



THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILD WELFARE INNOVATION

ENGAGEMENT SCRIPTS

PRIMER SCRIPTS FOR ENGAGING WITH FAMILY MEMBERS OF CHILDREN IN CARE

So you find a name and a phone number. You think you've found a young person's uncle, cousin, father and, *cue the dramatic music,* you pick up and phone to call and waver, just for a moment. What do I say? What if they shut me down?

We are asked time and time again for a script for those awkward calls to family members. We also find that if someone thinks you are reading from a script, they may quickly disengage. So with the caveat that the following are primers, not hard and fast scripts, we offer our years of experience in engaging family members via phone.

Typical initial statements to a known relative might sound like this:

“Hello, this is (name) with (agency). I am calling because I understand you are related to (parent’s name).”

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Pro tip: remember that humans are emotional beings. Just in the statement above, someone will begin processing, at light speed, about who it is, why things are happening and why they are getting the call. Empathy and overt, stated understanding goes a long way.

Once the relation is confirmed, continue on with additional information.

“I’m not sure if you are aware but (Parent’s name)’s children are in foster care. My role is to notify family members and find out if and how they would like to be involved as a support to the kids and the family. In addition to supports, I am also looking for family members who would be willing to care for the kids while they are in state custody so they do not have to live in a foster home.”

This is typically all the prompting necessary to start a conversation. Usually, an individual will immediately share their level of interest. They will also have questions. To help build rapport, we are of the mindset that we answer as many questions as confidentiality will allow.

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What about when we aren't sure if this is the correct number for a relative? It could be that there are several numbers listed for Samantha Jones and you aren't sure which one is her current number. The fastest way to get to the bottom of this mystery is to call each and every number, asking for Samantha Jones. Similarly, maybe there are several Samantha Jones listings in your town and you are trying to narrow down which one is the correct Samantha Jones.

The number one thing to remember is to own the awkward. It's truly the best way to get somewhere. Here's how this one might sound:

“Hi, my name is (name) and I’m looking for Samantha Jones or a member of the Jones family. [Slight pause to see if they respond.]

- If the person confirms they are Samantha Jones or if they give no immediate response, keep going: ***My job is to contact relatives of children in foster care and I am trying to reach out to a child’s family right now. I’m hoping you can help me figure out if this is the correct Jones family. Do you have just a few minutes to help me help this child?”***
- If after the initial pause the person says there is nobody by the name of Samantha Jones at this number, proceed with: ***Ok, I’m wondering if you are a relative of Samantha’s. Here’s why I’m calling. My job is to contact relatives of children in foster care and I am trying to reach out to a child’s family right now. I’m hoping you can help me figure out if this is the correct Jones family. Do you have just a few minutes to help me help this child?”***

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In the above scenario, the biggest takeaway is it's helpful to provide an alternative of also asking for a member of the Jones family. This allows for the person who answered to still potentially provide information without right away having to acknowledge that they are, in fact, Samantha Jones. Or it allows you to continue talking with someone who may not be Samantha Jones but may be her brother, sister, mother, father, son, daughter, niece, nephew, or partner - and they also have family information that they are willing to share, as well as put you in contact with Samantha Jones.

So let's say you get this far and there is a very helpful man on the phone who says he's not Samantha Jones and there are so many Jones members of his family that he's not sure if there's a Samantha or not. Then what? Well, we start using our family tree to trace back how he may or may not be connected. Genogramming software is wonderful for searching. It might sound something like this:

“Thank you so much for helping me. I know this feels so strange to be talking to a complete stranger but I can’t tell you how difficult this can be when I’m working with a family with such a common last name. I’ve built a family tree for this child where I’ve outlined his family all the way through his great grandparents. Would you feel comfortable giving me your name and I can search my family tree to see if you’re on it?”

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You might not believe us as you're reading this, but 9 times out of 10, if they've stayed on the phone with you this long they are not only going to give you their name but they will share the names of every single one of their family members to see if you can find them on your genogram. People truly want to help. And by comparing their family names to your genogram you will easily be able to see if you have the correct family. If not, thank them profusely for their time and tell them how much time they saved you. And then you move on to the next incredible, life changing possible connection for a child.

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