Exploring Needs and Setting Goals

Families often seek services with a specific goal in mind. The goal that is presented at intake may not accurately reflect what the family desires or considers the primary issue. For example, Mrs. Jenkins may indicate that the goal for treatment is to “keep my son in school,” while his teacher may indicate that she wants to “get Sam to stop pushing other kids and crying so much.” The actual needs and goals must be discussed and clarified for the Jenkins family, the teacher and you. The script below can be used to obtain information about the needs and goals desired by the family members.

Exploring needs
“As I have mentioned before, the partnership is built on open communication—meaning it is important for everyone to voice what they are thinking or feeling. In order to better understand and address some of the concerns you raised, I want to discuss how your family would look different once goals are reached. When I say ‘look different,’ I mean how would each person behave differently, speak differently, or perform differently as compared to now.”

Ask family members to voice how things would be different. Write down their responses on a sheet or board that everyone can see. The family may not provide many responses initially, but this task can be revisited in other sessions. Use the Mrs. Jenkins example to help them come up with what they want to see change.

Shaping goals
“I feel that coming up with goals for your family is a good way to create strategies that will work for both [Child’s Name] and for your family. I realize that you may be looking to me to have the answers, but you are the real expert on your child and you probably have a good sense of what things may work and what things won’t work for your child. There are a variety of strategies to address problems that youth may be facing but not all of them make sense for every child, so I want you to feel comfortable right from the beginning in voicing your opinions, concerns, and ideas. I want you to think about our relationship as a partnership with the goal of helping [Child’s Name] get better. I feel it is important that you have a say in what ‘getting better’ means and how we plan to get there. If we come up with some goals, or things you would like to see by the end of treatment, it will help us to put together some strategies on getting there.

“Now that we have come up with a few ideas about how your family would be different, we need to identify the actual goals that that we all are working toward and the specific outcomes that we are all seeking. Let’s start with the first difference that [family member name] mentioned. Review it. It sounds like he/she would like to see that person/family _____________________. Is that what you mean? Tell me in your own words.”

Go through the goals together, keep all the ones that are obtainable and try to keep at least pieces of ones that may beyond the scope of your work.

Write out the agreed-upon goals with the family and make sure to get their input on how they should be prioritized.
Remember that throughout future sessions, you should refer to the original goals and check in with families and youth to see if changes or alterations should be made to them.

Also help families put into words their questions and concerns. Families may not always know what to ask, but they will likely have questions.