

Assessment and Engagement Collecting information from the referral source, the client, and related systems such as schools leads social workers to the next stage of intervention—the assessment. Assessment involves gathering data from a client and from the systems affecting the client, such as the family, the school counselor, and the probation officer (Hepworth et al., 2017). These data are analyzed to determine which issues are problematic for the client.

Assessment is critical because it sets up the goals and intervention plans for the client (Kayser & Lyon, 2000). Therefore, the social worker must be thorough to gather all relevant data and keep an open mind when analyzing the information.

CASE EXAMPLE A

When Roger, the school social worker, met with Lyn the first time, he already had some information for his assessment. He knew that Lyn was a good student and was usually responsible about her studies. In the past month, she seemed to have lost interest in school and withdrawn from her peers. Roger used the first meeting to assess whether Lyn was in need of intervention.

At this first meeting, Lyn was initially quiet and made no eye contact with Roger. When Roger asked about a poem she wrote that had been published in the school yearbook, she seemed to show some excitement. Roger then used his interviewing skills to discuss Lyn's current situation and the concerns that her math teacher had identified. Lyn told him that her grandparents had moved back to China a month earlier. She cried when she explained that her grandfather had taken an interest in her education. He drove her to school each day and helped her with homework each afternoon. Her parents worked long hours, and she is an only child, so she was often home alone. Further questioning elicited the information that Lyn was having trouble sleeping since her grandparents had moved away and was having difficulty getting up in the morning.

Roger asked Lyn if he could contact her parents to discuss the situation with them. She was initially hesitant, but Roger's support and encouragement seemed to ease her tension, and she gave him permission to call her mother that night. Roger's conversation with Lyn's mother, along with the interview with Lyn and her teacher's observations, led Roger to his assessment of this case.

Three skills are critical in the assessment stage. First, the social worker must have effective interviewing skills to draw out information (Shulman, 2012). The school social worker asked Lyn questions that brought clarification of the issues observed by the teacher. He discovered that Lyn was having trouble sleeping, was feeling lonely, and was not as motivated in school. In addition, he uncovered some potential causes of these symptoms when Lyn



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mentioned that her problems began when her grandparents moved back to China. Asking clear and discerning questions, listening carefully, providing empathic and supportive responses, and presenting questions and information in a way that is appropriate to the client are essential parts of assessment (Shulman, 2012).

Secondly, a social worker must use engagement skills to connect with a client and draw the client into the intervention process (Hepworth et al., 2017). Engagement involves building a therapeutic connection with a client so that he or she feels involved in the problem-solving processes. This is especially significant because, as discussed earlier, many children and families do not initiate the work. In the case example, Lyn was initially quiet when she met with Roger. She may have been confused by the meeting and may not have understood its purpose. Roger's effort to connect with Lyn by discussing her poem is an example of the use of engagement skills; he was able to decrease her discomfort by discussing a topic of interest.

Finally, analyzing the information collected for the assessment is critical. For example, if the social worker had received information from the teacher, Lyn, and her mother that was consistent, but had failed to understand or interpret it correctly, the assessment would be faulty. Being able to draw conclusions that are sound and consistent with the information presented brings about intervention plans that are accurate and useful.



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CASE EXAMPLE B

The nurse from the adolescent mental health unit was concerned about the premature discharge of suicidal adolescents as well as the lack of immediate follow-up care. Kate's assessment led her to investigate the county's policies on continued stays for adolescents who present with self-injurious symptoms. In addition, she decided to make a collateral contact with local outpatient counseling agencies to advocate for new policies allowing clients with symptoms to begin outpatient aftercare counseling services within 48 hours of discharge. In this case, the social worker was not intervening with a particular child or family, but instead was intervening at the system level to ultimately affect many children and families. Her assessment led her to an intervention plan that included advocacy and policy making.

The problem presented by the nurse could have brought a variety of responses. Kate's assessment was that policy-level intervention would be the most effective way to address the problem.