The Importance of Engagement with Families

Worcester Public Schools

Toni DuBrino, MA
Martha Walley
WHY?
The Context

Parents and Teachers often receive the bulk of the “blame” when it comes to media and public discourse about problems in youth (delinquency, underachievement)

Families raising youth with behavioral and emotional challenges often find themselves having to work with many different providers:

- Department of Mental Health (DMH)
- Department of Children and Families (DCF)
- Department of Public Health (DPH)
- Department of Mental Retardation (DMR)
- Division of Youth Services (DYS)
- Schools
- Juvenile Courts
- Family Support and Advocacy Organizations
- Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA)
- Community Providers (pediatricians, therapists, psychiatrists)
- Early Intervention
- Health Insurance Companies
- Community & Neighborhood Organizations
- Houses of Worship
We all have different missions and mandates...

...almost guaranteeing different points of view

- **Schools**: education of the youth
- **DCF**: safety of youth
- **Juvenile Justice**: safety of the community
- **Mental Health Care**: child and family mental health
- **Medical Care**: child and family physical health
Challenges Families Face when working with multiple providers

- Feeling "caught in the middle" when different providers are giving different recommendations, suggestions and/or state agency mandates
- Feeling anxious or concerned (or in extreme situations, hopeless) when different providers are in conflict with one another
- Feeling "not listened to" when providers attempt to meet with each other to improve their collaboration, but do not include the family
- Feeling exposed or even intimidated when attending meetings with providers
- Feeling discouraged and frustrated with “one size fits all” models
Families are at risk for.....

- Feeling blamed / judged for their child’s behavior
- Feeling a lack of understanding / empathy for their feelings / stress / worries
- Feeling shame and embarrassment about their child’s behavior
- Feeling dependent on others for help and guidance
- Not feeling “heard” or “listened to”

These can all happen despite our intentions
Consequences of “System Distress” for Families

- Increased defensiveness
- Increased anger
- Greater likelihood of adversarial interactions
- Appearing “unreasonable” or “inflexible”
- Feelings of increased “helplessness” and hopelessness” (often appearing to others as apathy or “not invested”)
Two Important Kinds of Knowledge

Professional Knowledge:
- Comes from formal education and training
- Comes from experience gained through your professional role
- Comes from scientific or “objective” sources—research, books, articles

Experiential Knowledge:
- Comes from lived experience—not a professional role
- What is it like to live in this specific family or with this specific child, with this specific values and culture, in this specific neighborhood
Practical Strategies for Enhancing Engagement

- Entering into Working Relationships
- “Innocent” Interactions
- Empathizing with the parenting experience
- The Benefit of Transparency
Families raising youth with mental health issues often feel...

- Fearful
- Embarrassed
- Blamed
- Not Listened To
- Not Taken Seriously
- Angry
- Ashamed
- Misunderstood
- Hopeless
- Ignored
- Out of Control
- Dependent
Engagement and Relationship

Recognize that all of our work with children and families happens in the context of a relationship.

- All relationships involve intimacy
- Our work relationships are “forced relationships”
- It is human nature to feel ambivalence about any new relationship
- We all have different styles of entering into relationship
- Our past experiences with relationships very often “color” our current attempts at relationship
- Our present experiences with helping relationships very often “color” our future attempts at relationship.
- Find support to address one’s own feelings about the families with which you work
Entering into working relationships

- Remember, this is a forced relationship, and family’s will have different levels of motivation with the system
- Recognize and accept as legitimate different levels of motivation for change: “get you off my back” → “get me services” → “help me change”
- Recognize that cooperation is developmental and grows slowly over time
- If you sense lack of “motivation,” attempt to understand it...(previous bad experiences? unfounded fears? afraid of feeling blamed?)
- Listen to the reasons behind the anger with genuine curiosity—ask about it—get the “story behind the feelings”
- Resist temptation to defend the system if the family expresses anger, hostility towards them—validate that you hear them ... that is not the same as agreeing with them
- Ask what has helped them get through the anger in the past...what has helped them cope with these feelings all this time?
Engagement is Influenced by ALL Interactions

- All interactions produce experience
- The result of any interaction can be either a positive or negative experience
- Multiple negative experiences, however small, unintended or seemingly insignificant, tend to increase resistance, hopelessness, and defensiveness over time
- Multiple positive experiences, however small, unintended or seemingly insignificant, tend to increase hope and collaboration and reduce defensiveness over time

There is no such thing as an “Innocent” interaction
Empathizing with the Parenting Experience

Raising a child with challenging needs can impact parent functioning:
• Decreased Self Esteem
• Depression / Anxiety
• Shame / Embarrassment
• Loss of Patience; Increased irritability
• Strains on other family relationships— including marriages
The Benefits of Transparency

- There are all sorts of ways both intended and unintended we are inclined to keep our process of working with a family hidden from them.
- The more transparent our work, the more families tend to feel like partners in the process - rather than feeling like work is being done “to them”.
- Be honest and transparent about your process - including paperwork, notes, assessments, etc.
- Give the family choices whenever possible.
- Abusive and Violent contexts may require some secrecy - compromise transparency only when necessary to keep everyone safe.
- Regularly solicit family comments on how you are doing your job.
Don’t underestimate the “little things”!

- Given systemic challenges - what we often have most control over is the “little things”
- There are many “little things” that happen whenever we have a meeting
What families have shared with us...

1. Be sensitive. This is an intimate process for me even if it is not for you.

2. Allow and encourage me to bring people I trust to the meeting so I feel less alone and anxious

3. Try to stay away from jargon and acronyms, but if used, check in from time to time to make sure I am familiar with these terms

4. Ask me how I would like to be addressed during the meeting (Ms. Smith, Maria, Mom, etc).

5. Provide a way for me to know everyone’s name and their role with my child (index cards? name tags?)

6. When possible, refer to people, not just “systems” (“Lisa, over at the school is concerned that….” not “The school is reporting that…..)
What families have shared with us…

7. Please lead the discussion in the meeting so no one is feeling blamed by the problems my son or daughter is having.

8. Please find ways to incorporate my ideas into the meeting so that I feel my expertise is appreciated and recognized.

9. Let me know it is ok to decline to answer a question if I am not comfortable, or if I choose to remain quiet. Sometimes, structure might help me (“let’s go around the room and have everyone share one idea”)

10. Make time in the meeting for me to hear everyone’s hopes for my son, daughter, or family.

11. Provide even a small amount of time to discuss what is good about my son or daughter or family
What families have shared with us…

12. Transparency builds trust. Please do not have the meeting beforehand, so I feel that everyone is “playing their role” and the “fix is in.”

13. If decisions have already been made, please let me know ahead of time so I am not made to feel I am the only one in the room who “didn’t know.” Surprises will only cause negative reactions in me.

14. Try to remember that if I appear angry or defensive, it is the anxiety, fear, or feelings of shame I am feeling. Kindness and empathy will ease this more than responding with anger or defensiveness.
References and Further Reading


References and Further Reading


References and Further Reading


President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003), Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America. Final Report. SMA 03-3832
References and Further Reading


