



Practice Guide: Tips from the Field

Promoting Psychological Safety for Parents of Young Children

Inherent power imbalances and adversarial approaches can create difficult conditions for promoting psychological safety for parents with young children involved in the child welfare system. Child Protection Services (CPS) is simultaneously charged with providing resources and support to parents, while also maintaining the power to remove children from their care. Due to this dynamic, parents may feel unsafe asking for help because of the potential consequences. Historically, many of the government agencies whose purpose is to provide support have instead caused harm, which has created greater rifts and distrust among the people they were intended to help. In addition, many challenges at the systems level, including high staff turnover, lack of psychoeducation and training for staff on managing vicarious trauma, high caseloads, and lack of supports for front-line caseworkers and other professionals, have further exacerbated the problem. The following strategies were drawn from discussions at meetings in each of the six counties where Strong Starts has a presence to help overcome some of these barriers and promote psychological safety for system-involved parents with young children as best as we can. These strategies are intended for professionals who work with child welfare-involved families. While many of these strategies can be applied broadly across disciplines, they should be modified as needed according to one's role and relationship to the parent.

Contextualize A Parent's Behavior and Experience

Parents involved in the child welfare system experience a constant threat to their psyche and caregiving system. It's important to not take parents' reactions at face value but instead to contextualize their reactions and behaviors. With the threat of losing their child, feelings of shame, anger, despair, and hopelessness can manifest in defensive postures causing the parent to become defiant, withdrawn, submissive, callous, display emotional flatness, or seem unstable, or resistant to change. For parents of infants and toddlers, the threat of or loss of their child in the first few months or years of life is particularly devastating – not only is this an important time developmentally, it is also the period during which young children form their most important attachment relationships. The child welfare system expects “parents to learn and change their behavior when they are under severe threat.”

¹ Slade, Arietta. “Promoting Psychological Safety for the Parents of Young Children.” May 16, 2023.

However, neuroscience has shown that this is an impossible expectation and that the brain's capacity to function is compromised under extreme stress. Understanding a parent's reactions and behaviors within this context is imperative to providing support that truly creates psychological safety. When working with parents:

Be mindful of the roots of the lack of trust between parents and the system that you may work within.

Adopt a mentalizing stance, in which you imagine what the parent is thinking and feeling, to open more supportive lines of communication.

Acknowledge the power dynamic and historical harm that has been imparted on families by these systems.

Create and set appropriate expectations based on the parent's strengths and capabilities at the outset: Assist parents by mapping out the court process and collaboratively create a plan with them that sets them up to succeed.

Utilize Trauma Responsive Practices

The child welfare process can be extremely traumatizing for both children and parents. Moreover, some parents may have their own undisclosed child welfare history or currently be a youth in care themselves. Because you may not know a parent or caregiver's history, it's important to employ trauma-responsive practices at all times. When working with parents remember to:

Be aware of the language you use: Certain terms and language that may be commonplace can be inflammatory and demeaning, causing tension in the courtroom or in interactions with parents. Refrain from using terms like "birth or biological mother/father" and instead refer to parents by their name to build trust and rapport. For more information around reducing the use of harmful language, see [Rise's Glossary of Harmful Language](#).

Allow parents to speak from their own expertise and experiences: Parents have a great deal of knowledge about their own situations. To promote agency and create a safe space for parents allow more opportunities for them to speak about and direct their experience.

Allow opportunities for breaks and rests for parents in meetings or court proceedings as needed.

Focus on the parent's and family's strengths amid setbacks: Highlighting progress and creating a safe space for setbacks to be worked through are critical in fostering trust and building rapport.

Clearly outline your role and confidentiality policies up front: Having to divulge all parts of one's life, including relationship, medical, mental health, and childhood history, etc. can feel, and is, incredibly intrusive. It's important to detail with whom any information you may gather will go. This promotes transparency and can build trust with a parent. It's also important to manage expectations as to what you realistically can and cannot do for the parent and family. Do not make promises you cannot keep.

A NOTE ON COURTROOM PROCEEDINGS

The courtroom can be an especially emotionally-charged setting. Information recounted during court hearings can remind parents of traumatic events, so it's important to explain before the hearing what parents can expect and what they may be asked. Proceedings can occur quickly and be very confusing to those not familiar with how the court systems work. Recognize that parents may not know or understand what happened in the appearance and leave space/time after the appearance to discuss what occurred thoroughly.

- **Be aware of what information you are sharing in court hearings:** As much as possible, refrain from revealing private or inappropriate information in open court rooms since there may be people unknown to the parent.
- **Employ interpreters/translators as needed:** All parties to the case have a right to request a translator. If a parent cannot fully understand what is being said, then this is not only a violation of their right but also an impediment to creating psychological safety and promoting transparency.
- **Promote safety for those experiencing intimate partner violence:** For those parents experiencing intimate partner violence, make sure to take safety measures during court hearings like appearing virtually or staggering entrance and exit times.
- **Reiterate that information again at least one day later when intense emotions may have subsided:** Understand they may not have agreed with the outcome and be prepared to discuss options.

Create Safe Spaces

As much as possible, try to create spaces where parents or caregivers feel both physically and psychologically safe. The meaning of safety is unique to each person, and what is safe for one person may not be considered safe by another. It's important to build trust and rapport so that you can have an open dialogue about the safety concerns and needs of each parent. The practices below are some suggestions on how to create safe spaces.

Connect parents with parent or peer advocates: Many organizations now have parent advocates to help support parents in situations like Family Team Conferences or the initial Child Safety Conference with Child Protective Services. Ensuring that a parent advocate or another trusted person is with them may allow the parent to feel more comfortable.

Hold interviews, assessments, and evaluations in private spaces: The information disclosed in these types of assessments and evaluations is often very sensitive. Allowing privacy when conducting them is one way to create safer spaces. Parents should also have a formal mechanism to report any issues that may arise during the process to ensure an unbiased and fair evaluation.

Utilize Family Team Conferences more frequently to check in and explain the different steps in the court process as they occur: Having Family Team Conferences at more regular intervals can keep parents informed at what is expected in each step of the process so that they are not surprised by any unknown expectations. More regular meetings also ensures that they have more agency throughout the process.

Ensure that consents are voluntary and informed: Parents should understand the content and implications of any consent forms before they sign. Set aside time to go over the consents in detail with parents as needed.

Meet Basic Needs

Parents who are struggling with basic needs are operating in survival mode. This makes it difficult to adopt the changes that may be expected of them. Connecting parents to services and resources that meet their basic needs is the first step to ensuring that there is a foundation for psychological safety. To assist parents with obtaining basic needs, remember to:

Refer parents to parent-led or community-based organizations: Parents often feel more comfortable receiving services in the community they are familiar with and from non-government organizations. Peer advocates can be essential in allowing parents to better voice their needs in spaces where they may otherwise feel disempowered. Rise is one organization, led by impacted parent advocates, that offers peer support and resources. For more information, visit [Rise's website](#).

Identify and connect parents to interventions or services that address the core or primary challenges the parent is facing that might be impacting their relationship with their child: These services can include prenatal and postpartum care, housing, employment, and education services.

Increase Support for System Professionals

Many of the parents and families that are system-involved have a variety of complex needs. Creating the psychological safety needed for parents can often require intensive advocacy and case management work. It's imperative that child welfare professionals have access to psychoeducation about these needs and that they have enough support themselves to meet the demands of their caseload and manage the emotional impact of the work.

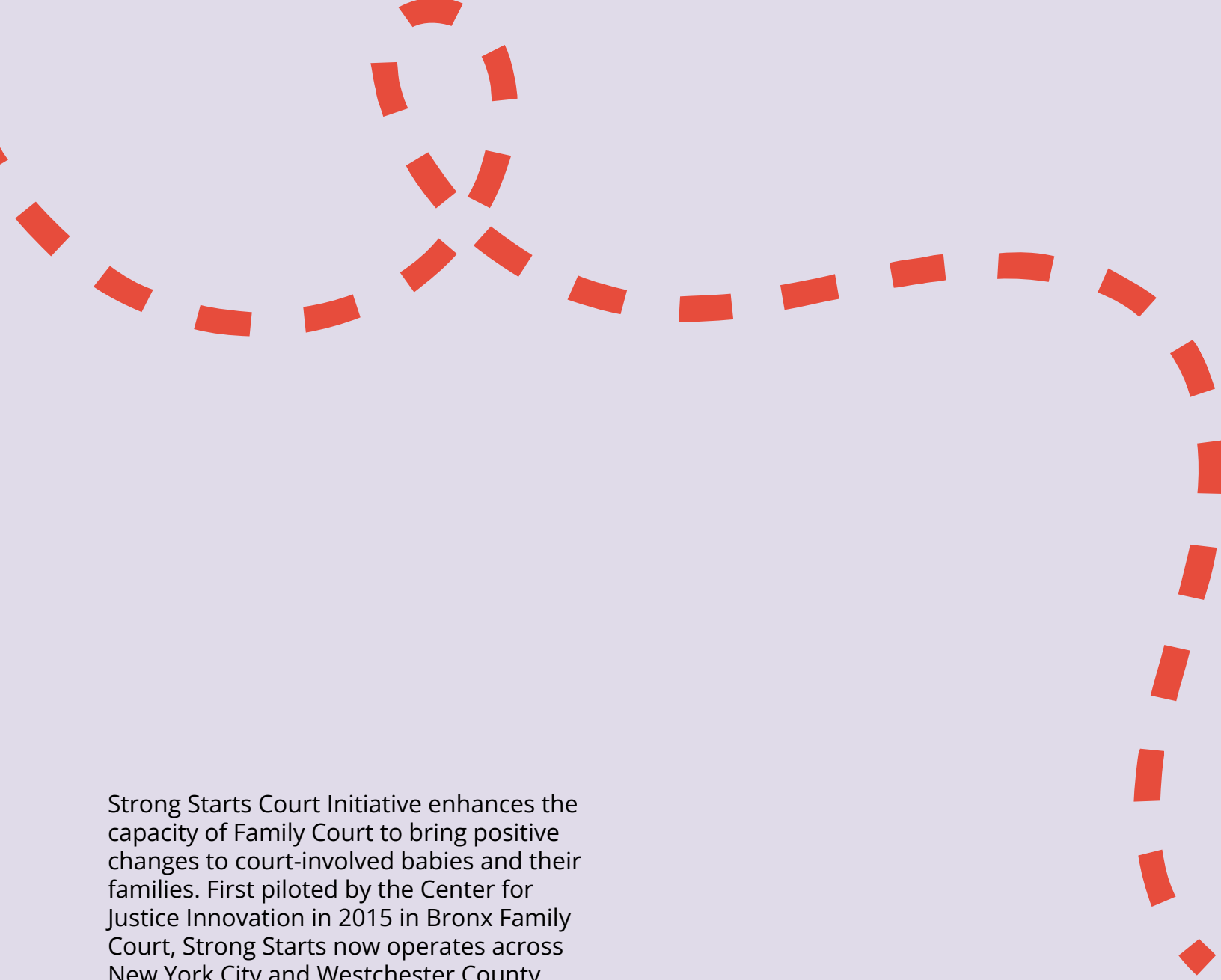
Increase training on revised mandated reporting policies.

Ensure that staff training includes basic education on early childhood development, adolescent development, infant and maternal mental health, and trauma.

Become familiar with and identify preventative, community-based clinical and family interventions: Many of these interventions can foster protective factors that divert parents and families away from system involvement.

Create proper support structures so that staff can remain consistent in their service provision: Consistency is critical in building trust and creating structure for families during a time that is tumultuous and marked by constant change. Supervisors and other management-level staff should ensure that their staff can meet this standard through reflective supervision.

For further information, please view [Strong Starts' training on psychological safety for parents](#).

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Strong Starts Court Initiative enhances the capacity of Family Court to bring positive changes to court-involved babies and their families. First piloted by the Center for Justice Innovation in 2015 in Bronx Family Court, Strong Starts now operates across New York City and Westchester County, bringing expertise in early child development to all stages of Family Court proceedings and supports infants, toddlers, caregivers, and families so that the court becomes a catalyst for positive change in the lives of the youngest children.

Strong Starts regularly convenes its stakeholders to discuss and strategize ways to improve practice for child welfare-involved families with very young children through county-based Steering Committee meetings. For more information on these meetings or project, visit the [Center's website](#) or reach out to strongstarts@innovatingjustice.org.

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