

Box 8.8 LaTonya Home Visit (Continued)

Social Worker: (Silence)

Mrs. Moore: There is nothing I can do but wait.

Social Worker: Well, the school nurse was telling me about a group for parents who have kids with sickle cell. I know you have a lot going on, but maybe we could find someone to stay with LaTonya and Dion. It might be helpful to talk to other parents.

Mrs. Moore: The other social worker had mentioned that a few years ago. We did go once. Mr. M. and me, but I was not comfortable talking. That's what my sister and my church are for.

Social Worker: I would be happy to get you some information.

Mrs. Moore: Well, that might be okay, but I don't think a support group is for me.

Social Worker: One positive about talking with other parents is they know about resources and specialists.

Mrs. Moore: Okay, I will think about it and talk to Mr. M. I want to meet with LaTonya's teachers too. I will call Dr. Good tomorrow and see if she can see her this week.

Social Worker: I would be happy to drive LaTonya to Dr. Good's office, if that would help you out.

Mrs. Moore: That would be great, her office is on the other side of town. I will call her office, and can I get back to you about the appointment time?

Social Worker: Sure, I will check into the Girl Scouts and tutoring and let you know what I find out the next time we meet.

Mrs. Moore: Okay.

Signs of Successful Client Engagement

You have worked hard to join with your client, and there is now a connectedness and commitment on your client's part to move forward and make some changes. You have covered all the basics, and now it is time to get down to work. It can be very difficult to maintain a sense of direction and focus, and without a goal to work toward, clients will lose motivation and interest.

Frame the client's concerns or problems for work in terms that are meaningful to the client. Ask the client about what changes he or she wants to make. Social workers-driven goals provide no incentive for the client to change, but a goal that is truly meaningful to the client may spark action. Mutually agreeing on goals and objectives is the key to effective partnering.

Ragg (2011) identifies a four-step approach to reframing the problem in an effort to move forward. This four-step approach is summarized in Box 8.9.

Referring back to the case of LaTonya, her parents, and the outreach social worker, Julie, there is an agreement now about how to move forward in defining goals and interventions. Mrs. Moore has successfully engaged in the helping process, as indicated by her willingness to meet with Julie again and to contact LaTonya's physician about her medical condition. Julie has agreed to locate child care services for the family and a tutor for LaTonya and to explore options related to age-appropriate activities (and fun ones), such as Girl Scouts. Providing specific services, such as providing LaTonya with a ride to the doctor's office, is essential if the client (who really is Mrs. Moore as well) has begun to reframe the problems into more workable solutions, you can join together, developing a plan of action that feels manageable, and provide realistic ways to move forward. Small and incremental steps work best. Start with the big picture, the long-term goals, and work backward, taking one step at a time.

Box 8.9 Reframing the Problem

1. Listen to the client and understand the client's definition of the problem—How does the client explain his or her situation? How does the client experience it? Does the client feel challenged or threatened by it?
2. Identify the elements of the client's current understanding of the problem that may interfere with solving the problem—Often, the client's perspective is clouded by conflicting factors. Clients may experience multiple, and shifting feelings about the situation. It is also important to understand how feelings contribute to behavioral actions. Who else is involved in the problem? What are the dynamics of those relationships? Does the client feel hopeful?
3. Identify the important themes, constructs, and language that the client identifies with the problem—Themes of loss, powerlessness, and hopelessness can keep the client from seeing any possible solution. The duration of these feelings and ongoing and repeated patterns and experiences can contribute to the client feeling overwhelmed.
4. Create an alternative definition—Clients can see that change is possible if given the opportunity. Asking questions such as "How would you like things to be for you six months from now?" "If you could make the current situation different (or better), what would it look like?" or "You wake up tomorrow and things are better, what has happened while you were sleeping?" can provide a new way of looking at an old problem, meaning that it is fixable, even if only in small but often compelling ways.

In Case Study #4 of Maria and Mrs. Anderson, the long-term goal may be Maria's reunification with her mother, Crystal. However, the reality of Crystal's life circumstances may very well preclude Maria's return home. In this case, it may be more realistic to work on goals to help Maria adjust to life with her grandmother. Concurrently, as Maria's situation becomes more stable, Nicole, can also work with Crystal in an effort to find employment, drug and alcohol treatment, safe housing, and other supports that she will need in order to become an effective parent to Maria. Taking each one of these goals and breaking them into small and manageable pieces will help Crystal feel successful and help maintain her motivation to regain custody of Maria. Nicole can also help Mrs. Anderson identify ways to make this transition more manageable. What kinds of resources might be beneficial to her during this stressful time? "Success" is a relative term. What is success to you may be quite different from the client's definition. A good way to evaluate success is to continually assess the client's level of motivation and commitment to goal setting and problem solving. As social workers, we play the roles of collaborator, advocate, teacher, broker, and so on, but the client must do the work. The social worker can encourage and assist in this process, but ultimately it is the client's self-determination that will shape the outcome of the helping relationship.

As you develop an ongoing relationship with your client, you will witness mood shifts, interest levels varying, and motivation waxing and waning. A relationship that spans many sessions (or months) will be different from a short-term crisis-oriented one. Regardless of the time commitment, continuing to convey interest and concern is the key to the helping process. Knowing the parameters of the relationship can help you work more effectively and efficiently. For example, in the case of Mrs. Kita, the social worker, Diane, has been meeting with her for over four months. The nature of the relationship has changed from formality to more openness and ease. As always, Diane has to be mindful of cultural differences and never presume to be a part of Mrs. Kita's "family or inner circle." You can see how the nature of the relationship is changing as they work toward Mrs. Kita's goals together.