

Strategies and Techniques for Family Engagement from Karl Dennis

Family engagement is based on the quality of your relationship with the family.

The development of the family-service provider relationship may be aided by using certain strategies for guiding the structures of your child specific team and interventions, as well as by using strengths-based and family-driven techniques. If a family is not engaged it is because (1) they do not need/want the service being provided, and/or (2) because they do not trust you – therefore, when you encounter a lack of engagement you must work to find out what the family “really” needs and/or build trust.

Structural Strategies

- ✓ Serve the whole family, so that the interventions are comprehensive and address the needs of everyone in the family.¹
- ✓ Expect families not to trust you. Approach the family openly and ask how you can earn their trust, i.e., “Don’t trust me, but do tell me what I can do to earn your trust.”
- ✓ Support the development of a strong family advocacy group so that you can use those family advocates to help families build trust with service providers.
- ✓ Identify and build relationships with “neighborhood informants,” i.e., busy-body neighbors and respected neighborhood leaders, so that they can help families build trust with service providers.
- ✓ Hold meetings at times that are convenient for the family.
- ✓ Meetings should last 90 minutes or less.
- ✓ Ensure that child-specific teams are at least 60% non-professionals, i.e., the child-specific team should be mostly family members, their natural support persons, and advocates.
- ✓ Ensure that child-specific team meetings support a strengths-based, family-driven, culturally proficient process, i.e., they should always begin with strengths and include family-driven strategies (described below).
- ✓ Maximize the free and natural resources that are used in the service plan to promote maximally self-sustaining supports – this supports life-plans, as opposed to treatment plans.
- ✓ Be sure to make it a priority to address living situations.
- ✓ Use language that families understand; avoid jargon and acronyms.
- ✓ Be accessible.
- ✓ Be direct and honest.
- ✓ Strive for consistency in who provides services.
- ✓ Have emergency supports available within 45 minutes of the initiation of a crisis plan.

¹ You can also avoid sibling rivalry, jealousy, and poor behavior by providing support and incentives to all children in the family rather than just one identified youth.

Strengths-Based Techniques

- ✓ Approach each child and family as “emotionally unique” rather than “emotionally disturbed.”
- ✓ Really take time to learn about and notice strengths.
- ✓ Find something you authentically like and comment on it, e.g., art in the family’s house, something a family member did, etc.
- ✓ Use the youth’s interests and talents as hooks for building a relationship.
- ✓ Turn challenges around to find the aspect that reflects a strength, e.g., parents finding living arrangements for children, however inadequate, reflects a commitment to have the children living someplace; belligerence reflects commitment to fighting for what they need; etc.
- ✓ Include service providers on the team who have similar interests/skills as the youth.
- ✓ Find jobs and services that align with the youth’s interests.
- ✓ Use strengths to build a sense of competence and accomplishment, e.g., pay youth talented in art to paint a mural or sign; create art shows and sell the art to the community; create awards that celebrate the individual accomplishments of a youth or family; etc.
- ✓ Mark all progress and success even if you are marking reductions in problematic behavior, e.g., being arrested less, being less truant, etc.
- ✓ Appreciate that it is adolescents’ developmental “job” to be difficult and to challenge authority – do not consider these challenges as failures.

Family-Driven Techniques

- ✓ Always approach a family by asking what they need; never bring a pre-developed plan to a family.
- ✓ Strive for a sense of partnership toward common goals with families.
- ✓ When prioritizing needs, families get twice the number of votes as service providers.
- ✓ Only families get to veto services.
- ✓ Only families have veto power over child-specific team membership.²
- ✓ Include families in every aspect of the planning and service delivery process.
- ✓ Trust the family’s instincts.
- ✓ When the plan is constructed, step back and ask the family if it is “their” plan – if not, start over. The family must feel ownership of the plan.

² This may be accompanied by letting the family know that the vetoed person will still be part of the decision making process – regardless of whether they are part of the child-specific team, and that it might be more effective to have that person in the meeting participating in the group discussions.