

Working with FAMILIES Working with THE MEDIA

Working with Families Working with the Media is a guide for nonprofit and government agencies who ask people to tell their personal story to the media. This might include child welfare agencies working to reform their systems by innovative programs to help families with a history of abuse and neglect or a terminally ill patient whose testimonial could help move important public policy. Or, it could be an average person with a personal story to share on an important issue being covered by the media.

The booklet includes advice about briefing families before an interview, preparing families and individuals for an interview, what to do during an interview, and the benefits of getting involved.

1 Choosing a Family

Choosing the right family for the interview is important, and you should consider the following:

Work with a family whose background and history are familiar to you.

Don't feel that you need to make the decision on your own. Discuss the choice with a team of colleagues including communications professionals or others who have had experience working with media.

Choose a family where the parent(s) and the children are comfortable articulating their story.

2 Briefing the Family

First, explain to the family why a reporter wants an interview. Once a family agrees to the interview, brief family members BEFORE they talk to a reporter.

Give an overview of what the interview will be about, as well as some information about the reporter.

Give the family some sense of the questions that will be asked.

Tell the family the name of the reporter, and show them copies of his or her past stories. Reassure them that you will be present at all times during the interview, and do your best to ensure that the interview is a positive experience for everyone.

Stress the fact that neither the family nor your organization can control what goes into the final story.

3 The Family's Rights

Make sure the individual and family members understand that they do not have to do the interview. Even after they have agreed, they still have rights, including the right to stop the interview at any time if they are uncomfortable.

The family can choose what aspects of their lives to talk about. Remind them not to talk about anything they do not want others to know about. You may want to help the family prepare a list of issues they want to discuss, and share that list with the reporter.

Individual family members have the right to decline to answer any questions they feel are too personal. The family can always tell the reporter, "I'm not comfortable answering this question, but I will answer your question about..." Use role-playing to help the family practice saying "no" and learn to change the subject.

Stress that until the reporter, photographer, or cameraperson leaves the room and all of the equipment is turned off, the interview is "on the record" and anything they say can be added to the story.

Parents and children can participate in the interview, but children should never do an interview alone.

Some newspapers or magazines will allow the family to review or check their quotes. This is not possible in all cases, but it never hurts to ask.

The family does not have to agree to use their full names or photographs. If they do agree to have a photographer or television camera present, the family still does not have to agree to show their full faces. But if they do not want to show their faces, the family should take precautions, such as putting away all family photographs, obvious mirrors, plaques and trophies that may identify the family.

Remind the family that the reporter may have follow-up questions after the interview is completed. And family members, too, can contact the reporter later with additional information.

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Getting to Know the Reporter

Do your homework and find out as much as you can about the reporter and the publication or broadcast outlet. Read the reporter's stories, and call colleagues who may have had experience working with him or her.

Meet with the reporter first before he/she interviews the family to ensure that there is a clear understanding about your program, and the children and families you serve. Let the reporter know what the family will or will not talk about.

Ask the reporter what type of story he/she is doing. Is it, for instance, a profile or an investigative piece? What is the story's focus, and what does the reporter expect to get from the interview? While you cannot always get a list of specific questions in advance, you have the right to know what kinds of facts and figures the reporter needs. Be sure to ask if a photographer or cameraperson plans to come to the interview.

Ask who else will be interviewed for the story. Feel free to suggest other people the reporter can contact.

Set parameters for the interview, including the time and location. Interviews should rarely take more than 30 minutes and almost never more than an hour.

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Getting Ready for Your Interview

Prepare a list of questions you anticipate. Develop three main points you want to get across and that you hope the family will talk about. Practice before the interview.

Be prepared to provide basic statistics about your organization and the issue.

Read the newspaper on the day of the interview in case there is a relevant news story that you may be asked about.

Give examples of stories that illustrate how your programs work and how families strive to better their lives and the lives of their children.

Be prepared for questions about high-profile negative cases. While you do not have to answer these questions, you may want to illustrate what works about your program in the context of a high-profile case that everyone knows about. Try not to say "No comment."

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Do's and Don'ts at Your Interview

Be honest and open with the reporter.

Focus on your three main points throughout the interview, but especially at the beginning and end.

Tell positive personal stories.

Keep it simple: don't talk in jargon or slang or use big numbers.

Don't speculate about what you don't know.

Know you are always "on the record" with a reporter.

If you are asked questions that require a simple "yes" or "no" answer, use them as a springboard to elaborate your main points and to give real-life examples.

Make eye contact with the reporter.

Be careful to talk about only those things you want to see in print, hear on the radio, or appear on television.

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Risks

It is extremely important to let families know that there are some risks involved when doing any interview. For example:

Children may be teased by classmates at school who hear about the interview.

Parents should be asked how they feel about having co-workers, friends, or their children's teachers see or hear about their problems and the services they have received.

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Benefits

Positive coverage can help build support for families and the programs that serve them. A successful interview will:

- celebrate the family's strengths and victories.
- reach other families in similar situations who may need help.
- show that families are eager to help themselves.
- help policymakers, reporters, and the public understand how children and families are working hard to improve their lives by telling their stories.

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©Communications Consortium Media Center, 1200 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005

202/326-8700 Fax: 202/682-2154 e-mail: info@ccmc.org www.ccmc.org

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