

# Practical Tips and Guidelines for Mental Health Practitioners and Service Providers

## Engaging with Families and Youth/Young Adults

Approach/Attitude	Activities
<p><b>Family and youth are experts of their situation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inclusion of the family’s voices and opinions during all stages of planning and decision-making is necessary for sustainable change and engagement.</li> <li>▪ Recognize the power differentials that are within the situation: As the professional/paraprofessional, how can you make the conversation more equitable? Is the family truly equal partners in planning and decision making?</li> <li>▪ See the family and their lives in entirety—not just as the presenting situation of need.</li> <li>▪ Families should have the opportunity to be informed about the available local resources before a crisis referral occurs. Literature and resources should be displayed and available throughout the community where families go regularly (schools’ main offices, schools’ nurses offices, grocery stores, at community events, etc.).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transparency</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain the process - <i>Both</i> the service providing processes and your reasoning/thought process behind suggesting any particular service or strategy.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explain how you arrived at all diagnoses.</li> <li>▪ Explain all acronyms.</li> <li>▪ Speak in terms that are understandable when describing services, policies, and procedures.</li> <li>▪ Provide comprehensive explanations of all available treatment options (not just the ones that you prefer).</li> <li>▪ Provide opportunities for formal and informal feedback from families (ie, focus groups, online surveys, conversations).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Supportive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Listen: <i>actively</i> to all expressed needs.</li> <li>▪ Validate: acknowledge the family’s fears, hesitations, and stressors; but <i>highlight</i> the strengths already displayed in their efforts (for example, they are here today for the appointment).</li> <li>▪ Inform: answer <i>all</i> questions your client and client’s family may have—try not to rush to end the appointment.</li> <li>▪ Follow up, follow up, follow up! The absence of a response after the first call does not mean that the family is uninterested in services.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Non-judgmental</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unless you have lived experiences yourself, recognize that your interpretation of how the acute situation is affecting the family will always be as an outside practitioner.</li> <li>▪ The family defines what a crisis is for them and what their most pressing needs are.</li> </ul>

<p><b>“Vision of Hope”</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identify and compliment the strengths of the family’s situation alongside the discussions of treatment for the prioritized need.</li> <li>▪ Have a large knowledge base for the local resources and help the family find options that may best fit for their unique situation.</li> <li>▪ Celebrate the family’s successes and milestones – doing so, communicates hope and validates for the family that they have made progress.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Culturally Responsive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If you are unsure about specific cultural aspects: ask, listen, and adapt.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Respectful</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognize the time that the family has spent waiting for today’s appointment and the opportunity to speak with a professional (sometimes as long as three months).</li> <li>▪ Be mindful of appearing rushed and distracted.</li> <li>▪ Respect that the parent(s) is the expert on their child.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Compassion &amp; Empathy</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Demonstrate compassion and empathy through your tone, facial expressions, active listening, and authenticity.</li> <li>▪ Share your story strategically (are you disclosing something because it will aid the family or yourself?)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Comprehensive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Review the client and family’s file before entering into the appointment. <i>Be mindful that it can be re-traumatizing and frustrating for families to retell story with each new professional or system. Also, be mindful that this file is not an entire, full representation of the child/family.</i></li> </ul>

- **Ideally**, all paraprofessionals and professionals that interact with a family navigating any of Virginia’s child-serving systems would strive to encompass each of these attitudes and subsequent activities.
- The incorporation of **parent peer support partners and other parent support programs** are greatly beneficial for families, as they teach and mentor parents so that they feel prepared, confident and skilled in securing and advocating for the services and supports their children need. The liaisons can fulfill many of these above duties with/for the family members without placing additional burdens on medical professionals. Furthermore, parent support partners promote family engagement and their services lead to better outcomes.



**About the Virginia Family Network**

The Virginia Family Network (VFN) is a contractual agreement between the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) and NAMI Virginia launched in 2011. We are here to ensure that families who have children and youth with mental health needs have the support and resources that they need and that voices are heard, valued, and respected.

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