



# 10 Tips for Building Effective Youth-Family-Defender Partnerships

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## Meet as Early as Possible in the Process

- Waiting to meet until right before a hearing can be stressful. The limited time and stress of needing to be in court tends to undermine attempts at building trust and understanding, which can ultimately hurt the child/family or client/attorney relationship and the case.

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## Be an Advocate

- A strong and effective defense benefits the client, families, and defenders.
- When youth, families, and defenders work together, the child and the child's case benefit.
- Youth, families, and defenders have to work together to ensure that youth rights are upheld.

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## Confidentiality Is Essential

- A lot of information can be shared among client, family, and defender—particularly information about the court process, programs, alternatives to incarceration, community-based resources, child-advocates, and peer-to-peer support for families.
- However, because the law requires the attorney to represent the child, not the family, the law and rules of ethics determine what information can or cannot be shared with family members. There is no exception for family members to the rule on attorney-client confidentiality. That means certain subjects, such as legal strategy and specific discussion of the facts, are kept private from family.

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## Establish a Mutual Understanding of the Court Process

- Families and defenders should have a mutual understanding of how the legal system works as it relates to the child and his/her case, what the next steps are, and who all the stakeholders (judge, prosecutor, police, family, child, school, friends, etc.) are and what roles they play in the child's life and/or case.
- Due to time constraints, discussions should be clear and concise. Families and defenders may not have a lot of time but everyone needs to understand what is happening with the child and the court process.

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## Communication Is Key

- Youth, families, and defenders should communicate often and as openly as possible.
- Frequent communication will build trust and confidence.
- Schedules can be rather busy for both families and defenders, but it is important to prioritize communication.

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## Value the Different Roles

- Families know the child better than anyone and can provide great insight into the child's strengths as well as challenges the child may face.
- Defenders know the court process and stakeholders and can provide guidance about what options and outcomes are available to the client in this particular case.

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## Gather Information

- Youth, families, and defenders can gather more complete information when they collaborate.
- Work together to determine which pieces of information are most important and make a clear plan to determine who will get the information, when, and where.

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## Be Candid and Follow Through

- Do what you say you're going to do, don't promise what you can't accomplish, and don't overstate what you know or can do.

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## Set Goals

- Youth, families, and defenders will feel like something was accomplished when they leave the meeting with a task or next steps list.
- Because the process can be overwhelming and confusing for youth and families, if they have a to-do list and/or short list of the next steps with due dates, they may feel like they can better navigate the labyrinth of the legal system and that they are engaged in developing a strong defense.
- Because defenders often have a lot of cases and clients, if the defender has a to-do list and/or short list of expected next steps, he/she will have an easy reference for follow-up and next steps and can readily respond to the client's and family's expectations.
- Lists should clearly outline who is gathering what information, any relevant due dates, and next steps (including court dates).

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## Engage in Disposition and Post-Disposition Collaboration

- Clients and families can assist defenders in developing a plan that supports the client and that the client can successfully complete.
- Once a disposition order is in place, youth, families and defenders can work together to ensure that the client has the support necessary to be successful.



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The National Juvenile Defender Center (NJDC) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to promoting justice for all children by ensuring excellence in juvenile defense. NJDC provides support to public defenders to ensure quality representation in urban, suburban, rural, and tribal areas, as well as offering a wide range of integrated services.

J4F is a national network of family leaders, impacted by the justice system, working to end mass criminalization, particularly of youth and in communities of color. We are working to advance systemic policy and practice change while also building a base of those directly impacted, to help other families, and collectively achieve and sustain reforms.

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