



University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work,
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Data Brief 4: April 2025

CWEB Post Hire Interview: Positive Family Interactions

Introduction

The post hire interview protocol was initiated in August 2020 to provide additional support to CWEB graduates as they enter their county child welfare agencies for employment. The goals of this project can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Interviews are completed by a former county child welfare administrator who is also a CWEL graduate. Interviews are completed once a CWEB graduate is employed for at least 90 days with follow-up interviews at six months, nine months, and up to a year. After the CWEB graduate's commitment is complete, the interviews are concluded. Graduates are encouraged to maintain contact with CWEB program staff and others they have identified in their network of supports.

Figure 1. Goals of the Interview Protocol

Goal 1: Support	Provide graduates with extra support as they start their child welfare career
Goal 2: Intervene	Acknowledge and reinforce the positives that are occurring in the workplace. Identify graduates who are struggling and connect them with the CWERP County Liaison for intervention
Goal 3: Retain	Increase retention time among graduates

In September 2022, the interview questions were revised to comprise two tracts: initial interviews and follow-up interviews. The addition of a specific question concerning the Foundations training was added to the initial interview in April 2023.

Literature Review

The literature suggests that positive relationships with families are a large contributor to satisfaction and retention of child welfare workers. Qualitative studies examining the experiences of child welfare workers have found that positive relationships with families are an important part of why they continue to remain in the field. Despite the difficulty of the job, many child welfare workers “Were quick to emphasize that they liked working with and helping families,” and “Many workers expressed the duality of the work as rewarding, but difficult” (Schelbe et al. 2017, Burns et al. 2023).

Even though their job is challenging, child welfare workers find meaning in the work because of the positive impact they have on their clients. Multiple studies found that child welfare workers felt that they were making a difference in the lives of their clients. Schelbe et al. found that “Workers derived satisfaction from making a difference in people's lives. They emphasized that they enjoyed knowing that they were impacting families and keeping children safe” (Schelbe et al. 2017). One child welfare worker said that “The job that I am doing is rewarding to me. I feel I am helping families to be stronger” (Burns et al. 2023).

Improving the lives of their clients led child welfare workers to feel more satisfied in their positions, as it gave their role a sense of purpose. In terms of retention, another study claimed that “Caseworkers are more willing to remain with the agency when they have confidence in their ability to engage with families in a meaningful way that they believe is beneficial to the children and families that they serve” (Johnco et al. 2014).

A key factor in retention of child welfare workers is whether they feel that they can make a significant positive impact on the outcomes of the children and families that they serve. By allowing child welfare workers to focus more on building relationships with families rather than focusing on the innerworkings of bureaucracy, child welfare agencies might see more persistence in their workers (Burns et al. 2023). The child welfare workers who remain in the profession recognize that the positive relationships with families are a large part of what keeps them in the profession. If they can see the positive impact they have on their clients, child welfare workers are more likely to be satisfied with their job and remain in child welfare.

Research

A total of 270 interviews were conducted, including 114 initial interviews and 148 follow-up interviews. The graduates from were asked to describe their experience at their child welfare agency at their initial interview. In this data brief, we are looking at a theme that appeared under multiple questions: Families-Positive. This theme was defined as “graduates had positive experiences working with families on their caseloads.”

Responses were read and grouped into themes by two independent reviewers. Any conflicting themes or coding was resolved by a consensus of the two reviewers. This data brief will look at the combined initial and follow-up interviews.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH FAMILIES

POSITIVE OUTCOMES



Graduates felt that their cases with positive outcomes were rewarding.

"She was involved in placing a youth at a Residential Treatment Facility. He made progress and really wanted out. through the placement team, they were able to find a foster home that was a good fit for him. She is excited for him to be with people who really care about him."

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Graduates thought that working with families helped them become better social workers.

"She has become more confident in speaking with clients and more knowledgeable about the resources available and picking the right services for clients."



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS



Graduates enjoyed the opportunity to build meaningful working relationships with their clients.

"She likes engaging with clients the best. She has twelve cases, many of them with teens. She can connect with the teens best."

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Graduates received positive feedback from the families on their caseload.

"In one case, it took a while to build rapport with the mother. At the end, Mom expressed her gratitude and thanked her for her work. She was able to close the case."



Results

Among the graduates who reported positive interactions with families, four subthemes emerged:

- Positive outcomes
- Professional development
- Building relationships
- Positive feedback

These subthemes are discussed in Figure 2. Of the 114 graduates that completed the initial interview, 36 (31.6%) mentioned the relationships with the families on their caseload as a positive part of their job. In terms of the 148 follow-up interviews, 15 (10.1%) mentioned positive family interactions in their interviews. For both time periods, the building relationships subtheme was mentioned most frequently. The next most common subtheme mentioned for both time periods was positive outcomes. An interesting observation is that the positive feedback subtheme was seen more frequently at the follow-up interview.

Discussion

Positive interactions with families were one of the top five rated themes among initial interviews. Many graduates enjoyed working with families because they found the work rewarding. Other participants stated that the relationships themselves were one of the most rewarding aspects of their position: "The best part of her work experience has been meeting the families and children and building rapport with them." The ability to build rapport and meaningful relationships with clients is an

important part of improving the outcomes and general well-being of children and families. One graduate discussed the positive effect she has on her clients, stating that “She feels like she is rewarded with positive outcomes for some of the families. She was able to connect an orphaned child with a relative, where he was provided custody today. There is a lot of emotion attached to this case.” The ability to make a positive impact on the children and families on their caseload is one of the most gratifying parts of a career in child welfare.

When asked to share a recent success in their career, several graduates reported that they received positive feedback regarding their interactions with the families on their caseload. One graduate observed that “One of the foster parents said in court that she was the best caseworker she's ever worked with.” Another graduate said that “She is getting positive feedback from her supervisor about her case notes and her family engagement.” Receiving positive feedback from clients and supervisors helps new child welfare workers build their confidence and believe in their ability to help their clients, even if the case is difficult.

While some graduates found building relationships with families challenging, breakthroughs in this area felt fulfilling. One participant said in her interview that “Building rapport with families has been good. Some people have been hesitant to respond to her, but she feels like she has tackled this situation well.” Building these relationships with clients is not always easy, but overcoming challenges and building strong working relationships broadens the workers’ engagement skills. Another graduate thought that the challenges of working with clients helped her to improve as a social worker: “She had a hard time learning to talk with some of the families, but she has learned some good ways to ask questions. She is growing in her learning. She can now confront clients when needed.” Even if interactions with families are not positive initially, graduates have found that they are able to learn how to positively communicate with their clients to promote a healthy working relationship. While a career in child welfare can be challenging, building positive relationships with families and helping to improve their lives is one of the most worthwhile parts of the job. A participant said that “This is the job she went to school for.” Child welfare can be a challenging career path but fostering collaborative relationships and witnessing families meet their goals positively impacts caseworkers’ desire to stay in the field.

References:

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