

# **PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN CHILD SAFETY CONFERENCES: WHAT PROMOTES PARENT ENGAGEMENT?**

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# CHILD SAFETY CONFERENCE

Birthparents and/or legal guardians and CPS staff assess safety concerns and make the best safety decision for a child.

Conference is held after an emergency removal.

Parental cooperation is expected, though many of them act defensively towards child protection workers due to numerous factors.

As a result, safety decisions are often made without parents' input and informed participation.

# BACKGROUND

Social service providers have long agreed that client empowerment and inclusion in the service planning and delivery will result in improved outcomes for them

## *HOWEVER:*

- Little empirical knowledge on its effectiveness in working with marginalized populations
- Especially difficult to engage parents who are being investigated for neglect and/or abuse

# STUDY GOALS

Examine the role of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

Learn about the impact of CWOP Rep services on parents & families

**Community  
Representatives  
(aka Parent Reps)**

Examine barriers to parental engagement

Discuss factors promoting engagement

# METHODOLOGY: MIXED-METHOD STUDY

## Quantitative Data

Child Safety Conference  
outcome data

- CWOP Involvement  
(East Harlem, N=232)
- No CWOP Involvement  
(Central Harlem,  
N=293)

Parent Satisfaction Surveys  
(N=68)

## Qualitative Data

In-depth face-to-face  
interviews

- Parents (N=21)
- Community  
Representatives  
(N=9)
- Child Protection  
Services Staff (N=30)

# PARENT SATISFACTION WITH CWOP REPRESENTATIVES

Satisfaction levels were high ( $N=68$ )

$M=3.70$ ,  $SD = .525$  (on a scale of “1” to “4”)

72.7% of parents reported being “Very Satisfied”

24.2% of parents reported being “Satisfied”

3% were “Partially Satisfied”

# PARENT ENGAGEMENT

## Barriers

Stigma

Parental emotional state

Lack of knowledge  
about CWOP's role

Cultural differences

# ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS: STIGMA

*I think that parents view ACS negatively as whole as and they just don't want anything to do with ACS, which I can understand because it is overwhelming to have an ACS case. (CPS worker)*

**Child welfare involvement was associated with concepts like bad parenting, child abuse or neglect, drug use, mental illness, or other conditions, which in turn created stigma.**

# ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS: *PARENTAL EMOTIONAL STATE*

Tense  
Feelings

Confusion

Anger

Fear

Apprehension  
and mistrust

*I was angry. I was very angry!... I didn't care who I curse out, who I spoke to. I just didn't give a hoot. 'Cause ... the system had my kids! (P)*

**Birthparents were described as shutting down at the mention of ACS and not wanting to share their story with yet another person.**

*"Some feel embarrassed; some don't want to talk at all about it. They feel that it's intrusive, that it's nobody's business" (PR)*

*"I didn't know if she was with me or against me" (P)*

# ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS

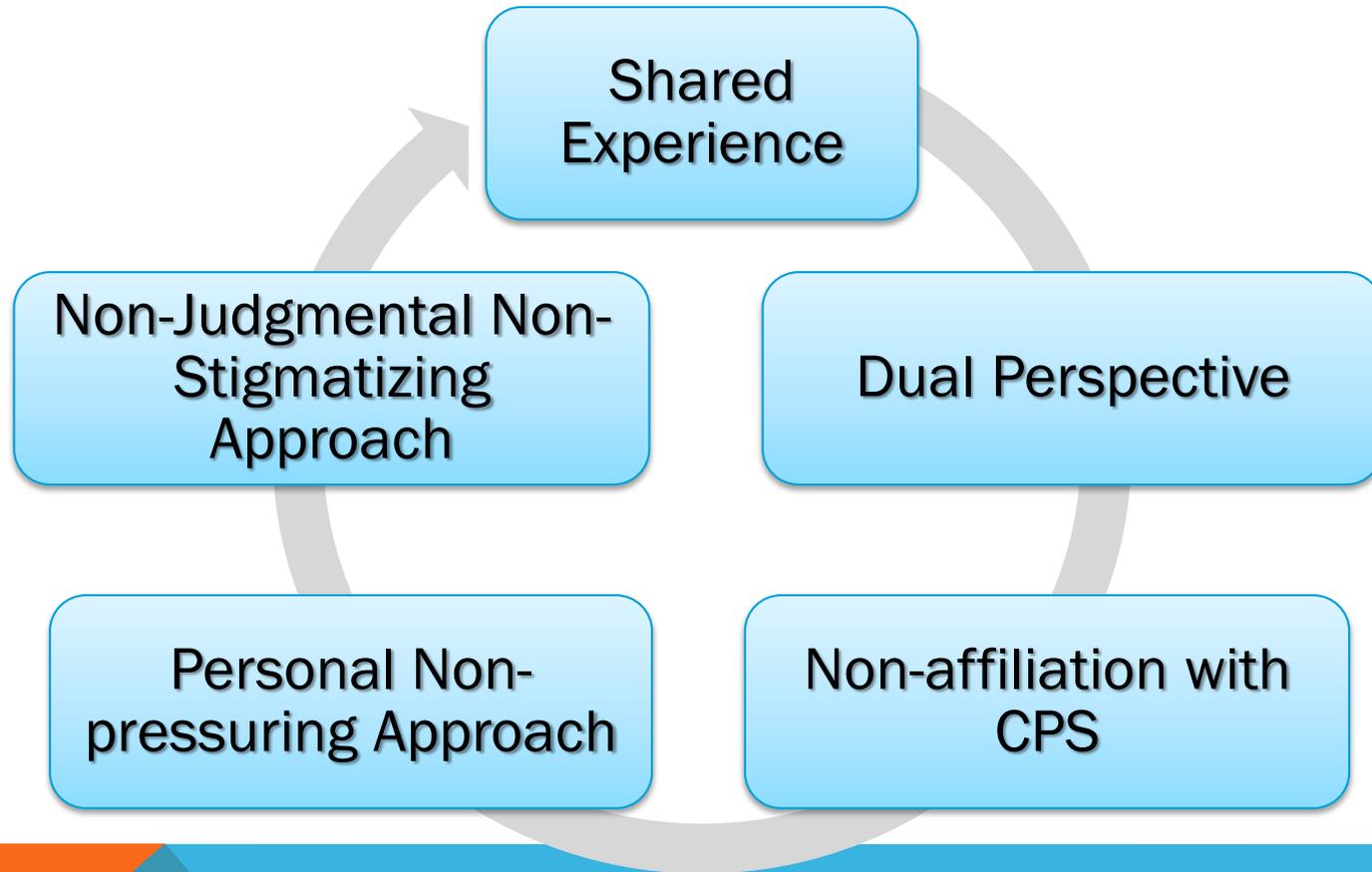
## Lack of Knowledge about CWOP's Role

- Misconception about CWOP and parent representatives and their connection to ACS

## Cultural Differences

- Customs and language (immigrants families), isolation and being guarded
- *“The challenge is to explain and re-teach that there are certain things that one can and can't do. Sometimes families have a hard time changing certain things” (PR).*

# FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT



# FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT: SHARED EXPERIENCE

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Unique  
understanding

*I know what she/he is feeling. I've been there, I've done that. I know it's hard. (CR)*

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System of  
mutual trust  
and honesty

*If they meet someone who's actually been through it and actually has custody back of their children, it makes it a little easier for them to open up and be honest. (CR)*

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Disclosure of  
personal ACS  
interaction

*I'm very open about my situation and my coming in contact with ACS and letting them know what it is: "I don't know what you've been through, but I know what it is to deal with this system [CPS]." (CR)*

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# FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT:

## SHARED EXPERIENCE (cont.)

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Instilling  
hope

*...It's that support in saying okay I've gone through this, and you can. It's kind of an optimistic approach and hope. (P)*

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Legitimized  
position

*The fact that they've been there and experienced similar situations that me and my husband were going through, that encouraged me to listen more and be more open to things and advice they had. (P)*

*Because not only do they know the process, but they know about their emotions and feelings that come along with that. They've been through it. So, they know what the family is feeling; what they are afraid of... When parents hear that, it's like a light switch. They trust them more. (CPS)*

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# **FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT: DUAL PERSPECTIVE**

Parent representatives hold indispensable knowledge on legal and other aspects of the child welfare system as well as have an exceptional understanding of the circumstances of parents and families facing child abuse and/or neglect allegations.

*I feel, being that I went through this, I have an idea of what the parent is going through and now I can sit on the other side, so I can help them from both angles. (PR)*

*Reps assist birthparents in understanding the multiple avenues that ACS and the parents would be required to pursue in order to ensure child safety and reunification. (PR)*

*Reps help dismantle the negative connotation surrounding ACS and its' employees. (CPS)*

# ***FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT: NON-AFFILIATION WITH CPS***

At the initial contact with the parents, Reps make it clear that they are not affiliated with CPS. Parents described feelings of relief upon learning that they had a neutral person willing to participate in the conference, someone who was not affiliated with ACS.

*I'm there to let them know that I'm from the community, that I'm no way affiliated with ACS, 'cause they already feel uncomfortable, they're already going into a battlefield. I am there to let them know that I'm there for them and I've been through that. I know the challenges of sitting at a child safety conference. (PR)*

# **FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT: PERSONAL NON-PRESSURING APPROACH**

The manner in which Reps approached parents was  
*“friendly, nice, and easy to talk to”*

*She presented herself in a diplomatic way; very friendly. She gave me an option, “If you don't wanna talk to me, you don't have to, I can leave right now... but this is what they are going to ask you...” So I had an option... I was like “yeah, please stay...” (P)*

*She came up to me, extended her hand and introduced herself, she called me by my name, “Ms. Johnson, what can I do for you?” These things mean a lot... (P)*

# FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT: PERSONAL NON-PRESSURING APPROACH

## Showing Support

Compassion

Honesty

Listening

*I don't say much, cuz ...what can you say to a parent at that moment, just "I'm here for you to listen." "That's all I could say, and it's powerful. (PR)*

## Communication

Speaking the parents' language

Translating terminology

Translating language

*Since I speak Spanish, they feel so much more comfortable because they be like, "I went to a conference and everyone speaks English, and I had my interpreter, and I barely understood the interpreter." (PR)*

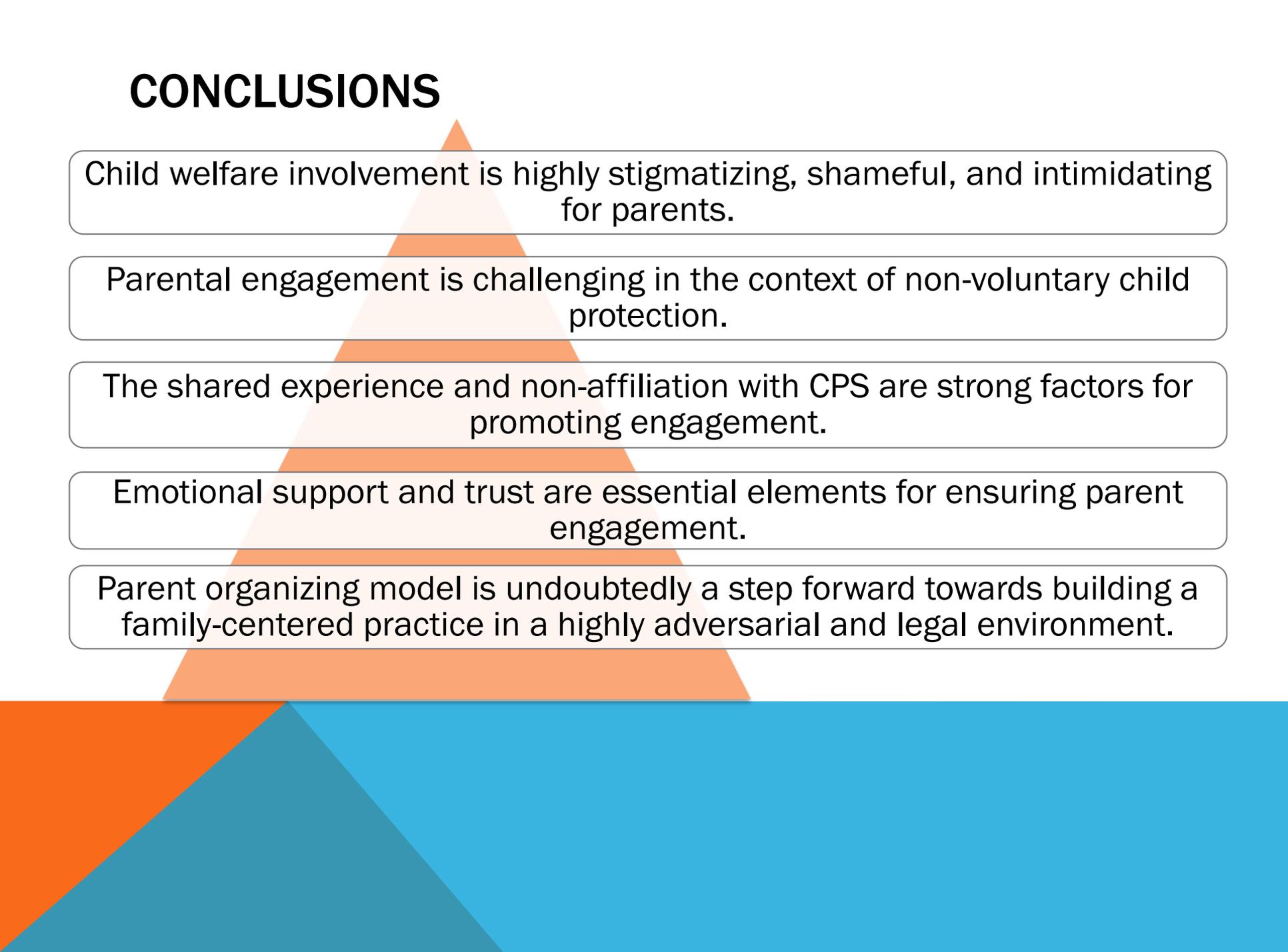
# **FACTORS PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT: NON-JUDGMENTAL AND NON-STIGMATIZING APPROACH**

Reps conveyed optimism in a pessimistic situation; they are “not looking down on you” and “not blaming you”

*You don't necessarily know that you're gonna make it out of that situation at that point. You want to believe that you're gonna get your child or your kids back. You want to believe that you can rectify the situation, and it's hard to believe that because there's no one in that room besides CWOP that had that approach to say, you know, “this could be rectified...” (P)*

*ACS was like “you did something wrong,” “you admitted to disciplining your daughter... you were wrong” as opposed to “what could we do to assist you as a parent?” The Rep was like, “well, why were you frustrated? ...Here's a parenting class... here's anger management...” ACS was all about “you did wrong, and your kids are out of your home...” (P)*

# CONCLUSIONS



Child welfare involvement is highly stigmatizing, shameful, and intimidating for parents.

Parental engagement is challenging in the context of non-voluntary child protection.

The shared experience and non-affiliation with CPS are strong factors for promoting engagement.

Emotional support and trust are essential elements for ensuring parent engagement.

Parent organizing model is undoubtedly a step forward towards building a family-centered practice in a highly adversarial and legal environment.

# NEXT STEPS

- ◆ There is a need to rigorously evaluate the parent representation model in order to be able to replicate, implement and/or sustain it successfully.
- ◆ Expansion of Parent Representatives into all NYC boroughs.



Lalayants, M. (2013). Parent engagement in child safety conferences: The role of parent representatives. *Child Welfare, 91*(6).

**Thank you!**

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