



## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH FAMILIES

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This tip sheet was created as a resource for state deaf-blind project personnel to use in their work with family members of infants and toddlers who are deaf-blind. The suggestions provide useful advice about how to form positive relationships during interactions with families.

### Before a Home Visit

- Call to confirm before you go and reassure the family that they can reschedule if needed. It's their time, not ours. Remind them who you are, what your project does, and what you hope to do at the visit.
- Review any background information your project already has about the child.
- Be punctual—arrive at the time you said you were going to.
- Be prepared—have what you need handy (brochures, phone numbers, etc.) and a toy or activity to model ways to engage the child. If families have requested assistance around a specific topic, be sure to bring some resources to give them.
- Be flexible and remember that some things are out of your control (e.g., you might drive a long way and then find out the child is sick).

### During the Visit

- Remember to ask how the family is doing (in addition to the child). And when they tell you, listen with compassion.
- Use your manners (e.g., “Thank you so much for meeting with me today”).
- Show appreciation that they reached out (“Good for you for making time to call the project”).
- Respect the family's home and space (don't sit on the bed or furniture without permission, etc.) and acknowledge the challenge of having so many strangers come through their house.
- Be mindful of the family's time. Be flexible if circumstances arise that make it necessary for you to leave earlier than planned.
- Be sensitive to the family's cultural background and customs and act accordingly (e.g., accept food if it is offered, take your shoes off at the door if the family does, etc.).

- Address family members by their preferred names (don't call them Mom, Dad, Grandma, etc.).
- Hold the child if it's culturally appropriate, but ask for permission first.
- Wash your hands before interacting with the child—some families may be concerned about germs.
- Comment on what is going well (this may be based on what they say or what you observe).
- When you make suggestions, avoid words such as “should” or “must.” Instead, say something like, “What I've seen/read/tried is...” or “What do you think about this idea/trying this?”
- Recognize and affirm the family's strength.
- Help the family identify their needs and prioritize what they want first (this gives them some choice and control).
- Make sure you *really listen well*. Don't let your agenda take precedence. Ask how you can help, and try to find a way to address the most pressing needs.
- Be aware of socioeconomic factors. Keep in mind that some families may need food and clothes before DB support/education.
- Use common sense and play it by ear during a visit. If you can see that the family is overwhelmed, don't add to their stress by giving them too much information at once.
- Don't blame or speak negatively about your team or another agency.
- Let the family know what they'll be receiving down the road from your project and who else on the staff might be contacting them. Repeating information is not a bad thing; families are under stress and might not remember things you've told them previously. Remind them that the project is there until their child's 22nd birthday.
- When a family member thanks you for your help, don't say, “It's my job” or “No problem” or “Anytime.” Instead say, “I'm happy to help” or “You're welcome.”
- “Never leave a thank you hanging”—make sure you're specific about what you're thanking them for.
- Remember that your visit is all about the family. Your interactions with families should not be influenced by your mood that day or other outside factors.

## After the Visit

- ALWAYS follow through on your promises (don't make any promises you don't intend to keep). If you said you would send them something or put them in touch with someone, do it by the date you specified.
- Plan for a follow-up visit or phone call.
- Document the visit and share the information with the family according to your project's system or policies.

## Anytime You Interact with Families...

- Be genuine, authentic, and specific!
- Withhold judgement. We all have our biases, but mindfully and intentionally put them aside.
- Remember that building a trusting, caring relationship is more important than the information/education you are giving the family.
- Remind yourself that there is likely underlying grief the family is going through.
- Use family-friendly language. Not all families will be familiar with acronyms or technical terms.
- If you plan to share the family's information with someone else, ask them for permission and find out how they would prefer to be contacted (phone, email, etc.).
- If you make a mistake or forget about something, be honest and own it.
- Don't forget that you are a support provider, not a stress provider!

## Tips for Phone Calls

- Introduce yourself (name, project, role). Provide contact information so they can easily get in touch with you in the future (since you can't hand them your business card).
- Be friendly!
- Smile (they can hear it in your voice).
- Slow down—it can be hard to absorb information over the phone.

- Always ask at the beginning if it's a good time. Offer to call back if it's not. If you hear lots of distracting noise in the background (even if it's in the middle of the call), ask if they need to go.
- Let them know how much time you have at the beginning of the call. Don't make the call if you don't have enough time to really talk over their needs.
- Give them your full attention during the conversation (don't check email, texts, etc.).
- At the end, recap what you covered and what you've promised.
- Send a follow-up email or letter after the call. (Some families won't have email.)

### Document Developers

- Megan Cote, Family Engagement Initiative Lead, NCDB
- Pam Kissoondyal, Family Specialist, Florida and Virgin Islands Deaf-Blind Collaborative
- Myrna Medina, Family Engagement Specialist, California Deafblind Services
- Jennifer Bigelow-Stambaugh, Family Support Coordinator, DeafBlind Central
- Jana Villemez, Family Consultant, CAYSI

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