



THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
College of Social Work

Service users' perspectives on their experience with child welfare workers: A systematic review

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Background

- Child welfare agencies work with individuals and families in an effort to promote safe and healthy environments for children to thrive
- The '**service user**', with whom agencies work, could be considered the **customer** despite entry being involuntary in many cases
- The voice of service users is crucial in understanding the degree to which child welfare workers meet their needs

Child welfare systems have moved toward partnership models

- Emerging evidence supports this effort: when service users experience a strong working relationship with the caseworker, successful outcomes are more likely (Lee & Ayon, 2004)
- **Child & Family Teams (CFT)** (Legislative Auditor General, 2011)
- **Systems of Care** (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008)

Partnerships are dynamic

- Considerable focus on the development and delivery of child welfare practices
- **Question:**
How well are services being received?

Research Question

- From service user's perspective, what are common themes on:
 - Desired caseworker practices and traits
 - Undesired caseworker practice and traits

Method: Design

Utilized **systematic review** and **content analysis** to capture and organize service users' voices

Method: Study Identification

- PRISMA guidelines were followed
 - Key words
 - Broad search terms to cast a wide net (“child welfare” and “child protective service” were combined using the Boolean operator “or” and then crossing the term “worker” using the Boolean operator “and”)
 - Data bases
 - PsychINFO, CINAHL; PsychARTICLES; and, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection
 - Inclusion criteria
 - Gathered narrative info from service users, regardless of age or status in child welfare system
 - Peer-reviewed sources and/or dissertations

Method: Study Selection

- Initially, 2037 studies were identified
- Abstract review identified 89 potential studies
- We secured these 89 studies, and ultimately 37 studies met all inclusion criteria

Results: Study Characteristics

- Participants: $N = 3,384$ (across all studies)
 - Female: 72%
 - Age: $M = 29.0$ (11.0)
 - Minor's voices included = 30% of studies

Location of Study

	Frequency	Percent
USA	16	43.2
Canada	12	32.4
Australia	2	5.4
Ireland	1	2.7
Great Britain / Wales	5	13.5
Europe	1	2.7
Total	37	100.0

Publication Year

Pre - 2000	11%
2001- 2010	56%
2011-	33%

Results: Coding

- Extracted comments from service users found in the articles (total = 861)
- All comments first organized into two broad categories:
 - Desired characteristics and activities
 - Undesired characteristics and activities
- Themes further organized into more specific practice behaviors and principles as guided by the “practice model”

Top Desired Characteristics

Character	Total Hits	Total Studies
Clear & direct communication	49	22
Instrumental support (material or practical support)	47	22
Empathetic, Caring, Nurturing	42	24
Guiding/Advising (parenting, working through system)	41	17
Responsive (timely, available, work hard, persistent)	38	22

Top Desired Characteristics

Character	Total Hits	Total Studies
Partnership Oriented (included in decisions)	36	17
Felt Understood	27	21
Professional, Prepared, Competent	26	12
Positive/optimistic/encouraging	25	15
Friendly (warm relationship)	23	13
Took time to listen	22	20

Top Undesired Characteristics

Character	Total Hits	Total Studies
Inadequate services to meet needs	26	12
Felt disregarded or invisible	20	14
Dishonest/Tricked Service User	18	14
Bossy/Threatened	18	9
Antagonistic (didn't believe in me)	16	9

Top Undesired Characteristics

Character	Total Hits	Total Studies
Not involved, left out of planning	15	11
Cold, low emotional support	12	7
Felt judged/blamed	12	7
Concern for quality of out of home care	11	9
Not enough time with caseworker	11	7
Harassed, degraded, criticized	11	6

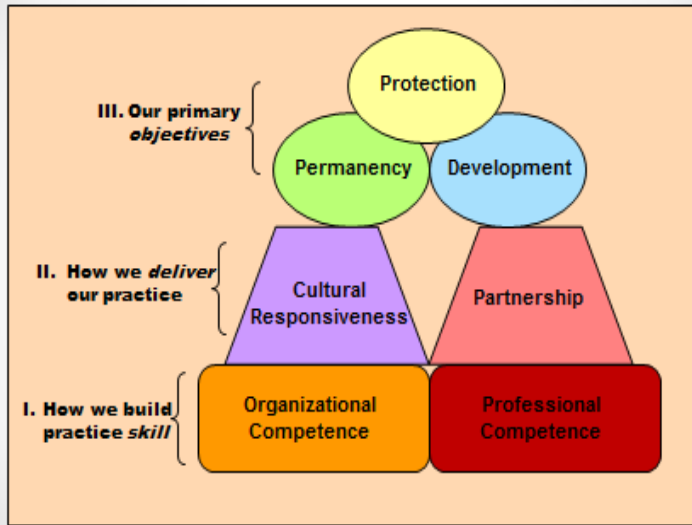
Top Undesired Characteristics

Character	Total Hits	Total Studies
Irrelevant activities	10	8
Not understood	10	6
Not informed (child status, process, updates)	9	9
Little involvement with bio child (in State's custody)	9	8

Fit between service users' comments and practice model components

Practical Context

Practice Model Principles



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DCFS Practice Model Skills

- Engaging
- Assessing
- Teaming
- Planning
- Intervening



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Service Users' Perspectives that are *Directly Trained* in Practice Model

Directly Trained through Practice Skills and/or Principles (346)	
Genuine (7)	Relevant Tasks (5)
Partnership Oriented (included in decisions) (36)	Focus on strengths (13)
Responsive (accountable, timely) (38)	Caseworker Accountability (6)
Professional-Prepared-Competent (26)	Respectful (19)
Supportive (tangible services, empathetic, caring, nurturing, guiding, advising) (130)	Truthful/Honest (20)
Focusing , goal setting (5)	Accepting (18)
Listened (22)	Culturally Responsive/Sensitive (1)

Service Users' Perspectives *NOT* Directly Trained in Practice Model

NOT Directly trained in Practice Skills and/or Principles (201)

Friendly (23)	Positive/Optimistic/Encouraging (25)
Open Minded (9)	Down to Earth (relatable) (15)
Calm, not bossy (13)	Reassuring (10)
Realistic to Needs (14)	Flexible (5)
Communicating in a clear, direct, transparent manner (49)	Understanding the client (27)
Putting people at ease (11)	

What did we learn?

- Service users are reporting information that suggests general satisfaction, which is remarkable given context
- The training curriculums widely adopted in U.S. Child Welfare Systems (i.e., the Practice Model) appear to effectively train to most of the factors that are reported as desired by service users

Implications: Additional Skills Training

- Communicating in a clear, direct manner (49)
- Helping service users feel understood (27)
- Provide some optimism, be encouraging (25)
- Be friendly (23)
- Realistic to needs (14)

Implications: Additional training on “non-skilled” activities

- Down to earth (15)
- Calm, not bossy (13)
- Putting people at ease (11) and Reassuring (10)
- Open minded (9) and flexible (5)

Implications

- Participants expressed most concern about
 - Not having the services they felt they needed to succeed
 - Often felt invisible or disregarded
 - Often felt tricked or as if people weren't honest
 - Feeling bossed or threatened
 - Not feeling believed, as if relationship was antagonistic
 - Not involved

Limitations

- Data filtered:
 - Voices of service users → primary researcher → secondary analysis
- Difficult to organize the many comments into single constructs and common themes that crossover to practice model competencies for training purposes

Possible next steps

- Further organize comments of service users into the practice model
- Examine the degree to which practice model training attends to service users' perspectives
- Examine methods of training to service users' comments
- Explore degree to which service users agree with findings

References

- Child Welfare Information Gateway (2008). *Systems of Care*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.
- Lee, C. D., & Ayon, C. (2004). Is the Client-Worker Relationship Associated with Better Outcomes in Mandated Child Abuse Cases?. *Research On Social Work Practice, 14*(5), 351-357.
- Legislative Auditor General (2011). A Performance Audit of The Division of Child and Family Services. Salt Lake City, UT: Office of the Legislative Auditor General.