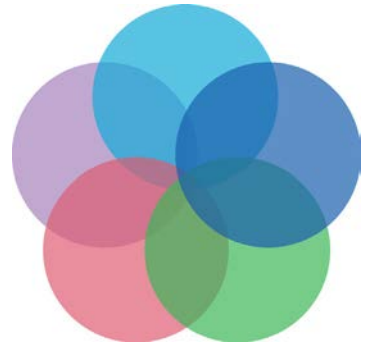


# The Family Engagement Inventory (FEI): A Brief Cross-Disciplinary Synthesis

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), early childhood education (ECE), and education (ED) with family engagement as defined and implemented across these fields of practice. Understanding the commonalities and differences in family engagement across disciplines can support cross-system collaboration among multiple 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 the latest and most reliable, practical information available into the hands of those who work directly with families, manage programs, and lead systems.



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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 across disciplines. Family engagement is a strategy that is often not an end in itself, but rather a means to achieving improved outcomes within a given intervention. Therefore, our intention was not to drill down into a given program's evidence and ascertain the incremental impact of family engagement. While quantitative evidence is often not available on family engagement outcomes *per se*, there is a wealth of qualitative data available that can be used to inform professionals on strategies to maximize the effectiveness of family engagement efforts. The key goals of the FEI, then, were to aggregate knowledge in a way that would be helpful to professionals and to engage in a true multidisciplinary exploration of this important approach to helping children, youth, and families.

To achieve this goal, the FEI draws upon two frameworks for the translation of research to practice: the Interactive Systems Framework (Wandersman et al., 2008) and the Rapid Synthesis Translation Process (Thigpen, Puddy Singer, & Hall, 2012). The Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) for Dissemination and Implementation was developed to address the gap that exists between determining what works based on the evidence presented and moving that knowledge into the field and to the practitioner. The ISF addresses both the needs and the hurdles faced by different audiences in using research in the most effective manner possible.<sup>1</sup> The FEI is designed to bridge these 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. The FEI provides resources to support communication among stakeholders in multiple systems and disciplines.

<sup>1</sup> Wandersman, A., Duffy, J., Flaspohler, P., Noonan, R., Lubell, K., Stillman, L., et al. (2008). Bridging the gap between prevention research and practice: The interactive systems framework for dissemination and implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 41*, 171–181.

The Rapid Synthesis Translation Process (RSTP) provides further specificity on the ISF. In order to distill research evidence into useful and user-friendly formats, six steps are needed: (1) accepting topics suggested by end users, (2) scanning findings, (3) sorting for relevance, (4) synthesizing results, (5) translating findings for end users, and (6) review by end users and experts.<sup>2</sup> The FEI followed these six steps by engaging the Children's Bureau and experts in each of the five disciplines covered in the review throughout the process and ensuring that the review was systematic, exhaustive, and rigorous. Further detail on our methods appears in the next section.

## Methods

In developing the FEI, staff conducted a preliminary literature review, consulted with experts, and then conducted an extensive review of various published literature and information about best practices. At multiple points throughout the process, staff consulted with experts from all five disciplines as well as Federal partners (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Department of Education, Children's Bureau, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Early Childhood-Child Welfare workgroup) and incorporated their feedback. This feedback process ensured a continuous focus on both the utility and the rigor of the review and distilled the information gathered into five aspects of family engagement: (1) Definitions of Family Engagement, (2) Themes Underlying Family Engagement, (3) Benefits of Family Engagement, (4) Strategies for Enhancing Family Engagement, and (5) What Works.

Altogether, more than 400 recently published sources covering family engagement were reviewed. These sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, white papers, reports, slide presentations, handbooks, training manuals, and websites that were published between January 2009 and March 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Thigpen, S., Puddy, R.W., Singer, H.H., & Hall, D.M. (2012). Moving knowledge into action: Developing the rapid synthesis and translation process within the interactive systems framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 50*, 285–294.

## Definitions

Definitions of family engagement were identified for each of the five disciplines reviewed (child welfare, juvenile justice, behavioral health, early childhood education, and education). Each discipline's definition of family engagement includes statements, phrases, and/or quotations that explain the meaning of or provide a description of family engagement. Where there was a seminal or authoritative definition of family engagement in a field of study, it was used as the basis of the definition.

As expected, the definition of family engagement differed by discipline (see box for definitions from each discipline), yet there were core commonalities that proved to be instructive.

Three core elements underlie definitions of family engagement:

1. **Collaboration:** Families are described as “partners” (CW) or “participants” (ED), and the nature of the relationship between service providers and parents is described as an “alliance” (BH) or a “goal-directed relationship” (ECE). 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.
2. **Communication:** It is evident from the definitions of family engagement that families have valuable information that is needed by service providers. While the purpose of the communication may differ (e.g., families can be engaged in decision-making

## Definitions of Family Engagement

Family engagement is defined in the five disciplines as follows:

**Child Welfare (CW):** Family engagement is a family-centered and strengths-based approach to partnering with families in making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes.

**Juvenile Justice (JJ):** Family engagement is any role or activity that enables families to have direct and meaningful input into and influence on systems, policies, programs, or practices affecting services for children and families.

**Behavioral Health (BH):** Family engagement is the process by which families and providers develop and maintain a connection while simultaneously demonstrating and communicating information, needs, attitudes, and values. This definition suggests that engagement is an ongoing process necessary to develop and keep a positive alliance.

**Early Childhood Education (ECE):** Refers to ongoing, goal-directed relationships between staff and families that are mutual, culturally responsive, and support what is best for children and families both individually and collectively. Staff and families share responsibility for the learning and development of children, the progress toward outcomes for children and families, and parent involvement in the program.

**Education (ED):** Parental involvement in education is the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving students' academic learning and other school activities.

about service provision, desired outcomes, or tracking progress), service providers need this level of communication to ensure they are taking the most effective approach to a given issue or goal.

3. Sustained engagement: Several disciplines (BH, ECE, ED) emphasize the regularity and sustained nature of family engagement. It appears to be implied in the others (CW, JJ).

While these definitions are not exhaustive, they do set the stage for understanding how family engagement is conceptualized and approached across disciplines.

## Themes

The qualities and characteristics of family engagement in each discipline were synthesized both within and across disciplines. The themes that emerged across all five disciplines (CW, JJ, BH, ECE, and ED) include:

- Child centered
- Solution focused
- Respectful and collaborative
- Joint planning and decision-making
- Family involvement (including children, youth, and extended family)
- Interagency/multisystem collaboration
- Informed decision-making
- Well-being of children

These themes capture an important tension in family engagement: while the engagement of families can be a deeply personal process focused on individualized communication and the well-being of a given child, the outcomes of those individualized communications should ideally be shared with other systems and/or providers working with the same family.

Engaging families in child welfare and juvenile justice may be more difficult than the other disciplines as families generally are not involved with these two systems voluntarily. Additionally, involvement with these agencies may include removal of the child from

the home, which may produce tensions between the family and the agencies. Despite significant attention to collaboration with families, many parents receiving child welfare services do not feel that they are actually included in the decision-making process. A number of factors may hinder development of the parent-caseworker relationship, including the perceived adversarial nature of child welfare involvement; prior negative experiences with child welfare services; parental fear, shame, and stigma; and problems such as substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. In addition, attempts to build relationships with the parents may be difficult based on the authoritative role of the child welfare caseworker and the parent's knowledge of the caseworkers' ability to influence key child welfare decisions.<sup>3</sup> Engaging with parents involved with the juvenile justice system can be difficult because they often experience the same type of mistrust as those parents receiving child welfare services. Often, the parents are also ashamed of their child's arrest and frequently believe that they are blamed for their children's actions.<sup>4</sup>

The themes indicate that, for effective family engagement to occur, children must be the focus of all of the decisions; professionals in all agencies need to be transparent, honest, and build trust with the families; and families, in turn, must be involved with the decision-making processes. In addition, collaboration must occur not only with families but also with other agencies in order to achieve the desired outcomes for families and children.

## Benefits

Literature from each discipline was reviewed to identify the desired outcomes of family engagement. Three primary benefits were common across all five disciplines (CW, JJ, BH, ED, and ECE):

- Builds trust with families

<sup>3</sup> Marcenko, M., Brown, R., DeVoy, P. R., & Conway, D. (2010). Engaging parents: Innovative approaches in child welfare. *Protecting Children*, 25(1), 23–34.

<sup>4</sup> Swift, J. (2013). Improving family engagement in juvenile justice systems. *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*. Retrieved from <http://jjie.org/improving-family-engagement-in-juvenile-justice-systems/104497/#>

- Promotes family buy-in for participation in identified interventions
- Promotes/improves well-being outcomes

The last two benefits appear to frame family engagement as an end in itself. While family engagement can certainly build trust and improve family buy-in, it is through that engagement that families will commit to appropriate services and appropriate outcomes can be achieved. Many other identified benefits were common among four disciplines. Some of these benefits were focused on process (i.e., family engagement expands/improves planning options and enhances the helping relationship). Others were focused on direct outcomes (i.e., family engagement builds/improves family decision-making skills and increases self-sufficiency, improves the provision of needed services and the satisfaction with those services, improves family members' ability to cope with issues, reduces/decreases problem behaviors in children/youth, improves children's ability to function in various settings, and improves family functioning).

## Strategies

Strategies for enhancing family engagement were identified at three levels:

- **System level:** Concepts, methods, plans of action, processes, and/or policies designed to assist agencies and systems in engaging families
- **Program level:** Links to various family engagement programs and/or methods of family engagement used by agencies
- **Practice level:** Methods, plans of action, processes, and/or policies designed for frontline staff to achieve or enhance family engagement

At the system level, two strategies were common across all five disciplines: (1) parent partner/support strategies, including parent support programs, which provide mutual support and opportunities to discuss parenting challenges and strategies, and (2) family and community-based services, which cover a broad array of strategies such as family preservation, mentoring, homelessness

prevention, and other services designed to support and strengthen families. In addition, engaging families in system reform or family advisory councils was identified as a system-level strategy across four disciplines (CW, JJ, BH, and ED). 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.

At the program level, one common strategy emerged across all five disciplines: parent support programs. In addition, three strategies were identified in four disciplines: (1) family advisory councils or parent leadership programs (CW, BH, ED, ECE), (2) family group/team decision-making approaches (a generic term for approaches in which family members are brought together to make decisions about how to care for their children and develop a plan for services) (CW, JJ, BH, ED), and (3) assessment processes strategies to identify needs, strengths, and resources and make connections to needed services and agencies (CW, JJ, BH, ED).

At the practice level, these strategies were common across all five disciplines:

- Validate the value and participatory role of families in planning and making decisions for their children.
- Set mutually satisfactory goals.
- Be consistent, reliable, and honest with families.
- Ensure constant two-way communication and collaboration between parents and providers.
- Listen actively to each family member.
- Support parents and make families feel valued and connected.
- Provide timely resources, services, and interventions that are relevant and helpful.
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development.
- Strengthen parenting skills.
- Include parents in meetings/conferences related to the evaluation, identification, placement, and education of their children.

These practice-level strategies focus on behaviors for engaging families (e.g., being consistent, honest, and reliable) as well as processes for achieving positive outcomes (e.g., facilitating children’s social and emotional development). Across these practice-level strategies, a similar theme emerges in the synthesis of definitions of family engagement: collaboration, communication, and sustained engagement underlie most of these processes.

## What Works

To identify “What Works,” practices and programs related to family engagement were identified that have been validated and are supported by a documented, evaluative process. Because family engagement is a component of a larger service delivery process, there is no quantitative evidence on the impact of family engagement per se from rigorous, controlled studies. Rather, the identification of “What Works” draws upon the rich experience of practitioners who understand family engagement from a nuanced perspective that cannot be captured in numbers. A listing of these practices and programs,<sup>5</sup> as well as articles and resources explaining some of the practices and programs, is included in the following box.

## How to Use the FEI

Professionals can use the FEI in several ways:

- Download at-a-glance summaries of key information to review and share with colleagues
- Compare themes, approaches, and resources across five fields and five areas
- Draw upon program and practice examples from specific disciplines to inform cross-discipline training and collaboration efforts
- Explore commonalities across fields synthesized from an evidence-based framework
- Access links to useful and valuable information and websites

<sup>5</sup> Detailed information on these practices and programs can be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov>.

## What Works in Family Engagement

### Child Welfare:

- Differential/Alternative Response
- Engaging Families in Case Planning
- Family Group Decision-Making
- Father Involvement Interventions
- Intensive Family Preservation Services
- Motivational Interviewing
- Parent Partner Programs
- Solution-Based Casework

### Behavioral Health:

- Brief Strategic Family Therapy
- Family-Driven Care
- Intensive Family Support Services
- Motivational Interviewing
- Multisystemic Therapy Parenting With Love and Limits

### Juvenile Justice:

- Brief Strategic Family Therapy
- Functional Family Therapy
- Motivational Interviewing
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care
- Multisystemic Therapy
- Parenting With Love and Limits

### Early Childhood Education:

- Family-Provider Relationships: High Quality Practices
- Engaging Diverse Families’ Exemplary Programs
- Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



## What Works in Family Engagement (Cont.)

### Education:

- Parental Information and Resource Centers
- Dropout Prevention Strategies and Model Programs
- School, Family, and Community Partnerships

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