

Changing Practice in Juvenile Probation: Engaging Partners Early and Often

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Overview

Implementing a research-informed approach to juvenile probation can have significant payoff. Aligning juvenile probation policies and practices with research could increase success rates and public safety, promote more efficient use of resources, and improve outcomes for the hundreds of thousands of youth on probation supervision each year. This fact sheet is part of a [set of resources](#) to help juvenile probation agencies and officers adopt a research-informed approach to supervision, an approach grounded in the best information available about [effective programs and practices](#) and successful implementation.

Engaging Partners Early and Often

Implementing a research-informed approach to juvenile probation requires the buy-in, cooperation, and contribution of many stakeholders. Research suggests that identifying and engaging stakeholders early in the change process can strengthen problem-solving, improve program design, and reduce staff and stakeholder resistance to new approaches. It also suggests that implementation efforts that use shared decisionmaking – including collaborations with the community – produce better outcomes. The research documents change efforts that never got off the ground because of a lack of stakeholder cooperation.

The research presents key strategies for promoting successful partner engagement that include the following:

- Address constraints on your staff's time so they can partner
- Educate partners about the “why” and the “what” of the change
- Create a shared sense of responsibility and a division of roles
- Establish formal and informal opportunities for communication and collaboration
- Create open communication channels
- Hold regular meetings to discuss the change

Critical Partners for the Change Process

A research-informed approach to juvenile justice centers on youth, families and other supportive adults, and community supports. In many communities, judges handle important parts of the research-informed approach rather than probation agencies, making judges critical partners during change efforts. Other potential partners to consider include:

- juvenile court personnel
- prosecutors
- defense attorneys
- law enforcement
- representatives of other agencies serving youth, including child welfare, health, behavioral health, and education
- legislators and representatives from state executive branches and city or county government leaders
- community-based service agencies and organizations
- community-members, including those from neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by juvenile justice system contact

Partnering with Families and Supportive Adults

Youth should be given the opportunity to define their caregivers or supportive adults who may include family mentors, teachers, and others who are not their parents. Characteristics of successful family engagement include (1) treating families with dignity and respect, (2) providing opportunities for peer-to-peer support, (3) developing partnerships between service professionals and families, (4) facilitating information-sharing between agency personnel and families, and (5) building relationships to promote sustained participation.



The Council of State Governments Justice Center offers a selection of [linked resources and examples](#) for productively engaging families in juvenile probation.

Engaging Judges

Judges are perhaps the most important partners for agencies implementing a research-informed approach to probation. Judges often decide whether cases are diverted away from the system, whether a youth is adjudicated delinquent on a charge, and—for those who are—whether they are released, placed on probation, or committed to state custody. They also typically assign conditions of supervision for youth placed on probation, and decide when to revoke a youth who fails to comply with those requirements. Judges' buy-in is crucial to successful change efforts; without it, most reform efforts will not work.



The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges has a [bench card](#) for applying principles of adolescent development in delinquency proceedings.



PARTNERING WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS TO IMPLEMENT SPECIFIC PROBATION REFORMS

Urban's research review identified several partner-engagement strategies specifically related to three of the core research-informed probation practices. These include the following:

■ Partner-engagement strategies to consider when implementing a screening and assessment system

- Involve court stakeholders when selecting a tool and in discussions about how the information will be used.¹¹⁸
- Share validation studies and interrater reliability studies with stakeholders.¹¹⁹
- Provide training for judges and attorneys on when and how to use assessment information and when and how information will be communicated to them. For more information, see Vincent, Guy, and Grisso's [Risk Assessment in Juvenile Justice: A Guidebook for Implementation](#).¹²⁰
- Frame assessment results as one additional, reliable piece of information to consider when making decisions and emphasize that assessments enhance, rather than replace, individualized decisionmaking.¹²¹

■ Partner-engagement strategies to consider when implementing a graduated response system

- Demonstrate consistency in approaches to handling violations of supervision to gain and maintain confidence from court personnel.¹²²
- Provide community partners structured decisionmaking tools to increase clarity and transparency regarding the use of sanctions and incentives.¹²³

- Involve youth and families in planning for and assessing the new system to increase perceptions of fairness.¹²⁴
- Hold information sessions for external partners, during which probation officers discuss their everyday use of graduated responses. Distribute written resources (such as brochures) that outline the rationale for and research supporting implementing graduated responses.
- Secure judges' approval of the graduated response system before implementation, especially when responses require judicial approval. Failing to do so can undermine probation officers' promises to youth, which damages perceptions of fairness.¹²⁵

■ Partner-engagement strategies to consider when matching services and promoting positive youth development

- Establish ongoing collaborations with service providers in the community. Consider generating a community of service providers to whom probation officers can refer youth (based on needs assessment).¹²⁶
- Build relationships in the neighborhoods youth live in and explore what mentoring opportunities—formal and informal—exist.
- Work with the supportive adults in a client's life to promote positive outcomes. These might include parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, teachers, or coaches (among others).