



# Putting Families First Playbook Educators

## Overview

Educators and school administrators are highly invested in the well-being of children and often have more direct contact with a child or youth than any other adult in their life. Educators see firsthand how the challenges families face impact children in the learning environment, and they sometimes feel powerless to address complex family dynamics within their roles.

A point of concern for many educators is lack of understanding around how child welfare decisions are made. The following talking points can support important conversations between agencies and educators around decision-making and supporting children and families in-home.

*“Cross- system collaboration is critical to supporting our students, families and community. We can better understand and offer supportive services if we know the needs in school and home. Working with our local Department of Human Services increases the support for our students and families. Sometimes having a non-school member discuss outside support with families is more effective. This collaborative approach ensures that children and families are supported in a more integrated, thoughtful way, which leads to better outcomes for all involved.”*

- Jennifer Schill  
Elementary School Counselor  
Barron School District

## Putting Families First in Schools

- Educators often see when children and families are struggling before they come to the attention of the child welfare system. Because of this unique position, schools and educators play a vital role in supporting children and their families.
- For busy school personnel, engaging child welfare can seem like the right answer. However, child welfare is often not best positioned to respond. Child welfare systems have strict statutory guidelines on when they can or cannot intervene in families' lives.
- Child welfare intervention is not always in the family's best interests, either.
  - In Wisconsin, the most common reason for Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement is neglect, which is often tied to economic stressors.
    - Research shows that impoverished families are more likely to be referred to child welfare – and families of color are much more likely to experience poverty than white families. These and other systemic barriers for families of color can disproportionately increase the probability for involvement with the child welfare system.
    - See "Research on Supporting Children and Families Together" for research on poverty and its relationship to child welfare system involvement:  
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/familyfirst/playbook-research.pdf>
  - In many cases, families need connection to services and resources – like housing, child care, counseling or other supports – versus intervention. Many think that child welfare has access to supports that the larger community does not, but unfortunately, this is not the case.
    - See "Preventing Removals and Investing in Prevention" for research on prevention, removals and long-term impacts:  
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/familyfirst/playbook-prevention.pdf>

## Make it personal:

Use child narratives, real examples and storytelling when training educators. Highlight examples that increase empathy for families. Share about the process and practices of child welfare work in Wisconsin to build trust in how the work is done.

## What Can Educators Expect Around Putting Families First?

Educators will continue to be key partners in supporting children, youth and families, whether or not they come to child welfare intervention as they do now. They will also continue to be crucial support to children at risk for or already experiencing maltreatment. They should continue to report concerns of child abuse and neglect to their local child welfare agency in their role as mandated reporters. Child welfare professionals will continue to prioritize child safety and maintaining school stability for children and youth.

Educators may also notice strengthened efforts to keep families in-home, including:

- Increased use of services, supports and safety planning that allow children and youth to remain at home when their family is facing challenges;
- Empowerment of the child's family to collaborate more closely with school staff to understand, participate in and advocate for their child's educational needs;
- Strengthened efforts to maintain and strengthen children's connections with people who know and love them;
- Efforts by child welfare agencies to help mandated reporters better understand the difference between child abuse and neglect concerns that should be reported and situations where families need resources, support or community services;
- and collaboration with community partners to develop and strengthen local resources and services that are accessible to all families.

## Barron County Partners with Schools to Put Families First

The Barron County Department of Health and Human Services and Barron County schools work closely together to provide ongoing and meaningful support to children, families and each other.

Barron County and its school district share a commitment to do what's best for children and families. They also understand that doing what's best for children and families means working together, across systems – child welfare, schools, public health – to provide fuller, stronger support and keep more children safely in their homes.

Their partnership is built on collaboration and communication. They meet frequently to share updates and information about the work being done in schools and Barron County, to set goals and to plan next steps for things like grants and trainings. School and child welfare professionals in Barron County communicate openly with each other and make time to ask and answer questions about options for families, decisions made and more.

This relationship-building is reflected in how Barron County and its schools work with families. School and child welfare professionals will be present in calls or meetings with families, and they consider support options and next steps together. Consistent and open communication is valued in these spaces, too, so families understand the process and expectations for situations like truancy proceedings.

By working together, Barron County and its schools demonstrate what meaningful partnership – for and with children and families – looks like.

## Food for thought:

Educators care deeply about their students. Emphasize the connection between the well-being of children and the well-being of their families.

- Build on existing empathy for children with the message that children and youth do best when their families are supported to meet their needs and parents are empowered as the experts on their children.
- Ask what they may need from human services or the community to support these children and families, without calling CPS. Are there other community resources that could be highlighted?

## How Can Educators Support Putting Families First?

**Build a supportive relationship with the family.** A strong connection with a caring professional can be significantly impactful in the life of a family. Educators can make efforts to build empathetic and non-judgmental connection with the child's parents and caregivers.

**Food for thought:** There are many reasons caregivers may not feel comfortable in educational settings or participating in scheduled meetings and events. It is important to stay away from assumptions that caregivers don't care about their children or their education and continue pursuing connection.

**Offer resources to strengthen families.** Children do best when their family is supported in meeting their needs. Educators are in a unique role to provide critical support. When a family appears to be struggling, reach out to them directly. Check in to see how the family is doing and normalize that all families need help sometimes.

- Provide families with information about the resources and services available at school and in the community.
- Consider identifying a "point person" at your school for family resource needs. This person may be able to help brainstorm solutions to provide families before CPS may need to be called.
- Create a bulletin board or community resource hub that makes information visible and easily accessible for everyone. Families may not respond to offers of assistance, especially at first. Listen to what families say they need and continue efforts to learn about what will work for each unique family.

**Partner with child welfare professionals.** Participate in multidisciplinary meetings with the family, child welfare professional and other service providers when appropriate. Collaboration can help create a system for regular communication and partnership focused on how to best support the child and family.

- Please note, a family's status with child welfare is considered confidential. School personnel may have limited information about child welfare's involvement, though they can still be supportive team members.

**Continue to center the family.** Regardless of child welfare involvement and whether or not the child is in the parent's home, in most cases parent remain the legal guardian and most consistent person in a child's life. They should continue to be invited to school meetings and events, as well as informed of a child's progress at school.

## Additional Resources



**What is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators** - a guide for educators that provides an overview of child welfare and describes how educators and child welfare professionals can work together.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/what-child-welfare-guide-educators/>

**Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators** - a resource that provides educators and school administrators with information about how to best work with children who have experienced trauma.

<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/child-trauma-toolkit-educators>