

# Family Engagement in Juvenile Drug Court: Lessons Learned

## Overview: Family Engagement in JDC/RF

Families members play a vital role in the Juvenile Drug Court/Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF) integrated model, which was created as a combination of two existing models: Juvenile Drug Courts: Strategies in Practice (JDC: SIP) & Reclaiming Futures (RF). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, funded an initiative to improve the effectiveness and efficacy of JDCs by integrating the models to create JDC/RF. The National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (the JDC/RF National Cross-Site Evaluation) includes five sites that received funding under this initiative.

This brief offers recommendations for one of the components of JDC/RF that goes beyond the relationship between the court and the youth: family engagement. Engaging families requires program staff to create or foster an active connection—an engagement—with people outside of the court. To inform policymakers and program managers that are seeking to improve or create a JDC/RF site, this policy brief explores challenges for engaging families and offers recommendations to enhance family engagement. These recommendations may also have broader implications for other JDCs. Policy recommendations for engaging families are summarized in the box to the right and described in more detail throughout this brief.

## Advantages of Engaging Families

Engaging families within JDC/RF involves more than court attendance, but it also yields significant benefits. Research shows that family engagement within JDC is associated with

### Recommendations in Brief

- **Require Parent/Caregiver Participation**
  - Establish a parent/caregiver agreement during enrollment
  - Determine if, how, and when to use coercive power
- **Improve Access to JDC Services**
  - Assess community-specific barriers
  - Provide substance abuse treatment at family-friendly times and locations
  - Hold court at family-friendly times
  - Select an evidence-based substance abuse treatment model that includes a family component
  - Establish family engagement benchmarks to create a feedback loop
- **Provide Resources for Family Members**
  - Employ a “parent partner”
  - Offer a parent/caregiver support group
  - Sponsor “family nights”
  - Link parents/caregivers to treatment
- **Engage Families from the Bench**
  - Foster synergy between judicial and familial authority
  - Leverage team input
  - Provide family member incentives

decreased drug use and reductions in personal and property crime.<sup>1</sup> In addition, family-based models are now consistently recognized among the most effective approaches for treating adolescents with drug problems.<sup>2</sup> Engaged families can also help the JDC/RF team maximize youth's success. For example, parents/caregivers can provide useful insight regarding a youth's motivators, which can help the JDC develop individualized incentives and sanctions.

Beyond the proven advantages of family engagement, implementing the integrated JDC/RF model specifically requires the JDC/RF team to explicitly realign the focus and priorities of the court, adding systematic emphasis on family engagement and bringing the concept to the forefront of the program. Family engagement is also part of each of the component models that formed JDC/RF. RF emphasizes family engagement through "Engagement and Transition," while JDC: SIP does so through "Strategy 12: Family Engagement."

## **Challenges to Engagement**

Because engaging families requires program staff to create or foster an active connection with people outside of the court, JDCs seeking to engage families face both external and internal barriers to engagement.

### **External Barriers**

External barriers are aspects of a family's life that render JDC/RF engagement difficult for reasons outside of their immediate control. For example, family members may be unable to attend court because court times conflict with their work schedule. Similarly, family members may face significant challenges in securing transportation to and from court—either due to the cost of fuel or the limits of their city's public transportation system. Because many JDCs require court appearances as often as two times per week, family members who face logistical barriers are often unable to attend court even if they sincerely desire to do so. In addition, some family members have behavioral health conditions, which can present significant barriers to engagement. These conditions can require parents/caregivers to consider their own substance use before they can properly fulfil the family role within JDC/RF and can motivate the JDC to consider substance use as an intergenerational issue.

### **Internal Barriers**

Internal barriers are beliefs and attitudes held by many families regarding JDC/RF, juvenile justice, and the role of the parent/caregiver, which can present barriers to engaging with JDC/RF. These beliefs can include skepticism about the integrated JDC/RF model or the court system, denial of responsibility, or a desire to be perceived as a peer rather than a parent/caregiver. For example, some family members view JDC as the youths' responsibility, other family members are concerned that the JDC will become too involved in their own lives, and still others are willing to help youth circumvent program requirements to remain on good terms with the youth.

## **Policy Recommendations: Lessons Learned for Engaging Families**

Because JDCs seeking to engage families face different types of challenges, the policy recommendations focus on (1) strategies to help engage family members that are willing but unable to engage (e.g., those facing external barriers) and (2) strategies to engage family members that may be more resistant to participating in JDC/RF (e.g., those facing internal barriers). Most recommendations can be considered and/or implemented on their own; however, they are best viewed as set of strategies that together constitute the lessons learned for family engagement. While each JDC must consider its unique circumstances and needs, many recommendations are interrelated. The recommended strategies are:

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<sup>1</sup> Henggeler, S.W., McCart, M.R., Cunningham, P.B., & Chapman, J.E. (2012). Enhancing the effectiveness of juvenile drug courts by integrating evidence-based practices. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 80(2): 264-275.

<sup>2</sup> Rowe, C. L. (2012). Family therapy for drug abuse: Review and Updates 2003-2010. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. 38(1): 59-81.

(1) Require Parent/Caregiver Participation, (2) Improve Access to JDC Services, (3) Provide Resources Specific to Family Members, and (4) Engage Families from the Bench.

### **Require Parent/Caregiver Participation**

Requiring an explicit commitment from a family member upon initial enrollment can help secure and encourage family participation and define the scope of the family's role within JDC/RF. Truly mandating parent/caregiver or supportive adult participation in JDC/RF is not always possible, but "mandatory participation" can take two forms: (1) a legally enforceable mandate granted by the larger judicial system in which the JDC is housed or (2) a voluntary commitment from the parent/caregiver to participate in JDC/RF. Importantly, JDCs that have legal authority over parents/guardians can compel them to attend court or treatment, but they cannot force them to engage—that is, they cannot force family members to "buy in" to the JDC/RF concept and participate meaningfully in all of the facets of the program. Even these courts can benefit from adopting family engagement strategies, which are designed to help family members become active participants in JDC/RF and, in turn, can help the JDC/RF team help the youth.

- **Establish a parent/caregiver agreement during enrollment.** Establishing a parent/caregiver agreement to participate in JDC/RF along with an eligible youth ensures that family members understand and acknowledge their role as active participants in JDC/RF. Though these agreements may not empower JDCs to impose sanctions on family members, they establish a clear role for the parent/caregiver and set expectations. In addition, these commitments can vary in their level of formality—from an oral agreement to a written "parent contract" with the JDC.
- **Determine if, how, and when to use coercive power.** Some JDCs can legally require parents/guardians to participate in JDC/RF activities (including court and substance abuse treatment, if indicated). This strategy is not available to many JDCs because of local laws and regulations, and JDCs that do not have this authority are unlikely to obtain it because jurisdictional issues are generally determined at the state level. However, for those courts that do have jurisdiction over parents/guardians, the JDC/RF team must determine if, how, and when to use its coercive power (e.g., if, when, and how to punish parents/guardians for non-participation).

### **Improve Access to JDC Services**

Because many family members face significant external barriers to engagement, simply streamlining access to existing JDC services can help foster family engagement. Notably, many strategies for improving access require reallocating JDC resources and reorienting the JDC team's philosophy around a family-centered approach. While many of these strategies may seem like "low hanging fruit" they can require substantial team "buy in" and planning, as many of them ask team members to work non-standard hours. In addition, implementing strategies to eliminate external barriers can help the JDC/RF team determine whether families are facing unreported internal barriers (e.g., using external barriers such as transportation issues as "excuses" for non-engagement). Strategies to mitigate external barriers include:

- **Assess community-specific barriers.** Assessing the barriers that affect a specific community can help properly allocate family engagement resources. The strategies presented in this family engagement brief represent lessons learned from a variety of sites, but each JDC faces a unique set of barriers that can be best addressed through a community-specific approach. Family input is vital to this assessment and can be solicited through formal surveys or through ad hoc interviews with parents/caregivers.
- **Provide substance abuse treatment at family-friendly times and locations.** Providing substance abuse treatment at family-friendly times and locations (e.g., evenings, weekends, and in-home services) can help families participate in treatment sessions and support youth attendance.

- **Hold court at family-friendly times.** Conducting JDC court sessions at family-friendly times (e.g., evenings after work/school) can make it easier for family members to attend court. Similarly, holding graduation ceremonies at those times can help increase participation and foster engagement.
- **Select an evidence-based substance abuse treatment model that includes a family component.** Selecting an evidence-based substance abuse treatment model that includes a family component can help engage parents/caregivers by directly involving them in the youth’s treatment and giving them a voice in that component of the program.
- **Establish family engagement benchmarks and develop a feedback loop.** Establishing internal benchmarks for family engagement can provide a valuable feedback loop to allow JDC staff to monitor and evaluate family engagement. This process can also help define engagement by attaching concrete metrics to the concept (e.g., attendance at court and number of contacts outside of court). After establishing a baseline, this feedback loop can help JDCs determine whether engagement strategies are effective.

### **Provide Resources Specific to Family Members**

Providing resources for parents/caregivers creates a straight-forward reason for families to engage with the court, further demonstrating that JDC/RF aims to serve families as well as their children. Resources can take many forms and can help combat internal barriers—by presenting the court as a tool for parents/caregivers—and external barriers. Resources or activities that the program can provide include:

- **Employ a “parent partner.”** A parent partner helps link family members to social services outside of JDC/RF. Employing a “parent partner” can help parents/caregivers overcome external barriers to engagement that they may not want to address in a court setting (e.g., financial and housing difficulties). The position can be filled by a family member of a graduate, a staff person, or a community partner (e.g., case manager).
- **Offer a parent/caregiver support group.** Offering a parent/caregiver support group can give parents/caregivers a safe place to discuss their issues outside of court. In addition to increasing family members’ role in the JDC/RF through attendance, a parental support group can provide moral support to families and offer a brainstorming session for family members that wish to become more involved.
- **Sponsor “family nights.”** Sponsoring a “family night” where youth and families engage in a positive prosocial activity (e.g., dinner, bowling, or board games) can offer parents/caregivers a supportive place to interact with their children and other JDC families. Family nights also offer informal settings in which family members can interact with court staff and develop relationships.
- **Link parents/caregivers to behavioral treatment.** Linking parents/caregivers to behavioral health treatment can help family members with identified or potential behavioral health conditions overcome personal barriers to engagement and ultimately improve the youth’s home life. Though parents/caregivers are often part of a youth’s behavioral health treatment, JDCs are usually unable to fund treatment specifically for parents/caregivers. However, JDC/RF staff can work with governmental and community partners to locate treatment resources and make referrals for JDC parents/caregivers.

### **Engage Families from the Bench**

In court, the judge has considerable power to encourage family members to be active participants and help them understand the role of the family in JDC/RF. Engagement from the bench offers the judge an opportunity to probe the family dynamic and use his or her position of authority and respect to support positive behaviors. In addition, engaging families from the bench can provide engaged parents/caregivers with a highly valuable resource by demonstrating that the judge, parents/caregivers, and JDC/RF system are working together.

- **Foster synergy between judicial and familial authority.** Active engagement from the bench can demonstrate to youth that the judge and parents/caregivers form a “united front,” creating a synergistic effect between familial and legal authority. From the bench, the judge can move both youth and parents/caregivers towards engagement by acting as a family arbiter and encouraging positive behavior on both sides. This strategy can be particularly important for courts with mandatory parent/guardian participation because it allows the judge to maximize the family members’ engagement while they are present in court, possibly triggering further engagement outside of court.
- **Leverage JDC/RF team input.** Leveraging JDC/RF team input is an important way to maximize family engagement from the bench. While the judge interacts with the family during court proceedings, other team members interact with the youth and/or family outside of the courtroom. As a result, team members are often able to provide unique insight into family dynamics, external barriers, and other factors that influence individuals’ behavior in the court room. Soliciting and utilizing input from the drug court team during pre-court staffings can help the judge target his or her engagement efforts.
- **Provide family member incentives.** The judge has considerable latitude to offer family members incentives from the bench (e.g., gift cards or movie passes). Providing incentives to parents/caregivers (in addition to youth) demonstrates that parents/caregivers are active participants in JDC/RF. In addition, providing incentives for family members offers them tangible rewards for family engagement—both through financial incentives and public praise in the court room.

### **About the National Cross-Site Juvenile Drug Court and Reclaiming Futures Evaluation**

The purpose of the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF) is to conduct an independent evaluation of the combined effects of the JDC: SIP and the RF models to identify the factors, elements, and services that perform best with respect to outcomes and cost-effectiveness. The evaluation is led by the University of Arizona, Southwest Institute for Research on Women (SIROW) in partnership with Chestnut Health Systems and Carnevale Associates, LLC. Additional information on the cross-site evaluation, including reports and presentations, can be found at <http://sirow.arizona.edu/substanceabuse> or by contacting Dr. Sally Stevens, Executive Director of SIROW, at (520) 626-9558 or [sstevens@email.arizona.edu](mailto:ssstevens@email.arizona.edu).

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