
The Role of Family Engagement in Creating Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Systems

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What is Family Engagement?

The term family engagement is being used more frequently in the context of juvenile justice; however, the meaning of the term is not always clear to all stakeholders. For the purposes of this brief, I will use the terms family engagement and family partnership interchangeably to describe a collaborative relationship between agencies or systems and families. This partnering relationship encompasses a spectrum of activity that not only includes the individual system-involved youth and their families, but also encompasses the policies, practices, and governance of the agency or system.

Family engagement must also be understood in terms of a shared definition of family. The movement for family-driven care in child-serving systems has advanced a broad definition of family that is much more inclusive than the definition traditionally used by juvenile justice systems:

A family is defined by its members, and each family defines itself. A family can include people of various ages who are united through biology, marriage, or adoption or who are so closely connected through friendships or shared experience that they are taken to be family members.

Families are dynamic and constantly evolving, redefining roles and relationships, welcoming in new members, and taking on new ideas and world views as diverse cultures intersect. Each family has a unique culture of its own in addition to the external cultures with which it and individual members affiliate.¹

I will employ this broad understanding of family throughout this brief. As someone who has had children in the juvenile justice system, as an adoptive parent, as a member of a same-gender couple, and as someone who has provided peer support for families of various configurations as they have encountered the justice system, I know that child-serving systems need to move beyond narrow, traditional understandings of who is family for the youth they serve.

Why Family Engagement is a Key Element in Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice

The current NCTSN definition of a Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice system includes these elements:

[A]ll parties involved recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system including children, caregivers, and service providers. Programs and agencies within such a system infuse and sustain trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills into their organizational cultures, practices, and policies. They act in collaboration with all those who are involved with the child, using the best available science, to facilitate and support the recovery and resiliency of the child and family.

A service system with a trauma-informed perspective is one in which programs, agencies, and service providers: ... (3) make resources available to children, families, and providers on trauma exposure, its impact, and treatment; (4) engage in efforts to strengthen the resilience and protective factors of children and families impacted by and vulnerable to trauma; (5) address parent and caregiver trauma and its impact on the family system...² (Emphases added.)

Families, in the broadest sense, are the primary context in which children receive care, support, a sense of identity and belonging. Even—and perhaps especially—when youth are placed out of the home, families are key to children’s ongoing health and development. Families will be involved long after children leave the juvenile justice system. The need for trauma-informed juvenile justice systems to recognize and respond to trauma as it affects caregivers, to act in collaboration with all those who are involved with the child, to make resources available, to address family trauma and strengthen family resilience, as described above, makes it absolutely critical that such a system partner with families.

It is only through fully embracing family engagement that a juvenile justice system can become a truly trauma-informed system. Family partnership is the means through which the necessary relationships can be built, and through which policies, practices, and agency culture can be shifted to create a trauma-informed system.

How Family Engagement Supports a More Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice System — and Vice Versa

When families are viewed and treated as partners in both their child’s care and in the operations of the juvenile justice system itself, the child, the family, and the system benefit. The most effective interventions for youth in the justice system are those that engage families in a strength-based partnership. A trauma-informed system builds on that fact by adopting a collaborative approach to the families and youth with whom they interact.

On the individual level, such collaboration enables families and system staff to work together to respond to trauma as it has impacted the child and his or her family. This can include such down-to-earth practical matters as families sharing information about traumas that have affected the child and family, as well as providing background on the child’s strengths and needs. System staff can assist families in understanding trauma and its effects, especially on behavior. Staff adopting a collaborative approach in a trauma-informed system must also understand that families and youth frequently experience trauma from the juvenile justice system itself, and must shape their work using the principle of “do no [further] harm.” This strategy is discussed in more detail in the brief on the Environment of Care.³

On the systemic level, families offer a rich, untapped source of expertise and information. They bring a different perspective that agency staff—no matter how well intentioned—simply do not have. Family engagement at this level includes various feedback mechanisms, specialized staff positions, and meaningful participation in focus groups, advisory bodies, and governing and policymaking councils that push juvenile justice systems toward transformation. Family-driven organizations also have a role, as I discuss later. Families bring a sense of urgency and immediacy that, while challenging, can help implement the culture shift that is needed to create a trauma-informed system.

What Does a Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice System that Embraces Family Engagement Look Like?

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has identified 10 key principles as the foundation of trauma-informed approach.⁴ Eight of these also exemplify core principles of family engagement. The following chart excerpts SAMHSA’s principles, and unpacks how they apply to family engagement in the juvenile justice setting.

SAMSHA key principles of trauma-informed approach	Application for family engagement in juvenile justice systems
<p>Safety: Throughout the organization, staff and the people they serve feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe, and interpersonal interactions promote a sense of safety.</p>	<p>Youth and families feel safe, both psychologically and physically, when encountering all parts of the juvenile justice system.</p>
<p>Trustworthiness and transparency: Organizational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency and the goal of building and maintaining trust among staff, clients, and family members of people served by the organization.</p>	<p>The juvenile justice system operates in a clear and transparent manner so that families and youth can both understand and trust the system and its staff.</p>
<p>Collaboration and mutuality: There is true partnering and leveling of power differences between staff and clients and among organizational staff, from direct care staff to administrators; there is recognition that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making.</p>	<p>The juvenile justice system treats families and youth as partners, sharing decision-making and information to the extent possible. Families and youth are engaged in policy-making and governance bodies and activities.</p>
<p>Empowerment: Throughout the organization and among the clients served, individuals' strengths are recognized, built on, and validated, and new skills are developed as necessary.</p>	<p>The juvenile justice system recognizes the strengths and expertise that families and youth have, and works with them to build new skills as needed.</p>
<p>Voice and choice: The organization aims to strengthen the staff's, clients', and family members' experience of choice, and recognizes that every person's experience is unique and requires an individualized approach.</p>	<p>Interventions are individualized and—wherever possible—reflect family and youth choices.</p>
<p>Peer support and mutual self-help: These are integral to the organizational and service delivery approach and are understood as a key vehicle for building trust, establishing safety, and enabling empowerment.</p>	<p>Family members and youth with previous juvenile justice experience provide peer support to others encountering the system.</p>
<p>Resilience and strengths based: Incorporating a belief in resilience and in the ability of individuals, organizations, and communities to heal and promote recovery from trauma; builds on what clients, staff, and communities have to offer rather than responding to their perceived deficits.</p>	<p>The juvenile justice system takes a holistic approach to families and youth and offers them paths to recovery from trauma, rather than reacting punitively to the symptoms of trauma.</p>
<p>Cultural, historical, and gender issues: The organization addresses cultural, historical, and gender issues; the organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., those based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, geography, etc.), offers gender responsive services, leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections, and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.</p>	<p>The juvenile justice system treats all families and youth fairly and respectfully, and employs culturally competent staff and interventions.</p>

The Challenges to Family Engagement in Juvenile Justice

The primary barrier facing juvenile justice systems seeking to collaborate effectively with families is the coercive and punitive nature of the juvenile justice systems themselves.⁵ Youth come into this system as a result of problematic behavior, and despite some systems' emphasis on rehabilitation and treatment, a culture of punishment overlays the endeavor, underscored by the power of the state to compel compliance for both youth and families. This punitive culture spills over to families, poisons relationships, and corrodes trust between families and system staff from the start.

Moreover, the punitive nature of the system means that, once youth and families are in it, behaviors that are manifestations of trauma are seen through the lens of criminality, and may lead youth into deeper justice system involvement or difficulty extracting themselves from the system. A trauma-informed juvenile justice system must understand and address this structural barrier.

The pervasive culture of blame and shame that families often encounter in juvenile justice systems creates another significant barrier to family partnership. Rather than viewing families as partners, too often system staff view families of youth in trouble as being inherently dysfunctional, and operate out of two-dimensional understandings of the realities of these families' lives. This bodes ill for any kind of respectful collaboration.

Here is a brief personal example. In a detention hearing for our younger son, who was charged with property crimes, a probation officer argued that he should be detained because our older son had also been "court-involved." Though we were in the room, there was no attempt to discuss the context with us. The fact was that our older son had been brought to court for egging houses after sneaking out at night despite our best efforts to stop him (including buying an alarm system). The information that we had another child who had been court-involved was, in the court's eyes, enough to establish us as bad parents.

Given this culture of blame, it is no surprise that there is no widespread accepted structure or model for partnerships between families and juvenile justice systems. Those who succeed at it have either devised and experimented on their own or borrowed from family engagement models in other systems, including education, children's mental health, and child welfare. Many of these systems have made strides in partnering with families in individual cases, providing peer support, and incorporating families in governance structures.

An imbalance of power and resources creates yet another barrier to robust family engagement at every level. Power also includes the knowledge and information that families need to navigate and to engage the juvenile justice system, both for individual outcomes and to address policy matters. On the individual level, families encounter a system that is very confusing and can be almost impenetrable to the lay person. A 2012 national research report created by and about families of youth in the justice system found that the vast majority of families reported that the system was either confusing or very confusing. Further, only 18% of families surveyed said that juvenile justice system personnel were helpful or very helpful as they tried to understand what was going on.⁶

A final challenge is that our families aren't recognized or treated in culturally competent ways. Traditionally, juvenile justice systems have limited their concern and interaction to those who fit into an extremely narrow definition of family, and in particular to legal parents or guardians. Reliance on such a definition of family can serve to cut youth off from their community of support, further traumatizing them at a time when they most need those positive supporters. For example, I have heard from many parents of youth in secure custody that their longtime companions—who have developed loving relationships with their child—have not been allowed to visit because of restrictions based on legal recognition of relationships.

Recommendations to Address These Challenges

Juvenile justice systems can address their punitive and coercive structure by adopting and infusing restorative justice principles and practices wherever possible. Restorative justice is inclusive and collaborative, usually bringing together persons who have caused harm (offenders) with those who have been harmed (victims), along with the

community and supporters of each as appropriate.⁷ Restorative approaches work to establish justice through accountability, repairing the harm, addressing the needs that have arisen to the extent possible, and emphasizing public safety by addressing the root causes of the harm in order to ensure that it does not happen again.

Restorative justice approaches are in harmony with a trauma-informed justice system, particularly in their emphasis on not causing further harm while at the same time holding people who have committed offenses accountable. Restorative justice practices such as Family Group Conferencing and Community Conferencing are being used successfully in juvenile justice settings in the U.S. and abroad.

Juvenile justice systems can create a culture that values families, and partners with them by specifically training staff in family engagement. Systems should work with families and family-driven organizations to create and deliver such training within a context of intentional, systemic culture shift. When done well, training in family engagement will also increase the juvenile justice system's cultural competence in relation to the families they serve.

In addition to training, juvenile justice systems can adopt a peer support model similar to the Family Partner role in mental health systems of care.⁸ This model entails hiring families with system experience in a professional peer support role. As Family Partners are embedded in the structure of the system, either within agencies or as part of a family-led organization, they act as change agents and bridges between families and system staff. Juvenile justice systems should also support policies that help build and sustain family-driven organizations that work with youth and families in the system.

To redress power imbalances, juvenile justice systems need to level the playing field with information and training for families on both trauma and the juvenile justice system. Systems should strive for transparency and engage families in decision making at all levels, including policy and governance bodies. They should, additionally, compensate families for their involvement in these groups.

Finally, juvenile justice systems need to seek out and use more family-centered, collaborative interventions, and continuously seek out culturally competent staff and contractors. The most effective and promising programs in juvenile justice incorporate a relationship of trust and partnership among staff, families, and youth. These are guiding lights pointing the way toward a system that respects and values all families, and partners with them in a strengths-based way.

Bright Spots

In their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath point out the importance of finding the “bright spots—successful efforts worth emulating.” Examining the bright spots reveals the strategies and tactics needed for success. In the area of family engagement, here are two major bright spots to consider:⁹

The emergence of a family- and youth-led movement in juvenile justice: Grassroots groups are organizing among families and communities affected by the juvenile justice system in California, Louisiana, Missouri, Texas, North Carolina, Virginia, Mississippi, Colorado, and in many other parts of the United States. These groups provide crucial peer support and empowerment to families of youth in the justice system. Some of them have become powerful forces for transforming juvenile justice in their state and local jurisdictions. For example, Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) and their allies pushed the state to close their worst youth prisons, adopt a different approach to their juvenile justice system, and address school discipline codes that set youth on a path to justice system involvement.

Many of these state and local groups are joining forces through the new Justice for Families network, the Community Justice Network for Youth, and the Alliance for Justice, which is affiliated with the Campaign for Youth Justice. Local and national family-led organizations are an important part of the family engagement equation: they organize, support, and equip families to engage as full partners in transforming juvenile justice systems.

Growing systemic attention to family engagement: Some juvenile justice systems are acting on their understanding of the importance of family engagement. For example, in Texas and Pennsylvania, juvenile justice professionals

are given training in family engagement on a regular basis. Also in Texas, the state juvenile justice agency has partnered with families to create a “Parents’ Bill of Rights” for families of youth in the system. The juvenile justice system in Santa Cruz, California, has adopted the use of family conferencing, and incorporates the wisdom of families individually and collectively to improve their system and its responsiveness to community needs.

Increasing use of restorative justice approaches also leads the way to greater family engagement. Juvenile justice systems in places such as Baltimore, Oakland, Chicago, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and many others are adopting various restorative justice practices.

Transforming juvenile justice systems into trauma-informed systems requires cultural and programmatic shifts toward creating true partnerships with families. Organizing and action by families affected by juvenile justice systems adds leverage that can push forward and sustain these shifts.

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⁷See Zehr, Howard, (2002), The Little Book of Restorative Justice, Good Books; Zehr, Howard and MacRae, Allan, (2004), The Little Book of Family Group Conferences, New Zealand Style, Good Books.

⁸For more on this model in mental health, see the Certification Commission for Family Support of the National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health at <http://certification.ffcmh.org/> and Obrochta, C; Anthony, B., Armstrong, M., Kallal, J., Hust, J., & Kernan, J. (2011), Issue brief: Family-to-family peer support: Models and evaluation. Atlanta, GA: ICF Macro, Outcomes Roundtable for Children and Families.

⁹For an excellent summary of successful family engagement activities, see Arya, Neelum, (2013—forthcoming), Family Comes First: Transforming the Justice System by Partnering with Families, Washington, DC: Campaign for Youth Justice.

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