



# YOUTH JUSTICE ISSUE BRIEF

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## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Effective and authentic family engagement supports the principles and practices of balanced and restorative justice. It brings the family and youth justice system alongside the youth, which creates a foundation for repairing harm and moving the youth to become a competent and responsible community member.

### Youth Justice Vision & Strategic Plan

Through the Department of Children and Families (DCF)'s 2016 [input gathering](#) process, a [vision](#) emerged regarding engagement strategies:

- Youth and families are the drivers of change and are empowered to make decisions with the recognition that they are experts on their needs.
- All workers engage youth and families meaningfully at all stages of a case.
- Case planning explicitly involves families and/or other natural supports.
- Approaches to engaging families and young people that are incentive and strength-based are promoted.

The Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Network developed a [Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Practice Model](#) where family engagement is a practice level strategy.

## Background

### Why Engage Families?

Within youth justice, family engagement occurs when the justice system respects family members as partners and facilitates their ongoing participation in decision-making regarding the youth's rehabilitation (Shanahan & diZerega, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Family engagement has emerged as an essential component of child-serving systems.

*“Family engagement should be a collaborative relationship where the families and legal guardians are considered partners in both their child’s treatment and the policies, programs, and practices of the youth justice system itself.”*

- Office of Juvenile Justice and  
Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

<sup>1</sup> Family engagement has been a priority at notable juvenile-justice related organizations, including: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University, MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change Initiative, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's National Center for Youth in Custody, Vera Institute of Justice's Family Justice Program, and Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative.



For a history of family engagement in juvenile justice and child welfare, read [Safety, Fairness, Stability: Repositioning Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare to Engage Families and Communities](#)

For more on defining family broadly and thinking about people in context, read [Why Ask About Family?](#), a Vera Institute of Justice guide for corrections.

Research shows that families and youth have improved outcomes when they are active participants in decision-making.

- Families can motivate youth when they are well-informed about the youth's progress (Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).
- Family visitation has a positive impact on the behavior and school performance of incarcerated youth (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).
- A family-systems approach reduces recidivism rates for justice-involved youth and reduces the rates of siblings' involvement in the youth justice system (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).
- Programs that work with families on parenting skills, school success, and greater supervision show success in reducing problem behavior and increasing school achievement (Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative).

## Defining “Family” Broadly

Families are a young person's primary emotional, social, cultural and spiritual resource. For young people in the youth justice system, family is best defined broadly to include biological family members, extended and chosen family (including godparents and foster siblings), and other important people such as mentors, teachers, and coaches (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and the Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).

## Core Concepts of Family Engagement<sup>2</sup>



### Dignity and Respect

Youth justice system staff listens to and honors family perspectives and choices. Family knowledge, values, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are incorporated into the planning and delivery of services.



### Information Sharing

Youth justice system staff communicates and shares information with families in ways that are affirming and useful. Families receive timely, complete and accurate information in order to effectively participate in decision-making.



### Participation

Families are supported in participating in services and decision-making and are empowered to increase their level of participation.



### Collaboration

Families, juvenile justice system staff, and justice system leaders collaborate in program and policy development, implementation and evaluation, and in professional education, as well as in the delivery of services.

<sup>2</sup> The core concepts of family engagement are exemplified by DuPage County in Illinois, a jurisdiction that has made significant progress in family-driven justice (Arya, 2014).

# Research You Can Use



Family engagement is about...	Supporting Research
<p><b>Dignity &amp; Respect</b></p> <p>...acknowledging and incorporating family beliefs and cultures into the services.</p>	<p>Systems need to operate from the belief that all families will act in the best interest of their child when they have the knowledge, skills and supports necessary to provide ongoing and developmentally appropriate guidance and interaction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers. (2009). <a href="#">Family Involvement in Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Justice System</a>. Pages 10-13.</li> </ul> <p>Agencies will have more success with youth and families if they foster cultural humility and linguistic competency, and offer individualized and accessible services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. (2017). <a href="#">Engage, Involve, Empower: Family Engagement in Juvenile Drug Treatment Courts</a>. Pages 12-13.</li> </ul> <p>Youth justice systems should continuously seek out culturally competent staff and contractors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Rozzell, L. (2013). <a href="#">The Role of Family Engagement in Creating Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Systems</a>. Los Angeles, CA &amp; Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Page 5.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Information Sharing</b></p> <p>...sharing accurate information in a timely manner to build a trusting relationship between families and agencies.</p>	<p>A promising approach to ensuring that families have access to information about the youth justice system is through providing generalized access to legal information through community-based organizations and existing legal organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Arya, N. (2014). <a href="#">Family-Driven Justice</a>. Arizona Law Review, Volume 56, Issue 3. Pages 660-702.</li> </ul> <p>Peer-to-peer support, one of five principles of family engagement presented in OJJDP’s Model Programs Guide, can be an effective way to help families navigate the youth justice system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Development Services Group, Inc. (2018). <a href="#">Family Engagement in Juvenile Justice. Literature review</a>. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.</li> </ul>

# Research You Can Use



Family engagement is about...	Supporting Research
<p><b>Participation</b></p> <p>...supporting families in participation and encouraging them to do more.</p>	<p>Families' needs must be addressed and they must be fully engaged partners. A significant effort must be made up front to engage youth and their families by creating more incentives than disincentives to participate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Hills, H., Shufelt, J., and Cocozza, J. (2009). <a href="#">Evidence-Based Practice Recommendations for Juvenile Drug Courts, National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice</a>. Pages 24-26.</li> </ul> <p>When a young person is involved with the youth justice system, family members should be consulted at various decision-making points.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and the Vera Institute of Justice. (2016). <a href="#">Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies</a>. Pages 8-10.</li> </ul> <p>Often what families need in order to be fully engaged partners is understanding, and some tangible help.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Pennsylvania Juvenile Delinquency Benchbook. (2009). <a href="#">Chapter 9: Delinquency and Disposition Determinations</a>. Pages 112-113.</li> <li>❖ Davies, H., and Davidson, H. (2002). <a href="#">Parental Involvement Practices of Juvenile Courts</a>. Washington DC: American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collaboration</b></p> <p>...families and agencies working towards the same positive outcomes and goals.</p>	<p>The most effective interventions, with the best outcomes for youth and families involved in the youth justice system, are those that view family members as partners and collaborators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers. (2009). <a href="#">Family Involvement in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System</a>. Pages 14-18.</li> </ul> <p>Focus groups are an effective way to collaborate. Justice for Families (J4F) created a guide for conducting focus groups with youth and families impacted by the youth justice system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Justice for Families. <a href="#">Focus on Youth and Families: A Guide for Conducting Focus Groups with Youth and Families Impacted by the Juvenile Justice System</a>.</li> </ul>

## Jefferson County | Fostering Resilient Families (FRF)



Jefferson County, a recipient of a Youth Justice Innovation grant, is implementing new youth justice programming that emphasizes the whole family. Combining Functional Family Case Management with robust incentives offered to all family members makes up the Fostering Resilient Families (FRF) program. All Jefferson County Justice workers and supervisors are being fully trained in the Fostering Resilient Families model. The model is based on the belief that improving family outcomes reduces the risk of further involvement in the criminal justice system.

Engaging with families to maximize opportunities for positive change—such as connecting families to services to meet their needs and goals and helping families to function in a healthy manner independent from service providers—is central to this model. Jefferson County is offering a menu of community treatment resources to all family members, including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) to help families manage stress and crisis.

FRF complements Jefferson County's extensive training and practice of Motivational Interviewing and the use of incentives to help families reach their goals. A growing body of research indicates that the best way to advance positive behavior is to apply incentives for good behavior combined with sanctions for misbehavior (Center for Children's Law and Policy, 2016). In the FRF program, each member of the family has the opportunity to earn incentives for making positive contributions to the functioning of his or her family. Each family designs an individualized goal plan where members can earn points for meeting certain individual or family goals. Points equate to incentives, ranging from no-cost options (earning certain privileges) to gift cards and tangible items. In lieu of a privilege or item with monetary value, youth also have the option of using part or all of their points to apply towards their restitution.

Jefferson County is using Live School, an app developed by a technology company that specializes in school-based incentives programming, to track incentives for families in the FRF program. Families have access to the app and can view their plan and see their progress.

Intended outcomes of the new family programming model are to:

1. Reduce opposition between youth and their families as they instead work in concert towards shared and individual goals;
2. Increase the number of youth residing in a family setting;
3. Decrease the number of out of home placements;
4. Decrease length of time in an out of home placement;
5. Increase parenting capacities; and
6. Increase overall family satisfaction and functioning.

The combination of family work, incentives, and enhanced treatment options for the whole family makes Jefferson County's program a promising model of how to effectively engage families.

❖ For more information about Jefferson County's implementation of Fostering Resilient Families, please contact [Jessica Godek](#).

## Outagamie County | Functional Family Therapy (FFT)



Outagamie County, a recipient of a Brighter Futures Initiative grant, began a Functional Family Therapy (FFT) program in November of 2015. FFT is a voluntary, evidence-based, short-term, intervention program for at-risk youth and families. The program has been identified as an effective treatment program for children and youth involved with or at risk of involvement with the youth justice system. The treatment is typically 12 to 14 sessions over three to five months. Services are provided in the home, but can also be provided in other settings. Clinicians build upon family strengths, identify patterns of distressing behavior, reduce blame and restore hope, all while maintaining a relational focus. Functional Family Therapy is considered to be trauma-informed and the clinicians providing FFT services in Outagamie County are trauma-informed clinicians.

The target audience for the program is youth (age 12-18) identified in Child Protective Services (CPS) with a first time referral to Juvenile Court Intake. The intent is to prevent further child abuse allegations and deeper penetration in the Youth Justice System. For youth already involved with the justice system, priority is given to youth who are dually involved with the child welfare and youth justice systems, who receive their first referral for delinquency prior to their 13th birthday, are screened as having trauma-related concerns, or score at a moderate or high overall risk level on the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI). Priority is also given to youth of color and youth for whom three or more CPS reports have been received. The justification for engagement of this cohort is the intent to improve family functioning. FFT aims to assist families in adopting effective solutions to family problems by making positive changes in behavior and parenting strategies.

Since the program began in 2015, Outagamie County has been collecting data on children and youth who have participated in the program. Preliminary data reveals:

- 54 youth and families have successfully completed Functional Family Therapy.
  - Recidivism rates for youth who complete FFT are lower than for other youth in Outagamie's youth justice system (20% recidivism rate for youth who complete FFT versus 44.5% for the general youth justice population).
  - Youth who successfully complete FFT have placement stability (97% are living at home at the time of program completion and remain in the home 3 and 6 months post completion).
  - Youth who successfully complete FFT have educational/ vocational stability (100% of youth are enrolled in educational or vocational programming upon completion of FFT).
- ❖ For more information about Outagamie County's FFT program, please contact [Heather Lawrence](#).



## THE NUMBERS

### The system strains families.



Nearly two-thirds of parents take time off from work without pay to support their child as a result of involvement with the system.



Approximately 1 in 3 families said they have had to choose between paying for basic necessities like food and making court-related payments.

### Families want more opportunities for involvement.

**80%**

of family members reported that they were **never asked** by a judge what should happen to their child.

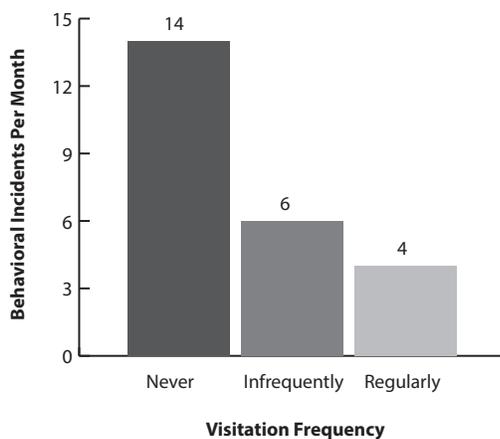
**86%**

of family members of youth in placement in the juvenile justice system said they wanted to be **more involved** in their children's treatment.

Source: Justice for Families, *Families Unlocking Futures* (2012)

### Family connections support better outcomes.

#### Behavioral Incidents & Visitation Frequency



Data from [Families as Partners](#) project where 290 incarcerated youth participated in a survey that asked about family contacts by phone, letters, and visitation and about perceptions of family support.

Source: VERA Institute of Justice (2013)



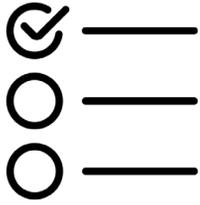
## THE VOICES

### What's Most Effective?

Wisconsin youth justice workers and supervisors representing various counties throughout the state indicated that families are more receptive to services when the following engagement strategies are utilized:

- Validation*
- Partnering, Not Controlling*
- Starting Where Family Is At*
- Creating Alliances With All Family Members*
- Trying To Repair Broken Bonds*
- Assisting With Very Basic Needs*  
(i.e. childcare, transportation, food, helping with therapy scheduling)
- Turning Conversation From "Take My Kid" to "Don't You Dare Take My Kid"*
- Communicating When Things Are Positive As Well As Negative*
- Redefining Success*
- Teaming*
- Getting Parents To Look Closely At Themselves*

# Action Steps



The following challenges and strategies were created by the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center with support from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and modified by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. The research-to-practice implementation resource, which can be viewed in more detail [here](#), presents ways to implement family engagement and involvement practices effectively and with fidelity to research from the field.

Challenge	Strategies
<b>Identifying family members or other supportive adults who can promote positive outcomes for youth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Define “family” broadly.</li> <li>✓ Visual tools, questionnaires, and other models developed by the field can be helpful to identify family members.</li> <li>❖ <a href="#">Family Finding</a> and other permanency-oriented techniques developed for youth in foster care can be used by youth justice agencies to identify and recruit family members who will be able to be part of the unconditional, permanent support system for these youth.</li> </ul>
<b>Supporting families in navigating the juvenile justice system and remaining involved with their children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Establish a culture of alliance with families who have children in the juvenile justice system.</li> <li>✓ Educate families about their children’s experience in the justice system.</li> <li>✓ Provide peer supports.</li> <li>✓ Outreach to families.</li> <li>❖ <a href="#">A Family Guide to Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Justice System</a> was created by a team of family advocates and juvenile justice practitioners to help families involved in Pennsylvania’s youth justice system. Similar guides can be emulated in other jurisdictions.</li> </ul>
<b>Engaging families to play an active role in youth’s case planning and treatment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ensure programming incorporates family knowledge, values, beliefs and cultural backgrounds in order to make family members feel respected and understood.</li> <li>✓ Involve families in supervision and service decisions.</li> <li>✓ Ease and simplify the process for families to engage with youth.</li> <li>✓ Provide opportunities for family contact with youth placed in facilities.</li> <li>✓ When families do not participate, partner with the families to identify and resolve the barriers to engagement.</li> </ul>
<b>Establishing and tracking family engagement performance measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Solicit family input on agency policies, practices, and outreach efforts.</li> <li>✓ Hold staff accountable for family outreach and support.</li> </ul>

# Resources

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