

Negative public images hamper child welfare investigators

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Even parents who have had no contact with child welfare agencies believe negative stereotypes about social workers and the likely outcomes of abuse or neglect investigations, misconceptions that complicate agencies' efforts to engage parents in interventions.

However, a new study suggests that training workers in communication and relationship-building skills, and ensuring that their caseloads are reasonable so they can spend adequate time with clients, could be as vital for Child Protective Services agencies as training workers about their statutory responsibilities.

According to the study, [parents' first impressions](#) of CPS workers – especially whether workers seem trustworthy, communicate effectively and are able to manage intense emotional reactions from parents – can significantly influence parental engagement.

In the study, 40 parents who received [home visits](#) from Illinois [child welfare](#) investigators about allegations of neglect shared their perceptions about those initial contacts. Specifically, parents were interviewed about the skills, behaviors and qualities that CPS workers exhibited that enhanced – or inhibited – parents' willingness to engage in the assessment and service planning processes.

"We wanted to get parents' perspectives because a lot of research that gets done on child welfare services doesn't ask the parents what they think," said Tamara Fuller, a co-author of the study and the director of

the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois.

Stereotypes about CPS workers, such as the misconception that their primary function is to remove children from their homes, often trigger strong emotional reactions in parents when caseworkers arrive.

Helping parents transcend these initial negative reactions "can set the stage for more collaborative working relationships with parents during the later stages of CPS services," according to the study, which was published recently in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*.

"Typically parents who receive an investigation are in some type of crisis in their family," said lead author Jill C. Schreiber, a research specialist with the U. of I. center. "There's something going on there that's concerning enough to warrant a call to CPS. The CPS worker's visit adds another layer of crisis for the family. The social worker has to get beyond those emotions and stress to make sure that the family is safe currently and not at risk for harm in the future."

Of paramount importance to the parents interviewed was whether caseworkers seemed trustworthy – if they followed through on promised tasks, promptly returned phone calls and exhibited knowledge and expertise of their job requirements.

"One of the things that parents talked a lot about was worker competence," Schreiber said. "Parents didn't understand the in-home assessments, so if they had a worker who was organized, efficient and competent, that was very reassuring for them."

The perception of worker competence was a unique finding, and may have been related to participants' unfamiliarity with the intervention process, the researchers said.

Since none of the families had been involved with child welfare previously, they may have placed greater value on their workers' expertise and abilities to guide them.

Because some CPS-involved parents were dealing with challenges that diminished their capacity to understand complex questions, such as low education levels, mental health issues or disabilities, study participants valued caseworkers who could reformulate questions in ways the parents could understand and respond to appropriately.

Likewise, parents appreciated it when workers clarified the types of child behavior or situations that were normal or expected, such as defiance from 2-year-olds and conflicts with teenagers.

Workers who clearly communicated what would happen and who asked sensitive questions in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental manner received high marks from parents, as did workers who actively listened to clients' concerns, provided contact information, were accessible by phone or made follow-up visits.

When workers demonstrated caring by providing emotional and concrete support through positive reinforcement and referrals to community resources, parents were more likely to perceive workers as trying to help rather than penalize them.

Parents also took pride in repeating strengths that workers had commented on.

Positive reinforcement may be especially important to parents struggling with shame or fear that a CPS visit stigmatizes them as "bad parents," the authors said.

However, workers who failed to refer parents to available services

reinforced parents' preconceptions of CPS workers as uncaring and uninterested in preserving families.

While all of the parents in the current study had experienced allegations of neglect, none of them had children removed from their home. The parents in the study were part of a larger ongoing evaluation in which Fuller is examining the effectiveness of the differential response approach to [child protective services](#). The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services is one of three agencies that has been testing the protocol, which gives CPS agencies greater discretion and latitude in handling low-risk cases.

Understanding the study population is critical for CPS because more than 70 percent of child welfare cases involve neglect rather than abuse and relatively few cases necessitate children being taken into substitute care, Fuller said.

"Only about 25 percent of cases are substantiated in Illinois, so the majority of workers don't find credible evidence that there was abuse or neglect," Fuller said. "And even if a case is substantiated, very few kids are removed from homes. The vast majority of children – more than 90 percent – remain in their homes following a child welfare investigation."

The authors suggested that CPS agencies could counter [negative stereotypes](#) and inaccurate media representations through awareness campaigns and public service announcements that describe how their services benefit families.

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