

# FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS

## EXPLORING WHERE TO START ON A KEY PIECE OF TRAUMA-INFORMED WORK



### Introduction

There is a growing awareness in the juvenile justice field about the critical importance of being “trauma-informed” in our work—in other words, recognizing and responding to the impact that traumatic stress has on many of the children and family members with whom we interact. This resource will focus on one of the core tenants of a trauma-informed approach that many organizations find particularly challenging: **family partnerships**.

Family partnership is defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) as a foundational element of trauma-informed work. This is because, among other reasons, if exposure to trauma takes away choice and control, than any opportunities for healing must maximize control.

Partnership is about recognizing that families are an untapped resource for understanding and reaching the youth we serve. It is about seeking out families as a critical part of the solution and resisting the urge to view them as the root of the problem. Family partnership goes beyond “engaging” families to meaningfully collaborating with them to achieve the best outcomes for the children we serve. Because trauma often disproportionately affects marginalized groups, true family partnership is also an important pathway to reducing disparities in juvenile justice outcomes.

This resource will explore

- » ways a juvenile justice professional can improve the impact of their work through family partnering,
- » why family partnership is critical to trauma-informed care, and
- » how partnership can improve a juvenile justice professional’s effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Juvenile justice can be a difficult and taxing profession. The people who dedicate themselves to this work do so to help youth overcome their challenges and become socially responsible citizens. Harnessing the power of family partnerships to become more trauma-informed can be a major strategy for achieving this goal. We hope this guide can help jumpstart that process for those who are interested.

In partnership and mutual respect,

- » NCTSN Juvenile Justice Committee
- » NCTSN Partnering With Youth and Family Committee
- » Center for Resilient Families
- » National Center for Child Traumatic Stress
- » National Child Traumatic Stress Network

# BENEFITS TO PARTNERING

## ACCOMPLISH WHAT YOU GOT INTO THE FIELD TO DO

### Partnering means shared responsibility

It can feel like the responsibility of helping a youth recover falls squarely on the shoulders of the juvenile justice professionals involved in their care. This adds to the stress of the job and can lead to feelings of failure if the youth falls short of their goals. On top of that, it's just not realistic. Most justice professionals have too many cases, and too little time with each person, to have the kind of positive influence they want. In a national survey of more than 2,300 juvenile probation officers conducted by NCTSN's Juvenile Justice Consortium, the most common job stressor officers reported was the feeling that the needs of youth and families exceeded their resources.<sup>1</sup>

When we partner with the youth and their family, we build a team to share the workload of the plan — also easing the sense among the family that the work falls squarely on their shoulders. If it works, we all share the excitement. If it doesn't, we all share the responsibility and can work to develop a new plan. Everyone has a stake in the success of the youth and can build on each other's knowledge and relationship with the youth.

### Share the psychological burden

People who serve justice-involved youth tend to be deeply empathetic people dedicated to improving their communities. Many suffer from the psychological burden—including possible secondary trauma—from interacting with people in difficult situations day in and day out. This contributes to burnout, high turnover, and reduced motivation.

Partnering with families means you aren't expected to do everything on your own, and that you alone are not responsible for goals that aren't achieved. True partnership requires being vulnerable and acknowledging your own limitations, which allows families to notice their own strengths, which can lead to greater success for everyone and greater emotional satisfaction and stability.

*"If you legitimately collaborate and partner with a family, then they're part of the plan. So it's not just on you, whether you're the judge or probation officer or whomever. Now you've created a genuine collaborative plan that's not just owned by the system or the professional."*

### See more of your impact

Though we expend a lot of effort serving children in the justice system, we rarely hear about when things go right. Most of what we hear about kids we work with are the negative outcomes: when they return to the facility or make the news. This can give the warped impression that our best efforts never lead to anything good, a thought that is profoundly de-motivating.

In fact, there are likely many more success stories than we realize. One of the few ways to hear about these "wins" are from the family—and many systems don't have open lines of communication with families. Developing stronger, lasting relationships with families means we'll hear more about how the youth we serve grow and change after they leave the system. This will not only help us be more effective, but also feel more fulfilled and motivated.

*"It's hard to conjure up success stories, not because they don't happen, but because we don't hear about them. That's one of our obstacles: because our work isn't family-guided, there's not a chance for the family to come back and talk about the improvement. One person here worked with a family and a kid graduated, and the mom flat out said: 'My son would not have graduated high school if it weren't for getting his education at your facility.'"*

# IMPROVED OUTCOMES FOR KIDS

## Tap into real motivators

Much of the juvenile justice system is built on the idea of using consequences to discourage bad behavior. And, if this is working, then it's perfectly reasonable to maintain this approach. However, many systems find that, despite using increasing consequences, youth keep coming back with more and worse charges.

The trauma lens suggests that we consider behaviors as a symptom of experiences, rather than choices that can be solely influenced by rewards and consequences. We know people from marginalized communities are more likely to be exposed to traumatic events, are less likely to seek help because of stigma, and are have less access to effective help.

Partnering with families helps us better understand what motivates the family and youth so we are working on goals *they* want to achieve, not trying to talk them into goals *we* want them to achieve. Thus, partnering with families may be a better approach for reducing recidivism, setting up the youth for long-term success, and reducing disparities in outcomes.

## Partnership is important for healing

We know that many people who have experienced trauma have not had enough experience being protected from harm to see the world as others might: that safety is something to count on. By treating families and youth as partners, we can provide them valuable practice making decisions and an opportunity to build toward their own successes.

## Engagement is more effective with a partnering perspective

Many juvenile justice professionals note that it can be difficult to get families engaged. However, think about how your effort level varies in situations where others tell you what to do versus when you help decide what to do. In any situation in life, people are unlikely to engage if they don't have a meaningful role or if decisions are made *about* them *without* them.

Treating parents as partners and giving them a voice in the process will lead to more meaningful and effective engagement, as well as improved attitudes toward the system.

## A NOTE ON THE WORD "FAMILIES"

In this document, we will use a broad definition of families as provided by the TA Partnership: "A family is defined by its members, and each family defines itself. A family can include people of various ages who are united through biology, marriage, or adoption or who are so closely connected through friendships or shared experience that they are taken to be family members."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Osher, T., Garay, L., Jennings, B., Jimerson, D., Markus, S., & Martinez, K. (2011), *Closing the Gap: Cultural Perspectives on Family Driven Care*. The Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health

<sup>2</sup> Bray, C., Cruise, K., Tener, R., Blackshear, K., and Olafson, E. (2017). *The NCTSN National Juvenile Probation Officer Survey*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

# WHAT ARE PRACTICAL STEPS JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEMS CAN TAKE TO BUILD FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS?

## INFORMATION

Many families report feeling a profound sense of powerlessness when trying to understand their circumstances in the juvenile justice system, which can be difficult for even the most bureaucratically-savvy people to navigate. Working with families as real partners requires helping families understand things like the status of their case, what to expect from the legal process, and their options and rights.

### Family Bill of Rights

One organization produced a Family Bill of Rights that plainly describes a family's options and rights, and what they should expect from the process, using language families can understand.

After noticing that some families either did not read the document, or had trouble understanding it, staff now meet with each new family to talk through their Bill of Rights and answer any questions. It's a great opportunity to set a tone of mutual respect with the family and ensure they have enough information to meaningfully engage, ask questions, and decide their future.

*The organization Justice4Families offers a Family Bill of Rights template with 5 key tenants:*

- » *Right to Notification*
- » *Right to Participation*
- » *Right to Peer Support*
- » *Right to Contact*
- » *Right to Influence Juvenile Justice Policy*

*Learn more about their template at [justice4families.org](http://justice4families.org)*

### Using peer mentors instead of facility staff

Many mental health systems use "peer support" as a powerful tool to help youth navigate become comfortable with the system. The same concept can work well for families in the juvenile justice system: Connecting new families with those who have already navigated the system. This has a number of benefits, including:

- » Peer mentors can alleviate the feelings of isolation that many families navigating the system report
- » Peer mentors may be able to address questions and concerns a new family wouldn't think to ask, and the facility wouldn't think to address
- » Families are likely to trust information from peer mentors

## RECOGNIZING PARENTS' OWN TRAUMA

### Family therapy

Recognizing that untreated trauma among parents can have an impact on children, some systems have begun offering therapy to family members. In one system, part of the in-take process for new families now includes offering family therapy. Additionally, a mental health professional contacts the families at

least once per month to check in and make sure they understand the services available to them. Every juvenile justice professional knows that at some point, most kids return to their family. Equipping the family with the skills to help keep the youth on track is a valuable investment of time.

## **A culture of listening and understanding**

Organizations that have prioritized partnering with families report significant gains from simply making a commitment to listening. The act of active listening builds trust and goodwill, and helps professionals understand the challenges families are facing. It can also help bridge gaps created by different communication styles of people from different cultures.

*“I’ve seen my staff change as they’ve made an effort to talk to parents and listen to what they’ve gone through in their lifetime.”*

Emphasizing listening in staff processes and professional development is a great first step to getting away from the “You’re the problem and I’m the solution, so I’ll tell you what to do” mindset.

## **ACCESS**

### **Accessible visitation hours**

An Illinois system has taken several steps to make it easier for families to visit their children and has seen a major uptick in visitation and family engagement. The first step was to get rid of official “visiting hours”—which had been windows of time on the weekends—and instead work to accommodate families whenever they wanted to (or were able to) visit. In addition to accommodating families’ schedules, this change signaled that family visits were encouraged, and not just tolerated.

### **Family Days**

One system created quarterly “Family Days” at two of its facilities. The events include picnics and art shows from the youth. The events not only encourage additional family visits, but also provide a great opportunity for staff to build positive relationships with families by interacting in a new setting.

### **Transportation and building relationships**

Transportation is a common barrier to family visits. A system in Oklahoma addressed this issue by sending staff members to drive parents to and from their facility.

This not only overcame the transportation barrier, but also created valuable one-on-one time for relationship building and information sharing. The shared time in the car allowed parents to ask questions and professionals to better understand the family’s situation and past. Staff have said this time was also a great opportunity to share information about the process, expectations, and timelines of their case.

### **Remote access**

Often referred to as “tele-health,” there are a number of technologies, usually involving video conferencing, that allow parents to visit with their child and facility professionals virtually when they can not make an in-person visit. This technology is becoming more widely available and accepted in the field.

# ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

## Form an advisory board

Forming an advisory board is a great way to create a two-way dialogue between families and professionals in an organization. When organized well, and made up of people reflective of the population an organization serves, an advisory board creates a consistent pipeline of ideas for improvement, helps professionals stay in touch with the lived experiences of families, and develops advocates for your system. Some of the groups involved in creating this resource have also produced a companion guide to forming an advisory board, available at [crf.umn.edu/advisory](http://crf.umn.edu/advisory).

## Tapping expertise from other fields

As a leader, one way to combat “the way we’ve always done things” is to bring in people with experiences outside of the profession. In an Oklahoma system, an influx of new staff with a background in mental health helped shift the focus away from specific offenses and toward treating the mental health and substance abuse issues of the youth in their care. These staff members not only brought new ideas to the table—they also brought their past professional networks that allowed for new partnerships across agencies.



Additionally, organizations can provide training in topics related to behavioral health and consult with mental and behavioral health organizations to provide additional support, including those that serve specific populations.

## Evidence-based programs

Adopting a program that has been rigorously tested and shown to be effective is one way of adopting a suite of practices that you can feel confident in. Many well-tested programs have specific applications to juvenile justice settings.

It is important to consider whether the populations with whom the programs were developed reflect the people your organization serves. There are a number of high-quality interventions adapted for a variety of specific populations.

There are several databases available with vetted information about these evidence-based programs, including NCTSN ([nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices](http://nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices)), Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center ([samhsa.gov/ebp-resource-center](http://samhsa.gov/ebp-resource-center)) and the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare ([cebc4cw.org](http://cebc4cw.org)).

## FINAL THOUGHT: FOCUS ON PROGRESS, NOT COMPREHENSIVE CHANGE

It’s unrealistic to think anyone can, or should, try to do all of these things. Instead, we hope our partners consider the importance of family partnerships as a part of a trauma-informed approach and start where they are, building on small successes instead of jumping in the deep end and trying to do everything at once. We believe there is tremendous potential in using family partnerships to improve outcomes for justice-involved youth, but success in this regard is often measured in steps, not miles.