

WORKING WITH FAMILIES OF CHILDREN IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE AND CORRECTIONS SYSTEMS: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATION PROGRAM LEADERS, PRINCIPALS, AND BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS

Prepared by the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth who are Neglected, Delinquent, and At-Risk



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**Working With Families of Children in the Juvenile
Justice and Corrections Systems:**

**A Guide for Education Program Leaders, Principals,
and Building Administrators**

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	1
Introduction to the Family Involvement Guide.....	3
Why and How This Guide Was Developed.....	4
What Is a Family?	5
Who Has Responsibility for Family Involvement and What Should They Do?.....	5
Factors to Consider When Working With Families to Ensure Educational Access and Successful Transitions.....	7
Engaging Families for Program Improvement and System Change.....	10
What Families Say Helps Them Get Involved With Correctional Education Programs	11
What Families Expect and Desire in a Correctional Education Program	13
Using Family Visits to Engage Parents in School Activities.....	14
What to Do When a Family Visit Does Not Go Well.....	15
How Do You Know Whether Family Involvement Is Improving?	16
Relationships Are Key	17
References.....	18
Recommended Resources	19

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About the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk

The mission of NDTAC is to improve educational programming for neglected and delinquent youth. NDTAC's legislative mandates are to develop a uniform evaluation model for State education agency (SEA) Title I, Part D, Subpart I programs; provide technical assistance (TA) to States to increase their capacity for data collection and their ability to use those data to improve educational programming for neglected or delinquent (N or D) youth; and serve as a facilitator between different organizations, agencies, and interest groups that work with youth in neglected and delinquent facilities. For additional information on NDTAC, visit the Center's Web site at <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org>.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT GUIDE

Successful outcomes for youth placed in the juvenile justice and neglect systems can be affected by the level of family involvement in their treatment and education. Family involvement can be a crucial element for students who are returning to school following an institutional placement. How do administrators, teachers, families, and students overcome the multiple barriers to family involvement in these systems?

This Family Involvement Guide was developed under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education and awarded to the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children Who Are Neglected, Delinquent or At Risk (NDTAC),¹ housed at the American Institutes for Research (AIR). Involving families as students move in and out of institutional placements requires the contributions of many partners. This Family Involvement Guide is the first of several guides that NDTAC is developing. Each guide will focus on a specific type of partner and address issues and strategies from that partner's unique perspective. This guide is designed for the juvenile justice program director and lead school administrator because they share joint responsibility for each student who resides in a facility and are central to the success of U.S. Department of Education goals. NDTAC will develop additional guides for other crucial partners, such as teachers, family members, and students.

Parents of youth in both the juvenile justice system and the neglect system may require additional supports to effectively navigate both the education and justice systems inside and outside the institution. This guide presents strategies to help increase family involvement in institutions that educate youth who are neglected or delinquent (N or D). Involving families in institutional settings can help maximize the educational experiences of youth who are N or D while they remain in the facility and improve their transition to community education or work programs upon release.

Although increased family involvement may present challenges to administrators in both the justice and neglect residential and security components of the program and the school program, the challenges can be mitigated through collaboration and cross training with the families of involved youth. Family organizations are an underused resource that can be tapped to enhance the role of families in the operation of institutions for youth who are neglected or delinquent.

This is an exciting time for launching family involvement initiatives. Several Federal, State, and local agencies have recognized how essential family involvement is and are including this important component in their strategies to transform institutional practice. NDTAC has developed this guide to help State education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), institutions, and other State agencies develop and implement more family involvement initiatives. The guide gives pointers on existing family involvement programs, describes innovative practices currently used in the field, and presents lessons learned through the experiences of cross-agency partners serving the same population of children and families.

NDTAC aims to produce valuable tools that improve educational outcomes for children who are neglected or delinquent. We hope this guide furthers that goal.

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WHY AND HOW THIS GUIDE WAS DEVELOPED

“Families have the potential to be the greatest source of positive change and support for youth in the juvenile justice system” (The National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice & the PACER Center, Inc., 2002).

“The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and throughout life.” More, programming aimed at involving families and special efforts to engage them in activities do make a difference (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, family involvement in correctional education has not been easy. The purpose of this guide is to offer some background, context, and practical strategies to administrators of correctional education programs and facilities who want to help their students reap the benefits of increased family involvement in their education.

The authors are experienced family leaders who are veterans of the Children's Mental Health System and System of Care movements. They are respected by families and professionals for their wisdom, knowledge, experience, skills, and integrity. Both have raised children with serious mental health needs who were also enrolled in special education. Both have been active and effective advocates for juvenile justice, mental health, child welfare, and education reform. Both have been involved in conducting research about family and youth involvement. Barbara Huff is also the founder of the family movement for children’s mental health and an inspiration to families across the country. Trina Osher is also the parent of a youth who spent most of his high school years in juvenile corrections settings and has graduated to the adult corrections system. She is a seasoned special educator with 30 years experience as a teacher, state administrator, and national policy analyst.

Topics to be covered in the guide were identified by holding a focused discussion with a group of State program administrators, education administrators and leaders of programs for youth who are neglected or delinquent. Questions raised were posed to a culturally and geographically diverse panel of family members who have extensive direct experience with these programs. Their responses along with information gathered through key informant interviews with program administrators, form the core of the suggestions in this guide. Additional materials were selected from the literature on family involvement including materials developed by the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health and several other training and technical assistance centers that are listed in the resource section at the end of the guide. Feedback on a complete draft was provided by the expert panel of family members. In addition, many of the ideas in the guide were presented in a Webinar conducted by NDTAC. Feedback from the Webinar’s 70 participants also influenced this final product.

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

The past 50 years have seen some dramatic changes in the structure of American families. The two-parent family with a working dad and a stay-at-home mom does not describe the family of most of the students in correctional education programs. The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health has updated the traditional definition of family: "A child's family is the group of individuals who support a child emotionally, physically, and financially. A family is defined by its members and each family defines itself. A family can include individuals of various ages who are biologically related, related by marriage, or not related at all. The job of a family is to unconditionally provide love, guidance, care, support, and otherwise nurture all of its members. Families operate according to the principle of 'zero reject, zero eject'" (Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, 2006).

Each family has a culture of its own, in addition to the external cultures with which it and its members affiliate. This culture influences how the family approaches the tasks of daily living (for example, food, dress, work, school). This culture can also direct how a family faces the challenges of raising a challenging child. Families function in different ways, have different resources at their disposal, and achieve different degrees of success.

Educational administrators who seek to have good relationships with their students' families make an effort to learn about each family's history, cultures, social mores, and values. They can then apply that knowledge in their professional interactions with families. For example, they are careful not to interpret a quiet or obliging deference as indicating agreement. Likewise, they do not assume that boisterous assertiveness is a sign of hostility or defiance (Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, 2004).

Families who are raising children with serious emotional, behavioral, or mental health needs very often have a history of being blamed or shamed by professionals for their child's problems or being shunned by friends and family because of the stigma associated with mental health challenges. They may be anxious or fearful, and feel isolated. Some families report being unfamiliar with and misinformed about the correctional system and associated educational programs. Because of this potential history, correctional education administrators should take extra care to treat the families of their students with additional patience and courtesy from the very outset and expect the same from their staff.

WHO HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND WHAT SHOULD THEY DO?

Misunderstandings about roles can be a source of conflict between families and the professionals who serve their children. Family involvement in correctional education programs can be improved by making sure everyone knows how they fit into the relationship and what others expect of them. The following descriptions of roles and responsibilities are the suggestions of the authors based on what they have learned from years of conversations with families, youth, and the professionals who serve them. Correctional education administrators will most likely need to adapt these descriptions to fit the specific requirements and conditions of their own setting.

The **educational leader** or **administrator** has overall responsibility for all aspects of the educational services provided for youth in correctional education programs. He or she sets the tone for the rest of the staff and models effective and appropriate communication and interaction with families.

Correctional education administrators are usually responsible for implementing policies that make the facility accessible to and hospitable for families. The educational leader's role should be to ensure that students have access to their families and that families have access to their children.

The role of the **family** is complex and can depend on the perspective from which it is viewed. From the institution's point of view, the family's role is primarily to support the treatment program and to follow through on recommendations from staff or orders from the court. Some facilities invite family members to sit in on educational planning meetings for their child. Many families are seeking more than this. Some want to have input about their child's care and treatment, be kept abreast of treatment and educational progress, and have a say in aftercare planning. Some want to rebuild a damaged relationship with their child. Families and facility staff alike hope that students will make good educational progress, acquire socially appropriate behaviors, learn to make good decisions, and improve their overall physical and mental health.

Ideally, the role of the **student** is to take full advantage of and appropriately respond to the educational opportunities afforded to him or her while in the correctional facility. Students generally expect their families to stand by them while they are in the correctional facility and after they leave. They hope for unconditional support from their families. Some want their families to change (for example, to stop using alcohol or illegal drugs). Not all of these expectations can be achieved in every case (Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, 2001).

Teachers, classroom aides, school counselors, social workers, and others who make up the **school staff** have the most daily interaction with students; they are responsible for educational programming and know the most about how students are responding to the program. Ideally, the school staff will promote good relationships with the students' families and communicate with them frequently. School staff should ask families about their child's educational history when they first enter the program and involve them in educational planning. Administrators can play a critical role by supporting the efforts of school staff to involve families and scheduling time for staff to make contact to build and sustain a relationship, regardless of the physical distance that separates them from their child.

The **courts**, although not onsite, can be a powerful player in correctional education programs. Courts can facilitate family involvement with a student (for example, by ordering family counseling), and courts can restrict family involvement with a student (for example, in the case of adjudications of neglect or abuse). Court orders can be changed as family circumstances change. Correctional education administrators and their staff may have the opportunity to present data to the court that could inform such decisions.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires extensive parental² involvement in a child's individualized education program (IEP). In the rare case when a student does not have a parent, a process exists for appointing a **surrogate parent**. A surrogate parent is a trained adult whose job is to protect the educational rights of the child and to advocate for and make education decisions in the best interest of the child.³

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING WITH FAMILIES TO ENSURE EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

There are several characteristics that can govern the ways (and the extent to which) families can be involved in a correctional education program. Some of these are characteristics of the family or its situation, and others are characteristics of the institution.

A family's ability to be involved depends on how far the correctional education program is from where the family lives and what kind of transportation services are available. It can also be influenced by the knowledge and skills of the family, its culture and language, and other demands, such as caring for an ailing elder or a primary caregiver's own depression or learning disability.

An individual family member's ability to be involved in or to be an advocate for their own child's education can also be rooted in the limitations of their own prior experiences. Adults who did not complete secondary school, who also had difficulty learning - perhaps because of an undetected disability, or who are involved with the legal system, may not know how to interact with school personnel or may not see how they can contribute to their child's schooling. They may be afraid to talk with teachers and feel unqualified to offer their own opinions or make requests. Families of children in protective custody could fear that challenging the views of school staff would have negative repercussions for their child or for their legal relationship with their child.

Institutions themselves have characteristics and policies that control family involvement. For example, institutions that are in a family's home community, such as non-secure day and residential treatment centers, might offer the widest range of opportunities for family members to be involved in their child's education while some secure adult correctional institutions do not offer educational programs to all residents in the facility. The following is a list of family involvement opportunities and strategies that correctional education programs or institutions could offer. It is based on suggestions from the correctional education administrators and the expert family panel members acknowledged in the front of this guide.

- Request the family's help in obtaining educational records.
- Hire family liaisons or contract with a family organization for this service to establish a solid link between the family and the child; make a concerted effort to involve the family in all aspects of

² The exact language of the statute follows: "The term 'parent' means—(A) a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child (unless a foster parent is prohibited by State law from serving as a parent); (B) a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State); (C) an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare; or (D) except as used in sections 615(b)(2) and 639(a)(5), an individual assigned under either of those sections to be a surrogate parent."

³ The specific language of the statute follows: "Procedures to protect the rights of the child whenever the parents of the child are not known, the agency cannot, after reasonable efforts, locate the parents, or the child is a ward of the State."

the child's education and transition and continue working with the family once their child returns to the community.

- Share results of educational assessments with the family.
- Involve the family in making recommendations for their child's educational services.
- Provide the family with a detailed orientation to the school program.
- Provide the family with a detailed orientation to the educational opportunities available.
- Seek the family's input for educational planning—by phone if necessary.
- Provide the family with frequent updates on their child's educational activities and progress.
- Offer the family a system for regular (weekly or monthly) communication (phone call, personal visit, or e-mail) with their child's teacher(s).
- Offer the family an opportunity for an individual conference with their child's teacher in conjunction with family visits to their child (an opportunity that may be contingent on the terms of labor contracts).
- Hold an open-school night every term.
- Have the school open, with teachers on hand to answer questions about the curriculum, for the family to take a tour on several visiting days throughout the year (like open-school night in a public school).
- Invite the family to join a parent-teacher association or its equivalent.
- Hold social events that families help plan, such as pot luck dinners and cookouts.
- Invite the family to participate in schoolwide academic celebrations and events, such as science fairs, school plays, or graduation exercises.
- Offer adult education programs for family members to develop their own skills.
- Invite the family to attend in-service trainings for school program staff on topics of interest such as wraparound services or positive behavioral supports.
- Invite family members to be volunteer workers in the school (an opportunity only some will have the luxury of being able to take advantage of).
- Invite family members to train school staff on family involvement.

Strategies for Family Involvement

One family involvement strategy is not likely to work with all families or for every student. Strategies for family involvement can be organized into three categories by using a three-tiered approach described in figure 1. Correctional education program administrators should consider efforts to engage family members at all three levels when developing a plan for family involvement compatible with their own setting.

In the first tier of the triangle are foundational or universal strategies. These opportunities are made available to all families to establish a relationship, gain their trust, and open communication channels. These strategies focus on creating a welcoming environment, soliciting family input, providing an orientation to the program, establishing routine mechanisms for ongoing communication, and sponsoring social activities.

In the second tier of the triangle are strategies for selected groups of families that may need a boost or extra encouragement to get involved. Providing transportation, child care, and qualified translators falls into this tier. These strategies also focus on connecting families with each other, offering families opportunities for education and training, and taking advantage of the family's visits to their child to meet with them. In addition, in the second tier are family members who desire or are willing to become more involved in advisory groups focusing on the overall education program. The section

in this guide on engaging families for program improvement and system change covers this topic in more detail.

Intensive strategies in the third tier focus on meeting the individual needs and more substantial challenges that keep the few families at the top of the triangle from getting involved. Here, effective approaches are truly individualized and may require intensive effort for a period of time. Hiring a trained and experienced family member to reach out to these families to gain their trust, build a bridge between the family and the school, support the family until it feels comfortable interacting directly with the school, and maintain a relationship once the student has returned to the community has been a very effective strategy.⁴

Figure 1.



Note. From “Supporting Family Involvement in Correctional Education Programs,” by T. Osher and B. Huff, 2006, July 27, Webinar for NDTAC, Huff Osher Consulting. Available online at: http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/events/webinars/webinar0806_huffosher.PPT

Transition

When a student returns to the community, family involvement can be critical to sustaining and building on the gains made while the student was in the correctional educational program. Just as planning for transition from the day a student is enrolled is a core component of a good correctional education program, including the student’s family in that transition planning from the start is essential. For example, families will need to have all relevant documents (such as transcripts and test results) and current Individualized Education Program (IEP), or a Section 504 plan if the student is eligible for special services. The student’s family will need information about educational goals and what subjects the student will need to continue or further his or her learning and whether their child will need special support or tutoring. The family will need to be connected with someone at the

⁴ The Rhode Island Training School is one example of a correctional education facility that reports success with this approach.

receiving school and know where to go for help if things do not go well with the educational transition. The correctional education program can help the family gather the necessary information and foster the necessary relationships with their community school education program before the student makes the transition.

ENGAGING FAMILIES FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT AND SYSTEM CHANGE

Many correctional education institutions and programs have governance boards, planning councils, advisory groups, and working committees where family input would be desirable. In some cases, family involvement is mandated. Correctional education administrators could solicit the help of these bodies in developing plans to improve family involvement in their institution or program. It is widely acknowledged that recruiting and retaining family members to take on such roles are ongoing challenges. This section addresses some of the underlying issues and suggests ways to help correctional education administrators and families work together towards systems change and program improvement.

Good relationships between correctional education administrators and families are built the same way relationships develop between any individuals: they depend on trust and mutual respect, which are easiest to achieve when both parties have a lot in common, such as having the same level of education and income or belonging to the same ethnic group or religion. Family members who do not speak English, have little education, or have very low incomes are less likely to have as much in common with administrators than parents with a professional background. Families may simply fear administrators and other school personnel because of their own unsuccessful or unpleasant school or other system experiences. These anxieties can readily be overcome when correctional education administrators demonstrate their genuine respect for family members, warmly welcome their collaboration, and generously provide support to make the partnership work.

Families do not choose a correctional education program for their child. It is forced on them by a court order. As a result, family members—even those who are highly educated and professionally successful—report feeling they are on unequal terms with correctional education administrators who, by virtue of their position, have power and authority. Administrators who have good relationships with families use their authority judiciously, sharing it rather than wielding it. Here are some strategies that have been shown to be effective (Osher & Huff, 2006a; Osher & Huff, 2006b):

- Putting families at ease and taking care not to overwhelm them
- Making sure that family members get all the information they need to be informed partners with a meaningful role
- Taking time to personally explain technical data, complicated situations, or the political environment in which a decision has to be made
- Orienting new family members to their roles and responsibilities, including introducing them to other members of the committee
- Presenting written materials to family members in advance (when possible), in their primary language, without jargon, and in a variety of formats
- Identifying shared goals—mutual self interest and focusing on these while recognizing that agreement on everything is not likely or even desirable
- Evaluating progress together
- Keeping communication open, honest, and constant

- Sharing decisionmaking—working to find win-win resolutions to problems encountered during the process
- Recruiting a diverse team of family members, training and supporting families who are willing to become engaged in change efforts, and making sure there is always more than one well-informed family voice

Dependability and compromise are also important in sustaining relationships, especially when the chief purpose is to solve a problem. Administrators who are successful in engaging families often take a strengths-based approach, but they are realistic in assessing institution or program weaknesses and more serious problems. They have earned a reputation among families, with their staff, and in the community for being reliable and dependable and for following through on commitments.

Partnering with families on policy teams, advisory councils, and other program-related committees and teams is not necessarily difficult, but it does require making some changes in how business is conducted. Most important, it requires having an open mind, active listening and being willing to truly share responsibility for making decisions and achieving outcomes.

WHAT FAMILIES SAY HELPS THEM GET INVOLVED WITH CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Focused discussions with families whose children are in correctional education programs yielded many suggestions for engaging families. They fall into five broad categories: culturally comfortable settings, outreach strategies, trust building, communication mechanisms, and family support services. The lists that follow are suggestions and are not all inclusive. Consulting with families of students served by their programs will give correctional education administrators additional ideas and help determine which suggestions are best suited to the needs of specific families and to a specific setting and student population.

Culturally comfortable settings are key to reducing the anxiety that families feel when encountering the correctional system. Involving families requires understanding and respecting diversity. Culture influences how a family approaches the tasks of daily living and can also direct how a family interacts with their child's school program.

When environments reflect the families' cultural background, written materials are in their native language, and their expertise is sought and respected regardless of their English proficiency, families feel more welcome. Families are more likely to become involved in their child's education and in activities of correctional education programs that consciously strive to be culturally competent. Some suggestions follow:

- Have qualified, trained interpreters onsite who speak the same languages as students' families, especially when legal matters are discussed. Always address family members directly instead of directing speech to the interpreter.
- Make sure that technical terms are understood and offer explanations; this will spare family members the embarrassment of having to ask.
- Offer foods that are familiar to families or allow families to bring foods to the program; for example, encourage families to bring food to a cultural festival or other school events.
- Be sensitive to cultural and ethnic characteristics. For example, provide students with grooming supplies that are suited to their skin and hair type.

- Avoid using cultural or spiritual activities as rewards and punishments. For example, Native American students should not have to “earn points” to have access to a sweat lodge.
- Make an effort to understand the physical and cultural community from which families come and to which their children will return. Ask families what aspects of the correctional education program need to be adapted or modified to ensure that their children will be able to transfer and sustain social skills learned in the correctional education program when they are back in their home community.
- Tell families who are enrolled with a Native American tribe about their rights to support from tribal courts. Ask State judges to engage tribal courts and encourage the tribal courts to work with families and take responsibility for their child’s treatment and aftercare.

Outreach consists of making concerted efforts to make it easy and comfortable for families to be involved with the program. It involves doing things that reduce the stress and strain of visiting the correctional education facility or being in contact with personnel from the program. Some examples follow:

- Provide local or long-distance transportation assistance, especially when children are placed at facilities that are not reachable by public transportation or are very far from home.
- Provide lodging for families to stay as a unit while visiting, such as a cottage on the campus, for up to a week at a time, or pay for a hotel nearby.
- Be flexible in scheduling meetings and events to accommodate family schedules and obligations and to cause as little disruption to family routines as possible.
- Give families ready access to their child and the facility.
- Give families tours of the campus.
- Encourage staff to visit the family’s home, and pay providers to deliver services at families’ homes if families wish.

In the Words of Families

“I could visit whenever I was in the area provided I made arrangements ahead.”

“As long as I called ahead I could go anytime.”

“The social worker always called back if you left a message.”

“Support groups cover so much and are a huge help.”

Trust is both essential and difficult. Administrators and correctional education staff are more likely to earn the trust of families by being truthful and sincere, demonstrating their respect, and taking steps to build relationships with them. Some examples follow:

- Provide helpful information in a timely manner.
- Welcome active family involvement in all team meetings about their child (not just IEP meetings). Include the family by phone if distance, job responsibilities, or other obligations make regular participation in person difficult or impossible.
- Arrange for fun, social experiences with other families, such as a monthly family pot luck dinner or a community or facility beautification activity at which staff and families work side by side.
- Include parents in discussions and decisions about their child.
- Find the right balance between maintaining institutional control and being family friendly.

Communication is the foundation of family involvement. It can establish barriers and boundaries or open pathways to understanding and cooperation. Listening is as much a part of good communication as speaking clearly. Language should be understandable by all parties. Jargon and acronyms should be avoided and technical terms explained in plain words. When a child is not living at home, regular

communication from the correctional education program allows families to maintain a connection with their child's experiences and progress. Some examples of communication follow:

- Give families helpful information about the program up front.
- Make caseworkers accessible to families by phone.
- Put policies and procedures in writing, using the languages that families speak. Make sure the translations are matched with the families geographic origins.
- Provide professional translators when necessary for conferences, meetings, and trainings.
- Give families updates by making weekly phone calls and by providing brief educational progress reports every 2 weeks.

Family support services are what families ask for most but say they get the least. Family support services make it possible to overcome obstacles to getting involved and staying in touch. Some examples follow:

- Hire a family member as onsite staff to provide family support and serve as a liaison.
- Arrange for voluntary peer-to-peer family support groups.
- Train family members to be mentors and partners to provide support to other families.
- Establish a family resource center where families can gather and get helpful information, especially when planning for their children to return home.
- Provide direct services for families, such as family counseling, mental health evaluations and referrals, alcohol and drug evaluation and treatment, and good recommendations to help get family members ready for their child to come home.

WHAT FAMILIES EXPECT AND DESIRE IN A CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Often a family's involvement in a student's educational program is driven by how well the program meets the needs of their child. When families are satisfied, they are more likely to collaborate and support the program. When families are dissatisfied, their feelings of disappointment or anger may govern their level of participation and behavior toward program staff. Families expect the correctional education program to offer each student educational opportunities tailored to her or his unique strengths and needs. Nevertheless, there are some things that all families expect.

First and foremost, families expect correctional education programs to be therapeutic—not punitive—and family friendly. They desire a high-quality education, not simply one that pushes all students toward a GED (general education diploma) regardless of their abilities and goals. Families want vocational education assessments and training to be available. Families advise correctional education programs to use creative, but rigorous alternative learning strategies such as cooking classes serving as lessons in applied mathematics, to engage students' interest and turn a weakness (such as inattention or distractibility) into an advantage.

Families expect correctional education programs to treat their children with dignity and respect and to actively teach social skills, not just manage their behavior. They expect staff to recognize when inappropriate behavior signals a mental health issue and to ensure that the student gets qualified mental health care immediately.

Families expect correctional education program administrators to hire only qualified staff who have specific training to teach and help students with learning challenges and mental health issues and to

work in partnership with their families. Many families stand ready to provide insight to correctional education program staff to help make this partnership a reality.

USING FAMILY VISITS TO ENGAGE PARENTS IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Given the effort it takes for many families to get to a juvenile justice facility, it makes sense to take advantage of these visits to provide information about correctional education and engage them in supporting their child's learning. Families have suggested that facilities try some or all of the following:

- Give tours of the school on visiting day.
- Open a family resource center in the school building on visiting day where families can pick up information relevant to their child's education and transition to a community school and where teachers can explain the curriculum and what students have been working on.
- Display samples of student work in the visiting area.
- Give each student a packet of their recent work and coach them to review it with their family on visiting day.

Administrators from several correctional education programs have shared strategies that have worked in their setting as follows:

- Education staff members in Maryland correctional education programs maintain a bulletin board in the family visiting area of each facility. They post information about curriculum and school activities, including newsletters, resource materials, and educational opportunities in the community for the adults in the family.
- Monthly special weekend family days are held in Arizona. Families can have a longer visit and share a meal with their child. In addition, activities are available for groups of families to do together. Arizona also contracts with a number of transportation companies throughout the State so that families can come to these events from all parts of the State.
- South Carolina's secure facility held a Family Focus Program Sunday in conjunction with the Institution School District's Open House.
- North Carolina has a policy that meetings and discussions about the child's privileges, school placement, promotion, or release planning do not occur unless the child and parent are present. The State facilities also provide transportation for families and have broadened visitation rules to allow families unlimited access 7 days a week.
- Rhode Island's correctional education program takes advantage of the family's participation in IEP planning meetings by offering them additional opportunities to visit with their child. Rhode Island reports very high family participation in IEP school planning meetings as a result.
- By law, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, under Regulation 3800, maintains that juveniles in custody have the right to visits from family at least every 2 weeks (unless restricted by court order). This right does not restrict more frequent visits.
- California has maintained a Foster Grandparent program for years. This program uses retired citizens for tutoring students in the juvenile justice system. The State is also in the early stages of developing site-based Family Councils. These councils will meet once a month to focus on relevant issues and to provide pertinent information about their children's schools and facilities.

WHAT TO DO WHEN A FAMILY VISIT DOES NOT GO WELL

Ideally, every student's family visits regularly. Generally these are pleasant social occasions. Family members may bring food, other necessities, their child's favorite things, and gifts. They share stories and experiences and make plans for the future. But sometimes, things don't go well—there is a disagreement, someone gets angry, or someone storms off. Unless such events are addressed quickly and appropriately, the bitter or resentful feelings may last, disrupting the student's progress. Family members may be so offended by the incident, or the way the institution has responded to it, that they disengage from any further interaction with the program or even with their child. Correctional education administrators can establish institutional policies that support family visits and direct how problems are handled.

Many students in correctional education programs already have stressful, even tenuous relationships with their family. The institution's response to a bad family visit should therefore be to make every effort to heal the breach and not react punitively by denying subsequent visits or immediately sending a negative report to the court, for example. Reunification with their family is a goal for most students. Those who are not expected to actually live with their family after discharge are still likely to continue to have some contact and will probably rely on them for some kinds of support. A fragile bond degrades when anything drives a wedge between the family and their child. A bad visit is better than no visit at all.

There are several ways to help turn a bad family visit into a constructive learning experience. Strong support from the administrator of the correctional education program can catalyze success.

Institutions can consider having trained mediators or professional counselors on hand to step in to de-escalate the situation as soon as a conflict begins to develop. All parties could then be taken to an emotionally safe environment. When everyone cools down, a facilitated discussion can take place that looks for the roots of the conflict without laying blame on anyone. Very soon afterward, the family and the student should be provided with additional opportunities to write down what they think happened and to meet with a counselor to work out differences and come to a constructive resolution.

Families should be offered counseling to work on the difficulties they have when their children make a visit back to their home. Sometimes students just use the family as a "punching bag" in order to release all the stress related to surviving in an institution or to having had a bad experience of some kind that week.

An important component of the process is to start a dialogue and keep it moving along, even if in short or very slow steps. Be creative. Use phone conversations if face-to-face meetings are too volatile. Encourage both the student and the family to record their thoughts and feelings in a journal. Ask them about what they wrote and help them find common ground.

Students whose relationship with their family has been restricted or terminated by a court order still need the same kind of support from caring, responsible adults. The correctional institution, courts, and correctional education program have the ability to work with these students to identify an adult who can give them the kind of unconditional support that a family would. To help nurture the relationship, these adults should be invited to visit and participate in current services and planning for the future. Building these relationships is not easy and can be stressful at times, and this stress can affect the quality of visits. Working through the problem, rather than separating students from these

new adults, can help deepen their understanding, promote respect for each other, and strengthen the relationship.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHETHER FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IS IMPROVING?

Many correctional education programs make an investment in data collection for continuous quality improvement. However, traditional parent satisfaction surveys (mailed out once a year) do not typically yield a robust response or provide data that indicate how families really feel about their involvement with the institution. The key to measuring progress is choosing meaningful outcomes, defining indicators, and finding a cost-effective way to gather data. Families can be valuable allies to correctional educational administrators in designing and implementing an evaluation of family involvement in the program or facility, including collecting data and partnering with researchers to analyze and disseminate the data.

Some outcomes and measures are mandated by Federal or State laws. Some are up to the discretion of an agency, a facility, or a program. When the latter is the case, family perspectives on what to measure can be sought out and given consideration. Families are more likely to be interested in functional outcomes (such as their child's ability to fill out a job application or having a pleasant supper together as a family) than clinical or institutional outcomes (such as the number of days "beds" are occupied). They are also more likely to be interested in the outcomes for their child rather than the group. From a family's point of view, overall improvement in the education level of the correctional institution is not a good outcome if their own child can't read. However, individual student data can be stripped of personal identifiers and aggregated to describe trends for an entire school population or segments of it.

Feedback from families and youth can be a source of powerful information for continuous quality improvement. Giving families and youth a lead role in designing the questions and methods of getting this feedback can ensure that they are meaningful, culturally appropriate, and family friendly. Hiring and training families and youth to collect the data (to make follow-up calls when surveys are not returned, conduct phone interviews, and moderate focus groups) increases the likelihood that the data will be reliable and complete (Osher, Van Kammen, & Zaro, 2000).

Finally, family members who feel that their voice has been heard, that they have been respected, that their child has made progress, and that their child has been treated fairly, can be the best advocates that any correctional education program can have. They will support objective data by adding their personal testimonies when it is time to report on the program's or institution's impact.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

The key to family involvement is establishing communication and building relationships with the student's parents, other family members or caregivers. Some family members are easy to connect with, while others face more challenges and are harder to reach and engage. Establishing communication with a student's family may require some creative effort and persistence on the part of the correctional education program staff. Don't assume that the family is not interested just because you don't get a response to your first effort to communicate. Use more than one strategy to reach out to each family, such as sending a message in the mail, making a phone call, and trying to meet them in person the next time they visit their child at the facility. Make a second, third, and fourth effort if there is no response to the first. Perhaps ask the student about the best way to get in touch with a family that does not seem to be responding. (See the text box for some questions to ask families about how to communicate with them.)

Questions to Ask Families About Communication

- Do they read and write in English?
- Do they use e-mail?
- Do they live in a place where mailboxes are not secure?
- Is there a time of day that is best for making a phone call?
- Can they make long distance calls from their home phone or do they have to call you back collect?
- Are they allowed to receive calls at work, and do they feel safe getting calls from you while they are at work?
- Is there someone the family trusts with whom you can leave a message when you need the family to get in touch with you?
- Would they prefer a face-to-face meeting if they leave nearby or can meet you at a convenient place in the community?

As you develop programming to encourage family involvement, focus on each family's own strengths and challenges. Understanding these will help you choose the most effective strategies to engage them in their child's educational program—and beyond. Whether universal, selective, or intensive strategies are needed to engage a family, fostering respectful communication and building a trusting relationship with them are essential for success.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Publications

Osher, T., deFur, E., Nava, C., Spencer, S., & Toth-Dennis, D. (1999). *New roles for families in systems of care*. Systems of Care: Promising Practices in Children's Mental Health, 1998 Series, Volume I. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice.

Abstract *New Roles for Families in Systems of Care* explores ways family members are becoming equal members with service providers and administrators, focusing specifically on two emerging roles: family members as “system of care facilitators” and “family as faculty.” Available online at <http://cecp.air.org/promisingpractices/1998monographs/vol1.pdf>.

Walker, J., & Aue, N. (Eds.). (2006, Winter). *Focal point: Research, policy, and practice in children's mental health: Strengthening social support*, 20(1). Portland, OR: Portland State University, Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health.

Abstract: This issue of *Focal Point* discusses how social support can be harnessed to improve children's mental health. Articles in this issue define and recommend various methods of establishing and improving social support among families, mentors, and peers. Types of support examined include family-to-family support, wraparound, peer support, and natural support. Available online at <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/pgPubsScript.php?documentID=658&choice=download>.

Walker, J., & Aue, N. (Eds.) (2006, Summer). *Focal point: Research, policy, and practice in children's mental health. Corrections*, 20(2). Portland, OR: Portland State University, Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health.

Abstract: This issue of *Focal Point* describes the need for, and provides examples of, new strategies for meeting the mental health needs of children and adolescents involved with the juvenile justice system. Available online at <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/pgPubsScript.php?documentID=695&choice=download>.

Cross, T. L., Dennis, K. W., Isaacs, M. R., & Bazron, B. J. (1989). *Cultural competence in serving children and adolescents with mental health problems*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Mental Health, National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health at Georgetown University.

Abstract: Culturally competent service providers are aware and respectful of the importance of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of the people they serve. They are also aware of the impact of their own culture on the therapeutic relationship and take all of these factors into account when planning and delivering services for children and adolescents with mental health problems and their families. In a System of Care, local organizations work in teams—with families as critical partners—to provide a full range of services to children and adolescents with serious emotional disturbances. The team strives to meet the unique needs of each young person and his or her family in or near their home. Available online at <http://www.athealth.com/Practitioner/particles/culturalcompetence.html>.

Centers

The Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health

The Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health provides and sustains leadership for a broad and deep nationwide network of family-run organizations. The Federation advocates for children with mental health needs and their families at the national level. Web site: www.ffcmh.org

The National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk

The mission of NDTAC is to improve educational programming for youth who are neglected and delinquent. NDTAC’s legislative mandates are to develop a uniform evaluation model for SEA Title I, Part D, Subpart I programs; provide technical assistance (TA) to States to increase their capacity for data collection and their ability to use those data to improve educational programming for youth who are neglected or delinquent; and serve as a facilitator between different organizations, agencies, and interest groups that work with youth in neglected and delinquent facilities. Web site: www.neglected-delinquent.org

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights Center

The mission of the Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER) Center is to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and their families, based on the concept of parents helping parents. Through its ALLIANCE and other national projects, PACER, a national center, provides support to thousands of parents and professionals each year. Web site: www.pacer.org

The Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health

The Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health (TA Partnership) operates under contract with the Federal Center for Mental Health Services to provide TA to system of care communities funded by the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program. The TA Partnership is a collaboration between two mission-driven organizations:

- The American Institutes for Research—committed to improvement in the lives of families and communities through the translation of research into best practice and policy
- The Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health—dedicated to effective family leadership and advocacy to improve the quality of life of children with mental health needs and their families

The TA Partnership models the family–professional relationship and shares a leadership role with families in planning, implementing, and evaluating systems of care in their community. The Partnership includes a staff of family members and professionals with experience in research and the mental health field. Web site: www.tapartnership.org

The National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice

The National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice was established in July 2001 to assist the field in developing improved policies and programs for youth with mental health disorders in contact with the juvenile justice system, based on the best available research and practice. The Center, which is operated by Policy Research, Inc., in Delmar, NY, in partnership with the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA), is supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and operates current projects with funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Center aims to provide a centralized national focal point that pulls together and links the various activities and research that are currently under way, maximizing the awareness and usefulness of new products and learning, and using the best available knowledge to guide practice and policy. Web site: www.ncmhjj.com

The Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice

It is the mission of the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice to support and promote a reoriented national preparedness to foster the development and the adjustment of children with or at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. To achieve that goal, the Center is dedicated to a policy of collaboration at Federal, State, and local levels that contributes to and facilitates the production, exchange, and use of knowledge about effective practices. Web site: <http://cecp.air.org/>

The National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice

EDJJ focuses on assisting practitioners, policymakers, researchers and advocates to identify and implement effective school-based delinquency prevention programs, education and special education services in juvenile correctional facilities, and transition supports for youth re-entering their schools and communities from secure care settings. Web site: <http://www.edjj.org>