
YOUTH FAMILY TEAM MEETINGS

Strengths/Needs-Based Service Planning With Teenagers & Their Family

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Strengths

- Every family and child has strengths.
- Families and children feel more capable when their strengths are appreciated.
- Services and supports that build on strengths are more effective than those driven by deficits.

Introduction



Designing individualized services that support a young person's move away from negative behaviors requires an accurate picture of the young person's strengths and needs and implementing services that will effectively meet those needs and build on his/her strengths.

Young people will continue to meet their needs through negative behavior if they are not actively supported into satisfying alternatives. The low success rate of interventions with teenagers is the result of the failure to tailor services to build on the strengths and meet the needs of each youth.

Youth Family Team Meetings (YFTM) are a strengths/needs-based approach different from other family meetings because of the emphasis on the young person taking charge of his/her change process: the meeting is youth-centered while also engaging the family. It is not enough to have the young person occupy a chair at "treatment team." Skilled facilitation at the YFTM supports the young person in speaking up and committing him/herself to steps to achieve his/her aspirations.

Identifying Strengths

The first part of the YFTM is identifying the strengths of the young person and family. Finding strengths may not be easy because troubled youth often appear to have had little success. Many have failed in school for years and live in high-crime neighborhoods in which it is difficult not to be involved in delinquency.

Nevertheless, every young person and family has unique strengths. Young people feel better when these strengths are appreciated. Services based on strengths are more effective than those driven by deficits. When planning starts with a problem--such as fighting or using drugs--often the wrong service results. Young people will defend against feeling even worse about themselves when their "bad behavior" is the focus of "treatment." A deficit approach also alienates families—they are defensive because the family is usually seen as the youth's primary problem. Instead of concentrating on pathology, our work with the young person and family must identify strengths that can be built on to ensure that services are specifically designed to enhance competencies.

Identifying Needs

A major part of the YFTM is reaching agreement about the specific needs behind a young person's behavior. Careful assessment of the unique factors behind each youth's behavior is an essential part of this process: how do immaturity, disabilities and trauma weave together to explain the unique way this young person thinks, acts and

Child/Youth Needs

- Be specific! For example: "Needs to experience success in school." Or, "Needs to learn to express anger to get what he wants without hurting others."
- Don't disguise services as needs. "Needs tutoring" is not a need!
- Don't think about possible services while listing needs.

reacts? This developmental assessment must be presented simply, without mental health or special education jargon or a reliance on diagnostic terminology. Developmental assessment should also include involving the young person in a process of self-evaluation, using the youth journal.

Identifying Services/Supports

Once agreement is reached on strengths and needs, the YFTM designs a combination of services and supports to build on strengths and meet each need, ensuring that the young person's family and service providers understand their role in meeting his/her needs. The strengths/needs-based approach avoids the



mistake made in traditional service plans that jump from the young person's deficits directly to program assignment; conclusions such as "He needs counseling" or "She needs residential" are services, not needs. First the young person's strengths and needs are identified and then services are tailored by asking, "What would it take to meet this need and build on this strength?" Participants are encouraged not to be limited by the slots available in a particular program or the lack of availability of a service. For example, if the young person needs to experience success, a service must be designed to ensure he/she becomes good at something. If the young person needs to think before acting or to show anger without hitting, a service must be designed to coach him/her to slow down reactions and see options. One-to-one coaching to meet these needs might not have been available in the standard menu of services, but providers may be willing to create it and may be reimbursed for it. The goal is to get as specific as possible about who will do what for how many

hours a week to build on strengths and meet needs, with a combination of family supports and public and private services.

Crafting Services/Supports to Match Each Need and Build on Strengths

- For each need, ask: "What would it take to meet this need?"
- Invent services /supports that capitalize on child and family strengths.
- Be creative! Don't be limited by existing services.
- Don't forget supports from the extended family and community.



YFTM Agenda

The most effective and manageable agenda for YFTMs is three parts:

STRENGTHS

of the young person, family and their support network

YOUTH NEEDS

behind their behavior

SERVICES/SUPPORTS

to meet those needs and build on strengths

This is an agenda the youth and family understand—it is logical and does not contain professional jargon (e.g., goals, objectives, steps etc.).

Example of a Strengths/Needs-Based Service Plan from a YFTM

“Morris” is a 15-year old who was detained for his second charge, a burglary, because he was skipping school and was on probation for being a passenger in a stolen car. His worker convened an interagency YFTM, with the goals of assisting Morris in making decisions about changes he wants to make in his life, encouraging his family’s involvement in that change process, and reaching agreement among professionals, Morris and his family about the needs causing his behavior and supports that could meet his needs. The meeting was scheduled after the work hours of his maternal uncle who is recognizing his special role in Morris’ life. Morris’ father was incarcerated three years ago, his maternal grandmother died last year, and his mother is

undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. Although she is frail, his mother actively contributed to the meeting, describing Morris' loving caretaking and her recent realization that she has been unable to give him the supervision and school encouragement he needs. The detention educational evaluation found that Morris is reading and doing math below his grade level. He reported that school became much harder when he began ninth grade and, unable to do the work, he gravitated toward other kids alienated from school.

His worker and teacher got Morris started thinking about his talent and understanding his sadness long before the YFTM put strengths and needs up on big sheets of paper hanging on the wall. Morris, his mother, his uncle, his worker, a detention teacher, a mental health staff person, his probation officer, a community-based program and the pastor of his mother's and uncle's church participated in the YFTM. Morris was pleased to hear professionals and his family talk about his strengths. In the small classes at the detention center, his reading and math were already improving, and he had contributed to an art show. His uncle had been driving his mother to visit every week. At the meeting Morris was encouraged to speak up about what he wants to be different in his life, to which his family and others contributed:



Morris' Strengths/Needs-Based Service Plan

MORRIS' STRENGTHS

- He helped his grandmother and has been trying to take care of his mother
- He is very good at drawing
- His mother and uncle love him and always encourage him to finish high school
- Before she got sick, his mother took him to visit his father in prison

Morris' Needs

To do something good with his art work

Supports/Services to meet Morris' Needs

- A one-on-one worker from the community agency will get Morris involved with the artists painting a mural at a neighborhood center.
- The pastor wants Morris to illustrate some church bulletins.

Not to feel stupid in school

His one-on-one worker will:

- help Morris apply to the School for the Arts
- help Morris re-arrange his current school schedule to include a double period art class
- set up tutoring at his school to continue his progress in reading & math
- set up art activities for the summer.

To talk about his worries about his mother and sadness about his father and grandmother

- A grief counselor will meet with Morris individually & with his mother, uncle and him to talk about supporting each other to cope with their losses as a family.
- His uncle will make dinner and spend time with Morris when his mother is feeling sick, especially after her treatments.
- The pastor will mobilize other church members to help in their home.

To have friends who go to school and are doing positive things

- His one-on-one worker will help him find "not boring" friends and activities.
- His probation officer will check with Morris, his mother and his uncle frequently regarding his curfew and will check with the school about his attendance.

In reaching genuine agreement with the young person and family, their needs should be written in their words or so they understand them. This will result in variation among plans: plans for different youth will not use the same words to describe needs.

While setting up payment for the services and making final arrangements for a school program may happen outside the meeting, it is crucial that meeting participants design a combination of services and supports that could be implemented immediately. The family may want more support on the weekend than during the week or in the evening rather than the afternoons or not on Sunday, and this can be negotiated. This plan reminds everyone what they agreed to do to meet Morris' needs. The community providers do not write their own service plan—they are held accountable for this plan, which is different from the plan for other youth and families their agency is serving.

Involving a young person in the process of clarifying needs and appreciating strengths can be a powerful beginning of change. Unless young people agree with adults about their needs, little will change in their lives. Getting their agreement about their needs places responsibility on them. The message is, "You are not being sent to a program to have something done to you. You have agreed on what you need. The services you have helped to plan will help you get those needs met."

YFTM Logistics

Young people are prepared for the YFTM by the strengths and needs-oriented daily practice of the professionals involved with him/her. A youth

journal may help the professional talk with the youth about past experiences as well as behaviors the youth wants to change, in advance of the meeting. About half the young people we work with have learning disabilities, and we must take care to ensure the youth comprehends these discussions. Family members are prepared for the YFTM by talking in advance about the young person's and family's strengths and the family's views of the what is behind the youth's behaviors. Family members are encouraged to bring extended family and/or other supporters to the YFTM, which is scheduled in a place and at a time convenient for family members.

The individuals at each YFTM will be different—not a standing multidisciplinary committee, but the individuals who know the youth and family best. While having a large meeting that overwhelms the youth and family should be avoided, it is optimal to have more than one family member, someone from the family's religious organization or other community context as well as professionals from several agencies who know the youth and family. If the youth moves or gets services from a different provider, over time some of the members of the YFTM will change. Clarity about the young person's needs will also be refined over time, so additional services and supports or changes in how they are delivered may happen in subsequent YFTMs.

It is essential to have YFTMs whenever they are useful for the youth, family and team and ensure that the YFTM is an integrated part of daily casework. Using full-time facilitators—instead of the youth's worker or worker's

colleagues--has the disadvantages of (1) typically meeting facilitators can only manage one meeting per family which usually occurs at a point of placement rather than periodically when requested by the youth, family or team and (2) meeting facilitators often produce plans in meetings that are viewed as a separate event captured on a piece of paper that has little to do with casework. Although meeting preparation is time-consuming, workers report that they have to do the work prior to a meeting as part of their casework anyway and would rather not have a meeting coordinator who will have no future role with the youth or family reach out to the family and other participants. A training program using role plays and co-facilitation practice prepares workers to be skilled facilitators.

What Makes a YFTM Successful?

- The young person is actively involved in the meeting and feels the plan is his/hers.
 - His/her family contributes ideas that are listened to and feels the plan will work.
 - The strengths of the youth and family are purposely built on during the meeting and by the supports and services that are designed.
 - Deficits do not dominate the meeting.
 - The underlying needs driving the delinquent behavior are patiently drawn out of the youth and family, with professionals contributing—we don't jump to services before we are clear what needs have to be met.
- The professionals avoid jargon; they present what they know about the young person (e.g., diagnosis or learning disabilities or medical condition) as needs that everyone can understand.
 - The services and supports are individually crafted to:
 - fit the young person and his/her aspirations
 - fit the family and their traditions and preferences
 - meet each unique need of the young person
 - build on the strengths of the young person and family
 - Many traditional services, especially office-based once weekly services far away from the family and standard school programs, have not been effective to stop delinquency; the plan created in a YFTM requires that providers tailor each service so that it will address the causes of the youth's behavior and the youth and family will participate.
 - Placement is not the goal of the meeting and using the meeting to decide placement distracts from the reason for convening a YFTM to reach agreement about strengths and needs and tailor unique services with the young person. YFTMs build a team that actively supports the youth and family and can be convened anytime the youth and family would benefit from face-to-face discussion of strengths, needs and services and supports to address those needs and build on strengths. Supports and services could be provided in a variety of places the youth might live.