Barriers and Strategies to Engaging Clients

Youth on Track Guidelines

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Engagement refers to a client's initial interest and consent to participate in a program, the relationship between the worker and the client, and retaining the client's interest or motivation to continue in the program.

A review of a range of family, child protection and juvenile justice programs demonstrates that engagement and retention can vary significantly across all programs, from a 10% to a 70% disengagement rate.[1] These programs all experience a range of barriers to engagement and have implemented many varying strategies to encourage engagement. The barriers and strategies outlined below are those that have had the most success when working with vulnerable and disadvantaged families, young people who offend and clients involved with the child protection system

1 Barriers to Engagement

It can be common for a family or young person to be labelled as 'difficult to engage' or 'hard to reach'. However, services can also be difficult to engage with, or hard to reach due to a range of factors. Families may experience challenges in trying to access these services. Service providers can do themselves a disservice if they do not examine the barriers their service may be presenting to the people they wish to engage with.[2]

The term 'hard to reach' has referred to the following three groups of people in an early intervention or prevention setting:[3]

- the underrepresented: this refers to those who are marginalised or excluded in society and therefore are generally not represented in programs

- the invisible or overlooked: those who tend to 'slip through the net' as their needs are generally not catered for or are overlooked

- the service resistant: this refers to individual characteristics or experiences that may make people wary of engaging with services.

Identification of these groups provides services with the opportunity to examine and address the barriers their service might present and increase their skills for working with a range of people. Services should consider who in their community is particularly marginalised, or who is 'slipping through the net' and how they can increase trust in their community. The onus should remain with the service to increase their capacity to engage with clients, rather than being placed solely on the client to engage with the service.

1.1 Service delivery factors that inhibit engagement

A review conducted by the former Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs explored engagement with hard to reach client groups and identified the following factors that inhibit engagement[4]:

- Location – this can relate to both the location of the service and the client when either a client is geographically isolated or is unable to access transport, or if the service location is difficult to get to.

- Provision of service that is or is perceived as irrelevant, inappropriate or stigmatising.

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[1] Watson, J., *Active Engagement: Strategies to increase service participation by vulnerable families.* Ashfield: Centre for Parenting and Research, NSW Department of Community Services, 2005.

[2] McDonald, M., "Are disadvantaged families "hard to reach"? Engaging disadvantaged families in child and family services," *CAFCA Practice Sheet.* Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Services, 2010.; and Cortis, N., Katz, I., and Patulny, R., "Engaging hard-to-reach families and children," *Occasional Paper No 26.* Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009.

[3] Cortis, N., Katz, I., and Patulny, R., op. cit.

[4] Cortis, N., Katz, I., and Patulny, R., op. cit., and Watson, J., op. cit.

- A lack of quality and/or specialist staff – this is more likely to impact on services that have short-term funding only or are outside of the metropolitan region.

- Staffing instability – regular staff turnover in short term programs can affect the relationship building with clients and the broader community

- Lack of adequate funding – this can result in overworked staff and restricted access to the service.

- Restricted opening hours – work requirements can mean that some people are unable to attend the service when it is open.

- Slow referrals, not following up promptly with clients or long periods between contact

Regional and rural areas experience further factors that inhibit engagement. People may be unwilling to seek help in a small community with little privacy and services delivered by 'outsiders' may create community resentment and reduce trust.[5]

1.2　Factors inhibiting engagement for young people and families

The following factors impact a person's capacity to engage with a service[6]. While these factors refer to individual characteristics or experiences, a service can employ strategies to assist with overcoming these barriers.

- Intimidation, fear or distrust about accessing a service, particularly if prior experiences with similar services have been negative.

- A history of refusing to seek help, or having strong opinions about seeking help.

- Communication difficulties, including being unable to understand what the service is offering.

- Chaotic daily life or complex lives that limit a person's capacity to consider the benefits of the service. This can include family breakdown, homelessness or transience (particularly due to involvement in criminal activity), family violence, mental health issues and substance use or being a sole parent or care giver.

- Hostility or disapproval towards the service from trusted family members or friends.

- Perceiving services as irrelevant or feeling hopeless about a service's capacity to assist.

- Service fatigue, particularly when multiple services have been or are involved with the family.

A parent or carer who is a victim of adolescent violence may be reluctant to seek assistance or justice intervention due to feelings of shame, denial and self-blame and may feel concerned about the consequences for their child.[7]

Young people who have experienced abuse or neglect may have particular challenges engaging with services. These young people may struggle to manage emotions, may experience symptoms associated with PTSD such as anxiety, panic, impulsivity and sleep problems and may show hostility towards any interventions.[8]

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[5]　Roufeil, L., and Battye, K., "Effective regional, rural and remote family and relationships service delivery," *AFRC Briefing Number 10,* Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2008.

[6]　McDonald, M., op. cit.; Cortis, N., Katz, I., and Patulny, R., op. cit.; and Watson, J., op. cit.

[7]　Howard, J., and Abbott, L., *The Last Resort: Pathways to Justice,* Melbourne: Peninsula Health, 2013.

[8]　Schmied, V., and Tully, L., *Effective strategies and interventions for adolescents in a child protection context,* Ashfield: Centre for Parenting and Research, NSW Department of Community Services, 2009.

Young people who offend may be using these offending behaviours to "gain a sense of identity, self-esteem and access to resources such as recreational facilities, social support and meaningful attachments".[9] A program that attempts to address or challenge their offending behaviour can inadvertently challenge the young person's sense of self, belonging and access to things they enjoy.

Young people and families are much less likely to engage in an involuntary program and much more effort will be required to communicate why their engagement will be positive. Engagement and retention in a program is likely to be much more successful when the young person and/or their family has chosen to engage and when some of the benefits of engagement are quickly realised.[10]

2 Strategies for Engagement

Research and examination of a service's client group and reflection on service delivery are key to developing strategies for engagement. Successful strategies for engagement should cover the service delivery/structure and worker capacity as well as consider techniques for individual engagement with each client referred to the program.

2.1 Service delivery

Practical strategies that have been demonstrated to assist with successfully engaging clients include the following[11]:

- Conducting home visits. Visiting the last known address for mobile families has been shown to increase engagement rates

- Using a range of contact strategies, including phone calls, home visits, notes on the door, letters, and text messages

- Telephone reminders of appointments

- Follow up phone calls to address any issues between appointments

- Regular contact with client. Contact at least weekly with the client has been shown to result in higher engagement rates than monthly contact

- Prompt referrals or following up quickly with clients

- Persistent follow up with clients. Caseworkers should attempt contact at least 3-4 times where a client has failed to attend a meeting or return a call

- Providing incentives such as food, vouchers and social outings

- Provision of transport or access to travel vouchers

- Free telephone service to allow clients to contact the service easily

- Utilising existing relationships to create 'warm introductions'. Accompanying and being introduced by a worker known to the family has been shown to increase engagement rates.

- Identifying and collaborating with an Aboriginal mentor

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[9] ibid. p.37

[10] "When engagement is difficult or not working", Child Wellbeing and Child Protection – NSW Interagency Guidelines, Accessed 2nd July, 2014, http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/kts/guidelines/engaging/when.htm

[11] Cortis, N., Katz, I., and Patulny, R., op. cit.; Watson, J., op. cit.; and Schley, C., Radovini, A., Halperin, S., and Fletcher, K., "Intensive outreach in youth mental health: Description of a service model for young people who are difficult-to-engage and 'high-risk'", *Children and Youth Services Review* 33 (2011): 1506-1514

- Excluding branding on cars and uniforms that use names related to past historical abuse of Aboriginal communities.

- Flexible working hours, including possible work in the evenings and weekends. This is not only relevant for people who work or attend school during the day, but also for people whose days may be filled with appointments with other services as well.

2.2 Relationship building / individual level

Building relationships is key to engagement and young people have identified that their relationship with the worker and the worker's ability to communicate with them was key to their engagement. While it can be particularly difficult and a slow process with 'hard to reach' clients, "supportive and engaging relationships develop motivation for change in both compulsory and voluntary settings".[12]

Strategies that can assist with relationship building and clear communication processes include:

- Role clarification - Communicating the worker's, the client's and the program's role with the client should be one of the first steps. Clients are unlikely to fully engage with the program until they understand the role that all parties are to play.[13]

- Program clarification - Related to the above point, this process expands on role clarification and provides the client with further information about the purpose of the intervention, the options for referrals, negotiables and non-negotiables, what is expected to occur while they are in the program and during each session, confidentiality, the development of the case plan and expectations, including the expectations the client may have.[14]

- Demonstrating program relevance - The service should demonstrate why this program will be of interest to the young person and/or their family (and not just why the service thinks it should be of interest)[15]

- Direct engagement - Focus on engaging the young person AND the family members directly and in person, not over the phone. It is much easier to ignore a phone call or a letter than it is a person talking face-to-face.[16]

- Spend time getting to know the client and understanding their perspective.[17]

- Encourage active participation with the client which includes using strengths-based strategies such as 'looking forward' and identifying solutions, setting achievable goals and reviewing their progress with the client, developing practical strategies and encouraging active participation.[18]

- 'Normalising' with parents some of the issues they are experiencing can provide perspective and assist parents to better understand the role they should play and encourage their responsibility.[19]

- Using Motivational interviewing principles for both families and young people. Effective engagement means decisions need to be made with them not for them.[20]

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[12] Mason, P. and Prior, D., *Engaging Young People who Offend,* London: Youth Justice Board, 2008, p.44; and Cortis, N., Katz, I. and Patulny, R., op. cit.

[13] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[14] Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit.

[15] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[16] Cortis, N., Katz, I. and Patulny, R., op. cit.

[17] Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit.

[18] ibid.

[19] ibid.

[20] Iannos,M and Antcliff,G ,The application of motivational interviewing techniques for engaging "resistant" families,

- Supporting priorities for families dealing with protective environmental factors such as facilitating referrals that support financial and housing stability.[21]

- Providing material or practical support through brokerage straight away (even for something as simple as groceries or fixing something broken) can demonstrate that the program is attentive to the client's needs and is able to provide practical casework support promptly.[22]

- Using a trauma informed approach that takes into account past negative experiences with organisations and addresses potential pre-conceived ideas.

- Highlighting support for victims to regain a sense of control over their daily lives and actively be involved in a healing journey.[23]

- Using word of mouth by ensuring past clients experiences are positive.

2.3   Caseworker capacity

A Caseworkers Study, conducted by the former NSW Department of Community Services, identified three elements that are key to relationship building and facilitating engagement:

- Commitment to the young person – this includes being available, reliable and flexible when needed

- Connection and interest in the young person

- Continuity of caseworker[24]

In addition to the above elements, caseworker skills and attributes that contribute to building relationships with clients include empathy, honesty, authenticity (don't try to be expert in everything), genuineness, accountable, listening skills, acceptance, use of plain language (avoid jargons), care and practicality.[25]

Working with young people who offend may also require workers to use skills that are not traditionally used in social work, such as being directive and persuasive. The worker may be required to direct someone away from danger or persuade them to take a more beneficial action (i.e. engaging with the program). This should be part of clear role clarification with the young person.[26]

Services should assist caseworkers to have the necessary capacity to work with the client group. Adequate training and specific engagement techniques should be provided to staff. Services should also consider hiring local community members or outreach workers to engage the community and build trust.[27]

Adequate caseloads and time should be allocated to caseworkers to manage stress and pressure. "Working with adolescents as well as with their family can be equivalent to working with two clients or cases" and this should be considered in caseload allocation.[28]

Matching caseworkers cultural profile with the local community supports one-on-one engagement, as well as building the cultural competence of other case workers[29].

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[21] Australian Institute of Family Studies Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect, 2017

[22] Watson, J., op. cit.

[23] Atkinson, J,AIHW, Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children, 2013

[24] Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit.

[25] Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit.; and Cortis, N., Katz, I. and Patulny, R., op. cit.; and Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[26] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[27] Cortis, N., Katz, I. and Patulny, R., op. cit.

[28] Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit. p.35

3 Client Retention

Client retention in the program should be thought of as the client's motivation to continue participating in the program. While all of the engagement strategies discussed in section two should be applied to retain a client's engagement in the program, additional strategies should be employed to motivate the client to remain committed to the program. These strategies are related to assessments, tailored interventions, case management, active participation and strengths-based and pro-social approaches.

Service providers working with clients who offend should also understand the concept of desistance in order to implement appropriate engagement strategies. A client's intention to desist is obviously linked to their motivation to continue participating in a program designed to stop their offending. Because a client's motivation and commitment to desistance is not linear and may increase or decrease at times, a flexible program design is necessary and the service should be aware that the type of response to a client's setback, such as an encouraging response or a stern rebuke, can impact the client's motivation. Note that a young person is never 'unmotivated', their motivation may have simply changed (for example they may become motivated to avoid their caseworker).[30]

3.1 Assessment and intervention

Conducting a thorough assessment is crucial for effective engagement as it assists the worker to identify the most appropriate interventions for the client. An informed assessment should consider the client's risks, needs and strengths in order to develop individualised interventions. Appropriate interventions (and support) are key to retaining a client's engagement in the program. Interventions should be tailored to a client's needs and delivered in a flexible and responsive manner in order to engage them and achieve positive results.[31]

3.2 Case management

A case management approach is most effective alongside an intervention as it can provide opportunities to sustain engagement in a program if a client disengages from an intervention. A range of factors can cause a client to disengage and the flexible and supportive nature of case management can help to respond to disengagement. Research has found that there are better outcomes when a caseworker or other significant person "works alongside offenders during the length of their programme" or intervention and helps the client to access holistic support.[32]

A case management approach that encourages active participation is essential to retaining engagement. Active participation should include a collaborative approach to problem-solving and goal setting and the worker should encourage the young person's interests. It is important to note however that the worker may also need to guide the young person with goal setting if they need more direction and should raise concerns about areas of risk. There may also be differences between what the worker, young person and parents/carer want from the program. Clarifying these differences can help to create common goals.[33]

Workers should regularly ask for feedback from the client and adapt the goals or strategies in response. A significant factor in retaining a client's engagement with a program is whether they feel positive about the help and support provided by the program. Workers should regularly check whether the program is still meeting the client's expectations. The feedback process can also assist the worker to assess

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[29] Australian Human Rights Commission, Chapter 4: Cultural safety and security: Tools to address lateral violence - Social Justice Report 2011

[30] Porporino, F., "Bringing sense and sensitivity to corrections: from programmes to 'fix' offenders to services to support desistance", in *What Else Works: Creative work with Offenders,* ed. Brayford, J.,Cowe, F. and Deering, J., p. 61-85, England: Taylor & Francis Group (2010); and Clark, M., "Juvenile Justice and a Strengths Perspective: Complement or Clash", *Reclaiming children and youth* 18 (2009): 21-26

[31] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.; and Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit.

[32] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[33] Schmied, V. and Tully, L., op. cit.

whether anything significant has changed in the client's life and conduct a new assessment in response. The feedback process should also allow for opportunity to recognise a client's achievements and progress in the program.[34]

Practical and active strategies with purpose and tangible results are effective engagement and retention techniques, particularly with boys and can demonstrate a service's commitment to the young person.[35] Some services have used voluntary sport programs as a way of engaging young people. However, it is important to note that a sport program alone does not impact on reducing the young person's offending rate and should be used for engagement purposes only.[36] It is likely that the principles behind using sport to engage young people could also apply to other interests the young person may have such as music or art.

3.3   Strengths based approaches

Strengths-based approaches can be extremely effective to facilitating positive outcomes and therefore encouraging engagement. Several of the strategies listed above employ a strengths-based approach, such as active participation with the young person and gaining the client's feedback. Strengths-based approaches do not aim to ignore issues, but rather "recognising and utilising genuine strengths in the young person, parents and family in order to build competencies and effectively address concerns".[37]

3.4   Rewarding and modelling pro-social behaviours

Identifying and rewarding pro-social behaviours is a key aspect of effective practice for young offenders and can have a positive impact on client satisfaction. A young person who has made a positive change in their behaviour, such as attending a family meeting or increasing their school attendance, should receive positive reinforcement or rewards for the behaviour. A caseworker must also display pro-social behaviours and model this for the young person, such as attending appointments promptly.[38]

3.5   Staff training and supervision

An essential aspect of effective engagement is well-trained staff. A range of studies have found that the higher the level of education that the caseworkers have, the more likely the clients are to attend the program and that the program is successful.[39] A range of training programs should be offered to caseworkers that work with young offenders, such as case management practice, managing caseloads, engaging with partners and communication skills. Training should also be provided to support staff to deliver the interventions as they were intended to be delivered.[40]

Providing adequate supervision to caseworkers can also have a significant impact on engagement, as well as effective service delivery. Increased staff supervision has been linked to increased client retention.[41]

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[34] ibid.; and Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[35] Schmied, V., and Tully, L., op. cit.

[36] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[37] Schmied, V., and Tully, L., op. cit. p.28

[38] ibid.; and Trotter, C. and Evans, P., "Supervision skills in juvenile justice" in *Offender Supervision: New directions in theory, research and practice,* ed. McNeill, F., Raynor, P. and Trotter, C., p.130-152, United Kingdom: Willan Publishing (2010)

[39] Watson, J., op. cit.

[40] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[41] Watson, J., op. cit.

3.6   Written agreements and relationships with other services

The development of service level agreements or memorandums of understanding can help to broker services more easily for clients, facilitate a smoother exchange of information and allow for better service coordination.[42] Young offenders can often experience much more difficulty accessing services due to their offending history. Creating relationships with other service providers can help to facilitate access to services that otherwise would not have provided a service to the young person.[43]

Develop opportunities for collaboration and partnerships with local Aboriginal services to support cultural safety and healing for families and young people and to provide pathways to engagement.[44]

3.7   Caseworker retention

Ensuring that the client only has to work with one caseworker has a significant impact on retention rates. This is also the case where a number of young people from one family may be involved in the service.[45]

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[42] ibid.

[43] Mason, P. and Prior, D., op.cit.

[44] Australian Human Rights Commission, Chapter 4: Cultural safety and security: Tools to address lateral violence - Social Justice Report 201

[45] Watson, J., op. cit.