In case planning, the more individualized and accurate the client assessment, the more useful it will be. PCAP developed the “Difference Game” card sort assessment to enable clients and case managers to work together to identify client needs (Grant, et al., 1997). It is easy to administer and interpret, is engaging and meaningful to clients, and can be a powerful strategy for intervention when used as a stimulus for identifying client goals. In working with clients who feel overwhelmed and immobilized by the complexity of their problems, the simple Difference Game gives both client and case manager a place to start. Clients often know what needs to be changed, but because of low outcome expectancy and a poor sense of self-efficacy, they feel helpless and incompetent to begin to solve problems on their own.

The Difference Game, similar to playing a card game, is a concrete, hands-on activity. Adapted from a scale developed by Dunst et al. (1988), it consists of a set of 31 laminated cards, on each of which is written an item that is a possible client need (e.g. “housing,” “drug or alcohol treatment,” “more education,” etc.) and including a “wild card” representing any additional need the client may choose. The case manager requests the client to sort the cards into two piles, those items that would “yes, make a difference” in her life, and those items that she does not need, or “no, would not make a difference.” The client is then asked to select from the “yes” cards the 5 items that represent her most important needs. Finally, she ranks these 5 cards in order of her priorities.

The case manager and client use these top 5 cards as the basis for discussion and for planning a course of action that will “make a difference.” There is a story behind each of the five cards the client has selected, and a skillful case manager can elicit these stories from a client without being intrusive. The case manager can ask, for example, “You selected the card ‘Somewhere Else to Live.’ Can you tell me about that? What’s happening where you’re living now?” This may elicit information about domestic
violence, an abusive landlord, drug-using neighbors, someone who is abusing her child, or an eviction notice the client has just received. It is these stories the case manager draws from the client that make the Difference Game an effective tool, that help the case manager assess the client’s current situation, and that help both case manager and client identify specific, meaningful goals that they will work on during the next 4 months (the treatment plan). Together they come to an agreement about realistic steps they can take toward meeting those goals. They record the goals, the small steps, and who will be responsible for accomplishing different tasks, using a specific PCAP form (Goal Assessment/Treatment Plan). It is critical that some of the steps, no matter how small, are attainable by the client in a 4-month period, because it is as she observes herself accomplishing desired behavior that her sense of self-efficacy develops.

Goals are evaluated and reestablished every 4 months because this length of time allows clients 1) to accomplish short-term, concrete tasks (e.g. complete paperwork for housing waiting lists, or enroll in a neighborhood parenting class), and 2) to make progress on long-term goals requiring fundamental, gradual life changes (e.g. stay in recovery or not see a former abusive partner). It is not unusual for a client to decide to work on a single, major issue (such as keeping her job, or staying clean and sober), and specify that as a continuous goal every 4 months throughout her participation in the project.

The effectiveness of the Difference Game is that it allows the client to choose the most meaningful priorities on which she will work, rather than having a professional from the outside determine what needs to be done. The client is therefore more likely to be honest with herself, mobilize her resources and utilize her own strengths. The focus is on possibilities and desired outcomes as opposed to problems, weaknesses, or negative conditions. The Difference Game, used in conjunction with the development of meaningful goals, is a logical method that illustrates to clients within the context of their
own lives the continuum from making a decision, to taking definite steps, to ultimately reaching a goal that makes a difference.