

NDTAC Issue Brief: Family Involvement

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The Issue

Research on effective practices in education shows that family involvement has a positive impact on student achievement [1–3]. The same tenet is suggested for juveniles involved in the justice system: *family involvement is correlated with successful transition and reduced recidivism* [4,5]. However, due to the various competing demands of juvenile justice staff and administrators, as well as the inherent challenges of family participation in the process, family involvement may not be at the forefront of educational program planning.

The Current Situation

Due to the intimate nature of primary relationships, families have significant impact on their children. Stressed parents and other familial role models who face myriad challenges affect their children through their way of coping with those stressors. For example, Thornberry and colleagues found a clear link between witnessing and experiencing family conflict and violence and later violent delinquent acts, poor school performance, poor mental health, and increased teen pregnancy [6]. Matlack et al. found that family structure

and interaction style were related to children's later aggression and antisocial behavior [7].

On the other hand, a family's powerful influence also can prevent delinquency through protective mechanisms and resiliency [8]. Supportive parent–child relationships, positive discipline methods, monitoring and supervision, child advocacy, and information gathering are all specific examples of familial protective mechanisms [8]. Therefore, many researchers believe that improving parent practices is the most effective strategy for reducing delinquency and associated problem behaviors [9,10].

Although familial challenges influence youth and affect their involvement in delinquency, family advocacy groups, such as the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (FFCMH), emphasize that all families have strengths and coping mechanisms to handle stressors. The FFCMH believes it is a matter of tapping into those strengths and building upon them, rather than continually focusing on the negative aspects and problems, that promote strong family relationships. Instead of labeling families and children as "at risk" for failure, which assumes

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a deficit, the strength approach labels families as “at promise.”

Considering the breadth of information available about the link between family involvement and juvenile delinquency, many organizations and programs are now implementing a family systems approach to prevention rather than singling out the child as a separate entity from the family. It is not a question of whether families ought to be included in the juvenile justice process—the question is *how*.

What Can You Do? Advice From the Field

NDTAC staff and Huff Osher, Inc. conducted a focus group with juvenile justice practitioners and family members in January 2006. Throughout the interview, practitioners and family members indicated that family involvement has not been a priority in the field. The practitioners who were interviewed viewed the absence of parents from their facilities as a lack of interest on the families’ part. In contrast, parents cited discomfort when they tried to engage facility staff as an explanation for their absence. Parents also did not think institutions were very welcoming and felt that they were not perceived as adding value to their child’s treatment. For example, on visiting days, parents frequently experienced long delays without explanation before being allowed to meet with their children.

Additional challenges that are real barriers to visitation may also exist, such as the distance that parents live from the facility and access to transportation. Parents also expressed concerns about not being contacted when an

issue or incident occurred with their child. Practitioners indicated that this may have occurred because the youth are seen as wards of the State once adjudicated and that, as a result, they may not extend the courtesy of involving families in decisionmaking. Practitioners also indicated that they often deal with lawsuits that challenge their practices, causing some administrators to be very reluctant to have any “outsiders,” including families, in their facilities to help with institutional programming.

Both practitioners and family members agreed that practical solutions to manage these types of issues exist, and institution leaders and families can resolve them by working together. Structured activities, such as participating in treatment or being able to meet with school personnel, would improve their visits—especially in situations where the personal relationship between the youth and his or her family is strained. Additionally, transportation can be provided to family members. In Pennsylvania, for example, counties provide bus services for families to visit or participate in treatment at the juvenile correctional facilities.

While the role of the practitioner and the family is key, interaction between juvenile and family courts is equally important. Juvenile and family courts are places where the needs of children are paramount, and judicial frustration with the dismal educational outcomes for youth in some institutional programs has resulted in some judges issuing specific court orders for placements and services, including diagnostic testing and assessment. This can lead to compliance taking precedence over a best educational practice and, in turn, can result in a flurry of activity that leaves little or no room

for creativity and inclusion of family in the day-to-day activities of an institution.

Although improvements can be made, judicial intervention has also, in many States, enhanced the quality of the education programs in institutions. Some judges have worked internally with other judges to develop tools that monitor what is going on in their local educational programs serving institutionalized youth. In Colorado, for example, one judge has started a school that sets high expectations for students and encourages family involvement. Idaho has also developed a State initiative that surveys family members on their experiences with the system. These surveys have resulted in improvements to and opportunities for family involvement in institutional programs.

Reasons for Family Inclusion

According to family advocacy groups, there are several compelling reasons for including families in the juvenile justice process: the family is most familiar with the child, the family is a large part of the environment into which the child will transition back after release, and targeted family counseling reduces recidivism.

The family is most familiar with the child.

According to the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice (NCMHJJ), “families know their child best, and can provide information that is critical to keeping the child stable and safe” [11, p. 1]. No one may be as familiar with a child as his or her primary caretakers. Even administrators, teachers, and experts who have much experience with the neglected and delinquent population may not

have the intimate knowledge and experience specific to a particular child as family members do. The NCMHJJ lists the following areas in which the family can provide salient information [11]:

- The child’s diagnosis and treatment history, including use of medication
- The child’s strengths and needs
- The family’s capacity to participate in treatment
- Circumstances that affect the child’s well-being
- The child’s patterns of responding to people and events in his or her surroundings
- The child’s education history and status, including an Individualized Education Program (IEP) if the child is enrolled in special education
- Transition and ongoing support services essential for successful and permanent reentry into the community

Furthermore, learning disabilities often run in families [12]. Families may provide pertinent contextual and historical information which may not appear in a child’s records or files [13].

The family is a large part of the environment into which the child will transition back after release.

There has recently been a shift in individual therapy for children in juvenile justice facilities to family systems therapy, as research shows that family therapy in comparison to individual therapy reduces recidivism [14]. Family counseling teaches all family members to deal with home life challenges through various coping mechanisms, anger management, and effective communication. Without family therapy, upon release from incarceration or out-of-home placement, youth are placed right

back into unhealthy environments where negative coping behaviors are enforced. Relapse into old patterns of thinking and behaviors may be very likely with no change in the surrounding environment. All of these reasons, notwithstanding the fact that families will most likely be part of a child's life long after juvenile justice staff and administrators have left the picture, speak to including families throughout the justice process.

Targeted family counseling reduces recidivism.

As discussed in the previous point, many studies confirm that maintaining family ties while youth are incarcerated or in treatment, and establishing or preserving positive family relationships correlate with a successful transition back into the community, and ultimately, with reduced recidivism [4,5,14,15]. However, Larson and Turner caution that only family counseling that "is carefully structured, teaches skills, and focuses on family problems or youth needs is shown to reduce recidivism ... a combination of cognitive problem solving training and parent training has been found to be the most effective approach for reducing antisocial behavior in youth and in reducing stress and depression in parents" [12, p. 20]. Also, as Slaton argues, effective family involvement must include establishing rapport with the family and ensuring they are valued as extremely important team members in the process [16].

In addition to the above reasons for family involvement in the juvenile justice process, advocates in the field emphasize three vital components of family involvement for staff and administrators to consider. These are:

- Family members must be seen, included,

and supported as valuable members of the child's team [11,17].

- Family members need information about the juvenile justice system, as well as their child's rights to services [11,17,18].
- If family members are unable or unwilling to be involved, surrogate family members, extended family members, or mentors (role models) should be assigned [17].

Federal Role

Current policy in both the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice supports family involvement, as Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) provides specific guidance on the issue. Under Title I, Part D, Federal nonregulatory guidance states that all participating State agencies must ensure that they will secure the assistance of parents to improve educational achievement. To the extent possible, they must give parents the opportunity to participate in their children's educational plans. Likewise, participating local education agencies must provide transition assistance such as family coordination and counseling services [19].

The 2002 reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act includes family involvement as an activity that could be funded with formula grant funds. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has specific provisions and requirements regarding family involvement that is relevant to the large number of students in facilities in need of special education services. Wider dissemination of these policies to administrators, with specific guidance and examples, is essential to improving practice.

The Federal Government has sponsored several initiatives regarding family involvement in juvenile justice and delinquency prevention. Three of these resources are listed below.

Strengthening America's Families

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has funded quests for the most promising practices and aided in the dissemination of information about such programs, held conferences that showcased these programs, held training sessions, and offered training and technical assistance in implementing the best family and parenting programs for the prevention of delinquency. Additional information as well as direct links to individual program Web sites can be found on the Strengthening America's Families Web site at www.strengtheningfamilies.org

Safe Start

Safe Start prevents and reduces the impact of family and community violence on young children (primarily from birth to age 6) and their families. OJJDP worked with Federal partners in the Office of Justice Programs and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop the Safe Start Initiative in response to emerging statistics and research on the prevalence and effects of children's exposure to violence.

Safe Start is designed to expand current partnerships among service providers in key areas such as early childhood education and development, health, mental health, child welfare, family support, substance abuse prevention and intervention, domestic violence and crisis intervention, law enforcement, the courts, and legal services. The goal of the project is to create a comprehensive service delivery system that will meet the needs of

children and their families at any point of entry into the system by expanding, enhancing, coordinating, and integrating services and support to families. This comprehensive system should improve the accessibility, delivery, and quality of services for young children who have been exposed to violence or are at high risk for exposure. For more information, visit: <http://www.ncccev.org/programs/safe-start/index.html>

Safe Kids/Safe Streets

Safe Kids/Safe Streets was developed to break the cycle of early childhood victimization and subsequent juvenile or adult criminality and to reduce child and adolescent abuse and neglect and resulting fatalities. The program provides fiscal and technical support to local efforts to restructure and strengthen the juvenile justice, criminal justice, and child welfare systems to more comprehensively and proactively serve youth and their families. The program also promotes coordinated management of abuse and neglect cases by improving the policies, practices, and information sharing among juvenile justice, criminal justice, child welfare, family services, and related systems.

To this end, it employs four components: system reform and accountability; implementation of a continuum of services to protect children and support families; data collection, information sharing, and evaluation; and prevention education and public information campaigns. For more information, visit: <http://www.iel.org/programs/sittap.html>

For More Information

For more information on family involvement and NDTAC, please visit the Center's Web site at: www.neglected-delinquent.org

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