



When the Juvenile Justice Strategy Group set out to design the critical components of the deep end work, we recognized that family engagement would need to play a prominent role. Not only does it make intuitive sense under the “my child” test, but a growing body of evidence shows that it leads to better outcomes for youth and thereby, public safety. In the opening pages of the 2013 National Academy of Sciences book *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach*, the authors point to scientific literature that demonstrates that parents, along with other influential people (including family members, siblings, peers, etc.) play a critically important role during adolescent development. Therefore, it’s not surprising that one of their guiding principles for juvenile justice reform is to “engage the adolescent’s family as much as possible and draw on neighborhood resources to foster... prosocial development and law-abiding behavior.”

Before we dive any deeper, we must clarify what we mean by family engagement. Following the lead of family advocacy experts, we are defining family engagement as “a meaningful partnership with families and youth at every level of the agency and system.” It’s important to note that meaningful engagement happens when families are truly valued, and when they are appreciated as experts and critical stakeholders in the shaping of positive outcomes. This is not limited to families as experts on their own children and the benefits to engaging them at the individual case-level; it also includes drawing on the experiences and expertise of families throughout all the stages of system reform.

While we affirm that systems need to strengthen family engagement as a key part of their reform work, we also acknowledge that doing this effectively can be challenging. Aside from laying out a set of core concepts that sit at the foundation of family engagement, the JDAI/Deep End Resource Guide also includes a few resources aimed at offering guidance to system professionals interested in strengthening family engagement policies and practices.

Core Concepts

- **Family engagement is a mindset:** Family engagement begins with a fundamental belief that **all** families care for their children, have strengths that can be built upon, and can be engaged and empowered. Family engagement is not about one single policy or practice or program, rather it lives in the culture of an organization and its evidence is seen in how families are treated and partnered with at a systemic level.
- **Define family broadly:** Narrow, traditional definitions of who “family” is will seriously undermine the ability of systems to achieve the best possible results for the youth they serve. Partnering with families cannot be limited to just parents and legal guardians. Instead, the definition of family should remain broad. This can include siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. An inclusive definition of family also embraces those connected by biology, marriage, adoption, and can even include people that have such significant shared histories and experiences that they are considered to be family. It is

not the role of the system to define who a family is. Families and especially youth should be given the opportunity to define this for themselves.

- Culture and context must be valued:** Every youth that comes to the attention of the juvenile justice system brings along with them a complex web of experiences and stories. Many of these stories sit within a rich familial and communal culture. System stakeholders will achieve better outcomes if their first instinct and motivation is to learn and understand. If done correctly and authentically, this approach can help to mitigate both implicit and explicit bias, which sometimes comes in the forms of judgement and making assumptions.
- Self-examination and patience are key:** True collaboration and partnership requires mutual trust and respect. Developing trust and respect among families that may come from different social, economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and cultures requires a deep level of openness for self-examination and exploration. We must be open to accepting that we naturally judge others that are different from us, but that a genuine interest in finding common ground is at the heart of building trusting and respectful relationships. Effective family engagement efforts are mindful of existing power dynamics and are intentional about sharing power and authority. Remember that true partnerships take time to build, and will require patience and perseverance.

Operationalizing Family Engagement at the Case and System-level	
<i>Case</i>	<i>System</i>
Families: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the process - Are part of making all key decisions - Have access to an advocate that has personal and lived experience with the juvenile justice system - Have the ability to have regular & routine contact with their children - Are given the opportunity to draw on their strengths and assets - Are not made to feel shame, fault, or guilt 	Families: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are routinely surveyed about their experiences, where solutions, not just feedback on current practice, are generated - Are able to contribute systematically to the reform agenda (i.e. participation on Steering Committees, Advisory Boards, etc.) - Are fairly compensated for their time - Are hired into positions so that their expertise is embedded

Embracing and operationalizing these core concepts is no small feat, either at an individual professional level, or especially at a systemic level. However, partnering with families will lead to better outcomes for youth and more meaningful and sustainable systems reform. Families are a youth’s primary emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual resource. Therefore, we cannot maximize youth success or achieve our public safety goals without meaningful engagement with their families.