October 2026

How can county staff support caregivers with youth in detention?

Prepared by Deborah Han, PhD, and Elizabeth Day, PhD, Project LINK

What is caregiver involvement in juvenile justice?

There are different roles that caregivers can play in their youth's experience with the juvenile justice system, such as recipients, extenders, or managers of services.[1]

Recipients	Extenders	Managers of services
Caregivers' direct engagement in services; providers address barriers such as transportation, childcare, communication difficulties, and access to care	Caregivers as partners; caregivers support learning and treatment through modeling, instruction, reinforcement, and ongoing involvement	Caregivers as leaders; caregivers navigate services, coordinate care, and advocate for their child's needs

Why is caregiver engagement so challenging?

A national literature review conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention[2] along with a study across seven states[3] found common barriers to caregiver and family engagement in juvenile justice services and substance use treatment programs:

1. Caregivers may feel blamed for their child's behavior, which undermines trust in the court process.
2. Caregivers feel uncomfortable sharing information with staff.
3. The punitive features of many programs can damage trust between staff and caregivers.
4. Caregivers often do not understand how the juvenile justice system works.
5. Transportation, scheduling, cultural, and language barriers make participation harder.

General strategies for engaging caregivers and families

A 2017 review of trauma-informed juvenile justice practices and policies highlighted youth and family engagement.[4] Findings suggested six strategies:

Train staff in family engagement and empowerment techniques	Prioritize youth and family preferences for services	Provide tangible resources to reduce barriers to engagement and partnering (bus pass, child care, etc.)
Provide education/service referrals to address parent/caregiver trauma and its impact on the family system	Involve youth & families in agency planning (advisory boards, routinely collecting feedback on services)	Provide youth and families with access to positive social support from people of similar backgrounds (e.g., mentors, peer advocates)

Address barriers early, and keep engaging throughout.

A systematic review of 17 randomized controlled trials[5] found that brief engagement efforts at the start of services improved early attendance when providers explicitly addressed both:

- **Practical barriers**, such as schedules and transportation
- **Psychological barriers**, such as family members' resistance and beliefs about the treatment process

The mental health approaches that kept families engaged long-term combined motivational interviewing, a family-systems focus, and support for family stress and coping, **delivered at several points throughout treatment, not only at intake**.

Staff can play a critical role in this continuous support, especially via informal hallway conversations and brief touchpoints.

Specific strategies for talking with caregivers and families

Two reviews of family engagement research in children's mental health[6,7] and a study[8] interviewing defense lawyers, family advocates, and clinicians identified common practices for effective engagement:



Communicate in ways that:

- Treat parents with respect
- Give power back to families
- Help families feel connected and understood by staff
- Offer resources for addressing needs (e.g., food, housing) for family members still at home

Tips for supporting caregivers and families

Explaining why the family's role matters

- Offer **simple statements** such as “Your involvement matters. Research shows that kids do better when a caring adult stays connected with them.”
- Offer resources or contact information for **peer navigators**
  - Peer navigators is an approach to supporting system-involved families by connecting them with individuals who have lived experience navigating the system. Peer navigators provide emotional, social, and informational support.

Explaining what services involve

- Provide a **“what happens next” tipsheet** that spells out what they can expect over time
- Provide a **list of who can best answer their questions** for different services
  - Share the list in a way that’s accessible and hard to lose track of, such as having them add numbers to their phone or asking if you can text or email the list
  - Include numbers for crisis and non-crisis responses

Asking about the family's needs, goals, and concerns.

- Provide **options for transportation**, especially if their child has moved facilities
  - Flyer with directions out how to get to the other facility via public transport
  - Flyer with other transportation options (rideshares, community transport, or other low-cost/subsidized transportation)
- Offer a list of **resources to support other demands** (e.g., childcare) or basic needs for family members still at home

Funding & Support

This brief was completed as part of a project funded by the William T. Grant Foundation and is a joint effort of the HEDCO Institute for Evidence-Based Educational Practice at the University of Oregon and Johns Hopkins University. All information provided is the viewpoints of the brief authors and do not reflect the official views of the University of Oregon, Johns Hopkins, or Project LINK. For more information, please email linkproject@uoregon.edu.

Methods

Findings presented in this brief come from a non-systematic literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as reports from non-partisan think tanks, foundations, and county and state program websites. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

References

1. Burke, J. D., Mulvey, E. P., Schubert, C. A., & Garbin, S. R. (2014). The challenge and opportunity of parental involvement in juvenile justice services. *Children and Youth Services Review, 39*, 39–47. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.01.007
2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2018). Model Programs Guide Literature Review: Family Engagement in Juvenile Justice. https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/model-programs-guide-literature-review-family-engagement-juvenile-justice
3. Piper, K. N., Pankow, J., & Wood, J. D. (2024). Juvenile probation staff perceptions of engaging families in substance use services. Family Relations, 73(3), 2079–2102. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12974
4. Branson, C. E., Baetz, C. L., Horwitz, S. M., & Hoagwood, K. E. (2017). Trauma-informed juvenile justice systems: A systematic review of definitions and core components. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 9*(6), 635–646. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000255
5. Ingoldsby, E. M. (2010). Review of interventions to improve family engagement and retention in parent and child mental health programs. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*(5), 629–645. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-009-9350-2
6. Lindsey, M. A., et al. (2014). Identifying the common elements of treatment engagement interventions in children's mental health services. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 17*, 283–298. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-013-0163-x
7. Piper, K. N., Jahn, A., Escoffery, C., Woods-Jaeger, B., Schwartz, D. P., Smith-Curry, C., & Sales, J. (2024). Contextual determinants of family-driven care implementation in juvenile justice settings. *Health & Justice, 12*(1), 35. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-024-00290-9
8. Amani, B., Milburn, N. G., Lopez, S., Young-Brinn, A., Castro, L., Lee, A., & Bath, E. (2018). Families and the juvenile justice system: Considerations for family-based interventions. *Family & Community Health, 41*(1), 55. https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.0000000000000172