Reasons for Protecting the Privacy of Children and Families

When determining eligibility for certain services and providing needed and appropriate resources, human service agencies and education institutions often require that children and families share very private information about themselves. Laws and statutes are in place to protect the privacy of these individuals and to ensure that this information is released only when necessary. Soler and Peters (1993) outline several reasons for protecting the privacy of children and families:

* "Confidentiality restrictions protect embarrassing personal information from disclosure." This information may include histories of emotional instability, marital conflicts, medical problems, physical or sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug use, limited education, or erratic employment.

* Confidentiality provisions also prevent the improper dissemination of information about children and families that might increase the likelihood of discrimination against them. Such information--about HIV status, mental health history, use of illegal drugs, or charges of child abuse--can be harmful if released. Harm can occur even if records show that the information is unproven or inaccurate.

* Protecting confidential information can be necessary to protect personal security. For example, in a domestic violence situation, an abused woman who leaves home may be in great danger if law enforcement personnel disclose her new location.
Confidentiality provisions also protect family security. Many immigrant families, for example, shy away from using public health clinics or other social services for fear that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will take action against them.

Restricting the information that human service agencies receive may also protect job security. Some information--such as a history of mental health treatment--may have no connection with a person's actual job performance but could jeopardize the individual's position, likelihood of promotion, or ability to find new positions.

Children and families also want to avoid prejudice or differential treatment by people such as teachers, school administrators, and service providers. Teachers may lower their expectations for the children they know are eligible for food stamps or free school lunches. This may set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy in which lowered expectations lead to lowered performance.

Confidentiality provisions also may be necessary to encourage individuals to make use of services designed to help them. Adolescents may avoid seeking mental health services at a school-based clinic, for example, if they believe that information will get back to their teachers, parents, or peers. The same holds for birth control or HIV-related medical consultations." (pp. 6-7)
Summary:

Assurance of confidentiality is important because it enables people to seek help without fear of such results as stigma, retaliation, disapproval, or damage to other relationships. Confidentiality encourages both full disclosure, which is essential for effective treatment, and the maintenance of trust, the means by which treatment is effected.

Soler and Peters (1993). Information obtained from North Central Regional Educational Laboratory