



The challenge and opportunity of parental involvement in juvenile justice services



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ABSTRACT

The active involvement of parents – whether as recipients, extenders, or managers of services – during their youth's experience with the juvenile justice system is widely assumed to be crucial. Parents and family advocacy groups note persisting concerns with the degree to which successful parental involvement is achieved. Justice system providers are highly motivated and actively working to make improvements. These coalescing interests provide a strong motivation for innovation and improvement regarding family involvement, but the likely success of these efforts is severely limited by the absence of any detailed definition of parental involvement or validated measure of this construct. Determining whether and how parental involvement works in juvenile justice services depends on the development of clear models and sound measurement. Efforts in other child serving systems offer guidance to achieve this goal. A multidimensional working model developed with parents involved in child protective services is presented as a template for developing a model for parental involvement in juvenile justice. Features of the model requiring changes to make it more adaptable to juvenile justice are identified. A systematic research agenda for developing methods and measures to meet the present demands for enhanced parental involvement in juvenile justice services is presented.

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Contents

1. Introduction	40
2. Parental involvement in education, mental health, and child welfare services	40
2.1. Family-driven care	40
2.2. Other models of parental involvement	41
2.2.1. Parents as recipients of services	41
2.2.2. Parents as service extenders	41
2.2.3. Parents as advocates or service managers	41
3. Parental involvement in juvenile justice	42
3.1. The extent of family involvement efforts in juvenile justice	42
3.2. Features of the juvenile justice system	42
3.2.1. Problem definition	42
3.2.2. Structure of decision making	42
4. Accounts of current practice	43
4.1. The importance of history	43
4.2. Respect and communication	43
5. Developing a model of family involvement for juvenile justice	44
5.1. Necessary components of any model for parental involvement in juvenile justice	44
5.2. The need for measures	44
5.2.1. System context	45
6. Potential benefits for practice	45
Author note	46
References	46

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1. Introduction

The parent–child relationship, whether positive or negative, is a significant factor in adolescent development. An adolescent moves to independence from this primary relationship, and returns to it in varying ways throughout adulthood. As a result, parental involvement is now widely recognized as a crucial consideration for promoting positive child outcomes in education, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice.¹

The potential value of parental involvement and the forms that it might take vary across service systems. In juvenile justice services (as in child welfare services), it can be argued that the importance of parental involvement is still not adequately appreciated, and that the methods for realizing parental involvement are still under-developed. This is not too surprising. The historical rationale for intervention in both of these systems of care is the presumption that the state may need to usurp the parents' role to ensure the safety of the youth and/or the community. Indeed, juvenile justice professionals, under the broad doctrine of *parens patriae*, oftentimes actively assert themselves into a parent role (acting *in loco parentis*), under the presumption that the existing family dynamics are part of the problem that precipitated state involvement in the first place. Child welfare and juvenile justice service providers are often in an adversarial position with the parent, simultaneously trying to engage in a positive and supportive role with parents while still meeting the larger societal goals of community or child protection. The foundational doctrine of *parens patriae*, while often necessary, is nonetheless in conflict with the goal of empowering and supporting parents (Pennell, Shapiro, & Spigner, 2011). The idea of working with parents thus often evokes ambivalence from service providers; parents are sometimes a negative influence and sometimes a positive resource to be incorporated into an intervention. For service providers, knowing which view is accurate and how to proceed with parents is an art. Parental involvement therefore is not always considered a positive goal and can often be a practice with more perceived downside risks and problems than potential payoff.

Juvenile justice professionals have recently begun moving toward addressing the challenge of increasing positive parent involvement. A recent survey of juvenile justice probation and correctional leaders (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2008) identified family involvement as not only one of the three most important issues, but also the most operationally challenging issue facing the juvenile system. Juvenile justice personnel in both community and residential settings often express a recognition of the potential value of parental involvement (Pennell et al., 2011), but remain unlikely to have a clear method for successfully engaging and involving parents. It is also safe to say that the level of recognition regarding the value of parental involvement, and the level of commitment to adopting changes to improve parental involvement vary markedly across jurisdictions. Rhetoric about the value of parental involvement seems high in juvenile justice currently, but implementation of systematic steps to improve it has been limited to date.

Improving parental involvement in juvenile justice requires a full recognition of the inherent tensions of service provision within the framework of juvenile justice and the development of methods for involving parents constructively in light of these realities. There is, not yet, however, a clear and consistent conceptualization of

what parental involvement looks like, or should look like, in juvenile justice. Currently, the juvenile justice system is relying on compelling anecdotes about the importance of parental involvement (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, OJJDP, 2013), but widespread adoption of this practice requires an elaborated vision of what parental involvement might look like in juvenile justice and methods for knowing when satisfactory parental involvement is actually being achieved. Knowing whether parental involvement is related to positive outcomes for adolescents in the system is a question that is even further downstream from these developments.

Elaboration of a model for parental involvement in juvenile justice can allow for the development and distribution of empirical measures. With measures, evidence-based practices can be identified, routinized, and disseminated. Until these basic issues about conceptualization and measurement are addressed, improving parental involvement in juvenile justice will remain an art, a fad, or a political movement with considerable variability within and across jurisdictions. With some common concepts and measures, however, parental involvement can become a developed strategy that can be shared, examined, and enhanced.

This paper discusses the nuances of parental involvement in the juvenile justice system and proposes an initial framework to clarify this construct in juvenile justice. It argues for increased conceptual clarity and sound measurement. Addressing these issues is an essential first step in determining if and how parental involvement might improve intervention in the juvenile justice system.

2. Parental involvement in education, mental health, and child welfare services

Parental involvement in child services has been implicated as a necessary element to facilitate positive treatment outcomes in the mental health, education, and child welfare sectors (Atkinson & Butler, 1996; Reynolds, 1992; Richards, Bowers, Lazicki, Krall, & Jacobs, 2008; Solish & Perry, 2008; Waugh & Kjos, 1992; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). It may be particularly crucial when out of home placement is involved (Nickerson, Brooks, Colby, Rickert, & Salamone, 2006). It is important to look at what the idea of parental involvement means to other professionals serving children and adolescents before determining what it might mean in juvenile justice service provision.

2.1. Family-driven care

Perhaps the most far-reaching and ambitious movement regarding parental involvement is that of “family-driven” care. Arising out of the systems of care approach (SAMHSA, 2003), family-driven care espouses a powerful, central role for parents in the provision of services, with treatment goals, objectives, and strategies being ultimately decided according to what the parent sees as most beneficial for the family and their child. The idea is that the parent knows best about what makes sense for family members and their child, and that service providers should be able to collaborate with parents about intervention goals and strategies as well as adapt their interventions to the individualized needs of children in their care. In short, the parents are “in charge” of setting priorities and service goals.

The broad application of this family-driven approach sees parents not only as partners in service planning in individual cases, but also as active and equal participants in program operations and policy formation (Williamson & Gray, 2011). In this formulation, parents are more than just individuals who are active agents in the implementation of treatment plans, but are instead proactive agents in the formulation of individual treatment approaches, design of programs, and promotion of policies for services responsive to the needs of parents, families,

¹ It must be noted that, for many youth, a “parental” relationship may not be the one who had a biological or adoptive parent; it may be the one with an extended family member or other caretaker who provides primary instrumental, social, and emotional support. We think of the term *parents* as referring to those with primary responsibility of care for a child regardless of their nominal relationship to that child. When we speak of parental involvement, then, we mean to denote the process of engaging this potentially wide range of individuals in a positive process promoting the successful development of an adolescent.

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