



Family Engagement Guide

Purpose

The purpose of the Family Engagement Guide is to help agencies and organizations that work with children, youth, and families understand how and why to include family members in making decisions about services, support, and referrals during the case planning process.

Audience

This guide is intended for frontline service providers, as well as middle and upper management staff, in any local government agency and community-based organization that serves children, youth, and families.



Meaningful Family Engagement

Meaningful family engagement is a key priority in many agencies and systems that support children, youth, and families. Fields such as child welfare, behavioral health, public health, juvenile justice, education, early childhood development, housing, and victim advocacy recognize it as both a core practice and a guiding philosophy.

Common themes across systems include:

- Child-Centered Approaches
- Trauma-informed, Strength-Based Responses
- Joint Planning and Decision-Making
- Family Involvement (including children, youth, caregivers, and extended family) at the System and Service-Delivery Levels
- Individualized Services
- Open, Honest, and Respectful Interactions
- Interagency and Multisystem Collaboration





Who is considered "family?"

All types of family and important connections should be considered when working with individuals, children, and families, understanding that some of the most supportive people in a person's life may not be related by blood. Including kin, extended family, and other emotionally connected individuals within the broad concept of family creates more opportunities for meaningful family engagement.

The Benefits of Meaningful Family Engagement

Meaningful family engagement can lead to better outcomes for children and families, especially during times of crisis. It can also support the well-being of staff by helping them feel more confident in their work and by strengthening resources in the community.



Specifically, increased family engagement can:

- Enhance the fit between family needs and services.
- Improve families' abilities to cope with the issues that they are experiencing.
- Enhance systems' capacity to support children, youth, and families, including improved services and resources.
- Enhance the helping relationship.
- Boost staff morale by improving service outcomes and improving workforce skills.

Strategies for enhancing family engagement

Strategies for enhancing family engagement should address the safety of children, youth, and family members and may occur at three levels:

- **Practice level:** Methods, plans of action, and strategies designed for frontline staff.
- **Program level:** Approaches and procedures used by agencies and organizations.
- **System level:** Processes and policies to support larger networks of agencies and organizations.

Practice-Level Strategies

1. Help families understand the issues and reasons for agency involvement.
2. Actively include families in planning and decision-making.
3. Be consistent and transparent with families.
4. Provide timely resources, referrals, and interventions.
5. Set measurable, achievable, and mutually satisfactory goals in case management and planning.
6. Recognize and respect the strengths, beliefs, and traditions that come from each family's unique culture.
7. Recognize and respect diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
8. Provide services and information in family members' preferred language.
9. Break down terms and processes to make the system easier to understand.



Program-Level Strategies

1. Hire staff with lived experience to coordinate family engagement and assist in developing staff training.
2. Regularly train staff on meaningful family engagement strategies.
3. Implement strength-based programming including, but not limited to, parenting education, family therapy, and/or parent mentors.
4. Recognize and respect the strengths, beliefs, and traditions that come from each family's culture.
5. Ensure that all interventions and services are culturally responsive.
6. Establish policies and practices of offering interpreters and translation services during meetings, events, and trainings for families who are not fluent in English.
7. Provide diverse interventions in order to individualize services specific to family need.



System-Level Strategies

1. Gather and review feedback from families to identify challenges, explore ways to increase engagement, and consider possible policy changes.
2. Map opportunities to collaborate with existing family support organizations and develop family support program resource directories.
3. Strive to create greater equity by addressing the power imbalances between families and the organizations and systems that serve children, youth, and families.
4. Engage families in reviewing and evaluating state laws and policies that impact children, youth, and families.
5. Collaborate with families to advocate for adequate and meaningful resources that meet the needs of children, youth, and families.



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