

KEY COMPONENTS FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Getting Families Involved

Create an atmosphere that is hospitable, respectful, safe and non-judgmental.

Recruit more than one family representative. This will help prevent feelings of “tokenism” and provide a friendly environment for new families who join.

Before a family can get involved, they often need to have access to resources for their own child and family. Don't ask too much too soon. Remember families often have many responsibilities and crises at home.

Supply flexible financial support. Many families cannot afford the expenses of joining a group. Stipends for meals, transportation and child care can make a critical difference for family members.

Ask what level of involvement the parent can offer. Many families continue to deal with crises at home and are reluctant to make an open ended commitment of time. If they feel they have let you down, they will disappear.

Be aware that many families have had a negative experience with an agency. It may be a challenge to get them to walk through the door again. Acknowledge that agencies do make mistakes. Then explain how valuable their experience can be in creating change.

Make sure family members are well informed before the first meeting and on an ongoing basis. Make sure they know the purpose of the meeting, have information about each member and can contact someone for “outside” mentoring.

Provide validation and appreciation. Family members want to know that their input is valued. Other families in the community need to see how those contributions are being used as well.

Family members need to voice their experiences. Take advantage of situations where parents can tell their stories as this develops comfort and encourages leadership. It should never be harmful to a parent to share experiences honestly.

Sustaining Family Involvement

Family members need a sense of purpose, acceptance and accomplishment. Groups must have a clear purpose, lines of authority and be conducted in a manner that is safe, respectful and supportive.

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Families must have access to the same information as other members of the group in language that is free of jargon and acronyms. Just as parents are unfamiliar with acronyms many professionals need to learn "parentese." All language must be respectful and inclusive of families.

Touch base with the parent before the meeting, telling them you are glad they have come. Give them a run down on the "cast of characters" they will encounter. Help them develop comments and comebacks to use if needed.

Debrief them if necessary and clear up any confusion. Touch base before the next meeting and reconnect. Develop a structure to keep in touch.

Listen to recommendations on how to make things more family-friendly.

Responsibility and power must be shared with families as group members, including joint decision making and problem solving. Without a sense of ownership, families will not be invested in a group. Without a sense of hope, families cannot invest in the future.

Remember that *personalities do matter*. Handpick parents for any committee. It is important to find the right match. Otherwise they may come back and ask, Why did you send me there?

Many boards and committees have at least one member who is "difficult" but has a crucial expertise. Some parents may similarly have strong and passionate views but also bring a crucial expertise to the group.

If life experience is our expertise, no one has any more than anyone else. Many parents may not have degrees but they have a PhD in life experience.

Develop and nurture parent leadership whenever possible.

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