Bureau of Children's Services

Deciding Together Guide Instructions

The Deciding Together Guide provides a clear, step-by-step team approach to facilitate dialogue between service coordinators and families using a family-centered, collaborative decision-making framework to develop comprehensive outcome-based support plans. This approach recognizes and maximizes a child's and their family's capacities, resiliency, and unique abilities, and promotes self-determination and inclusion in all facets of family and community life.

Deciding Together Protocol: The Five Steps

Step 1: Issues and Goals
- Strengths, problems, needs
- Goals and outcomes being sought

Step 2: Creative Thinking

Step 3: Weighing Options

Step 4: Developing the Plan

Step 5: Evaluating the Plan

This manual provides instructions for the team regarding how to facilitate each of the steps, factors to consider, and examples to help illustrate the steps.

The child's team typically includes the child or youth, family members, the support and service coordinator (SSC), and other key support people typically identified by the family. This approach within a team model promotes transparent and collaborative decision-making, increased follow-through by all team members, and better outcomes for the child and family.

Families are the experts regarding their child's and their own lives. Other team members are there to help support the family to ensure the child's best life. To promote full participation by the child or youth and their family, it is important to provide them with an overview of the Deciding Together process before starting, and to encourage family members to share their thoughts, ideas, and questions throughout the process.

Each family has a unique story and set of life experiences. Knowledge of the child and family's strengths, interests, hopes, dreams, priorities, and resources aids the team in building an individualized service plan that builds upon current strengths and resiliencies of the child and family.

Everyone on the team engages in the decision-making steps.

Step 1: Issues and Goals

Issue and Concerns: What are the concerns, problems, or core issues?

- Listen while the family shares their concerns or challenges.
- Explore what the child and family would like to work on or improve.
- Look at short-term and long-term needs for the child and family.
- Prioritize those that are most important to the family.

Goals and Outcomes: What goals are being sought?

- Ask the family what kind of results would they like to see.
- Envision the child's best life and what this would look like.
- Explore what goals would help the child and family enjoy new activities, build relationships, and learn new skills.
- Consider upcoming transitions.

Purpose

It is important to encourage the family to start where they feel comfortable. Some families will want to start by sharing their struggles and challenges; others will want to start by sharing recent successes or the areas in their lives that are going well.

Support planning typically initiates from either a proactive or reactive perspective. Proactive planning occurs during initial plan development and at regular intervals throughout the course of ongoing work with a family. Proactive planning is strength-based and starts with the focus on outcomes. Reactive planning typically occurs when a current problem is presented to the team. Reactive planning focuses on responding to a problem.

When beginning with proactive planning, the conversation starts with the strengths, outcomes, and goals being sought and then explores barriers that may limit achieving these goals using problem-solving prompts. When using the Deciding Together Guide for reactive planning, initiate the discussion by fully unpacking the core problem(s) first, then identify how it relates to current or new goals and outcomes.

Grouping issues and outcomes into Step 1 requires the team to determine whether they are starting from a proactive or reactive planning framework. Both places are important in coordination, and each requires a complete exploration of the circumstances in order to proceed.

Take time and listen to the child and family's perspective, and assist as needed in exploring the underlying concerns. Include a holistic view of the child and family's circumstances and their unique vision for the child's full participation in family and community life. Be sure to consider a family's culture and traditions when exploring concerns and goals.

Thorough exploration using open dialogue at this critical first step helps the whole team to reach an understanding of the core problem.

Practice

Issues and Needs

When identifying issues and needs, take the time needed to understand the full scope of the concerns or needs. Avoid offering solutions during this step. It is easy to skip to a solution to the problem or a service to meet the need. Avoid the temptation in Step 1 to start thinking of solutions or services; instead spend time learning the need(s).

It may be stressful for a child and their family to talk about problems. Be sensitive to how the conversation may impact the child or youth, and focus on strengths and goals.

Example questions to help with exploring issues and/or needs:
- What is happening?
- What is stressful in your day-to-day routines?
- Help me to understand better.

Examples of how a need, issue, or problem may be expressed:
- I need a break or I want respite.
- I need someone to be home with her while I go grocery shopping.
- The school keeps calling us to pick him up during the day due to behaviors.
- I just lost my job and I need help finding a job and managing bills.

Goals and Outcomes

When identifying the goals and outcomes being sought, it can be helpful to encourage the family to imagine what they would like for their child and family's future. (It is never too soon to be thinking about adolescence and adulthood.)

Shifting from services to goals and outcomes is a big change in thinking for many people. Sometimes it can be easy to identify the problems but more challenging to identify the outcomes or changes being sought. This step asks all team members to help identify or clarify potential outcomes.

Example questions to help with exploring outcomes:
- What are your hopes?
- What are your priorities for your family?
- What types of activities would you like to do as a family?
- What types of activities is your child interested in exploring?
- What does it look like when things are going well? or What would "better" look like?

Examples of an outcome or result include:
- I want her to learn how to socialize with other children.
- I'd like him to play with other children more often.
- I want to be able to do the laundry and dishes without worrying about her safety.

Step 2: Creative Thinking

What are all of the potential ways or options to assist the child and family in reaching the outcomes and addressing the issue(s)?

- Start with the family's input and ideas.
- Encourage participation and gather everyone's ideas.
- Include opportunities to increase independence and inclusion, to develop new skills, and to develop social connections for both the child and family.
- Consider natural (friends and family), community, and other potential support systems.

Purpose

With a clear understanding of the child and family's unique strengths, needs, and goals, the team can now start thinking creatively about potential supports that might move them toward their vision of full participation in family and community life. This step moves the discussion to imagining possible solutions.

Practice

Once the team has spent the time fully understanding the problem and how it relates to the child and family outcomes, creative thinking comes easier. This is an open process in which all team members consider ways to meet or reach the outcomes identified and address the problem. It is important to start with the family's input and ideas and then actively seek everyone's input. All ideas are welcome at this stage, regardless of whether they turn out to be the best solutions in the end. This is a time to gather a broad range of suggestions about services and who might provide support. It is not the time to analyze, critique, or reject any ideas. Narrowing the list comes later.

Considerations:
- Talk about how this issue might be addressed for any other child, including children without disabilities. This can help to promote more creative ways to consider resolutions.
- Be sure to think about all types of supports:
  - Birth to 3, Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) Waiver, Children's Community Options, Comprehensive Community Services, and other Medicaid programs
  - Resources through schools, child protection, and other public agencies
  - Community resources (such as community centers, libraries, nonprofit agencies, religious organizations, local support groups)
  - Natural supports, including extended family and friends
- Include opportunities to increase independence and inclusion, to develop new skills and social connections for both the child and family
- Explore child and family preferences
- Multiple supports may be needed to fully support the goal or outcome

Examples:
- Could a mentor help the child experience greater inclusion in the community?
- How could the child participate in an activity that matches their interests (playing soccer, drawing, or other hobbies)?
- What natural supports in the child's life could be drawn upon to contribute?
- Would a safety proofing or behavioral health crisis plan help ensure safety?
- Are other resources, such as FoodShare and housing assistance, available?

Step 3: Weigh Options

Which of the options would work well (be effective)?
- Include options that are culturally responsive and/or preferred by the child and family.
- Consider which options are reasonably expected to work.
- Include options that have a positive impact, without causing hardship, harm, or risk.
- Decide which options are allowable (comply with regulations), promote quality, and promote long-term results at the best value.
- Consider other systems (school individualized education plan, human services, or legally required supports).

Purpose

Not all of the suggested supports will be the best or most appropriate fit. During this stage, the team works together to identify which options are likely to work well (be effective); fit the family's priorities, values, and culture; and promote independence, inclusion, development of new skills, and social connections for the child and family.

This step provides another opportunity for service coordinators and families to share their expertise with one another as they work to develop the best course of action. Service coordinators can offer what they know about the Birth to 3 and CLTS programs, other available services and supports in the community, and successful strategies other families have tried. Families may also have knowledge in these areas, and additionally bring their expertise about their child, family, culture, preferences, and which services are most likely to achieve their desired outcomes.

Practice

Consider both short-term and long-term needs and goals. Explore which supports will benefit this unique child and family over the next few days, weeks, and months, and which may improve the child's development, life skills, and outcomes over the next few years.

Example Questions:
- What strategies make the most sense for this child? This particular family? These goals?

- What are the child's and family's preferences?
- Does it suit or fit the family's culture and values?
- What supports and services are likely to be most effective?
- Based on this family's knowledge of their child, which options are most likely to be effective?
- Is it cost-effective over the long term? Does it address current needs in a way that may prevent a larger issue, concern, or crisis down the road?

Special Considerations

"Positive risk-taking" is a model that recognizes that some risk-taking is a vital part of a good life for all people with or without disabilities. We all need to develop skills in making choices in order to have new experiences and accomplishments. Long-term goals of independence, self-direction, community inclusion, employment, and best quality of life are long-term outcomes to be promoted for every child (within the family's cultural framework).

Once an option is determined to be likely to work, or to be effective, the team then explores all funding options and considers cost-effectiveness. It is required that the team explores cost-effectiveness and ensures public funds are used responsibly. Decisions are never about costs alone; they are always about a balance of costs and degrees of effectiveness. Sometimes a more expensive option in the short term is actually more cost-effective in the long run. For example, an investment in skills-building services can improve a child's ability to be more independent and less reliant on others. In some instances a more costly short-term option is necessary in order to assure health and safety. For example, a fence may be necessary to assure safety, even if the long-term goal is to teach safety awareness in the community.

Step 4: Develop Plan

Develop the support plan together

- Identify who will be the providers of supports.
- Prioritize goals, establish timelines, and identify team members' responsibilities.
- Maximize community resources, such as Medicaid services, school, housing assistance, food stamps, natural supports, and community.
- Identify how and when to evaluate the plan for success.
- Stay engaged, work to understand all perspectives, and seek solutions.

Purpose

In this stage, the team sets priorities, decides on supports and services, and identifies roles and tasks to begin implementing the plan. The service coordinators create a service plan that lists all of the chosen supports and services and their respective start dates, frequency, and funding sources on one plan. The plan will indicate if another agency (such as school district, mental or behavioral health provider, child protective services, other health care plan) is responsible for providing and/or paying for a service. The

service plan also includes any relevant natural supports, such as friends, family, and community resources.

Practice

It is important to establish timelines, identify who is responsible for what actions, and schedule follow-up contacts with family and providers. It can be easy to leave a planning meeting in which everyone thinks that someone else was taking the next action steps, so be sure to document each person's role and responsibilities. Determine in advance how often the team will meet to review the effectiveness of the support plan and what will be measured to determine success.

Considerations

Identify how the team will determine whether the established support plan is working. Ask how the team will be able to know if it's working well. Identify what problem will be resolved and/or what outcomes will be met or supported.

Appeal Process

It is natural for people to have differences of opinion from time to time. If team members disagree, stay engaged in conversation; explain the thinking or rationale behind decisions and any relevant program requirements or limitations; and try to make sure everyone is heard and individual perspectives are understood. Sometimes additional information and/or guidance is needed before making a final decision.

Reasonable people, doing the best they can, may still disagree. Every family has the right to file for a hearing with the Division of Hearings and Appeals. Service coordinators are required to provide every family with information about their right to appeal (verbally and in writing) in any instance where services are denied, services are reduced from requested amount, and when the family's choice of provider is not approved. It is helpful to explain to families that requesting a formal appeal is not perceived as a negative action and is simply another avenue for advocating for their family.

Step 5: Evaluate Effectiveness

Is there progress? Is the plan working?

- Identify what is working well for the child and family.
- Identify areas in need of improvement or new goals.
- Determine if the plan needs to be adjusted.
- Repeat the steps to update the plan as needed.

Purpose

Service plans are living documents that are expected to be changed and updated regularly in response to the child and family's changing circumstances, priorities, and interests. In order to obtain the very best outcomes, it is important to regularly review the effectiveness of the supports and services.

Practice

Effectiveness can be measured by a child and family report (or review of daily or weekly journaling); by reports from caregivers, school staff, or other involved persons in the child's life; and/or by observed behavioral or health changes.

The best plans do not always yield the best results. When this occurs, go through the steps again to see if there is another support or service that could enhance the outcomes. Sometimes services work for a while and then lose effectiveness for a period of time; they may work again in the future. Regular assessment of the impact of supports and services is critical to provide the right services at the right time in the right amount.

Questions to consider when reviewing a plan include:
- How well does this set of supports and services meet the child and family's needs and promote their ability to achieve their desired outcomes? Is it an effective plan? Is there room for improvement?
- Have new needs emerged as a result of the child's growth and development?
- Has the child or family identified changes in their goals, interests, or priorities? How well does the current plan support those changes? Can it be more responsive?
- Have changes in circumstances either made the need for one type of service obsolete, or highlighted a need for another kind of service?
- Are there any new community supports or services that could be added to the plan?
- Does the plan continue to be cost-effective in the long term? Does providing a particular service now help prevent a greater need or crisis down the road?

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