

Safeguards Against Bias



Bias can enter into decision making in a variety of ways, many of them unconscious and related to how our brains process complicated information. Particular forms of bias in child welfare decision making can result from risk aversion, confirmation bias, stereotype bias, negative information bias, and the danger of “cascading information.” The following approaches may help you avoid these forms of bias by engaging in critical thinking.

1. Be aware that we all have a natural inclination to accept confirming evidence without critical thinking.
2. Act as a devil’s advocate; what are the possible counter arguments?
3. Identify the data that may not support your conclusions; do they suggest you need to rethink? Does this information help you understand where another party is coming from?
4. Identify your potential biases and how they might color your interpretations without your even being aware of it.
5. Seek out people who might not share your beliefs and biases and ask for their input.
6. Understand and appreciate the family’s culture, including race, ethnicity, economic situation, religion, place of residence, etc.
7. Watch for bias against father’s side of family.
8. If the child or family speaks another language, how do you know you are understanding not just the words they speak, but the meaning behind the words?
9. If the child is Alaskan native or American Indian, seek training in the specific tribal culture. There are over 500 tribes in the United States, each with a unique culture and history.
10. Understand the family’s traditions and how they might affect relationships and attitudes toward court systems. For example, traditions of respect for elders may make some children hesitant to confront family issues. Families may also view courts as intimidating and even oppressive.
11. Ask whether case plans are reasonably tailored to the specific needs of the child and family. Research has shown that many parents need practical help, but this kind of assistance is not always a priority in case plans.
12. Connect with the child’s community, which may be a source of additional and even unexpected support. For example, many children have “natural mentors” who are not formally involved in the child protection process.

13. Be open to and encourage appropriate connections for the child, including siblings, religious connections, community and cultural institutions. For older youth, intimate relationships are probably also important.
14. If you are working with a youth whose sexual orientation differs from yours, get training to understand their needs and how the system might affect them.
15. Media reports can result in biases as systems respond in crisis mode. If there have been recent media reports in your area about child welfare systems, ask whether the news, which may be about a dramatic but not necessarily representative case, has affected how you think about your case.