



## **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE**

Because youth are usually dependent on and involved with family members who exert a powerful influence on their choices, they will be more likely to succeed in the juvenile court if court personnel and programs build alliances with family members, enlisting their help to identify and address challenges in their children's lives. The role of caregivers is very important as they are needed to help supervise, monitor, and set rules so that their children will learn to develop their own internal rules and good judgment over time. Caregivers are also needed to coach youth and help them develop the skills needed to become contributing members of society.

At the same time, by strengthening the relationship between youth and their families, the juvenile justice system can lay a foundation for the ongoing care and supervision that are crucial for continued success after a youth leaves juvenile court.

In 2013, the Campaign for Youth Justice, in partnership with Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), published Five Features of a Transformed Justice System:

- 1) Families will be supported before and after challenges arise.
- 2) Families will have access to peer support from the moment a youth is arrested through exit from the system.
- 3) Families will be involved in decision-making processes at the individual, program, and system levels to hold youth accountable and keep the public safe.
- 4) Families will be strengthened through culturally competent treatment options and approaches.
- 5) Families will know their children are prepared for a successful future.

In addition, there are five characteristics of programs that successfully engage parents/families. These include:

- 1) Treating families with dignity and respect. This component includes acknowledging that family members are sought out and treated with respect and dignity by system professionals. Family beliefs, cultures, and experiences are also acknowledged and incorporated into services in culturally, linguistically, and developmentally competent and sustainable ways.
- 2) Providing peer-to-peer support. This involves using family members and other youths with previous juvenile justice system experience to provide peer support for families of various configurations. Such support may help build trust, establish safety, and empower families. Some agencies have also hired staff to focus specifically on connecting families who are encountering the justice system with others who will help them navigate the system and stay better connected.
- 3) Collaborating and partnerships between service professionals and family members. Whether involved with child welfare, schools, or the juvenile justice system, families and service providers share decision-making responsibilities and work together toward the same positive outcomes and goals. Consequently, across these disciplines, families are considered equal partners or participants and are systematically included in developmentally appropriate activities and programs that foster a sense of community, accountability, and respect for others.
- 4) Meaningful communication across all involved parties. This involves two-way communication and information sharing between juvenile justice personnel and family members or a youth's legal representative. Families are provided information about court processes, expectations of their children, and programmatic activities. They are also considered a valuable source of information, even during the early phases of arrest, interview, and interrogation,

as they can supply information and background, including traumas that affected the child and family, and what service providers need to know to decide on treatment options, service plans, and how to improve learning, developmental, mental, and behavioral outcomes for the youths.

5) Sustained familial engagement. Understanding the context and situation of families can help to overcome most barriers to engagement such as functioning (i.e., values, norms, communication, affective expression), denial of problems, and concerns about privacy. Family buy-in increases the likelihood of commitment to treatment goals and significantly influences reunification rates and overall family outcomes. Building and sustaining relationships with families can substantially impact the safety, permanency, and well-being of children while both involved in the justice system and when they return to their communities.

In selecting an area of focus, it will be helpful for you to create a stakeholder group that comes together for the express purpose of improving juvenile court operation. Your stakeholders should be made up of judges, representatives from the district attorney's office, representatives from the defense bar, chief probation, juvenile court management, court administrators, representatives from community service providers, representatives from youth oriented-prosocial activities (like youth sports leagues), youth and their families, and of course the community. Once you've gathered your stakeholders together, there are a number of things your team needs to know about family engagement including:

- The broad definition of family;
- How to develop partnerships with families;
- What is meant by a "family friendly" program;
- How to determine who has influence within the family;
- Techniques for building trust with families;

- Evidence-based models of family intervention and treatment;
- How to determine the support and services families will need from the juvenile justice system;
- Techniques for dealing with family issues and behaviors that are likely to impede a youth’s progress (such as conflict, substance use, or resistance to the program).

### Recommended Resources

Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies, February 2016. The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. This paper reviews the literature exploring the relationship between family contact and short- and long term outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system, and identifies ways that agencies from police through reentry staff can better engage families in ways that promote both personal contact and active involvement in case assessment, planning, and management

Safety, Fairness, Stability: Repositioning Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare to Engage Families and Communities, May 2011. The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. This paper offers strategies for those who work with youth in juvenile justice and child welfare to improve the way they work to engage families so that youth can gain a sense of belonging, competence, well-being, and purpose.  
<http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/pdfs/famengagement/FamilyEngagementPaper.pdf>

### Questions for Discussion

At what point in our process will we identify a youth’s “family”?

What steps have we taken to develop a family-friendly juvenile court? And what still needs to be done?

What strategies do we use to give families the opportunity to ask questions, share concerns, and participate in decision-making?

How do we involve the family in developing and delivering incentives and sanctions to their child?

How and when do we assess the need for family counseling and other support services?

What resources exist in our community for evidence-based counseling, therapy and skill development for families?

What do we expect from (require, need from) families and how will we determine what they expect from us? How will we clarify this agreement?

What processes do we have in place to deal with resistant or uncooperative families?

If we plan to include family representatives on our steering committee, how will we recruit them and what role will we ask them to play?

How do we monitor and evaluate our progress in building a supportive home environment for each youth?