

ENGAGING CAREGIVERS IN YOUTH SERVICES

An essential component to effective youth services is the active involvement of positive, prosocial 'caregivers' (parents and other significant adults in a youth's life).

Described below are *strategies* for engaging with these very important people in youth services.

1) ESTABLISH A 'POSITIVE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP' WITH CAREGIVERS.

Initial contact should focus on joining with caregivers (utilizing the suggestions below) prior to requesting their commitment to participate in family therapy or other youth services. Do not 'cold-call' to set up family therapy, without first establishing a positive, trusting relationship with caregivers.

2) **PLACE CAREGIVERS IN AN 'EXPERT ROLE'**. Caregivers are the true experts regarding their child's development and needs. They often have valuable information and insights to share. Questions that can tap into a caregivers' expert role include:

- What are your thoughts/ suggestions regarding how we can best help your son/daughter/grandchild?
- What has worked well in the past?
- What has not worked well?

3) **EXPLORE CAREGIVER'S 'SELF-CARE'**. Ask caregivers, "How are you doing?" Acknowledge that it can be stressful having a child who is struggling. Emphasize the importance of caregivers taking good care of him or herself in order to be 'at their best' when caring and supporting their child and family.

4) **GIVE 'COMPLIMENTS'** to caregivers about their parenting and children. Highlight the positives you observe.

5) **BE 'UNDERSTANDING, PATIENT, AND EMPATHETIC'** towards caregivers who are initially mistrustful and defensive. Acknowledge that the "system" is not perfect and makes mistakes. If a caregiver is initially defensiveness or disrespectful, let it 'bounce off' and maintain a respectful, professional demeanor. Explore the circumstances of caregiver's past negative experiences in youth services, to help reduce the risk of future problems.

6) **'REFRAME' CAREGIVERS' INITIAL MISTRUST AND DEFENSIVENESS AS GENUINE CARE** for their child. Caregivers are understandably protective of their family and want to ensure that services are actually helpful and not harmful to their child and family.

7) **'MATCH THE INTERPERSONAL STYLE & AFFECTIVE RANGE' OF CAREGIVER/ FAMILY** in order to join with them (also referred to as mimicking or "mimesis", Minuchin, 1974). For example, a caregiver/family who interacts in an upbeat, jovial manner will typically connect better with a youth service provider who communicates in a similar upbeat, positive tempo, while a more interpersonally reserved caregiver/family will more likely respond best to a provider who communicates in a similar low-key manner.

8) **BE 'COLLABORATIVE'** with caregivers. Remind caregivers that we are all on the SAME TEAM and have the SAME GOAL, which is to help their child learn to cope in healthy ways and develop into productive, prosocial adults. Use words like "we", "us", and "let's" to help convey a sense of togetherness.

9) **PROMOTE 'HOPE' IN CAREGIVERS BY SHARING INFORMATION** about developmental & statistical reasons to be optimistic about youth (& adults) capacity to make positive life changes. Reasons for hope include the *maturation of the prefrontal cortex & corresponding enhanced executive functioning, the power of Neuroplasticity, low lifetime prevalence rate for delinquent behaviors, power of Resilience, & Post-Traumatic Growth outcomes.*

10) **HELP CAREGIVERS TO BE 'INFORMED CONSUMERS'** about their child's treatment. Provide caregivers with a *Rationale* for Services being provided and how it can benefit their child and family. Also have *Regular Discussions/ Updates* about their child's progress (especially positive changes).