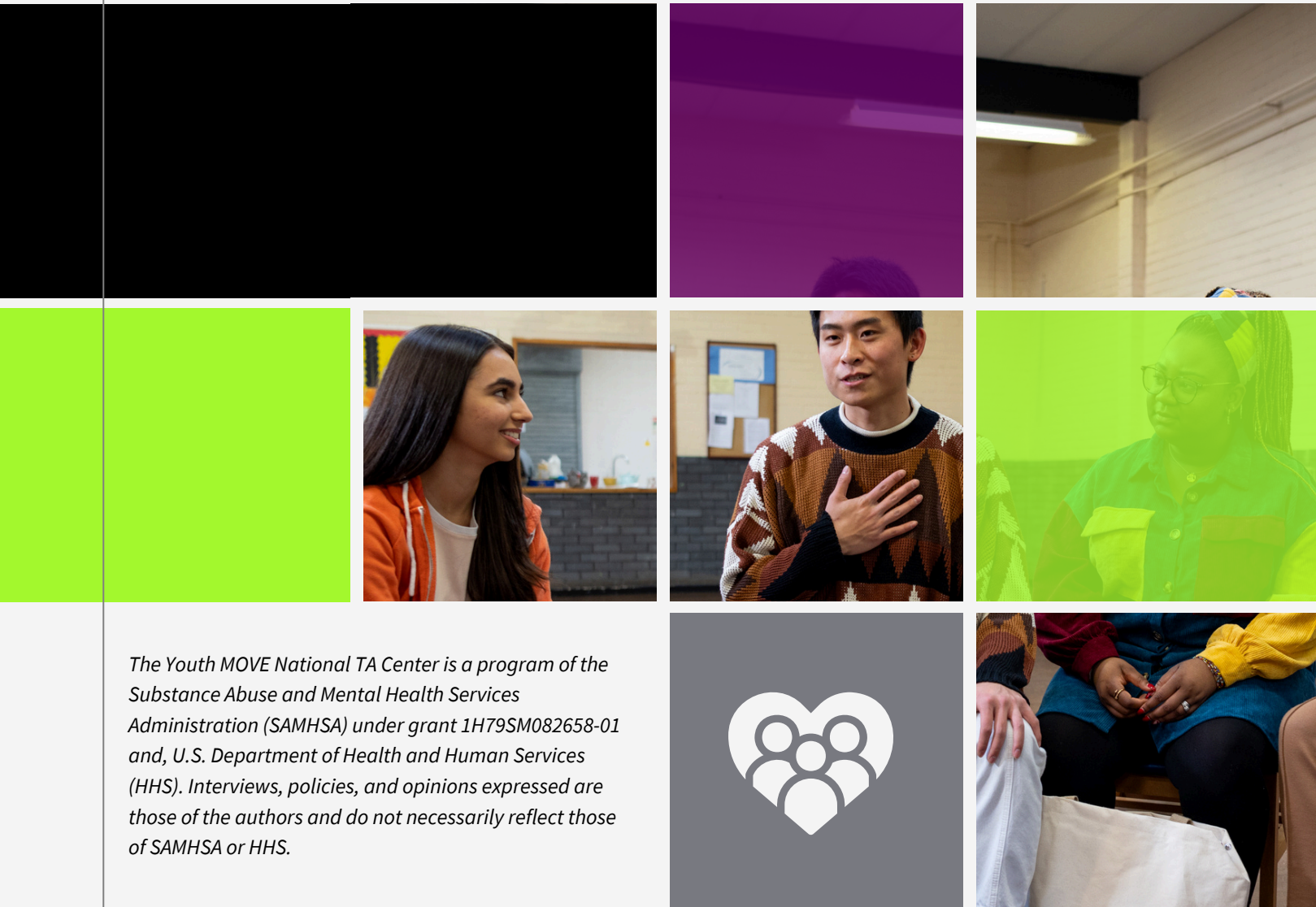


Family Engagement & Support in Youth Mental Health Care:

An Implementation Guide for Care Providers



The Youth MOVE National TA Center is a program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under grant 1H79SM082658-01 and, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Interviews, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

Contributors

Who is YOUTH MOVE NATIONAL™

Youth MOVE (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience) National (YMN) has been connecting, supporting, and developing youth leadership in advocacy to create positive system change for over 20 years. As a youth-led and driven, ageism-focused social justice nonprofit, we envision a future in which young people are valued as empowered leaders, advocates, and designers of communities that are built for all youth to thrive. We do this through policy change and system reform work, national trainings and accreditation programs, and working directly with youth across the nation to address their specific communities needs through our 50+ Chapter Network (and growing). We do by practicing authentic youth engagement through youth driven decision making by elevating youth voices of lived and living experience.

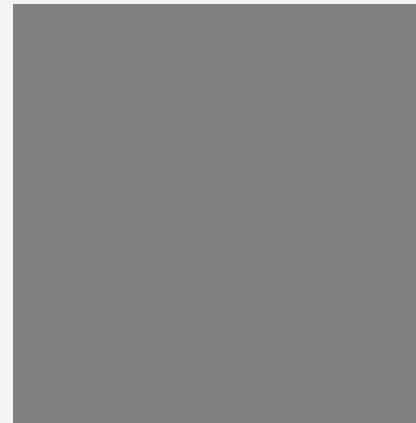
Mission: Youth MOVE National connects, supports, and develops youth leadership in advocacy to create positive change. We practice authentic youth engagement through youth driven decision making by elevating youth voices of lived experience. We ensure that young people are heard and valued as leaders in the agencies, communities, and systems that impact their lives.

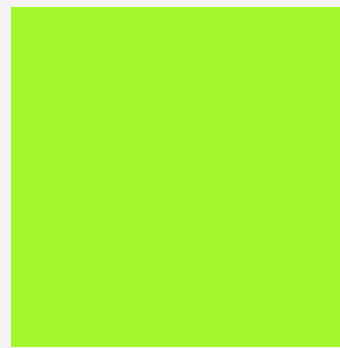
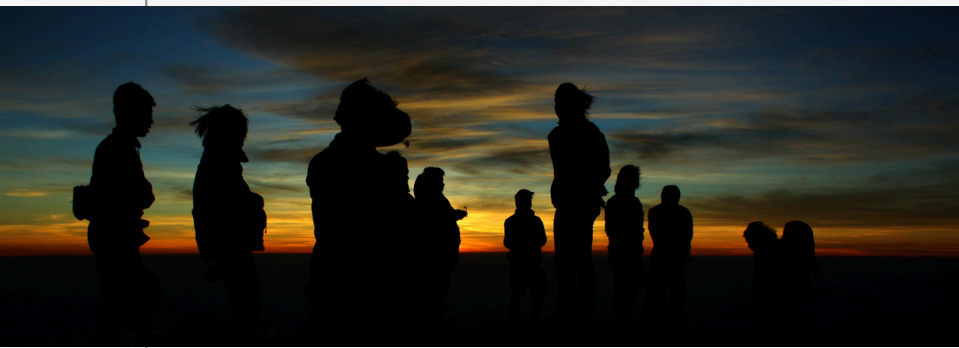
Who is BE STRONG FAMILIES

Be Strong Families (BSF) is a 501(c)3 organization known internationally for using structured, small group conversations to foster transformation and healing within families. BSF's mission is to create transformative change by nurturing family connections, promoting well-being, and preventing violence through empowering engagement with parents, youth, and extended families. We partner with systems, service providers, and communities to develop conversations that strengthen families and support their goals. BSF's offerings include Parent Cafés and professional development trainings, each designed to deeply engage parents and foster resilience within families, encouraging positive outcomes for children and youth.

Mission: To create transformative change by sustaining conversations that nurture family well-being and prevent violence.

Vision: To help build a world where families are strong, children are safe, and every community is a safe and nurturing environment for children.





Introduction to the Implementation Guide

The Family Engagement & Support in Youth Mental Health Care: Implementation Guide is designed to help mental health providers, family advocates, and community organizations create supportive, inclusive environments for youth, young adults, and their families during mental health treatment. By actively involving families as partners, communities can improve outcomes and create stronger support systems for youth navigating mental health challenges.

This guide draws on practices from Be Strong Families and Youth MOVE National, national subject matter experts and leaders in family engagement and youth empowerment. It provides a structured approach to engaging families through effective communication, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive strategies. By implementing the principles outlined in the guide, organizations and providers can foster collaboration, amplify youth and family voices, and reduce systemic barriers, all while prioritizing healing and self-agency.

Together, let's build a mental health care system where families and youth are at the center, empowered and equipped to thrive.



Glossary of Terms



Youth Peer Support: Empowers young people to connect, share experiences, and provide mutual support, promoting mental health in a safe, inclusive space.

Family Peer Support: Connects family members to foster resilience and share experiences in a supportive environment.

Vicarious Trauma: The emotional impact from indirect exposure to others' traumatic experiences, affecting service providers and youth/family members alike.

Protective Factors: Characteristics or resources that help individuals, families, or communities maintain well-being, especially under stress or adversity.

The Learning Community

The Learning Community (LC), developed by Youth MOVE National's Peer Center in partnership and led by Be Strong Families (BSF), informed this implementation guide by serving as a foundational space for collaborative exchange and resource building. Through seven online sessions held from September 2023 to February 2024, the LC used Parent Café-style small-group discussions and interactive webinars to explore trauma-informed family engagement practices in mental health care. This format fostered open discussions around the unique needs of parents and caregivers supporting youth in mental health and recovery contexts. The insights gained from these sessions, particularly around best practices in trauma-informed engagement, directly shaped the guide, ensuring that the concepts address real-world challenges and offers practical, responsive strategies. This community-driven approach to developing the guide helped ensure its relevance and applicability to those working on family engagement in mental health care and recovery.

Defining Family Engagement in Youth Mental Health Care

For Youth and Families

Family engagement means active, collaborative involvement in a young person's mental health treatment journey. It includes participating in treatment planning, attending provider sessions, offering consistent emotional support, implementing supportive strategies at home or other settings, and advocating for the youth's needs while empowering their voice and choice in care. Key elements are open communication, trust-building, and recognizing family strengths to foster well-being.

For Agencies and Providers

Family engagement is an intentional effort to involve families as partners in treatment, recognizing them as essential in the process. Agencies facilitate family input and collaboration in decision-making, provide education, and ensure services are accessible and culturally responsive. Efforts also address systemic barriers like stigma, language, and resources to foster a collaborative environment.

Lived Experience Perspectives

Parent or Caregiver Lived Experience: Refers to the day-to-day experiences and emotional impacts on family members supporting a young person with mental health needs.

Youth Lived Experience: Focuses on the youth's journey through mental health challenges, including personal insights, coping strategies, and experiences with youth-serving systems.



Family Peer Support

Family Peer Support is essential in youth mental health treatment, empowering family members to connect, share experiences, and strengthen each other in a safe, supportive space. By actively involving families, peer support helps them feel more prepared and resilient, supporting youth recovery more effectively.

Key Concepts:



Family Peer Support Values: Emphasizing family involvement in treatment, participants discussed ways to integrate family support values into the organizations they represented.



Trauma and Vicarious Trauma: Participants explored the impact of trauma on families, particularly vicarious trauma, where family members may feel emotional distress from supporting others affected by trauma.



Effective Communication with Families: Different communication strategies were shared, highlighting how communication impacts family experiences and outcomes.



Building Protective Factors: Sessions focused on building resilience, coping skills, and informal support networks to reduce stress and improve family well-being.

Family Engagement in Recovery Services

Engaging families in youth mental health recovery involves inviting active participation in the treatment process, recognizing their unique perspectives, and building a supportive recovery-oriented environment. Family involvement ensures the recovery journey is collaborative, with both youth and families contributing to positive outcomes while having voice and choice throughout.

Key Concepts:



Family Engagement in Recovery: Emphasized the role of family involvement in recovery processes, especially understanding family needs and challenges.



Principles of Family Support: Sessions explored values that guide family support, emphasizing collaboration and respect for family autonomy.



Trauma-Informed Approaches: Participants discussed how to recognize and respond to trauma exposure within family dynamics.



Youth-Driven, Family-Guided Support Plans: Focused on respecting youth autonomy while ensuring active youth and family involvement in recovery plans.

Trauma

Understanding and addressing trauma is crucial in youth mental health and family mental health treatment. Trauma impacts not only the individual but also family dynamics and well-being. Trauma exposure may lead to emotional, behavioral, and relational challenges, which service providers must consider to create a supportive environment.

Key Concepts:



Trauma Affects Family Dynamics: Trauma can impact the entire family, influencing interactions and support systems.



Behavioral Responses: Trauma often manifests in behaviors such as emotional dysregulation or relationship difficulties.



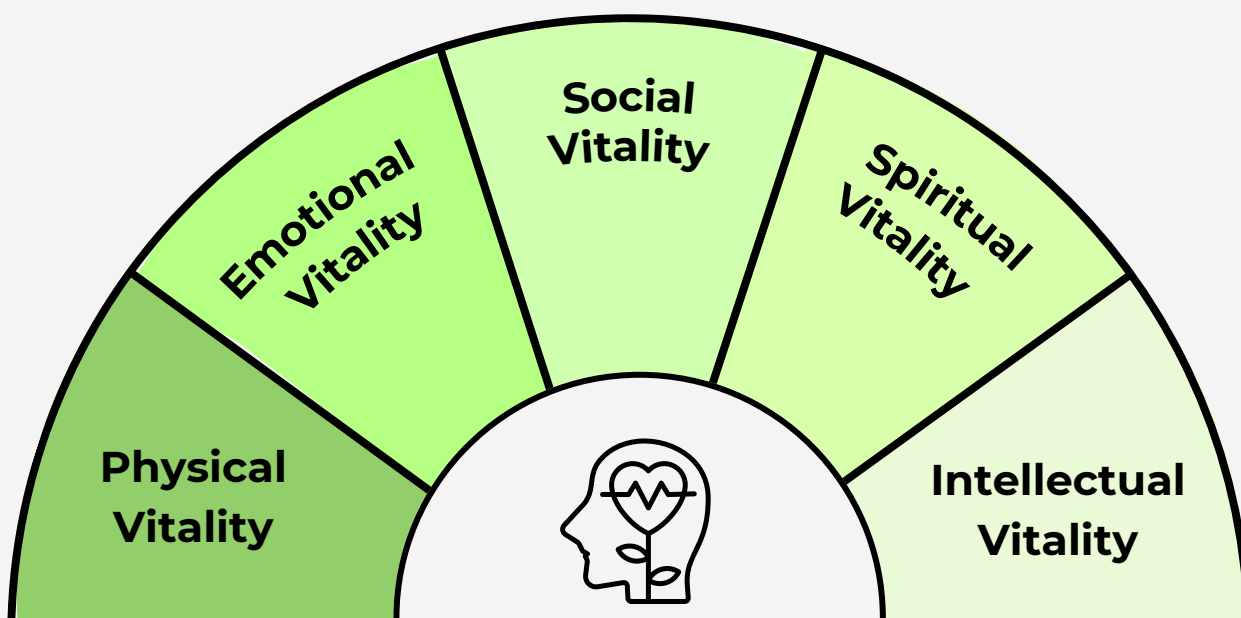
Healing Requires a Holistic Approach: Effective trauma care addresses the needs of both the individual and the family, fostering resilience and recovery.

Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma affects youth and family members, as well as mental health providers who have been indirectly exposed to others' trauma through care services and support. Recognizing and addressing vicarious trauma in oneself is essential to maintaining well-being and supporting others effectively.

Domains of Vitality

A trauma-informed approach to well-being involves enhancing five essential "domains of vitality," each aimed at fostering a holistic sense of health and resilience. These domains recognize that well-being is multifaceted and interconnected, especially important for those with lived experiences of trauma.



Physical Vitality:

- Physical vitality acknowledges the role that the body plays in managing stress and healing from trauma. This domain is foundational for restoring energy, enhancing resilience, and improving overall well-being. When these aspects are nurtured, they help regulate the nervous system, making individuals more capable of managing stress responses effectively.

Emotional Vitality:

- Emotional vitality centers on developing skills to regulate emotions, manage stress, and build resilience. This involves identifying healthy coping mechanisms that allow individuals to process emotions safely. Emotional vitality also emphasizes accessing support systems and seeking guidance, whether through trusted friends, mentors, or professionals, which can provide stability and validation during challenging times. Building emotional resilience allows individuals to navigate life's ups and downs with greater flexibility and adaptability.

Social Vitality:

- This domain highlights the importance of nurturing strong, supportive relationships and building networks of care. Social vitality encourages individuals to connect with others in meaningful ways, fostering a sense of belonging and safety. For those who have experienced trauma, relationships can play a critical role in the healing process, offering emotional support, understanding, and a shared sense of purpose. Strong social connections can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, reinforcing that one is not alone in their experiences.

Spiritual Vitality:

- Spiritual vitality is about finding meaning, purpose, and a sense of connection beyond oneself. It encompasses any practice or reflection that fosters inner peace, hope, or a sense of purpose. Spiritual vitality offers individuals a way to connect with a greater purpose, which can be especially grounding and uplifting during difficult times.

Intellectual Vitality:

- Intellectual vitality involves learning, growth, and understanding the effects of trauma on the mind and body. In a trauma-informed context, intellectual vitality may include education about trauma's impact on mental and physical health, resilience-building techniques, and ways to foster personal growth. Empowering individuals with this knowledge can lead to greater self-awareness and a sense of agency in their healing journey.

Together, these domains of vitality create a comprehensive framework for promoting well-being, particularly in trauma-informed settings. By addressing each domain, individuals are supported in a balanced and holistic manner that honors their journey and strengthens their overall resilience.

Relationship-Based Practice (RBP)

Relationship-Based Practice (RBP) centers on building strong, trusting relationships between service providers, families, and youth. RBP recognizes that positive relationships are essential to effective support, healing, and resilience building.

Key Concepts:



Trust: Built through reliable, empathetic interactions, essential for collaboration and relationship safety.



Collaboration: Involves active partnerships with families and youth in decision-making.



Empathy: Understanding and sharing the feelings of others, which strengthens connections and fosters support.



Introduction to RBP: Participants can explore core principles of partnership and collaboration, such as trust, empathy, and empowerment.



Building Trust and Collaboration: Discuss strategies for building trust, including active listening and consistent transparent communication.



Empathy in Practice: Exercises to enhance empathy and understanding in family interactions, such as using reflective listening skills.








Challenges and Barriers to RBP: Explore potential barriers to RBP, such as time constraints or organizational policy or procedures, and idea generate shared strategies for overcoming these challenges.



Communication with Families / Family Engagement

Effective communication is crucial to successfully engaging families in youth mental health treatment. Authentic engagement involves building transparent, trusting relationships with families, valuing their voices as active participants in their child's care.






Key Concepts:

-  **Family Engagement:** Actively involving families in planning, implementing, and evaluating services, respecting their insights and experiences.
-  **Authentic Engagement:** Fostering meaningful connections with families, ensuring they feel heard, valued, and supported.
-  **Transparent Communication:** Sharing information openly and clearly, including treatment options, progress, and challenges.
-  **Cultural Responsiveness:** Adapting communication to respect diverse cultural backgrounds, reducing barriers and enhancing trust.
-  **Active Listening and Empathy:** Skills for listening beyond words to understand family experiences, building trust and rapport.

The Protective Factors Framework for Families

The Protective Factors Framework strengthens family resilience, fostering a nurturing environment for youth mental health and well-being. By focusing on protective factors, service providers can support healthier family dynamics and improve outcomes for youth facing mental health challenges.

Key Protective Factors:

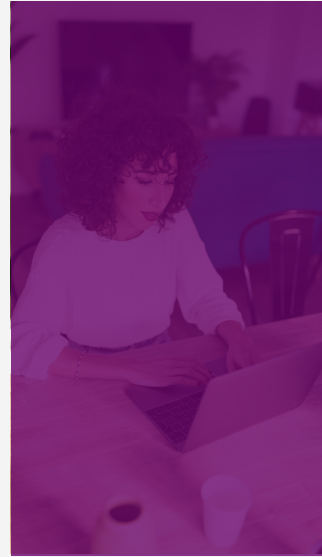
-  **Parental Resilience:** Helping parents build coping skills and manage stress.
-  **Social Connections:** Encouraging families to develop informal support networks.
-  **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Supporting parents in understanding child development and effective parenting strategies.
-  **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** Providing access to necessary resources and support.
-  **Social and Emotional Responsiveness of Children and Youth:** Promoting skills in emotional regulation and social interaction.

Resource Spotlight:

Protective Factors Framework – The Center for the Study of Social Policy

The five protective factors at the foundation of Strengthening Families are characteristics that have been shown to make positive outcomes more likely for young children and their families, and to reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Learn more about the research-based Protective Factors Framework below.






[Check It Out Here >>](#)



Culturally Responsive, Trauma-Informed, and Accessible Educational Opportunities for Families

Providing culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and accessible education for parents and caregivers is essential in youth mental health support. Such resources empower families to better navigate challenges and contribute positively to youth outcomes.



Key Concepts:

-  **Culturally Responsive:** Respectful and responsive to diverse cultural backgrounds, adapting materials and practices to fit families' unique needs.
-  **Trauma-Informed:** Acknowledging the impact of trauma on families, creating safe, supportive learning environments that promote healing.
-  **Accessible:** Minimizing barriers to participation by offering flexible formats, such as online and in-person options, and ensuring necessary accommodations.
-  **Understanding Culturally Responsive Practices:** Techniques for creating inclusive content and fostering a respectful environment.
-  **Implementing Trauma-Informed Education:** Strategies for creating safe spaces, addressing potential triggers, and promoting resilience.

Empowering Advocates with Lived & Living Expertise

Recognizing the value of lived and living expertise is vital in youth mental health support. By empowering individuals with personal experience, service providers can foster a more inclusive approach to supporting youth and families.







Key Concepts:

-  **Lived and Living Expertise:** Insights gained through personal experiences with mental health challenges, which offer valuable perspectives on family and youth needs.
-  **Authentic Advocacy:** Leveraging personal experiences to create positive change, engaging genuinely to support others.
-  **Embracing the Value of Lived and Living Expertise:** Highlighting the unique contributions of individuals with lived and living experience to advocacy.
-  **Enhancing Advocacy Skills:** Building effective advocacy skills, such as storytelling, public speaking, and relationship-building.
-  **Navigating Systems and Partnerships:** Strategies for working with invested partners and decision-makers to amplify the voices of youth and families.

Navigating Complex Systems and Overcoming Obstacles

Supporting youth and families in navigating mental health systems ensures they receive the care they need. By providing guidance and resources, service providers empower families to overcome barriers and access essential support systems.






Key Concepts:

-  **System Navigation:** Helping families connect with appropriate services, resources, and support within complex mental health systems.
-  **Family-Guided Support:** Incorporating family perspectives to tailor services and supports to each family's unique needs and desires.
-  **Youth-Driven Support:** Prioritizing youth voices in planning and delivering services, respecting their choices and perspectives.
-  **Understanding Mental Health Systems:** Providing an overview of services, resources, and pathways to care.
-  **Developing Culturally Responsive Support Plans:** Integrating family-guided and youth-driven approaches for customized support.
-  **Overcoming Systemic Barriers:** Addressing common obstacles such as stigma and limited access, with strategies to improve equitable access to care.

Comprehensive and Customized Family Support

Comprehensive, customized support for families is essential in helping them navigate mental health systems. Tailoring skills-building programs and resources to families' needs enables providers to address complex challenges more effectively.






Key Concepts:

-  **Comprehensive Support:** Offering a range of resources, services, and interventions to address diverse family needs.
-  **Customized Support:** Tailoring services to each family's preferences, strengths, and cultural background.
-  **Culturally Responsive Support Plans:** Incorporating cultural values and beliefs into support strategies to create a responsive approach.
-  **Developing Skills-Building Programs:** Creating programs that empower families with practical tools and knowledge.
-  **Cultural Responsiveness in Family Support:** Understanding the importance of integrating cultural considerations into family support plans.

Building Strong Support Networks

Developing robust informal support networks promotes resilience and well-being among youth and families facing mental health challenges. A sense of community and belonging helps families manage stress and build resilience.

Key Concepts:

-  **Informal or Natural Support Networks:** Friends, family, neighbors, and community members who offer emotional support and practical assistance, reducing stress and fostering connection.
-  **Resilience:** The ability of individuals and families to adapt and recover from adversity by cultivating strengths and developing coping strategies.
-  **Strengthening Informal or Natural Support Networks:** Identifying and fostering connections within communities to enhance resilience.
-  **Cultivating Social and Emotional Resilience:** Evidence- and strength-based approaches to build emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving skills within families.
-  **Building Family Strengths and Resources:** Identifying and amplifying family assets, empowering them to navigate mental health challenges effectively.

Amplifying Youth Voice and Choice

Promoting youth voice and choice in mental health care empowers youth to play an active role in their well-being. This approach ensures that care decisions align with the unique needs and goals of the youth, promoting better outcomes.

Key Concepts:



Youth Voice: Engaging youth in sharing their experiences and insights to inform mental health services and policies.



Youth Choice: Respecting autonomy in care decisions, fostering shared decision-making that includes youth, families, and providers.



Integrating Youth Voice: Techniques for gathering youth feedback through surveys, focus groups, and advisory councils.



Promoting Youth Choice in Care Decisions: Practical approaches to shared decision-making, respecting youth preferences in care planning.



Parent Education for Empowering Youth: Educating parents on the importance of youth voice and choice, fostering collaboration between youth, families, and providers.

Addressing Bias, Judgment, and Stigma in Mental Health

Acknowledging and countering bias, judgment, and stigma in mental health care is essential for creating an inclusive environment where youth and families feel valued. By actively working to reduce stigma, service providers promote empathy and understanding.

Key Concepts:



Bias: Preconceived beliefs or attitudes that negatively influence perceptions and actions toward specific groups. In mental health, biases can perpetuate stereotypes and reduce care quality.



Stigma: Negative social attitudes toward characteristics or diagnoses, such as mental illness. Stigma can lead to discrimination, creating barriers to seeking and receiving effective care or support.



Recognizing and Countering Bias: Identifying types of bias (e.g., implicit bias) and promoting fairness and equity in service delivery.



Challenging Stigma and Labels: Techniques for reducing stigma, such as sharing accurate information and fostering empathy.



Developing Inclusive Resources: Creating culturally responsive services and accommodations for diverse families, ensuring inclusive mental health care practices.

Writing a DEI statement for your organization can help address bias, judgment, and stigma, as long as it is followed up with on-going actions. For example, Youth MOVE National's is:

Youth MOVE National is a youth focused, social justice nonprofit dedicated to ensuring a future in which young people are valued as empowered leaders, advocates, and designers of communities that are built for all youth to thrive. As we know, not all youth are presently thriving, especially those who are disproportionately affected by systemic oppression. That is why we amplify youth voices who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual / Aromantic and other youth who are non-exclusively heterosexual and/or cisgender (2SLGBTQIA+), disabled youth, and more. Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and having a critical, intersectional lens in all we do, helps better ensure affirming, trauma informed environments, where youth are welcomed as they are, for who they are.

Expanding and Improving Access to Mental Health Resources

Expanding resource availability and access is crucial to ensure all youth and families receive needed mental health care. Service providers can help address disparities and promote equity by advocating for resources and guiding families in navigating available services.

Key Concepts:



Resource Availability: The presence of mental health services and support within a community. Disparities in availability can lead to unequal care access.



Referral Pathways: Processes to connect families with appropriate services and resources, ensuring timely access to care.



Mapping Local Resources and Identifying Gaps: Assessing service availability and advocating for expanded resources in underserved areas.



Understanding Referral Pathways: Clarifying criteria and processes for connecting families with mental health services.



Enhancing Resource Knowledge and Navigation Skills: Developing skills to stay informed on services, eligibility, and options for families.

Understanding the Historical Context of the Mental Health System

Examining the history of the mental health system offers insights into systemic issues and challenges. Understanding past influences on mental health practices helps service providers and families address disparities and work toward equity in care.

Key Concepts:



Institutional Racism: Discriminatory practices or policies within institutions that perpetuate disparities in access to care and mental health outcomes, particularly for historically and presently marginalized groups.



Historical Trauma: The cumulative harm experienced by specific groups due to oppressive events across generations, impacting mental health and resilience.



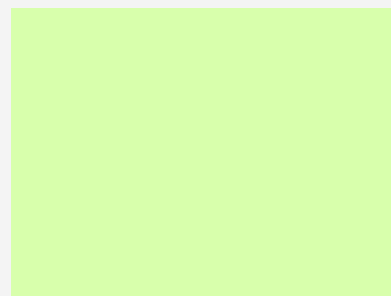
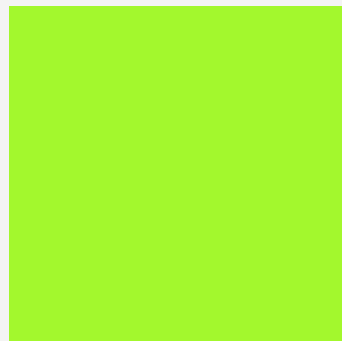
Examining Institutional Racism: Exploring historical foundations of racism in mental health systems and strategies for addressing ongoing inequities.



Understanding Historical Trauma: Recognizing how trauma affects communities and discussing approaches to foster healing and resilience.



Connecting History to Contemporary Practice: Reflecting on the historical context of mental health systems to inform service delivery, advocacy, and policy, with an emphasis on promoting equity.



Questions for Organizational Self-Assessment

Organizations can use the following questions to explore readiness and areas for growth in family engagement during mental health care:

Organization Readiness:

What resources, training, and support do we have to ensure effective family support services?

Are staff members knowledgeable about best practices, and do we offer professional development to enhance skills?

Advisory Boards:

Do we have a family advisory board, and is it representative of the diverse families we serve?

How do we incorporate feedback and recommendations from the advisory board?

Are family members on the advisory board equal partners and have voting rights?

Data Collection & Reporting:

What data do we collect on family support services, and how can it improve our programs?

Are our data collection methods ethical, culturally sensitive, and aligned with organizational goals?

Tokenism:

Are family engagement strategies inclusive and respectful, avoiding tokenization?

What steps can we take to promote genuine family-professional partnerships?

Potential Barriers:

What obstacles might families face in accessing services, and how can we address them?

Are our services accessible to families from diverse backgrounds, and how can we improve accessibility?

Partnerships with Family-Run Organizations:

How can we collaborate with family-run organizations to better serve families?

Are our partnerships mutually beneficial, with shared goals and values?

Overcoming Systemic Barriers:

How can we contribute to dismantling systemic barriers and promoting equity in mental health care?

Are we engaging with other organizations to address systemic challenges and drive positive change?

Summary

This guide underscores the importance of family engagement in youth mental health care, offering actionable insights for service providers, caregivers, and community members. By focusing on building supportive relationships, understanding the impact of trauma, enhancing communication, and providing culturally responsive resources, providers can create a collaborative environment that respects the voices of youth and their families.

By integrating these principles, organizations and practitioners can enhance the well-being of youth and families, fostering a mental health system rooted in compassion, respect, and positive change.

