



# **A Practice Guide for Working with African American Families in the Child Welfare System**



*The Role of the  
Caseworker in Identifying,  
Developing and  
Supporting Strengths in  
African American Families  
Involved in  
Child Protection Services*



Author, Maxie Rockymore, MSW

February 2008

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**For more information contact: [maxie.rockymore@state.mn.us](mailto:maxie.rockymore@state.mn.us)**

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# Introduction

This practice guide was developed as a tool for social workers to help them address the systemic issue of the overrepresentation and racial disparity of African American children and their families involved in child protective services. It is anticipated that this guide will serve as a resource and reference manual for caseworkers (the person working in the practice of social work) as they engage African American families in effective service delivery.



This guide will not explore the historical context of racial disparities in detail because there are other resources for this information. This practice guide will not focus on the role of other systems (courts, schools, law enforcement, etc.) that may impact the lives of African American families involved in the child protection system. This guide focuses on practice and systemic change at the caseworker level.

Caseworkers have a unique opportunity to engage and empower African American families on their caseloads. The use of this practice guide should first be discussed within the child protection teams with supervisors to build consensus around meaning, concepts and possible implementation. As new, improved practices are implemented by caseworkers, it is hoped that they will be able to make a paradigm shift when engaging clients in case planning activities that will result in better outcomes for African American children and families, including an appropriate reduction in African American families on caseloads.

The key element to this practice paradigm shift is the caseworkers' identification, development, support and documentation of strengths in African American families on their caseloads. There is a need for a new practice model that supports building on the family's existing strengths and skills. Caseworkers need to begin to support and

encourage this indigenous knowledge and wisdom so that parents can expand and build on these resources (Berg, Kelly, 2000, p.17). Based on research and experience, this information was gathered and developed to assist caseworkers in:

- Augmenting or developing their best practice skills in client engagement
- Understanding cultural differences between the caseworker and African American clients
- Appreciating the differing world views of caseworkers and clients that may be shaped by family tradition, race, culture and socioeconomic factors
- Developing new methods of engagement that can lead to improved child safety, well-being and permanency outcomes for African American children.

This guide brings together the knowledge presented in research literature about working with African American families, and synthesizes it into a reference guide that will help child protective services caseworkers identify strengths in African American families and build upon them.



## Overview

It is important that the reason and/or need for a practice paradigm shift in perceiving and working on the strengths of African American families is identified. In the past, social work practice focused on a deficit-problem-based model of interacting with clients. Current practice, however, reflects a growing transition to a strengths-asset model of working with clients. This transition has been slow, and continues to evolve. Workers need to refocus and learn how to augment their assessment and client engagement skills towards strengths with all clients, but particularly African American clients who may comprise the majority of caseloads in some child welfare systems. Noted researcher Dr. Dorothy Roberts succinctly summarizes the state of African American children in child protective services in America:

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*Black children make up nearly half of the foster care population, although they constitute less than one-fifth of the nation's children... Once removed from their homes, Black children remain in foster care longer, are moved more often, receive fewer services, and are less likely to be either returned home or adopted than other children.*  
*(Roberts, 2002, p.vi)*

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Minnesota child welfare data found that, as a percentage of the general child population, and in comparison to children of all races, African American children are five times more likely to be in out-of-home care. The data also revealed racial disparity for African American children at other key decision-making points along the child welfare case continuum (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2002).

In 2003 the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) and Dr. Susan Wells, University of Minnesota School of Social Work, conducted a comparative case review study of African American children and Caucasian children in the child welfare system.

The goal of these case reviews was to examine case type, level and delivery of services for African American and Caucasian children. In most cases, there was not a statistical difference between African American and Caucasian children for case outcomes at assessment, case management, etc.

However, there were differences in case characteristics during the assessment process; and race was found to interact with these case characteristics in a way that is predictive of case dispositions (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2005). Case characteristics and race were predictive for African American mothers and children involved in domestic violence, substance abuse, on public assistance and for the age of the child. Among several of the outcomes from this study and subsequent report was a recommendation to build and support family and community strengths of African American families (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2005). It is recommended that this practice guide be used as a companion tool to the DHS study and recommendations.



# Case Practice Modalities to Identify and Support Strengths in African American Families

The task of identifying strengths in African American families can be complicated by the lack of research and literature describing African American families in strength-based terms (Roysce, Turner, 1980). Other researchers added “Unfortunately, there is minimal research on African American families and especially African American family strengths” (Littlejohn-Blake, Darling, 1993). On the contrary, the majority of literature encountered spoke to the pathology and deficit-based views of African American families and family functioning. However, given the disproportionate numbers of African American children and families involved in child protective services, a new frame of reference and engagement must be developed. This frame of reference must focus on the strengths of African American families as a means of effective engagement and family intervention. The worker must document the strengths of Black families as they attempt to understand these families better (Roysce, Turner, 1980).

## Defining Family Strengths

Family strengths have been defined in many ways. Researcher Robert Hill defines family strengths as “Those traits that facilitate the



ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit. They are necessary for the survival, maintenance and advancement of family networks” (Hill, 1999, p.42). Other researchers such as Littlejohn-Blake and Darling define family strengths as “Those relationship

patterns, interpersonal competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that create a sense of positive family identity” (Littlejohn-Blake, Darling, 1993). Researchers have identified several key strengths and life coping skills that are evident in African American families. Hill identified five strengths of African American families:

- Strong achievement orientation
- Flexible family roles
- Strong work orientation
- Strong kinship bonds
- Strong religious orientation (Hill, 1999).

However, others have talked about resilience and protective mechanisms that exist in African American families. Although the strengths and/or resiliency are not always constant, they can be seen as present and evolving in the life cycle of African American families (Hildreth, Boglin, Mask, 2000). Additionally, some parenting strengths of low-income, single mothers have been identified, such as:

- Substantial parent involvement
- Abundant amount of support for parenting from external caregivers
- Parenting skills that emphasize and enhance achievement
- Respect for others, self respect and racial pride with their children (Woody, Woody, 2003).

All of these strengths, in different combinations or sequences, can be used as the worker engages the parent(s) at key decision-making points in the life of the case.



## Implications for Caseworker Practice

Caseworkers must be keenly aware of the role that race, class, culture and socioeconomic conditions and factors play in the lives of African American families. Poverty and limited financial resources can negatively impact an African American mother's ability to parent. In fact, researchers Daphne S. Cain and Terri Combs-Orme, in their study of parenting and family structure in African American families, found that poverty and the quality of parenting experienced by mothers influenced parenting more than marital status or family structure (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005).

Race and culture are intricately woven into the worldview of African American families. "Culture" within this practice guide means a system of shared actions, values and beliefs that guides the behavior of group members (Gibson, McRoy, 2004). African American families value cultural identity and racial pride for themselves, and particularly when raising and socializing their children. Other researchers suggest that child welfare service takes place in a cultural context and requires



a culturally relevant or non-deficit worldview (Gray, Nybell, 1990). Taking this approach can help caseworkers reframe their view of African American parents and families on their caseloads.

## Different Lenses

All caseworkers, when anticipating working with African American clients, should take some time for self-reflection to look at their own family functioning, values, codes of conduct and parenting practices, and decide how their family ecology may benefit or harm the African American families that they work with. Researcher Sandra Barnes suggests that social workers, and human services agents who interact with African American families (especially families that face economic

problems), should continually evaluate the standard by which they judge these families (Barnes, 2001). Also, the majority of social workers, who are mostly European Americans, tend to have a more liberal progressive world-view as compared to an orthodox world-view of African American clients (Hodge, 2003). Caseworkers of color, along with European American caseworkers, need to look at their socioeconomic class values that may be different from lower income African American families.

As caseworkers begin the interview and engagement process with African American clients, they need to monitor their own feelings, since involuntary clients are accused of offenses that are contrary to societal and the worker's values (Rooney, 1988). More importantly, caseworkers need to put on different lenses when engaging African American families, and move from a deficit-liability view of African American parents to an asset-strength-based frame. Furthermore, the worker must be able to see each African American client as unique, and be able to provide an appropriate assessment based on the unique characteristics of the family. Royse and Turner assert "It remains the social worker's responsibility to make an individual assessment based on the particular client's strengths and weaknesses" (Royse, Turner, 1980).



# Identifying, Developing and Supporting Strengths Application to Practice

There are several family schematic or ecological elements that seem to be present in some form or fashion in the lives of families involved in the child welfare system and that could, or should be, addressed by social workers who interact with them. These elements should be considered by the caseworker at key decision points in the child protective continuum, i.e., intake, family assessment/investigation, case management, reunification, placement, etc. when working with African American families in general, and specifically with the parent(s) involved in a particular case. Reflecting on these elements and identifying, developing and supporting strengths in African American clients should begin with good case planning. In fact, the worker should ask themselves **“How will I look for strengths throughout the life of this case, and how will I document them in the case file(s)?”**

## Family Relationships, Structure and Dynamics

The caseworker should consider the family connections and kinship bonds when first working with a client. Scannapieco and Jackson assert that the strengths of the African American family can be attributed to a strong kinship network (Scannapieco, Jackson, 1996). Focusing on relatives, kin and/or extended family members should be a priority when talking to the client once a case is opened and/or accepted for assessment. The caseworker needs to try to establish a picture of the family support system available for the client, and the status of relationships, both maternal and paternal, in the client's family system. It is important to confirm the presence and role of the father of the child(ren) and look at ways to engage him early in the case planning, and discuss with the mother the value of doing so. Nybell and Gray report that, although case recording forms do solicit information about the father's identity...he is often ignored in interview sessions or home visits. This failure to engage African American men in the child welfare planning process holds true... for other men ...who may play roles of quasi-father, supportive companion, or friend (Gray, Nybell, 1990).

The following questions and ideas can be considered by the caseworker in preparation for, and while conducting the home visit.

**Questions:**

- How do I/we acknowledge and support the kinship relationship?
- What are the maternal and paternal influences in the life of the parent and child?
- Who holds authority and power both formal and informal, in the kinship network?
- Which relatives have the capacity to support the parent(s) and child(ren) as an out-of-home placement prevention strategy during the current case problem?

**Ideas:**

- From a concurrent permanency planning perspective, consider relatives as first preference for possible out-of-home placement, and as an ally for successful reunification.
- From a permanency perspective, view relatives and kin as a first and natural choice for permanency.

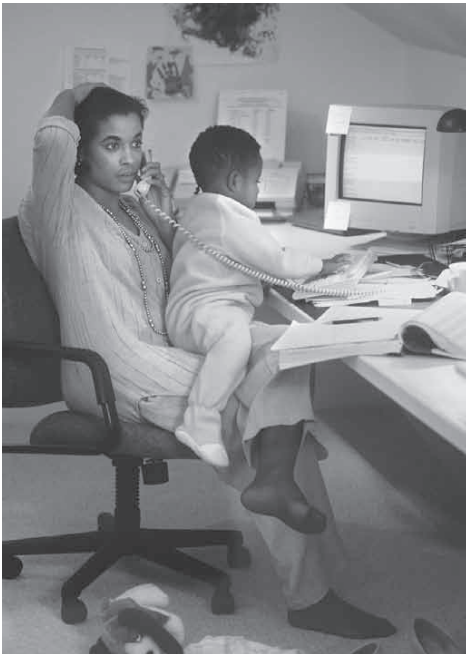
**Practice strategies:** Caseworkers should use the following strategies once a case has been opened and accepted for case management services: Relative Search (See Relative Search Best Practice Guide *Bulletin*, Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2005); Family Group Decision Making/Family Group Conference; and Concurrent Permanency Planning.



## Supporting Healthy Male-Female Relationships

In some cases, poor adult male-female relationships are a basis for child welfare intervention, in that domestic violence and unhealthy partner relationships have an adverse impact on child and family functioning. Many times, mothers, who are most often the custodial parent involved in child protection cases, are not healthy enough to make positive partner choices for themselves. They need to see how their relationship choices can affect their child(ren). After building some level of trust with the mother, the worker should engage the mother in a discussion about the male partner in her home, and encourage her to identify the positive and negative effects of his presence in the home, and on her child(ren).

Discuss with the mother possible avenues for addressing family discord, such as family therapy, counseling and/or marital support at her church or place of worship. If child and mother safety is an issue, a culturally appropriate referral to a domestic violence agency should be made.



When family discord is identified, sometimes there are underlying problems that contribute to this discord, such as loss of job, car problems, health issues, parenting, substance abuse or debt, all of which can exacerbate family functioning. The worker can then help the mother and her spouse or partner look at family roles, and how they can work together to help each other and the child(ren). In fact, egalitarian role responsibility and

flexibility are strengths of African American families, and should be supported by the caseworker in developing a practice intervention with the family (Hill, 1999). The caseworker and/or domestic violence advocate (if domestic violence is involved) should consider and discuss the following factors when providing in-home case management and/or reunification services:

- The presence and level of violence in the home.
- The mother's ability to make healthy partnership choices (partner, father-absent, step).
- Safety strategies for children (i.e. going to neighbor's house, parents going outside to cool down) so that they don't hear the arguments. Should address safety; identify warning markers that alert the mother or child that safety action needs to be put in place.
- Communication techniques that help both parents to de-escalate their arguments and focus on problem identification and problem-solving.

**Practice strategies:** Make referrals to African American or culturally competent family therapists, domestic violence and substance abuse programs. Use risk and strength assessment tools, but discuss with a supervisor how these tools may be based on a nuclear family model, and may have or create differences in service delivery for African American clients. Use Guidelines for Responding to the Co-occurrence of Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2005).



## Mother's Well Being: View and Reflect on Mother's Emotional Self and Health

Caseworkers are challenged when working with African American clients to help them address neglect, child rearing, and/or child behavioral issues. These mothers face societal and racial stress factors that may temporarily hinder their ability to parent. However, the worker should take a strength-based approach that makes use of assessment skills that enables them to identify the unique qualities that the mother possesses. They also need to be aware of the finding that low income and single status are not synonymous with poor parenting (Woody, Woody, 2003).

Usually, African American mothers have an idea of what it takes to be successful in life. A strong tradition of working and achievement are often passed down from generation to generation (Hill, 1999). These strengths offer a familial frame of reference for which the mother measures herself and successful outcomes for her children. The African American orientation of a strong work ethic and achievement can provide the impetus for a discussion with the mother about self reflection and personal goal setting. In doing this the worker needs to help the client develop two levels or types of goals: primary and secondary.

### **Primary goals:**

- Ask the mother what her strengths are
- Focus on the mother's self esteem
- Discuss her mental health status and possible referral to African American mental health agencies or culturally competent therapists
- Determine alcohol and/or drug issues; has mother acknowledged problems and received treatment?

**Practice strategies:** If there are alcohol, drug and/or mental health issues, discuss with mother how these issues may impede her ability to achieve goals and outcomes for herself and for her child(ren). Refer mother for a chemical health assessment and a mental health screening, if appropriate, and support treatment options. Ask mother if there are kin available to help her (transportation, babysitting, etc.) and care for children while she utilizes services.

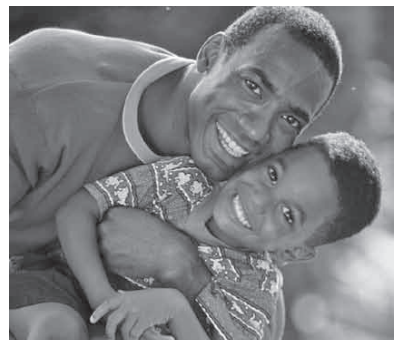
## Secondary goals:

- Ask mother about her current education level (high school graduate, college, dropped out) and abilities
- Ask client to discuss parents' and or kin's educational expectations for her as a child
- Set educational goals: learn to read, increase reading level, work toward General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.), return to college
- Discuss mother's current employment status and suggest that she talk to agency or community-based employment counselors
- Review work requirements, if applicable, for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. If appropriate, do cross case work with TANF workers to reduce conflicting case demands on client.

**Practice methods for goals:** Utilize Motivational Interviewing and Ethnographic Interviewing techniques, as well as Solution Focused therapy/skills. If caseworkers are not aware of these client engagement methods, they should consult with their supervisor and seek training.

## Parent-Child Relationship Building

There are two considerations that caseworkers should undertake when attempting to support the parent-child relationship of the African American client: the child's age and developmental level, and the mother's ability to nurture and protect the child(ren). But workers should be aware that African American traditions hold that child rearing is a community task or responsibility (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005). Therefore, the caseworker should identify and acknowledge other kin who might be assisting in parenting, or are available to assist.



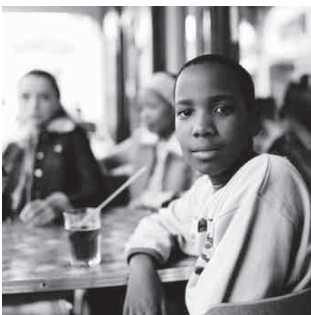


Hill reports that most Black single parents place major emphasis on socializing their children for higher educational and occupational attainment (Hill, 1999, p.111). Therefore, the caseworker needs to consider a number of variables. Is there a language or culture of achievement that is spoken in the home (Hill, 1999)? Can workers identify and support it and use it as an incentive and motivator for the parents? For younger children, is the mother or other family members engaging toddlers in motor skill development activities and/or school readiness activities, such as recognizing colors and learning ABCs, or singing African American cultural rhymes such as “Old Mary Mack,” “Little Sally Walker,” etc? For older children, is the family expressing their values about education and achievement? For instance, “*If you want to get ahead you’ve got to get a good education.*”

## Child’s Age and Developmental Level:

- **Young children:** review the developmental level of the child(ren) with parent(s). If a delay is suspected, talk with parent(s) about appropriate assessment tools and agencies that can help. More importantly, observe and monitor parent-child interaction over time and constructively support this interaction.

- **Adolescents:** Discuss behavioral changes and developmental stages of teenagers with parents. Discuss how the dynamics of their parent-child relationship have changed, and what “acting out” and “attitude” issues mean. Discuss the impact that school and peers have on the child and ask the parent(s) if there are kin, faith community, or individuals in the community who can model and support the teenager. Also, have the parents reflect on how their own parent(s) addressed these issues and what strategies (sports, discipline and behavioral expectations) worked and what is appropriate today. Help them to understand that today’s African



American youth living in urban areas deal with many challenges that can hamper their healthy development (Murry, Kotchick, Wallace, Ketchen, Eddings, Heller, Collier, 2004). Some examples of these challenges are violence, unemployment and racial attitudes about young Black males, and lower academic achievement expectations.

## Mother's Needs and Ability to Nurture and Protect Child(ren):

- Ask mother to describe the good things that she does every day for her children.
- Have mother define and describe her ability to nurture.
- Have mother describe stressors that keep her from parenting effectively.
- Ask mother how her ability to nurture can be developed and supported as it relates to the stressors in her life.
- Ask mother to describe what specific thing(s) that relate to the reason for the child protection report, family assessment or substantiation, that need to be changed, i.e. educational neglect-truancy, domestic violence, or unsupervised child(ren). Examine this collaboratively with the parent(s) and document in the case plan.
- Help parent(s) and child (if age appropriate) to create action steps to address issues (i.e. getting to school, behavioral issues). The caseworker should support and document this.
- Help mother reflect on how spouse/partner or relatives/kin help the nurturing process.

**Practice strategies:** Use goal setting and planning for child safety and neglect issues, and family group conference. Help mother identify a mentor (i.e. uncle, aunt or volunteer from professional mentoring agency) for older child(ren). Identify relatives or kin who can “co-parent” younger children, and who can model healthy nurturing. For child(ren) under age 3, a referral to the interagency early intervention committee for screening and assessment for developmental delays should be done (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2004). For those in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems ages 3 months - 18 years, a mental health screening should be completed (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2004).

## Spirituality

As stated earlier, the orthodox beliefs and world views of most African American families and low-income clients differ from those of caseworkers, particularly in religious or spiritual beliefs (Hodge, 2003). Workers tend to have a more progressive world-view that can be in conflict with the orthodox world-view of many African American clients. However, spiritual belief systems have been identified as a strength for African American families (Dunn, Dawes, 1999).

Although faith and spirituality tend to be extremely personal for families, a caseworker should acknowledge this if the client brings it up in conversation. This is particularly important if the client believes that their faith can bring their family through the current crisis. Caseworkers can use affirming language that acknowledges that faith and spirituality can be a resource for the client. Dunn and Dawes suggest using spirituality-focused genograms as a resource for African American families. This should be done only after trust has been developed and a therapist has been trained on creating genograms (Dunn, Dawes, 1999).

Additionally, many caseworkers have been trained and are familiar with developing genograms with families, and perhaps can utilize their knowledge and skills to develop spiritually-focused genograms that highlight the family's history and beliefs about faith, and how it can be used to address family problems.



# Community Resources

In the ongoing case management phase, it is important for the caseworker to have a plethora of community resources and services readily available. The caseworker should become aware of culturally-specific community-based services for clients, and focus on professional relationship building with community agencies. When caseworkers accomplish this successfully, they become a valued ally who can work with the client and community to support positive outcomes for the child(ren) and parent(s).

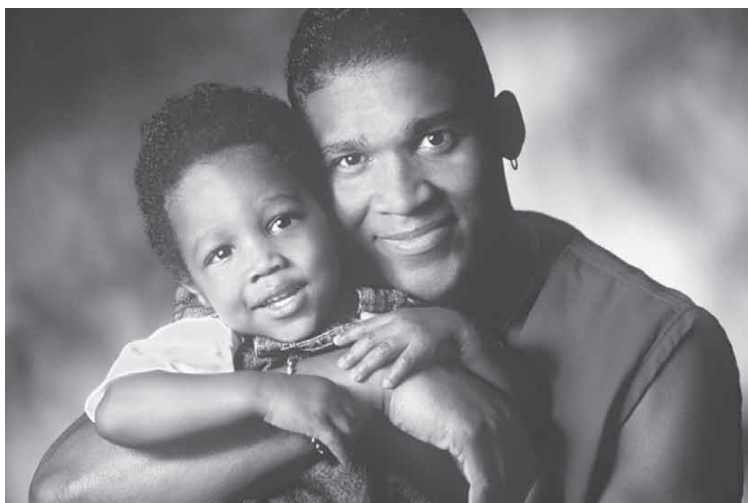
Parents involved in neglect and/or abusive situations are often isolated from kin. They may not be aware of community resources that can act as a buffer from isolation and other problems. Low income families involved in the child welfare system can be highly mobile as they choose, or are forced, to move to another state or part of town to escape problems. The decision to move may be the first positive step that the parent(s) take in order to make a fresh start. The caseworker's knowledge of culturally appropriate community resources and activities can be the catalyst to help families stabilize and build a new foundation for family functioning. The caseworker should consider:

- Reducing isolation of mother and family.
- Helping parent(s) to make choices to access services.
- Making effective referrals by learning about financial, housing and other resources for clients. Workers should know the start date of program activities (i.e. start date of eight-week parenting program).
- Acting as a community resource, caseworkers should see themselves as a conduit for clients so that the parent(s) can be empowered to access and complete services.

**Practice strategies:** Caseworkers should visit culturally-specific community-based agencies and build positive relationships with key workers. This will help caseworkers to be able to make better and more personal referrals for clients. The caseworkers should ask community agencies if s/he can observe agency support groups. These techniques will help the caseworker to support referrals and participate in a community-based approach to helping clients realize their goals.

At the heart of identifying and supporting African American families' strengths is family preservation. While African American families and/or single parent clients may experience many burdens, extended family networks have shown that assumptions cannot be made that single parents necessarily raise children alone.... risks may be ameliorated by extended family networks (Brown, Cohon, Wheeler, 2002). Dorothy Roberts suggests that what happens to individual parents and children in the child welfare system is closely related to the status of Black Americans as a whole (Roberts, 2002, p. 232). If African American families can be preserved in their broadest form, that is extended family and kin, then perhaps the racial disparities for African American children in the child protection system can be reduced and/or eliminated. Focusing on the strengths of African American families is best practice and family-centered case practice.

African author Sobonfu Some, from the Dagara tribe in Burkina Faso, Africa, says that children are spirits who come to test the willingness, generosity, genuineness and openness of people...they are called the future because no community has ever survived without its children. So, the role of the community is to attend to the children's needs (Taylor, December 2005). Child welfare caseworkers play a key role in empowering clients to meet the needs of their children and families. Therefore, they are instrumental in supporting strengths, and creating and sustaining community.



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For more information contact:  
maxie.rockymore@state.mn.us



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**  
Child Safety and Permanency Division  
PO Box 64943  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0943