

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Guidance Framework

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental purpose of the juvenile justice system is to provide a transformative experience for young people so they can remain in their communities, make better decisions and develop into healthy adults. Ongoing, effective family engagement is critical to achieving these outcomes, but most systems fall short of building meaningful partnerships with families. As a result, in systems across the country, families struggle to understand how to fully support young people in the system, and youth — alienated from their support networks — face increased likelihood of rearrest and incarceration.

Families are central to a young person's support network, sense of identity and healthy development. For juvenile justice agencies, new alliances and partnerships with families will bring fresh perspectives to strategies to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities.

Efforts to involve and support families as they navigate the juvenile justice system look different from place to place, largely because systems have lacked a definitive road map. **Building on existing efforts, this document offers a framework that distills available research and combines it with concrete advice from the field on the mindsets, concepts and practices needed to improve family engagement.**

WHO SHOULD USE THIS FRAMEWORK

The framework can be used by juvenile justice system staff, community partners and technical assistance providers to promote the development of sustainable family engagement efforts and allow for clear measurement and regular assessment of progress. The framework can also help streamline discussions about family engagement, providing practical suggestions about how to better engage community partners and support transformative efforts.

FRAMEWORK STRUCTURE

This strategic guidance framework highlights four guiding concepts that are critical to effective family engagement in juvenile justice systems:

- creating a staff culture centered on families;
- defining what makes a family;
- supporting, guiding and advocating for families; and

- empowering family voice and retaining family connections.

Each concept is explored through the following sections:

- a **rationale** explaining why the concept is important;
- **system- and case-level definitions** of each concept, underscoring the dual perspectives that should be considered at all times;
- a list of **critical progress factors** detailing how to tell when the concept is being successfully implemented;
- a list of **supporting research and bright spots** directing readers to the research and examples from the field that were used to develop the framework; and
- an **implementation opportunities checklist** suggesting potential actions to take to address the concept.

An action planner for beginning or improving family engagement efforts is included with this framework. The action planner guides users through a list of questions, instructions and examples to help them identify opportunities and actions related to their site's specific family engagement goals. A [blank, customizable work plan](#) template is available as a separate resource.

A NOTE BEFORE USING

It is important to acknowledge that juvenile justice jurisdictions engage families in various ways every day. This guidance framework highlights specific approaches to enhancing sites' current engagement efforts with the understanding that young people come into the system with varying levels of family involvement and support, and that families have differing needs. The framework has been designed to address the broadest array of issues distilled into essential, digestible concepts for the field, but it cannot account for all the unique features of every jurisdiction and every family,

Systems will need to maintain a focus on meaningful family engagement and continually revisit the framework and supplemental aids to sustain their efforts, specifically in the areas of training, onboarding new staff, community partnerships and policies. Each jurisdiction will need to determine its own focus areas and regular review processes because one size won't fit all.

It is also critical that systems take deliberate steps to approach families in a manner appropriate and responsive to their culture, explicitly considering issues of race and privilege. System professionals and community partners must work to ensure that families never feel pressured to compromise their values or cultural norms as a result of efforts to engage them. This means anticipating a broad range of family structures and norms and developing a flexible engagement approach that does not prescribe or project a certain model as standard. A focus on families requires collaboration with community partners, consideration of racial equity and input from families throughout the process. Without a commitment to

approaching family engagement in a way that responds to their culture, this work has the potential to reinforce — rather than disrupt — inequality related to race, class and privilege for young people involved with the juvenile justice system and their families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

The following concepts not only reflect values that should be held by juvenile justice agencies and partners, but also highlight effective strategies for partnering with families and achieving better outcomes for youth.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

GUIDING CONCEPT	SYSTEM LEVEL	CASE LEVEL
CREATING A STAFF CULTURE CENTERED ON FAMILIES	Systems actively work to transform their cultures and shift staff perceptions through policies and training that focus on families' needs and strengths — developing staff who are focused on serving youth and their families.	Families receive respectful, consistent and effective service — without judgment — from all individuals they encounter within the juvenile justice system.
DEFINING WHAT MAKES A FAMILY	The operating definition of family is changed to extend beyond biological parents and legal guardians.	Individual youth and their caretaker(s) define who makes up the members of their family.
SUPPORTING, GUIDING AND ADVOCATING FOR FAMILIES	Systems create policies to ensure families are offered training on the juvenile justice system and develop a network of support services and resources to address family needs throughout the process.	Families have access to training, resources and peer advocates to support their ability to guide and advocate for their child in the juvenile justice system.
EMPOWERING FAMILY VOICE AND RETAINING FAMILY CONNECTIONS	Systems engage families at the earliest point possible, create an environment in which families are empowered to have a voice in all decision making and employ practices that allow youth to maintain contact with their families as easily and frequently as possible.	The families of youth in the juvenile justice system are aware of the child's status at any given time, actively participate in all decisions regarding the youth's case and maintain consistent and regular contact with the youth to fully support them throughout the process.

CREATING A STAFF CULTURE CENTERED ON FAMILIES

Staff view families as partners. They understand that their actions directly affect how youth and families experience the juvenile justice system, and that their positive engagement contributes to the long-term success of the young people they serve. Staff actively work to shift their mindset and accept that it is their duty to engage in activities that promote a culture that focuses on families.

RATIONALE

Families are often blamed when a young person engages in delinquent behavior or breaks the law. Negative stereotypes and perceptions about families have traditionally led to juvenile justice system policies, procedures and cultures that do not support or encourage the active involvement of families in young people's experience with the system, effectively denying youths the benefits of family engagement.

SYSTEM LEVEL

Systems actively work to transform their cultures and shift staff perceptions through the institution of family-centric policies and training — developing staff who are focused on best serving youth and their families.

CASE LEVEL

Families receive respectful, consistent and effective service — without judgment — from all individuals they encounter within the juvenile justice system.

CRITICAL PROGRESS FACTORS

1. Staff demonstrate a commitment to shifting their mindsets by taking action to adjust current practice.
2. System leaders implement change management strategies to shift their organizational culture.
3. Families report confidence that young people will be treated fairly and humanely by the system.
4. Families report increased rapport with and trust in staff.

IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES CHECKLIST

- Develop and mandate training for staff on meaningful family and youth engagement.
- Identify community partners to provide training support for juvenile justice staff.
- Offer mechanisms, such as surveys or ombudspeople, for families to provide confidential feedback on their experience with the agency and staff. Track that feedback.
- Incorporate specific assessment of family engagement measures into staff performance evaluations.
- Develop opportunities for staff and families to engage in open dialogue about enhancing the family partnership.
- Provide opportunities for families to contribute to and participate in staff trainings to communicate family needs and perspectives.
- Incentivize staff to:
 - positively and actively engage families at each stage of juvenile justice system involvement;
 - identify opportunities to make it as easy as possible for youth and their families to interact; and
 - maintain communication with families and consider families first (after the welfare of youths).
- Explore the possibility of adding a dedicated family partnership position to enhance and support implementation of the agency's new policies.
- Build funds into the budget specifically dedicated to partnership work and creating a family-centric culture.

5. System leaders enhance and implement staff accountability measures throughout the system to track the quality of service to families (for example, level of family engagement incorporated into staff performance evaluations).
6. System leaders provide regular and ongoing trainings for staff.
7. Staff report improved employee morale.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND BRIGHT SPOTS

- [Engaging the Families of Youth in Custody: An Essential Goal for Juvenile Justice Practitioners](#) — Juvenile Justice Information Exchange article
- The New York Foundling
 - [Kids Experiencing Young Successes \(KEYS\)](#)
 - [Families Rising](#)
- [Best Practices in Juvenile Corrections and Detention](#) — National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
- [Family Engagement and Involvement: Strategic Innovations from the Mental Health and Juvenile Justice Action Network](#) — National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice

DEFINING WHAT MAKES A FAMILY

For young people in the juvenile justice system, family is best defined broadly to potentially include biological family members (immediate and extended) and legal guardians, chosen family members (such as godparents, foster siblings, etc.) and other important people (such as mentors, teachers, coaches, etc.).

RATIONALE

Youth in the juvenile justice system have support networks (also known as circles of care) that feature a range of individuals that might not include their biological parents. Including youth in identifying their support systems or families increases the likelihood that these individuals will be engaged.

SYSTEM LEVEL

The operating definition of family is changed to extend beyond biological parents and legal guardians.

CASE LEVEL

Young people and their caretaker(s) define who makes up the members of their family.

CRITICAL PROGRESS FACTORS

1. Young people and families report that justice professionals were familiar enough the youth's support network — the adults committed to the young person's well-being — to identify strengths and gaps in sources of support.
2. Youths report having a solid support system from the start of their involvement in the juvenile justice system.
3. Youth-identified family members are engaged as soon as possible after the point of infraction.
4. Systems revise policies referring to biological family members.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND BRIGHT SPOTS

- [Identifying, Engaging and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies](#) — Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Vera Institute of Justice

IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES CHECKLIST

- Review policies to ensure that family is defined broadly, and not limited to biological family members.
- Develop a series of questions that help facility staff engage youth about their family and social support to determine the strength and diversity of — and gaps within — youth support systems; revisit inquiry results as youth move through the system.
- Review jurisdictional policies to include the most expansive definition of family possible to reflect all the positive people who can be in contact with individual young people and participate in their programs. Young people who have support from their circles of care while in the system do best.

- Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool
- Family Engagement Practice Level Strategies — U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families and Children's Bureau
- Family Case Management Flowchart
- Strength-Based Genogram
- Family and Institutional Ecomaps

SUPPORTING, GUIDING AND ADVOCATING FOR FAMILIES

Systems provide families with a number of entry points, including training and access to advocates and resources, to ensure they can be well-informed participants in the broader juvenile justice system and can meaningfully engage throughout the process with their child.

RATIONALE

Families of young people in the juvenile justice system often express being overwhelmed and unclear about the process their child has been thrust into. Informed families are better prepared to support their children and advocate for their families and other families affected by the juvenile justice system.

SYSTEM LEVEL

Systems create policies to ensure families are offered training on the juvenile justice system and develop a network of support services and resources to address family needs throughout the process.

CASE LEVEL

Families access training and use resources and peer advocates to support their needs and the experience of young people in the juvenile justice system.

CRITICAL PROGRESS FACTORS

1. Families are provided with guidance on what to expect during the juvenile justice process and when and how they can actively participate.
2. Families report having a clear understanding of the legal terminology they will encounter during the process.
3. Families report feeling prepared to effectively interact with justice system personnel (such as case managers, defense attorneys, judges, probation officers and other) during the process.
4. Families report feeling better prepared to support their children throughout their involvement in the system.

IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES CHECKLIST

- Create a network of community-based organizations that can provide support to families.
- Consistently engage partners including law enforcement, schools, faith-based organizations and health care, social service and mental health providers.
- Leverage partnerships to provide a range of services to support the families as necessary, including but not limited to:
 - developing trainings;
 - providing advocates;
 - providing meals and transportation; and
 - creating family-focused activities.
- Develop a mechanism to track families who choose to access system services.
- Establish family councils to increase family involvement in agency policy development and provide peer support.

5. Community-partner and peer-advocate resources are readily available to families, including sources of support unrelated to the juvenile justice system (such as housing services, employment services and government assistance programs).
6. Peer advocates have had personal experience with a loved one in the justice system.
7. System leaders establish clear roles and responsibilities for the individuals and entities within and across systems that are involved with a young person’s case or family so there is cohesion; these roles are clearly articulated to families by a single point of contact.
8. Families report they understand how to advocate on behalf of their own child.
9. Families report they understand how to raise broader department-level issues with system leaders, such as ways to reduce the barriers to family involvement or change policies and practices that apply to all youth, if they desire to do so.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND BRIGHT SPOTS

- [Navigating the Juvenile Justice System: A Handbook for Young People and Families — THRIVE Initiative in Maine](#)
- [Cross-Cutting Value: Family Engagement — The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)
- [10 Tips for Building Effective Youth-Family-Defender Partnerships — National Juvenile Defender Center and Justice for Families](#)
- [Engaging Juvenile Justice System-Involved Families — National Center on Crime & Delinquency](#)
- [Improving Family Engagement in Juvenile Justice Systems — Juvenile Justice Information Exchange article](#)
- [Family Engagement in Juvenile Justice — Massachusetts Department of Youth Services](#)
- [Family Engagement and Involvement: Strategic Innovations from the Mental Health and Juvenile Justice Action Network — National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice](#)
- [Your Guide to the Juvenile Justice System in Illinois — Models for Change](#)
- [The Juvenile Justice System: A Guide for Families in Illinois — Models for Change](#)
- Community Connections for Youth (Bronx, New York)
 - [Parent Peer Support Program](#)
 - [Family Engagement Training](#)
- [A Guide for Conducting Focus Groups with Youth and Families Impacted by the Juvenile Justice System — Justice for Families](#)

EMPOWERING FAMILY VOICE AND RETAINING FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Family involvement is immediate and ongoing throughout a youth's experience with the system; it is treated as a right for all families rather than a privilege granted by courts and service providers. As such, everyone involved with the system ensures that families play a central and active role in all decisions that affect the youth.

RATIONALE

Youth with actively engaged family networks are more likely to have better outcomes because of the importance of caring adults in young people's lives. Engaged families are better able to maintain connections with their child throughout their involvement with the justice system.

SYSTEM LEVEL

Systems engage families at the earliest point possible and create an environment in which families are empowered to have a voice in all decision making. They employ practices that allow young people to stay in contact with their families as easily and frequently as possible throughout their involvement with the juvenile justice system.

CASE LEVEL

Families are aware of their child's status in the system at any given time, actively participate in all decisions regarding the youth's case and maintain consistent and regular contact with their child to fully support them throughout the process.

CRITICAL PROGRESS FACTORS

1. Families report having up-to-date information regarding their child's case status and are involved in formal meetings and hearings.
2. Families report feeling encouraged to weigh in on decisions regarding their child's case and reentry planning.
3. Families report being well informed and encouraged to express concerns or pose questions throughout the juvenile justice process.

IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES CHECKLIST

- Institute policies that promote frequent and open family visitation (including the children of detained youth).
- Create policies to incentivize staff to positively and actively engage families at each step of the juvenile justice process.
- Provide guidance to young people's families on ways they can be actively and appropriately involved with their case.
- Create mechanisms for proactively providing status updates to the families of detained youth on their well-being and their case.
- Create a family-friendly atmosphere and environment in the offices where cases are handled.
- Establish a process to capture and address families' concerns and grievances regarding young people's experience in the juvenile justice system.

4. Families report being aware of their child’s well-being in out-of-home placement.
5. Mechanisms exist for families to provide confidential feedback on their experience with the juvenile justice system, and families are aware of these mechanisms.
6. Policies clearly state how feedback from families will be collected and reviewed by system staff.
7. Most youths report being in contact with their families on a regular basis while in out-of-home placement through visits and calls.
8. Policies clearly prioritize placing youths as close as possible to where their families live.
9. Policies clearly prioritize scheduling meetings and hearings at times that do not create hardships on families and provide them with the greatest chance of attending.
10. Families receive resources such as child care, transportation and other sources of support directly or through partnerships to support and increase their ability to remain engaged throughout the juvenile justice process.
11. Procedures and guidance specify how families can remain informed on their child’s status and well-being.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND BRIGHT SPOTS

- [Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies](#) — Vera Institute
 - [Neighborhood Opportunity Network Offices](#) — New York City Department of Probation
 - [Just Beginning](#) (formerly known as the Baby Elmo Program) — Youth Law Center of San Francisco
 - [CLOSE to Home Project \(Connecting Loved Ones Sooner Than Expected\)](#) — Ohio Department of Youth Services
 - [Parents of Incarcerated Children Bill of Rights](#) — Texas Juvenile Justice Department
- [The Impact of Family Visitation on Incarcerated Youth’s Behavior and School Performance](#) — Vera Institute
- [Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice](#) — Justice for Families