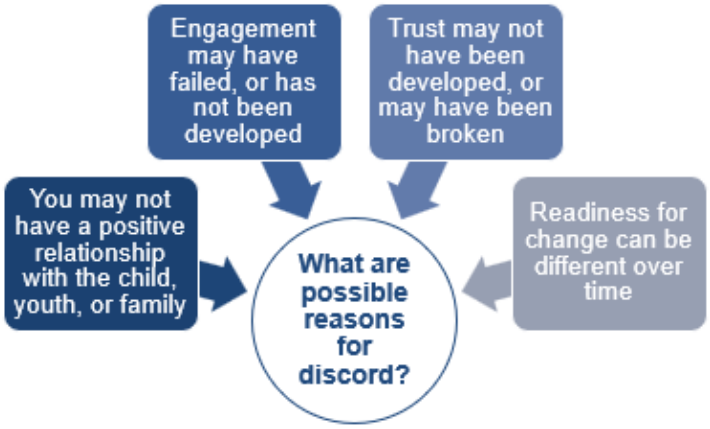
Ambivalence occurs when someone simultaneously experiences contradictory emotions, attitudes, or desires toward the same person, object, or situation. Individuals may feel frustrated or threatened by this unresolved tension, which can manifest as hostile or aggressive responses toward others, particularly when another person is perceived as a source of conflict or an obstacle to resolving that tension.

Ambivalence can lead to avoidance of emotionally charged interactions, as individuals try to sidestep confronting complex feelings. When ambivalence is coupled with stressors, unresolved internal conflict may lower thresholds for aggression. The internal turmoil creates a sense of unpredictability, prompting defensive or aggressive behavior as an attempt to regain psychological control or assert clarity. People's brains go "offline."

It's important to remember that your presence as a Child Welfare caseworker is often perceived as stressful. Fear of the unknown or uncertainty amplifies ambivalent tension. Competing needs or desires, including prior experiences of hurt, betrayal, or conflicting goals, can intensify aggression or withdrawal. When parents have high ACEs scores, the likelihood of earlier experiences of hurt increases.

Notes

Discord



A conflict is more than just a disagreement: It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether the threat is real or not).

Discord continues to fester when ignored: Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being and survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.

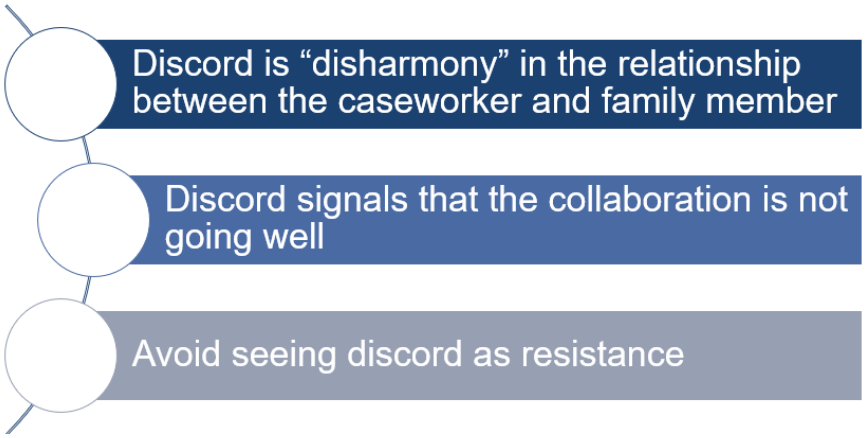
We respond to discord and conflicts based on our perceptions of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, beliefs, and values.

Conflicts trigger strong emotions: If you aren't comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, you won't be able to resolve conflict successfully.

Discord is an opportunity for growth: When you're able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your relationship can survive challenges and disagreements.

What are possible reasons for discord?

Discord: How do I feel about this relationship?



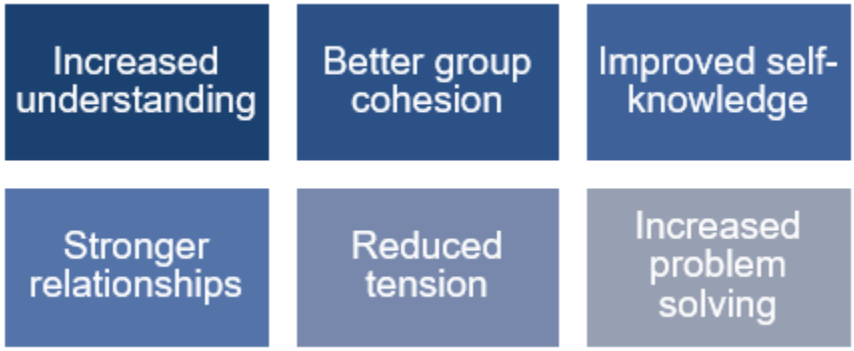
When discord is present, it signals the need to prioritize rebuilding collaboration.

How might the family act if discord is present?

What do you think would signal that discord exists in your relationship with the family?

How might a child welfare caseworker have contributed to the discord?

Benefits of Managing and Resolving Discord



Increased understanding: The discussion needed to resolve conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them insight into how they can achieve their own goals without undermining those of other people.

Increased group cohesion: When conflict is resolved effectively, family members and caseworkers can develop stronger mutual respect and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.

Improved self-knowledge: Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

Stronger Relationships: Poorly managed conflict often causes friction and can damage relationships. By learning how to resolve conflicts in a professional, respectful manner, relationships can be strengthened.

Reduced Tension: Conflict can cause tension if you don't know how to handle the situation. A disagreement that stays unresolved causes tension to build and often spreads to other people who weren't originally involved. This can result in people choosing sides and pitting themselves against one another.

Problem Solving: When caseworkers demonstrate skills that manage and resolve conflict, family members learn that problems can be solved in healthy ways and are more likely to engage in problem-solving rather than blaming or denying the situation

Notes

Responding to Discord

How you respond to the discord is essential. Work to identify your own emotions. Be aware of your nonverbal messages and your tone of voice. Remind yourself that ambivalence is a normal part of the change process.

There is no one way to identify and resolve discord. For some, when they have a feeling of discord, they may shut down, withdraw, give up, or become confrontational. Engagement skills are the key to repairing discord.

Apologize: Acknowledge when your words or actions may have caused offense or discomfort. A sincere apology can repair trust and demonstrate professionalism and empathy.

Affirm: Use affirmations to validate the family member's perspective and show respect. This helps create space for healing and connection.

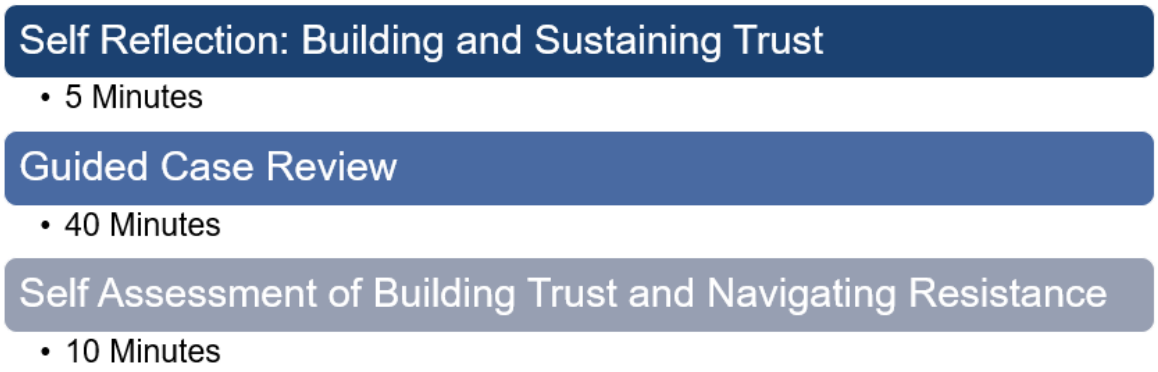
Shift Focus: If a topic is too emotionally charged, redirect the conversation to a less contentious subject while still maintaining the goal of support.

Be self-aware: Monitor your own emotions, tone, and body language. These nonverbal cues can either escalate or ease discord.

Notes

Section 4: Individual Practice and Application

Self-Reflection: Building and Sustaining Trust



Activity: Self-Reflection: Building and Sustaining Trust

Consider the following about your practice:

Presence: What efforts do you put toward managing your presence with families? Consider whether a family would sense when you are rushed, anxious, or judgmental, or when you are grounded and fully present.

Power: What efforts do you put toward acknowledging authority openly with children, families, and community partners in your day-to-day work? Consider when this feels easier or more challenging.

Positionality: How do you acknowledge your identity and the impact of your worldview on your casework practice? Consider your day-to-day practices and the supports you are able to access.

Sustaining Trust over Time: Consider the ways that you reflect, repair, and maintain relationships with children, families, and community partners.

Activity: Guided Case Review

Choose a case that is complex or needs further development for this activity.

Consider each of the prompts below to guide your case review. Be behaviorally specific in your responses, citing examples when you are able.

Section One: Building Trust

Reliability

In what ways did you keep your promises, follow through, and demonstrate consistency with this family?

Consider the impact of this on your relationship with the family:

Caseworker action or inaction	Impact

Identify times in your work with this family when you didn't keep promises, follow through, or were inconsistent with your practice.

Consider the impact of this on your relationship with the family:

Caseworker action or inaction	Impact

Integrity

Consider specific moments when you engaged in hard conversations with this family.

How does this support their engagement in the child welfare process?

Competence

Identify one moment in the life of this case that you feel proud of your casework practice.

How did your skills resonate with the family in this moment?

Identify one area of growth that impacted how you worked with this family on this case. What ideas do you have to grow in this area?

Respect

Identify three moments in the life of this case in which you demonstrated value for the family's voices, choices, and identities.

How did this impact the child welfare process?

Caseworker action or inaction	Impact

Care

List three ways that you intentionally expressed care in a way that the family felt genuinely cared for and regarded.

Caseworker action or inaction	Impact

Section Two: Ambivalence and Discord

In what ways have you seen members of this family and their safety and support network demonstrate ambivalence in this case?

In what ways did you address the ambivalence?

How has your response contributed to the movement toward change?

Identify instances of discord between yourself and the family or their safety and support network, in this case.

How has this impacted the child welfare process?

What important or difficult conversation have I avoided, and how might addressing it move the case forward?

How have you engaged in family-centered practice when family friendliness would have been easier?

Activity: Self-Assessment of Building Trust and Navigating Resistance

Continuing with your case review. Review your case to identify both strengths and opportunities in how you are building trust and navigating resistance or discord. Then, reflect on which specific strategies you want to strengthen or develop further to improve your practice.

How am I demonstrating trustworthiness, reliability, integrity, competence, respect, and care, and where might trust be at risk?

What are the key strengths in this family system, and how should these guide next steps?

Section 5: Debrief and Collaborative Practice

Scaling Check In

Where do you find yourself on navigating resistance or disorder?

Not confident at all					Extremely confident

Where do you find yourself on building trust?

Not confident at all					Extremely confident

Debrief

Notes

Aligning Next Steps for Family-Centered Practice

- Work in pairs. Each of you will take turns sharing your reflections.
- Using the results of your Guided Case Review, identify two specific areas where you see opportunities for growth in your practice.
- For each area of growth, develop a clear, measurable goal that describes what you will do to improve.
- Identify supports available to you, or gaps where support is not readily available, to support this goal.
- Share the results of your Guided Case Review and your goals related to this review.

Area One of Opportunity and Growth

Goal for growth	
Supports available to you	
Gaps in support	

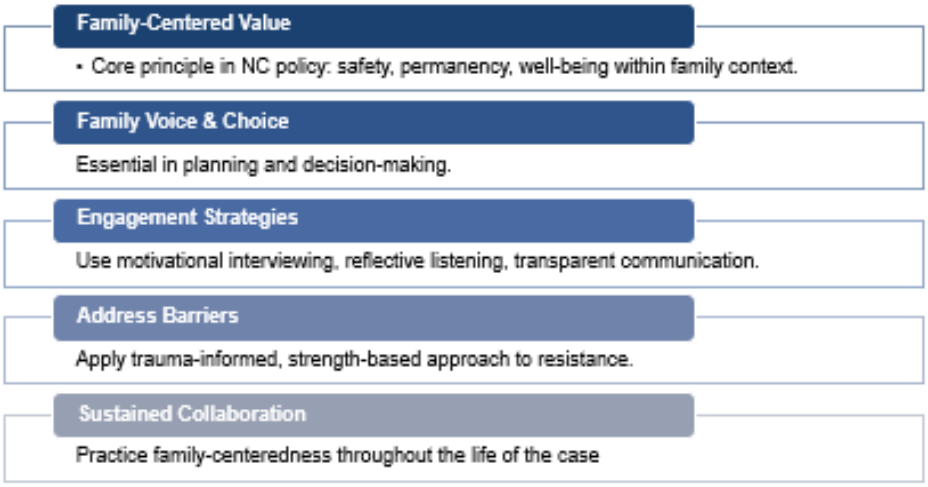
Area Two of Opportunity and Growth

Goal for growth	
Supports available to you	
Gaps in support	

Debrief

Notes

Key Takeaways



Notes

Bibliography of References

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services [NCDHHS DSS]. (2021). *Worker Practice Standards Desk Guide.* https://www.ncdhhs.gov/cw-worker-north-carolina-worker-practice-standards-desk-guide/open

The University of Iowa National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice. (n.d.). *What is family-centered practice?* https://nrcfcp.uiowa.edu/what-is-family-centered-practice

Evident Change & California Department of Social Services. (2023). *Participant guide: Advanced SDM® training: Rigorous and family-centered safety planning*. https://docs.evidentchange.org/Pages/California/Content/Advanced%20SDM%20Training/Safety%20Planning%20Participant%20Guide.pdf.

National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice. (2025). *What is family-centered practice?* Nrcfcp.uiowa.edu. https://nrcfcp.uiowa.edu/what-is-family-centered-practice.

Public Knowledge. (2025). *Meeting notes*. March 18, 2025, Safety planning focus group, Safety design team.

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. (2025). Parent engagement (including non-resident parents) and needs assessment. *NC child welfare manual: Cross-function topics.* https://policies.ncdhhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/Cross-Functions-October-2025.pdf

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. (2025). Required forms: Planning forms. *NC child welfare manual: Permanency planning services policy, protocol, and guidance.* https://policies.ncdhhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/Permanency-Planning-Manual-September-2025.pdf

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services [NCDHHS DSS], Child Welfare Services. (2025). Parent Engagement (including Non-Resident Parents) and Needs Assessment. *NC child welfare manual: Cross-function topics.* https://policies.ncdhhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/Cross-Functions-June-2025.pdf

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Family engagement: Partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://cwlibrary.childwelfare.gov/discovery/fulldisplay/alma9910001760597076 51/01CWIG_INST:01CWIG

Terrefe, T.A. (2024). From fear and distrust to trust and collaboration: Exploring transitions in the quality of relationships in the encounters between immigrant parents and child welfare services. *Int. Journal on Child Malt. 7*, 477-499. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42448-024-00201-3.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2017). *NCTSN Core Curriculum on Childhood Trauma – The 12 Core Concepts: Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Children and Families*.

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//the_12_core_concepts_for_understanding_traumatic_stress_responses_in_children_and_families.pdf

Munro, E. (2008). *Effective child protection, 2nd Ed.* SAGE Publications.

Turnelle, A. & Edwards, S. (1999). *Signs of safety: A solution and safety-oriented approach to child protection*. Norton.

Bath, H. (2008). The Three Pillars of Trauma-Informed Care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth 17*(3), 17-21.

Geller, S. M., & Porges, S. W. (2014). Therapeutic presence: Neurophysiological mechanisms mediating feeling safe in therapeutic relationships. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 24*(3), 178–192. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037511

Siegel, D. (2020). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are, 3rd Ed*. Guilford Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Ortega, R. M., & Faller, K. C. (2011). Training child welfare workers from an intersectional cultural humility perspective: a paradigm shift. *Child welfare*, *90*(5), 27–49.

Miller, W.R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change, 3rd Ed.* Guilford Press.

Segal, J., Robinson, L., & Smith, M. (2025). *Conflict resolution skills.* HelpGuide.org, Communication. https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/conflict-resolution-skills.htm