

The Family Engagement Inventory: A Brief Cross-Disciplinary Synthesis

Taking a cross-disciplinary approach to strengthening families, the Family Engagement Inventory (FEI) is designed to familiarize professionals in child welfare (CW), juvenile justice (JJ), behavioral health (BH), education (ED), and early childhood education (ECE) with how family engagement is defined and implemented across these fields of practice. Understanding the commonalities and differences in family engagement across disciplines can support cross-system collaboration among systems often working with the same children, youth, and families.

Family engagement is recognized as a foundation for success across the human services and education fields. The FEI puts current, reliable, and practical information into the hands of those who work directly with families, manage programs, and lead systems.

The FEI is available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/fei/>.

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Framework

Whereas most evidence reviews focus on the effectiveness of a program within a given discipline, the FEI focuses on a strategy that crosses disciplines. Family engagement is a strategy that is often not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to achieving improved outcomes within a given intervention. While quantitative evidence is often not available on family engagement outcomes, there is a wealth of qualitative data that can inform professionals on strategies to maximize the effectiveness of family engagement efforts.

The FEI is designed to bridge the CW, JJ, BH, ED, and ECE systems by distilling what is known about family engagement across disciplines, providing practical information about how professionals can use this information effectively, and providing support and connections for those who are implementing family engagement strategies. It provides resources to support communication among professionals and stakeholders in multiple systems and disciplines. To achieve this, the FEI draws upon two frameworks for the translation of research to practice: the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) for Dissemination and Implementation and the Rapid Synthesis Translation Process (RSTP). ISF was developed to address the gap between determining what works based on the evidence presented and moving that knowledge into the field and to the practitioner (Wandersman et al., 2008). ISF addresses both the needs and hurdles faced by different audiences in using research in the most effective manner possible.

RSTP provides additional specificity on the ISF. According to RSTP, six steps are needed to distill research evidence into useful and user-friendly formats: (1) accept topics suggested by end users, (2) scan findings, (3) sort for relevance, (4) synthesize results, (5) translate findings for end users, and (6) provide end users and experts the opportunity to review (Thigpen et al., 2012). The FEI followed these six steps, including engaging the Children's Bureau and experts in each of the five disciplines throughout the process to ensure the review was systematic, exhaustive, and rigorous. Additional details on the methods appears in the next section.

Method

Development of the FEI included a preliminary literature review, consultation with experts, and an extensive review of various published literature and other information about best practices. It also included multiple consultations with experts from all five disciplines and the incorporation of their feedback. This process ensured a continuous focus on both the utility and rigor of the review. The literature reviews included a variety of resources published between January 2010 and September 2016, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, white papers, reports, presentations, handbooks, training manuals, and websites. The information from this review was distilled into the four domains (aspects) of family engagement:

- Definitions
- Underlying themes
- Benefits
- Strategies

Definitions

Definitions of family engagement were identified for each of the five disciplines. This section presents the definitions from each discipline and the commonalities that emerged.

Definitions by Discipline

The following presents the definitions of family engagement for each discipline. Although the definitions are not exhaustive, they set the stage for understanding how family engagement is conceptualized and approached across disciplines.

Child welfare

- Family engagement is a family-centered, strength-based approach to establishing and maintaining relationships with families and accomplishing change together (McCarthy, 2012; T. Compain, personal communication, February 28, 2017). At the practice level, this includes setting goals, developing case plans, making joint decisions, and working with families to ensure their children's safety, permanency, and well-being. It encompasses the inclusion of children and youth (when age appropriate), as well as adult family members, in case planning and case activities, and also involves supporting the development of relationships between resource families and biological families. On an organizational or system level, family engagement means including families as key stakeholders and advisors in policy development, service design, and program and service evaluation.
- Effective family empowerment is the act of engaging, involving, and lifting up the voice of families throughout the practice and system levels of the child welfare continuum (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016; A. Braxton, personal communication, March 18, 2016). It promotes family buy-in; enhances the helping relationship; and promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. When families feel they are a part of the child welfare process, they are more motivated to make needed changes. Family empowerment allows them to be the drivers of the decision-making process rather than being told what to do. When family buy-in is achieved, reunification rates and overall family outcomes improve.

Juvenile justice

- Within juvenile 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).

- Family engagement: Any role or activity that enables families to have direct and meaningful input and influence on systems, policies, programs, or practices affecting services for children and families (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2012).

Behavioral health

- Family engagement within behavioral health concerns the attitudes, behaviors, and affect of family members regarding particular interventions or treatment options (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013; Hock et al., 2015). Increased family engagement often results in better outcomes for both the individual being treated and the involved family members.
- Family engagement is the process in which families and youth have a primary decision-making role in the youth's treatment (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2009). Families are involved in making decisions regarding providers involved in the treatment team, and are encouraged to express preferences, needs, priorities, and disagreements. In addition, families actively collaborate in treatment plan development and in identifying desired goals and outcomes. Families are provided with thorough information to guide their decision-making and make joint decisions with their treatment team. Families actively monitor treatment modifications and treatment outcomes.

Education

- Family engagement in schools is defined as parents and school personnel working together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Family engagement in schools is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage parents in meaningful ways and the parents are committed to actively supporting their children's and adolescents' learning and development.

- Parental involvement in education is the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving students' academic learning and other school activities. As described in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, parental involvement helps ensure that the following occur:
 - Parents play an integral role in assisting in their children's learning.
 - Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education at school.
 - Parents are full partners in their children's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in their children's education.

Early childhood education

- Family engagement refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs—including planning, development, and evaluation—that promote children's development, learning, and wellness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For family engagement to be integrated throughout early childhood systems and programs, providers and schools must engage families as essential partners while providing services that encourage children's learning and development, nurture positive relationships between families and staff, and support families.
- Family engagement is the process used to build genuine relationships with families (K. Beigel, personal communication, June 16, 2016). Relationships with families support overall family well-being and children's healthy development. When families are engaged, partnerships are created that have a common focus—helping children grow and thrive. Family engagement happens in the home, early childhood program, school, and community. It is a shared responsibility of all those who want children to succeed in school and in life. Family engagement is based on the idea that parents and others who care for their children work together to prepare children for success. The specific goals of the partnership for each family may vary

and can depend on family preference, culture, and economic or social stresses. A true partnership honors a family's strengths and culture, mutual respect, and shared goals for the child.

Commonalities

As expected, the definition of family engagement differs by discipline, yet there are four core elements that underlie each discipline's definition:

- Collaboration: Families are described as "partners" (JJ, ED, and ECE), "participants" (ED), and as "accomplishing change together" (CW). Furthermore, service providers and parents share responsibilities in making decisions and work together to improve outcomes for families and children at the practice and system levels. While the nature of the collaboration between service providers and parents differs across disciplines, a positive and collaborative relationship between "equals" appears to be essential.
- Communication: Families have valuable information that is needed by service providers. While the purpose of the communication may differ (e.g., decision-making about service provision, desired outcomes, progress tracking), service providers need this level of communication to ensure they are taking the most effective approach to a given issue or goal.
- Sustained engagement: Three disciplines (BH, ECE, and ED) emphasize the regularity and sustained nature of family engagement. It is implied in the others (CW and JJ).
- Involvement at the system level: Families are engaged in service delivery at the system level, as well as the practice level, to inform change. Families are included in evaluating current policies and programs, as well as in providing input into the revision or development of policies and programs.

Themes

The FEI synthesizes qualities and characteristics of family engagement in each discipline and across disciplines. The following themes emerged across all five disciplines:

- Child-centered approaches
- Collaboration with families
- Joint planning and decision-making
- Family involvement (including children, youth, and extended family)
- Interagency and multisystem collaboration
- Individualized services
- Open, honest, and respectful interactions
- Family involvement at both the system and service-delivery levels

These themes capture an important tension in family engagement: the engagement of families in these disciplines can be a personal process focused on the well-being of a given-child, individualized services geared to meet the unique needs of a family or a child, and open, honest, and respectful communications with families. It also, however, includes joint decision-making and collaboration, not only with the family, but also with other providers and systems that are working with the same family. In addition, the themes, as in the definitions, acknowledges the importance of family engagement occurring not only at the practice level, but also at the system level.

Family Engagement Difficulties in the CW and JJ Systems

Engaging families involved with CW and JJ may be more difficult than the other disciplines as families generally are not voluntarily involved with these two systems. Additionally, involvement with CW and JJ agencies may include removal of the child from the home, which may produce tension between the family and the agencies. Despite significant attention to collaboration with families, many parents receiving CW services do not feel that they are included in the decision-making process. A number of factors may hinder development of the parent-caseworker relationship, including the perceived adversarial nature of CW involvement; prior negative experiences with CW services; parental fear, shame, and stigma; issues parents are experiencing with substance use, mental illness, and domestic violence; and high caseworker turnover, high caseloads, and limited resources to assist families. In addition, attempts to build relationships with the parents may be difficult based on the authoritative role of the CW caseworker and the parent's knowledge that caseworkers can influence key decisions (Marcenko, Brown, DeVoy, & Conway, 2010).

Engaging parents involved with the JJ system can be difficult because they often experience the same type of mistrust as those parents receiving CW services (Swift, 2013) and because JJ staff also are burdened with high caseloads, frequent staff turnover, and limited resources. Often, parents of youth involved with the JJ system are ashamed of their children's arrest and frequently believe that they are blamed for their children's actions.

Benefits

Literature from each discipline was reviewed to identify the benefits (desired outcomes) of family engagement in each of the five disciplines, with six primary benefits emerging across all the disciplines:

- Enhances the fit between family needs and services
- Promotes or improves the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and youth
- Improves the likelihood of positive outcomes for families
- Improves families' abilities to cope with issues they are experiencing
- Enhances systems' capacity to support families, including improved services and resources
- Enhances the helping relationship, boosts staff morale, and improves workforce skills

These common benefits seem to indicate that family engagement can help improve outcomes for children and families and can improve how families cope in times of crisis. In addition, family engagement can also enhance the well-being of those working with families by building the capacity to support families, improving community resources, and boosting staff morale.

Strategies

The FEI identifies strategies for enhancing family engagement at three levels:

- Practice level: Methods, plans of action, processes, and/or policies designed for frontline staff
- Program level: Various family engagement programs and methods of family engagement used by agencies
- System level: Concepts, methods, plans of action, processes, and/or policies designed to assist agencies and systems

Practice-Level Strategies

Practice-level strategies focus both on behaviors for engaging families (e.g., being respectful and honest) as well as processes for achieving positive outcomes (e.g., providing timely resources). The following are the practice-level strategies common across all five disciplines:

- Validate and value the participatory role of families in planning and making decisions for their children
- Be consistent, reliable, respectful, and honest with families
- Set mutually satisfactory goals
- Provide timely resources, services, and interventions that are relevant and helpful
- Ensure constant two-way communication and collaboration between parents and providers
- Support parents and make families feel valued and connected
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development
- Include parents in meetings and conferences related to the evaluation, identification, placement, and education of their children
- Include honest conversation, education, assistance, and support to help families understand the issues and reasons for agency involvement
- Honor the cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and spiritual backgrounds of children, youth, and families and respect differences in sexual orientation
- Train providers on family engagement strategies
- Ensure programs include parenting education and treatment, family therapy, and/or parent mentors and support

Similar to the family engagement definitions, the themes of collaboration, communication, and sustained engagement are underlying features of most of these strategies.

Program-Level Strategies

Three common program types emerged across all five disciplines:

- Culturally responsive programs: Acknowledge that professionals within the five disciplines need to understand the strengths, beliefs, and practices each family's unique culture carries with it and emphasize that interventions and services need to respect and honor the various cultures while also ensuring the safety and well-being of children
- Child and youth engagement approaches: Stress the importance of engaging children and youth, whether in permanency or case planning (CW and JJ), treatment planning (CW, JJ, and BH), or the classroom (ED and ECE)
- Parent partner and parent support programs: Utilize parent partners and mentors, who have experience with a particular agency, to provide support and guidance for parents new to the system and to establish supportive, nonthreatening relationships, which is assisted by the fact that the partners and mentors do not hold the power or authority of agency staff

In addition, two program types were identified in four disciplines. Family group (or family team) decision-making approaches, in which family members and professionals are brought together to make decisions about how to care for children and develop a plan for services, were used in CW, JJ, BH, and ED. The CW, BH, ED, and ECE systems also use programs to engage incarcerated parents as well as their children and families.

System-Level Strategies

At the system level, two strategies were common across all five disciplines: (1) family and parent leadership and (2) engaging families in system reform or family advisory councils. Involving families in system-level decision-making can build better dialogue with families, create significant buy-in for further engagement, and contribute to better decisions, which in turn holds agencies more accountable to those they serve.

How to Use the FEI

The FEI enables professionals to access information on family engagement that is organized by discipline and domain. The FEI allows the user to explore commonalities across the disciplines from an evidence-based framework. In addition, the user can share the commonalities documents and discuss how commonalities and differences across domains may help the disciplines work together more effectively to achieve better outcomes for families.

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