

## Examples of Messages You Can Use to Engage More Effectively

**Psychoeducation:** When caseworkers meet children and families, they immediately have the opportunity to help them understand what trauma is. This is important because “trauma” becomes the language of the child welfare system around the child. When children hear the word “trauma” in all systems, it further reinforces a language for what has happened to them.

*Example: “As you know, I am a caseworker who works with kids and families. I work with many families, and I know that children and families who have experienced what you have can be traumatized. “Trauma” does not mean something is wrong with you, but rather that something big and usually harmful has happened to you. People who are traumatized often are worried that something “bad” may happen to them again, or they think that the “bad” thing that happened was their fault. My job is to do all I can to help children and families deal with their trauma by making sure they get the right support and services. I will be doing all I can to not only keep your family physically safe, but to keep you emotionally safe as well. I will need you to help me figure out what you need to feel safe and be successful in what you do.”*

**Empower:** Children and families who have experienced trauma often perceive themselves as powerless to protect themselves. They view authority as negative and potentially harmful. They have learned to survive by either resisting authority or placating those in authority. Empowering children and families means giving them the decision as to what and how much that they want to share with their caseworker and others around them. When children and families are empowered, they are much more likely to communicate both their story and what it means to them.

*Example: “I want you to know that you can tell me as much or as little as you want. It is up to you to decide, because it is important to me that you have some power over what you say. Too many people have taken your power away by making assumptions and decisions without asking you. You are the person who knows your story the best, so I want to hear from you what you think is important to help me do the best job I can for you.”*

**Honor:** Honoring children and family’s maltreatment and trauma history demands that we acknowledge the tremendous challenges and difficulties that they have experienced. We need to recognize their courage in trying to survive and move forward while not knowing what is going to happen to them. Affirming the children and family’s courage builds both self-esteem and competency, which are the building blocks of well-being.

*Example: “I want to tell you that hearing about your life gave me an appreciation for the painful experiences that you have had. In no way can I really understand what it has been like for you. What I do know is that you have been courageous against all the difficulties. My job is to communicate to MDHHS and the court the challenges you have*

*faced, your courage to meet those challenges, and what we can do to help you get through this and become even stronger.”*

**Trust:** Acknowledging the children and family’s likely underlying distrust of others, especially authority, provides an opportunity for the children and family to be understood for who they are rather than what others want them to be. Children and families who have been maltreated and traumatized build trust very slowly because so many people have promised them safety and care, yet have only harmed and/or rejected them. So when a caseworker tells a child or family member “you can trust me,” he/she is asking the children and family to do the impossible. Rather, the child and family is going to feel much safer (physically and psychologically) if we acknowledge the reality of their distrust.

*Example: “Given all that you have been through, I cannot imagine how you can trust what I say or what I do. You have difficulty trusting others for good reason. I am not asking you to trust me, but rather that you give me a chance to show you: 1) that I will keep my word and, 2) that I will be honest with you about what is happening and what may happen in the future. I will not try and protect you from information that may be difficult. My hope is that my honesty will help you gain some confidence that what I say is true.”*

**Knowledge:** Most often children and families know much more than they are communicating to those they view as authority. They may have shared portions of their history with others before, but it is unlikely that they shared the complete story. Acknowledging and verbalizing this reality provides a meeting place between the caseworker and the child and family, which helps them potentially communicate more of what has happened. The child and family feels better understood and more likely to communicate more of what has actually happened.

*Example: “A lot of the children I work with have shared parts of what has happened to them. Only you know what has gone on. Only you know how much you have shared and what may be missing. You are the only one that knows what goes on in your brain. This is good because it gives you the decision about how much to share. I am hoping that you can share as much as you feel comfortable with. The more I know the better I can advocate for you.” “I am also aware that you and I may not agree as to what should happen within your family. We may not agree, but the more I know, the more able I will be to advocate for you in this process. I will tell you how I am going to advocate for you so you know what I am thinking. The more we share about each other’s thinking the better able we will be to talk together, which will hopefully result in better outcomes for you. One of the most important things you can do is to tell me that you disagree with my position, which will help us learn more about each other.”*

**Communicate Your Limitations:** Children and families believe that authority can often do whatever they want. They believe that if a person in authority says he/she is going to advocate for a decision, that it will definitely happen. They do not understand that caseworkers can only communicate what they want, but that they cannot make a judge or other decision-makers side

with them. Talking to the child and family about a caseworker's own limitations will help to minimize false hope that what they want to happen will happen.

*Example: I want you to know what I am going to say to the judge when I go into court. I will give the judge my recommendation about what I think should happen and I will do my best to convince the judge to agree with me. However, the judge makes his/her own mind up. It is the judge who has the final say and he/she may or may not agree with me. This is difficult for me and probably for you as well, because we want the judge to do what we want. Some days I can get angry because I believe that the judge has made the wrong decision. I will let you know what the judge has decided and provide you with his/her explanation because you have a right to know. We can think about what I can say next time to have a better chance of convincing the judge.*