

Using Comprehensive Family Assessments  
to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes  
Ramsey County Community Human Services &  
University of Minnesota School of Social Work  
St. Paul, Minnesota

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# Comprehensive Family Assessment Intake Baseline Report: Family Interview Addendum

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## Family Interviews

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### **Introduction**

The following report is an addendum to the Ramsey County Intake Baseline Study and summarizes the results of ten interviews of families involved in Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) Child Protection intake services between June 1, 2008 and November 15, 2008. The goal of the family interviews was to better understand how families perceived and interacted with child protection Intake services at Ramsey County.

### **Methods**

#### ***Instrument Development***

After reviewing case records, researchers at the University of Minnesota developed a family interview instrument with assistance and guidance from project advisory groups made up of Ramsey County Child Protection managers, supervisors, workers, community members, service providers, and service recipients. The instrument was based on input from several sources, including the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008) items; the *Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines for Child Welfare* (Schene, 2005); and Harris & Poertner's *Measurement of Client Satisfaction Scale* (1998), which focuses on interactions between child welfare workers and clients.

#### ***Interview Protocol***

Protocols for contacting families were developed as a collaboration between evaluators at the University of Minnesota and Ramsey County. The Ramsey County Special Project Coordinator made an initial call to families randomly pulled from the larger sample of intake case records reviewed (N=120) to inform them of the project and to request an interview. In the initial phone call with Ramsey County the voluntary nature of the interviews was emphasized, giving potential participants opportunity to decline. Families were also informed of incentives – \$25 gift cards to a local superstore – that were provided to participants. A script was developed for the Ramsey County Special Project Coordinator to help guide conversations with families.

For families who agreed to be interviewed, a second call was made by University of Minnesota interviewers. A second script walked interviewers through reconfirming that families were still interested, reminding them of the voluntary nature of the research study, and then scheduling a time for interviews. If families still expressed interest in being interviewed, the University of Minnesota caller would ask for a time and location to complete the interview. After it was determined that the process needed to be streamlined, the Ramsey County project director made all of the calls to families, including arranging the interviews.

Interviews were conducted by two University of Minnesota researchers; one served as the interviewer and the other recorded family members' responses. The interviewer introduced a consent form explaining families' rights in the research process, confidentiality, procedures, compensation, and the voluntary nature of the study. If the family still consented to being interviewed, all participants signed and dated a form. A second copy was given to families to keep, while the signed copy returned with the interviewers.

Upon completing the interview, researchers returned to the University of Minnesota with unidentified participant responses. Generated case numbers were recorded on top of the interview form, without names or identifying information. The recorder then transcribed participant responses in a Word document. Both the interviewer and the recorder also completed a short Family Interview Reflection Sheet to describe both researchers' impressions of the interview (e.g. roles of members present, how participants were involve in the case planning process), and general impressions noted by researchers.

### ***Sample***

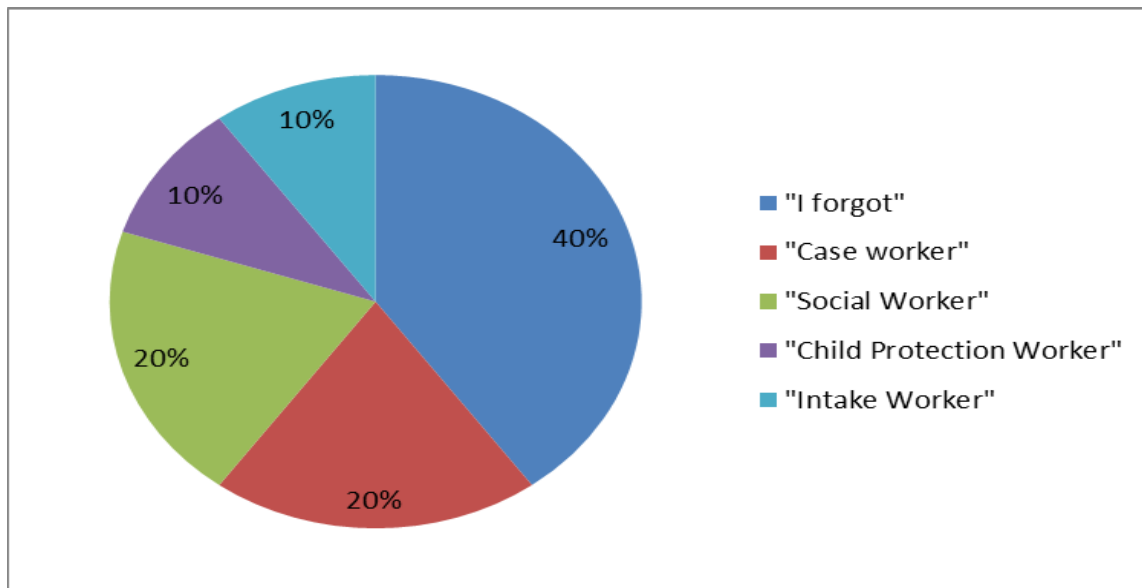
The sample for the family interviews included ten families selected from the larger population of cases from the record review (N=120) for in-person qualitative interviews. For the purposes of the Comprehensive Family Assessment project's Intake Baseline Study, the population of Ramsey County child protection cases consisted of all cases opened in traditional investigation or Family Assessment between June 1, 2008 and November 15, 2008.

## Results

### *Initial responses*

The interviews began with a series of questions about the family's relationship with their intake worker. The first question the research team asked the families was about the first worker from Ramsey County Child Protection that the family met. The interviewer asked what that worker was called and, if necessary, provided prompts including "case aide," "case manager," "social worker" and "intake worker. **Nearly half of the families could not recall the title of the first worker with whom they met**, stating "I don't remember his name" or "I forgot." One person stated the first person from Ramsey County child protection that they came into contact with was a Case Aide.

Figure 1. Family members' report of the first person they met from Ramsey County Child Protection



Families were next asked to describe what happened at the beginning of the case – how the case was open or how they found out that child protection was involved. **Families described a variety of methods that workers used to inform them that Child Protection had opened a case regarding their family. The method of first contact reported most by the families was a phone call (50%).** Families who received a letter

(20%) reported receiving a phone call from the worker soon after. Thirty percent of the families reported learning of their involvement with child protection through a home visit from a Child Protection worker or the police.

**Families' first meetings with their intake worker mostly took place in the family's home.** One family reported they never met with an intake worker and only spoke to a worker on the phone. A few families had their first face-to-face meeting with an intake worker outside of the families' home, such as the hospital or at one of the Ramsey County social service buildings. **When asked how often families met with their intake worker, only one family reported meeting with their worker more than once.** Families were asked to describe their first meeting. (The proportion of families stating the most frequent response is given in parentheses below.) Families reported that the intake worker asked questions or interviewed them (60%). Families also described the length of the meeting, which ranged from 45 minutes to one hour (40%), how they felt during the first meeting, including "scared" and "nervous" (20%), qualities of the intake worker, including "professional" and "understanding," (20%), and their concerns about their financial situation (20%).

Families were asked to describe what they recalled the intake worker thought the families' issues or concerns were, as well as what the families' perceived as their issues and/or concerns. **The families reported that for the most part the intake worker's opinion about the family's issues and/or concerns were about the welfare of the child and the specific allegation of abuse or neglect (60%). However, 40% of the families reported the intake worker never told them what they, as the intake worker, thought the family's needs and concerns were. In addition, some of the families reported that their needs and concerns were more complex than the incident that brought them to the attention of child protection.** Although 40% of the families reported that they did not think their family had any issues and/or concerns, the remaining families described financial troubles, their children's behaviors and/or mental health issues, as well as custody problems as being areas of concern to their family.

The majority (70%) of children of interviewees remained in the custody of their families during the intake period, with 30% experiencing out of home placement with a

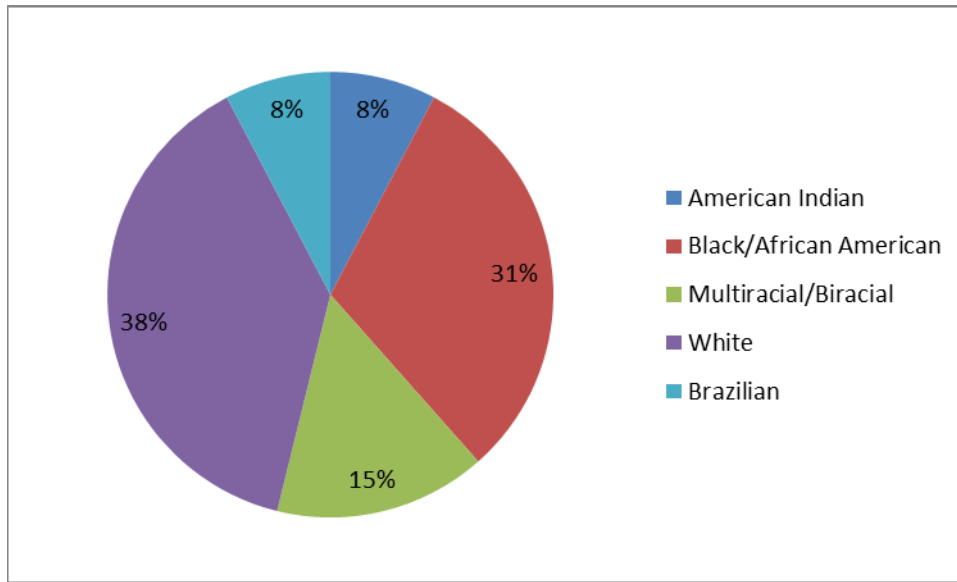
relative. Families reported that their relatives did not receive financial assistance for these placements or that they were unsure about families receiving assistance. Families were also asked to describe what they remembered the intake worker told them about what would happen with their case. Families were told their case would close (40%), transfer to program case management (10%), or receive services that the family had asked for (20%). One family was told that outcomes were dependent upon the family's cooperation. Two families reported that they were never told anything and only learned that the case was closed when they received a letter in the mail after meeting with the intake worker. None of the families interviewed reported court involvement.

### ***Culture***

Families were asked several questions regarding culture and the extent to which their culture was included throughout their interaction with Ramsey County Child Protection. **Families were first asked to share how they *define* culture. The top responses included religion (40%), race (30%), family traditions (30%), values (20%) and customs (10%).** Other definitions included language, politics, and geographical location. One family responded, "I'm not sure how to define it." **When asked if they would *describe* their own culture, families' responses included descriptions of their own race and/or ethnicity (20%), nationality (20%), religious affiliation (30%), their language (10%), community (20%), values (30%) and the importance of family, both nuclear and extended (30%).** Other responses included the type of food the family eats and the holidays the family celebrates. One family responded "I don't know."

When asked to self-identify by race or ethnicity, the top three categories for race/ethnicity were Black/African-American, Multiracial/Biracial, and White. One family member indicated they were American Indian/Alaskan Native and one indicated Brazilian. None of the families identified as Hispanic/Latino/Spanish. Families could choose more than one race/ethnicity (see Figure 1).

Figure 2: Self-identified race of family members



### ***Relationship with worker***

Families were asked questions about their relationship with their intake worker. Families were given a card with a Likert scale measuring frequency (never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, does not apply) of interactions with the intake worker on the following 24 items. Table 2 below shows the results of the family's responses to their relationship with the intake worker. It should be noted that most family members described the intake worker as frequently or sometimes directing them to services to help the family. Most family members reported that intake worker's expectations of them were clear (70%) and sometimes (30%) or frequently (50%) reasonable. A majority of family members reported that the intake worker frequently listened to their side of the story (70%), cared about their kids (50%), followed through with plans (67% where applicable) and returned phone calls (83% where applicable). Families reported that intake workers were respectful of family culture and privacy. On the other hand, families from which children were removed reported that intake workers rarely or never "understood how hard it was to get my children taken away". Nearly half of family members reported that intake workers did not involve them in decision making about the case. **In general, families reported that their worker listened to their side of the**



**story, devoted the appropriate amount of time to their case and was responsive, had reasonable expectations of them and was respectful of them, and informed them about available services. Families reported less satisfaction with worker empathy and experience, and family involvement.**

Table 2. Family's relationship with intake worker (N=10)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Doesn't Apply
1. My intake worker encouraged me to discuss when things were better with my family	40%	-	30%	-	30%
2. When my intake worker made a mistake, s/he admitted it and tried to correct the situation	10%	10%	10%	10%	60%
3.* My intake worker spoke up for me with other professionals involved with my case	-	11%	-	11%	78%
4. My intake worker understood how hard it was to get my child(ren) taken away	10%	10%	0%	0%	80%
5. My intake worker informed me about the help that was available to me	20%	10%	20%	40%	10%
6. My intake worker's expectations of me were reasonable	-	10%	30%	50%	10%
7. My intake worker told me what s/he planned to say in court about my family and me - both negative and positive	10%	-	-	-	90%
8. My intake worker listened to my side of the story	-	10%	20%	70%	-
9. My intake worker cared about my kids	-	20%	30%	50%	-
10. When my intake worker said s/he would do something s/he did it.	-	-	20%	40%	40%
11. My intake worker devoted enough time to my case	-	10%	30%	40%	20%
12. My intake worker told me who I could contact for help when he/she was gone for more than a day or two	10%	-	10%	10%	70%
13.* My right to make decisions about my children was respected during the time they were in foster care	-	11%	-	-	89%
14. My intake worker got me necessary services in a timely manner	10%	-	10%	20%	60%
15. My intake worker returned my calls	-	10%	-	50%	40%
16. My intake worker had experience dealing with the kinds of problems my family and I were experiencing	30%	-	10%	40%	20%
17.* I was involved in decisions made about my case	33%	11%	11%	33%	11%
18. My intake worker was clear about what s/he expected of me	-	-	20%	70%	10%
19.* Meetings with my intake worker occurred at least once	-	-	-	89%	11%

20. My intake worker respected my right to privacy	10%	-	10%	70%	10%
21.* My intake worker helped me talk to my child(ren) often	11%	-	-	-	89%
22. My intake worker explained to me what would happen in court	-	-	10%	-	90%
23. My intake worker respected my culture	-	-	30%	70%	-
24. My intake worker calmed my fears about what the agency could do to my children and me.	30%	-	10%	50%	10%

\*N=9

**Families were asked to describe their relationship with their intake worker using one or two words. About a third of the families interviewed used language indicating a positive experience including “good” as part of their response and stating that they felt listened to and helped by the intake worker. About a third of the responses indicated that there was not much time to develop a relationship with their intake worker, stating it was “brief,” “short” or “nonexistent.” A few families expressed the relationship in negative terms, stating it was “irritating,” “unnerving,” “cold” and “unfriendly.”**

### *Services*

The next set of questions were about the types of services the family received and the extent to which these services matched what the family did well and what they needed. Families were asked what services they received while working with child protection. **Only 30% of the families responded that they received services.** Of those families, only one family followed up on a referral but reported that the service provider never called the family back. Families were asked what services their children received, including any assessments. **Ten percent of the families received services for their children. When asked if the families felt the services they received fit their family’s needs and concerns, half stated “no” and half stated “yes,”** although one family indicated they could have used more help. **When asked if the help or services fit what their family did well, 40% reported “yes,” 20% reported “no” and one stated “[the worker] was not very encouraging about what we did well”.** The remaining families stated that the question

was not applicable. **When asked if they received services that were unhelpful, 40% indicated this question was not applicable, and of the remaining, all but one stated no.** The one remaining family stated the service “hindered more than helped” and that the service agency was “not run well.” Families were asked if there were services or help they needed but did not receive. Two families indicated “no”, but the **remaining families’ responses included needing help with material resources (furniture, employment, finances) and services for various types of counseling or assessments.**

**When asked if services were sensitive to their family’s culture, one family stated yes and three stated no. When asked to explain how services did or did not address their family’s culture, one family stated their kids had a social worker who was of the same race as the family; another family stated “they did not respect that I was a mom who stayed home with the kids and that time and money were limited.”** A third of the families were already involved with agencies or had been receiving some services, both formal and informal but the majority of the families were not involved with any service agency and had not been receiving any help or outside services prior to their involvement with child protection. **Some of the families worked with their intake worker to find appropriate services or to work with service providers that the family was already working with.** One family stated that the worker agreed to allow the family to go to their own clinic rather than one the child protection worker had suggested, which the family appreciated. Families were asked if they knew whether the intake worker and service providers had met or talked about the family’s case when they (the family) were not present. One third of the families indicated that had happened although one family did not identify with whom the worker communicated. Other families indicated their worker had talked with the police, other family members, and medical staff.

The families were asked to list five things they liked about the first few days and weeks of their experience with child protection services and five things they would change. **Two families stated there was nothing they liked about their experience with child protection services. A few families expressed that they liked that their intake worker helped them get services. Some families listed characteristics such as “understanding,” “non-judgmental,” “polite,” “empathetic,” and “kind.”** In terms of

**things families would have changed about their experience with child protection the most common responses were either that they would rather not to have been involved in child protection at all, or a wish that more services had been available. Responses also included rude or insensitive treatment by the intake worker and the lack of power they experienced due to not knowing what was going to happen to their family.**

### ***Family and worker concerns***

Families were asked whether they or their intake worker had concerns about the family's financial situation. **All of the families indicated that they had concerns but the intake worker either did not ask about their financial situation or did not seem to think it was as much of a concern. When asked if the family or the intake worker had concerns about whether they had enough support from family and/or community, 90% of the families responded that it wasn't mentioned by the worker or if the family mentioned lacking support that the worker did not seem to be concerned. Families were also asked whether they or the intake worker had concerns about their parenting or their children's response to their parenting. Eighty percent of the families responded "No" to the question and one family responded "Yes," and indicated that the intake worker suggested counseling. Another family mentioned having concerns about child behavior, but not wanting to talk to the intake worker about their concerns.**

Approximately one-third of the families reported they had concerns about how things in their lives at the time were affecting them, and for these families stress was their top concern. **Families were asked if they or the intake worker were concerned about how events from their past affected them during the present time. Seventy percent of the families responded "No."** One family stated that "[the worker] didn't want to hear anything about my past." **Twenty percent of the families mentioned past abuse and/or lack of past support from family and community as being a concern.**

**Families were given an open opportunity to share whether there was anything else they wished to state about their experience with child protection. One of the themes that emerged from the responses was a desire for some type of follow up**

**from workers.** Families mentioned that they received a letter in the mail informing them their case had been closed and they would have preferred hearing this information from the worker or they wished that the worker had checked in with them to see how the family was doing. One of the families felt child protection was too easy on fathers and “gets down on the parent kids are living with.” This family stated, “They need to put a bigger responsibility on the father. It was always pinned on me. The father needs to be penalized as well. Dads need to be held responsible. I had to beg for my kids’ dad to be involved.” Two families had positive things to say about their worker. One family stated, “In the beginning it was so rough, but it turned around in a week...The intake worker completely took my side and changed in the end. He was on top of it and made it feel like he really cared.”

## **Discussion**

The responses of the families who were willing to share their experiences with child protection for this evaluation were varied. As a result of the small sample size, these families’ experiences cannot be generalized beyond the scope of these particular families. Instead these families’ experiences can be viewed as case studies through which to examine the Ramsey County child protection experience. Family relationships with workers varied. Thirty percent of the families described their relationship to the worker in negative or adversarial terms and an equal proportion of families describe their relationship to the worker in positive terms. Common reasons for negative relationships were 1) the limited availability of time to develop a relationship with their worker, and 2) experiencing out-of-home placement. In general, families reported that their worker listened to their side of the story, devoted the appropriate amount of time to their case and was responsive, had reasonable expectations of them and was respectful of them, and informed them about available services. Families reported less satisfaction with worker empathy and experience, and family involvement in the process. Regarding services and assessments, the majority of the families did not describe receiving services or assessments that the families themselves felt were needed. The families’ responses indicated that although financial concerns were a common self-identified need, most of the workers did not address these concerns. Questions about culture and culturally appropriate services in the family interviews

revealed that families found it difficult to engage in conversations around culture as it applies to child protection services. Finally, the short amount of time that families were involved with child protection created some concerns for families. Families felt the workers did not get to know them well enough to identify their needs; emphasis was on safety concerns and not on larger contexts such as the family's financial stability, past concerns or family history that might affect the incident being investigated. The families felt the worker's involvement with their family ended abruptly, with a lack of communication about how the case was going, when it was going to close, or follow-up afterward regarding any unmet or unidentified needs and concerns.

Ramsey County Child Protection intake workers are challenged by timelines and practice philosophies that may encourage brief and abrupt interactions with families in order to investigate and make a determination of maltreatment within statute requirements. The nature of an intake assessment is itself often perceived as adversarial by family members and may require a deeper level of engagement with families. Increased engagement with families will help workers and families identify their needs, culturally appropriate services that may be available, and improve communication in general. The Comprehensive Family Assessment practice model may help to facilitate intake workers' communication and transparency about the child protection intake process, assist in helping families identify their areas of strengths, needs and concerns, explore the desire for and availability of culturally specific services (building off of Ramsey County's Anti-Racism Initiative), communicate more clearly regarding the case closing process, and improving the experience of child protection involvement for families in Ramsey County.

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