

# Evidence Brief

## Seven Promising Practices for Working with Black Families When a Young Person Becomes Involved in the Criminal Justice System

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX’s online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: “Black”, “African American”, “youth”, “justice-involved”, “in conflict with the law”, “representation”, “pathways to criminality”, “justice system”, “best practices”, “engagement”, “parents”, and “families”.

### Summary of Evidence: Seven Promising Practices

#### 1. Treat families as equal partners.

Approach families from an **asset-based, rather than deficit-based, perspective**, and do not lay blame on families, as the punitive nature of programs can have an impact on trust. Focus on highlighting “families’ strengths, even amid challenges, rather than adopting and designing approaches based on negative stereotypes” (Pekel et al., 2015, p. 5).

Family engagement is key to a young person’s health and development, both when they are involved in the justice system and long after they return to their communities (Rozzell, 2013). Provide families with **opportunities for decision-making and involvement** (e.g., in the design and implementation of their child’s treatment), and acknowledge and incorporate family beliefs, cultures, and experiences into services in culturally and linguistically responsive ways (Arya, 2013; Pennell et al., 2011; Rozzell, 2013).

#### 2. Recognize and address barriers to engagement.\*

Families of justice-involved youth may face **multiple barriers to engagement**, including a lack of familiarity with the justice system, transportation and scheduling challenges, cultural differences, and language barriers. Additionally, Black parents/caregivers are often subjected to **racial discrimination**, and the knowledge that Black immigrant parents/caregivers hold about their children is often unrecognized (Guo, 2012). These forms of non-recognition can be attributed to misconceptions of difference and a lack of knowledge about Black culture.

Programs that **ask Black parents/caregivers how they want to be engaged and what barriers exist** – and then take steps to reduce these barriers – are more likely to get them involved (Guo, 2012). For instance, if Black families do not feel comfortable in the physical space, or with program staff,

they are unlikely to be engaged. Be aware that **Black families from different cultural and social backgrounds may have different expectations** about what a welcoming space may look like (Oregon Gear Up, 2014).

*\*See also Top Eight Good Practices for Parent/Caregiver Engagement with Black Families (YouthREX, 2018).*

### **3. Promote two-way communication and information sharing.**

Research shows that families often find the juvenile justice process confusing and alienating, and are frustrated when their input is overlooked or ignored (Luckenbill, 2012; Rozzell, 2013).

Organizations can work to **bridge the communication gap** between the justice system and families by providing information about (Luckenbill, 2012):

- What happens to youth as they progress through the juvenile justice system;
- The roles and responsibilities of the professionals they encounter; and
- Their rights and responsibilities as parents, and those of their children.

Be mindful of the barriers that families may face, and present information in clear and understandable ways; for instance, consider sharing concise written materials (such as brochures) in plain language. **Respect the knowledge that families bring**, and seek their input, which can inform treatment options and service plans, and contribute to improved developmental, mental, and behavioural outcomes for youth (Arya 2013; Rozzell 2013).

### **4. Incorporate peer support.**

Organizations should consider engaging family members and other youth with previous juvenile justice system experience to provide peer support for families. Evidence suggests that this kind of support may help **build trust, establish safety, and empower families** (Rozzell, 2013). For instance, some agencies have hired staff in order to connect families with peers who can help them navigate the system and stay better connected (Vera Institute of Justice, 2014).

If feasible, consider a peer support model similar to the Family Partner role in mental health systems of care, which involves hiring families with systems experience in a professional peer support role. Embedded in agencies or youth-serving organizations, Family Partners can act as **“change agents and bridges between families and system staff”** (Rozzell, 2013, p. 5).

### **5. Consider a family therapy component.**

Research suggests that family therapy may be effective in supporting justice-involved youth and their families (Development Services Group, Inc., 2018). Family-based therapeutic interventions are based on the idea that improving family functioning can promote positive outcomes for children and youth. Evidence suggests that Functional Family Therapy (FFT), a short-term intervention that targets youth and their parents/caregivers, can **contribute to reductions in recidivism** (Celinska et

al., 2013; Sexton & Turner, 2010). Multisystemic Therapy–Family Integrated Transitions (MST-FIT) has also shown promise in supporting youth with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders during their transition from incarceration back into the community (Trupin et al., 2011).

## **6. Acknowledge the cultural wealth of Black parents/caregivers.**

Evidence suggests that Black parents/caregivers draw upon a cultural wealth that holds great importance for supporting their children. For example, research shows Black mothers support their sons' education both in and outside of the school in a range of ways, including (Allen & White-Smith, 2018):

- Supporting the *racial socialization* of their children (see #7 below);
- Drawing on *racial capital* to navigate, manage, and resist racial marginalization and prepare their children to do the same;
- Using *navigational capital*, the ability to maneuver through and manipulate institutions and practices that were designed to exclude Black families; and
- Supporting young people to develop *racial consciousness*, the ability to respond to racialized events.

## **7. Support racial socialization.**

Programs should support families in the process of racial socialization, which may constitute a critical starting point for the development of youth intervention programs (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). *Racial socialization* is a strategy for raising healthy children in a society where being Black often has negative connotations; it may include fostering cultural pride (e.g., emphasizing the history and accomplishments of African Americans), preparing youth for encountering bias, egalitarianism, self-worth, and responding appropriately to negative messages (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014).

Research suggests that racial socialization results in a number of **positive outcomes**, including (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014):

- Increased self-esteem,
- Positive ethnic identity,
- Decreased rates of depression and anger,
- Improved racial coping and cultural competence,
- Improved socio-emotional and behavioural functioning,
- Positive academic and cognitive outcomes, and
- Increased school engagement.

Evidence shows that cultural assets (e.g., having a strong, positive ethnic-racial identity) can be linked to **positive development and overall wellbeing** for young people. Cultural pride and preparation for bias can buffer the negative impacts of discrimination and stereotypes on various

outcomes related to academic achievement.

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