Effective and timely case planning helps prevent further involvement with the justice system. Aligning research and practice in case planning supports a shift toward a dynamic approach to supervision in which youth and probation officers jointly set expectations and goals. This suggests probation officers (1) engage youth and caregivers or supportive adults in the development of case plans, (2) set targeted and incremental expectations for youth, and (3) ensure youth and caregivers understand what is expected of them and the consequences of noncompliance.

ENGAGE YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CASE PLANS

WHY: Actively listening to and engaging with youth and supportive adults in case plan development reflects alignment of research and practice in youth probation. When engaging youth and family members, it is important for probation officers to understand and respect the influence of family contexts. Research suggests that caregiver involvement in case planning is crucial and can facilitate positive youth outcomes, including educational achievement and improved mental functioning.

HOW: Engage youth in case plan development. Engage youth in developing requirements and strategies, identifying short and long-term goals, and prioritizing focus areas.

HOW: Engage caregivers or supportive adults. Let youth define who their caregivers or supportive adults are, and work with them to involve adults in their lives who will support their success over the long term. View caregivers as experts and valuable participants in the case planning process and consider hosting a team meeting with multiple supportive adults in youth’s lives. Help caregivers connect with peer support.

HOW: Make meetings accessible. Hold meetings in a comfortable setting for youth and caregivers and work around youth and caregivers’ schedules. Provide translators and/or transportation as needed. Use technology to facilitate caregiver participation in meetings or planning sessions if necessary.

SET TARGETED AND INCREMENTAL EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUTH

WHY: Often, youth on probation are asked to comply with a large number of requirements, which can be difficult for youth to manage. Aligning research and practice in youth probation suggests that more successful probation plans set incremental expectations and focus on promoting positive youth development.
HOW: Include youth and caregivers in goal planning. Ask youth and caregivers what goals and objectives are important to them.

HOW: Keep goals concise and constructive. When possible, limit the number of orders with which youth must comply, and develop orders constructively, aligning requirements with goals to promote positive development. Use positive language to frame goals and expectations.

HOW: Set incremental and easily measurable goals. Jointly set goals that are tied to youths’ interests, easily measurable, and defined by a specific window of time for easy evaluation. Set goals that can be accomplished easily and in the short term so youth are likely to experience successes early on. For example, set a goal of starting community service work or improving attendance at probation meetings.

ENSURE YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS UNDERSTAND EXPECTATIONS, CONSEQUENCES, AND INCENTIVES

WHY: Ensuring that youth understand the reasoning behind their case plan is critical to procedural justice and both perceived and actual fairness; it can also help promote accountability, healthy moral development, and critical thinking skills. Youth who fully understand the terms of their probation may be more likely to comply with probation conditions.

HOW: Ensure comprehension. Use age-appropriate language to help youth understand the probation process and use strategies to "test" comprehension of requirements and goals. Avoid acronyms and jargon. Build in regular check-ins and be clear about the consequences of specific actions.

HOW: Explain the reason for requirements. Discuss with youth the justification behind probation requirements to encourage buy-in and promote moral development.

HOW: Promote mutual understanding. Engage youth and caregivers in conversations that seek mutual understanding, where youth and caregivers have equal opportunity to be heard, listened to, and understood.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ON ENGAGING CAREGIVERS: Justice for Families and the CSGJC’s Family Engagement and Involvement resources

EXAMPLE OF STATE CASE PLANNING TOOL: Florida’s Youth-Empowered Success (YES) Plan

EXAMPLE OF GOALS TO ENCOURAGE: Washington, DC DYRS’s positive behaviors table

ON PROMOTING POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT: the National Juvenile Defender Center’s issue brief

ON AGE-APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE: the Washington Judicial Colloquies project

CASE STUDY: DYRS YOUTH FAMILY TEAM MEETINGS

The Washington, DC, Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services (DYRS) convenes Youth Family Team Meetings to help tailor case plans to youth’s individual needs. In addition to DYRS staff, meeting participants are parents, other family members, mentors, teachers, and other people involved in the youth’s life. They jointly develop an individualized success plan that outlines the services the youth needs (like tutoring, job training, or substance abuse prevention) and the progress the youth needs to make within treatment.

For additional information on effectively engaging caregivers and supportive adults, see Justice for Families resources and tools.

This fact sheet summarizes chapter 3 of Bridging Research and Practice in Juvenile Probation: Rethinking Strategies to Promote Long-Term Change. The full report includes citations for the research summarized here.

This project was supported by grant number 2015-MU-MU-K002 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, nor should they be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples. Copyright © October 2018. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.