

Using the CANS with African American Clients & Families

Best Practices

Background

In January 2013, the San Francisco Department of Public Health, solicited the Office of Quality Management to develop a guide for engagement strategies when using the CANS with African-American caregivers and youth. Dr. Nathaniel Israel and Leonora Oliver-Williams created a document which highlights the following information to help clinicians engage in more culturally appropriate ways. The project states the importance of considering “Each individual [as] unique. As such, each client should be approached with humility on the part of the clinician given that we cannot know in advance what practices are most effective with that individual client.”

Script for Clinicians on How to Introduce the CANS

“Thank you for meeting with me today, I really appreciate your time and look forward to getting to know more about you and your family. We will be working on a tool today called the CANS which is short for the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths questionnaire. By filling this out together, we will be able to identify the areas of need and strengths that your youth has so that we can create a treatment plan together. I will be asking you different questions, please feel free to ask me questions as we go along and if you do not feel comfortable answering a question that is okay. Where would you like to start? We could begin by talking about your youth’s strengths and areas s/he is doing well in, or we could begin by talking about the reason s/he was referred to treatment? What sounds better to you?”

General Considerations to Keep in Mind

- Understand that often families are seeking support because caregivers may be feeling overwhelmed and looking for support.
- Caregivers would like to be greeted with an individual who is *nice* and *happy* to provide services for the family.
- Praise is helpful, especially in assuring the family and youth that they are doing the right thing by accepting services.
- It is recommended to take the time to explain the process, why you’re doing what you’re doing.
- Talk about who you may share information with and clearly explain confidentiality.
- Build rapport, and show genuine interest in getting to know the youth and family by talking about yourself and who you are as a person.

- Note the specific purpose of the CANS; it's so that we can communicate clearly about needs and strengths of the child and family.
- Inform the family that at the end of the assessment you will be reviewing the assessment with the family.

Engagement Approaches & Tips by Main CANS Domains

Life Functioning

- No specific considerations noted.

Child Strengths

- State that you want to give caregivers control of the process, allow them to choose where they would like to begin in the assessment.

Behavioral/Emotional Needs

- Move from general (syndrome) to specific (symptom) way of talking about each need.

Traumatic/Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Remind families and youth that these questions are asked of everyone.
- Be clear about the purpose of asking these questions to help address trauma-related symptoms that a youth may have.
- Be supportive, sensitive and composed.
- Sit side by side to the caregiver or youth, particularly if they are anxious or concerned about privacy so that they may see your notes.
- Remember that these topics may be difficult to discuss and may be trigger memories for the child/family.

Risk Behaviors

- Be clear about the terms you are using to describe behaviors and why you are using those terms.
- Talk to all key individuals involved in the child's life and when you write the assessment describe who identified the concern.
- Review the information with the caregivers so that they are aware of what additional (if any) concerns have emerged, and in what settings/with whom.

Cultural Factors

- Introduce this topic by providing examples of what culture factors are, to elicit responses that may help with treatment planning (i.e. language, music, traditions, and beliefs, sense of family and community, ect.).
- Empower clients by highlighting the importance of their community culture and or their family culture to celebrate their unique experiences.
- Be transparent and genuine by opening up a conversation about differences and similarities between the youth and family and your own cultural background. By acknowledging the differences and similarities, you are allowing for a sense of deeper understanding and trust to grown within the therapeutic relationship.

Developmental Factors/History

- Caregivers have specifically asked to be given at least 24 hours notice regarding the types of questions that will be asked about their child's development, so that they can find/organize this information.

Caregiver Needs

- Remind caregivers that this is a family process and their involvement is appreciated.
- Ask questions in terms of how you can provide support to parents around these needs, so that they can provide better support to their child.
- Be explicit about which adult services can be provided either internally or externally with agencies.
- Be sensitive and remind caregivers to any risk associated with answering certain questions, be clear about your role as a mandated reporter.

Reviewing the CANS Assessment

- Restate the purpose of completing the CANS.
- Provide a copy of what you write up in a timely manner.
- Provide a process to resolve disagreement.
- Re-state the core need of the presenting problems to help treatment planning.

References

Israel, N. & Oliver-Williams, L. (2013). Engagement Strategies: African-American caregivers and youth. San Francisco, CA: The San Francisco Department of Public Health