# Goal Setting for Success with Caregivers in Child Welfare

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When developing case plans with caregivers, we want to support them in creating goals that will set them up for success. Research has shown that the way goals are framed can affect a person's wellbeing and chances of accomplishing their goals[1]. One way of maximizing the benefit caregivers can get from their case plan is through creating approach goals as opposed to avoidance goals:

- **Approach goals** focus on moving us *toward* the outcome we want or increasing positive behaviors. An example of an approach goal might be: "excel at my job by going to work every day and letting my boss know when I am sick."

- **Avoidance goals** focus on moving *away* from the outcome we don't want or decreasing negative behaviors. An example of an avoidance goal might be: "don't miss too much work and lose my job."

When we think about our goals in either approach or avoidance terms, we activate different systems in our brain. The system that helps us avoid negative outcomes is primed to respond to punishment and motivates us through fear and anxiety, while the system that helps us approach positive outcomes is primed to respond to reward and motivates us through positive feelings like enjoyment and a sense of fulfillment[2]. These two systems both serve important evolutionary purposes. Our "avoidance" system is designed to help us survive while our "approach" system is designed to help us flourish[3].

Even though our avoidance system is necessary and can be helpful at times, working on avoidance goals has been shown to consume more mental energy than working on approach goals[4]. Avoidance goals may also contribute to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and physical illness if overused[5]. In contrast, approach goals have been shown to produce better outcomes for people overall[6].

In general, people do better at meeting approach goals than avoidance goals[7]. When we think about approach goals, it primes us to visualize the desired outcome. For example, what image comes to your mind when you hear the goal, "win the race?" It's likely an image that depicts victory, and you probably feel a sense of encouragement as a result. When we think about avoidance goals however, we are more likely to be visualizing the undesired outcome. When you hear, "don't lose," you are probably picturing yourself losing and feeling dread. This act of visualization may contribute to our chances of succeeding or failing at our goals[8].

## Strategies for Workers

The benefit of setting approach goals comes from how we *think* about our goals[12]. For this reason, simply rewriting an avoidance goal into an approach goal for someone may not be enough to get the full benefit. If a caregiver or child you work with is struggling to come up with an approach goal, try using one of these strategies to get them thinking about what they want to work toward in life:

➡ Exploring the "why" behind their goals

➡ Asking what they hope to gain from accomplishing their goals

➡ Taking them through a visualization exercise like the "miracle question"

➡ Asking how their life would be different if they were able to make the change they want to make

Additionally, people enjoy working on approach goals more than working on avoidance goals[9]. When working on approach goals, we are more likely to notice little steps we succeed in taking toward that goal. Noticing these little successes helps us feel closer to our desired outcome. This can give us a boost in our mood, reinforce our self-efficacy, and increase our motivation to continue working toward our goals. When working on avoidance goals, we are more likely to notice when we fall back into engaging in the undesired behavior, as opposed to all the time we spend not engaging in that behavior. It's also more difficult to visualize how close we are to meeting our goal, since our goal is simply to put as much distance as possible between us and the undesired outcome. This can leave us feeling frustrated and reduce our motivation to continue working toward our goal[10].

Practically, child welfare workers can work with caregivers to create case plans focused on approach goals instead of avoidance goals.

### Developing approach goals:

One way to tell the difference between approach and avoidance goals is through the language being used in the goal. Here are some words we often use in our goals that may indicate whether they are approach or avoidance goals:

| Approach words: | Avoidance words: |
| --- | --- |
| Do | Don't |
| Obtain | Lose |
| Increase | Decrease |
| Begin | Stop |
| Attend | Miss |
| With | Without |
| Replace | Reduce |

You'll notice that the approach goal words are used to encourage positive behaviors, while the avoidance goal words are used to discourage negative behaviors. For this reason, we can think of approach goals as "yes" goals, and avoidance goals as "no" goals. While this list isn't exhaustive, it helps to give us ideas of what kinds of words we use to encourage positive behaviors versus discouraging negative behaviors. The people we work with will likely start with an avoidance goal in mind that they want to work on. We can encourage them and help them in turning their avoidance goal into an approach goal[11]. Here are some examples:

| Alexis (she/her) | Sol (they/them) |
| --- | --- |
| Alexis' relapse of symptoms of mental illness have created a barrier for her to take care of her son the way she would like to. When you and Alexis meet to create her case plan, Alexis states her goal is to "stop forgetting to take my meds." How might Alexis turn this avoidance goal into an approach goal? Here are some suggestions:<br><br>• "I will take my medications every day as prescribed."<br>• "I will set a daily alarm on my phone to remind me to take my medication." | Sol has been struggling to keep their home a clean and safe environment for their kids. Working together on their case plan, Sol tells you, "I don't want my house to be such a mess." How might Sol turn this into an approach goal? Here are some suggestions:<br><br>• "I will devote one hour a day to picking up and cleaning."<br>• "I will wash the dirty laundry each Sunday." |

## Case example:

Here is an example of how we can help someone shift to an approach goal by using a visualization exercise:

*Rafael (he/him) set a goal when he first started working with his Child Protection Services (CPS) worker to quit drinking so he wouldn't lose his kids. At their next meeting, Rafael disclosed that he was struggling to meet his goal:*

**Rafael:** "Every time I think about not drinking, all I want to do is drive to the store and get a bottle of whiskey. When I eventually break down and take a drink, I just feel out those feelings."

**CPS worker:** "You've been working really hard at your goal and it's frustrating to feel like you're not getting anywhere with it. I think the way we laid out your goal may be causing you more stress and making it harder to succeed. Let's do a visualization activity to help us rethink your goal."

*Rafael agreed, and the CPS worker continued to guide Rafael through the "miracle question" exercise:*

**CPS worker:** "I want you to imagine that a miracle occurs over night while you're sleeping, and when you wake up tomorrow morning, your problem is magically gone… How do you know it's gone?… What does that look like?… What does that feel like?… What are you doing differently throughout the day?"

**Rafael:** "I'm the dad I want to be. My kids have my full attention. I'm playing with them every day, eating healthy, and drinking plenty of water. I'm setting a good example for them like I want to."

**CPS worker:** "That's a great vision for the future, so what can you do instead of drinking to help you get there?"

**Rafael:** "Practice the following activities next time I feel a craving to drink: Urge surfing, call a supportive friend, take a walk with my children."

**CPS worker:** "Those are really important and positive steps, Rafael. Let's be sure to plan for sure the drinking doesn't get out of hand?"

**Rafael:** "I will have a can of beer instead of a couple of shots of whiskey."

*Rafael and his CPS worker reframed Rafael's goal and objectives in approach terms to match his vision of success. Now when Rafael thinks about his goal, he is joyful and hopeful as he imagines himself as the dad he wants to be. Every day he meets his goal, Rafael is reminded that he's living out his vision for his family. Rafael successfully reduced his drinking as a result, meeting the goals on his CPS case plan.*

## Future Research

There is still a lot to uncover in our understanding of approach and avoidance goals. For one study avoidance framed as a person their smoking were more effective in helping people stop smoking than approach goals[13]. It may be that when we're already in an unpleasant experience we want to get out of, making our goal to "cure" ourselves of it could be helpful.

Studies looking into approach and avoidance goals have largely been in academic settings in North America or Europe, sampled neurotypical, white college students. More research is needed with diverse populations and contexts to better understand how to use approach or avoidance goals most effectively.

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