CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Strategies for Engaging Families in Prevention Programs

Rapid Literature Review

Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

As of April 19, 2023

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Executive Summary

This report was developed in response to an internal request from the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse). The Technical Assistance (TA) Team was asked to conduct a rapid literature review to examine strategies that can be used to engage families in prevention programs. In order to complete this task, the TA team explored studies that assessed education, child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice and considered guidance from non-DoD government agencies and non-profit professional organizations. Three military-specific reports were also included in this review. These reports present findings, trends, and recommendations on strategies that can be used to engage civilian families in programs that show promise in their utility with military populations.

This report highlights the importance of viewing families as systems that are part of a larger community and discusses strategies to empower family members to leverage their inherent strengths within the family system and their communities. The review identifies a range of evidence-based strategies that have been used successfully to engage families. These methods include creating collaborative partnerships, using effective communication strategies, building relationships, delivering suitable content, engaging program providers in professional development, and ensuring program engagement from policy to practice. In addition, being culturally sensitive and tailoring approaches to engage families from diverse backgrounds are highlighted as ways to increase family engagement. A list of insights for program developers and practitioners who seek to enhance family engagement is also offered. This rapid review is a preliminary examination of the research and guidance on engaging families in programs; however, it is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the literature.

Six major evidence-informed strategies for helping programs increase engagement with families are listed below:

1. Treat families as interconnected systems within communities.
2. Form collaborative partnerships with families.
3. Build relationships with families based on dignity, respect, and trust.
4. Deliver targeted content that is relevant, flexible, and timely.
5. Train program representatives on engagement and a strengths-based mentality.
6. Establish a systematic approach to engagement from policy to practice.

Introduction

Engaging families in programs that are evidenced-based and delivered with fidelity has been identified as a critical factor in promoting positive outcomes for individuals, youth, and families. The Technical Assistance (TA) team at the Clearinghouse for Military and Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) received a request to review literature that examines strategies that can be used to engage families in prevention programs. The reviewed materials included research studies, systematic reviews, and established guidance from non-DoD government agencies and non-profit professional organizations. Research that examines this topic was identified by searching peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature, and an emphasis was placed on research published between 2010 and 2023. Search queries included combinations of the following terms: strategies to engage families in programs, prevention, education, military effective family programs, effective engagement, engaging families' mental health, increase engagement, and public health engagement. Search platforms included ProQuest, Frontiers, Google Scholar, PubMed, and general Google web search.

View Families as Interconnected Systems within Communities

Every military unit is part of a larger ecosystem of other units and branches, and, similarly, every Service member and military family is part of their own internal and external network of connections. These connections influence the attitudes and behaviors of every member of the family network. In order to effectively engage with these families, programs must contain components that address the full ecosystem of the military family. Over the last decade, research and best practices support this perspective. Barnes (2020) advises that programming should look at the whole family as one entity that functions as a system when developing health-promotion programming. When choosing suitable programs, facilitators must recognize that each member of a family can impact the choices of every other family member. Wadsworth (2013, p. 418) notes that when families are engaged as systems their resiliency can be mobilized, and adverse behaviors can be decreased. Work by Kelleher et al. (2017) found that highly effective programs tended to have a family-based component in which parents and children were welcomed and noted that inviting other family members to participate boosted its acceptability and, thus, reduced stigma and made the intervention more approachable. If military families are to be effectively engaged, then they must be seen as an interconnected system. The following section discusses practical ways in which providers can engage with families as part of a larger ecosystem including empowering family voices and identifying and leveraging existing family networks.

Empower Family Voices

Another major component of the family-centered approach is building and empowering families to act as catalysts for positive change in their own lives. Nearly all of the articles and best practices the TA team reviewed included a focus on leveraging families' skills and strengths (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). A foundational aspect of this empowerment is verbalizing one's own needs. The National Institute for Children's Health Quality (2023) advises that programs should empower the voices of families and notes that in order for engagement to be successful each family member must feel secure with his or her place in the family in order to share his or her ideas. Listening to the thoughts and experiences of families helps program facilitators and family members better identify needs, capacities, and solutions to their problems. The self-reflective component of this dynamic can be especially important because caregivers may not see external best practices as pertaining to them (Barnes et al., 2020).

Self-advocacy is a key component of capacity building that is often overlooked. Program staff who successfully engage families often provide education, training, and support for parents and caregivers to help them develop self-advocacy skills, which, in turn, enable them to effectively share their stories and access information or local resources. Many highly engaging programs also offer workshops for mentoring or coaching that intend to develop leadership abilities in participants, which may enable families to take a more active role in their growth and development (Center for Healthcare Strategies, 2021).

Identify and Leverage Existing Networks

As previously mentioned, each Service member and family member exists within a broader community ecosystem. These ecosystems have inherent strengths and capabilities that can be harnessed to increase engagement and to better enable desired outcomes. Peer networks for social connectedness, faith-based organizations for spiritual growth, and community non-profits for support services, are three examples of community groups that bring tools and resources. Researchers encourage program leads to consider the family's entire environment including the individuals, the family as a whole, and the community. This can be especially true for the military community in which stigmas surrounding mental health and a "suck-it-up" mindset often act as significant barriers to engagement. Schreiber and McEnany (2015) found peer-to-peer resources to be especially helpful in preventing stigma within these populations and in increasing treatment usage.

Program staff can also tap into other existing systems, networks, and community sources, including community-based organizations and religious leaders (Spencer & Casau, 2021). Engagement is fostered when program providers introduce and encourage families to form support networks that can include peer groups and community

engagement opportunities such as volunteer organizations (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018). Lindsey et al. (2014) found that including relatives, friends, neighbors, and faith leaders in program planning and delivery increased military family engagement in treatment programs. Horwitz and Marshall (2015, p. 295) reinforce the importance of community and family engagement noting that: "support is most effectively provided by kinship networks, and … agencies should only be relied upon when these networks are not up to the task." This last statement offers a critical point. In many cases, programs focus on implementing externally determined treatments or interventions and ignore local resources that can help with acceptance and engagement. When programs ignore these resources, effectiveness and outcomes often suffer.

Form Collaborative Partnerships with Families

Collaboration and respect were two themes that have been found to be effective in engaging families in programming. The social science, education, public health, and outreach domains purport that program facilitators should work to create a collaborative partnership with the family members. Power-sharing, cooperation, and two-way communication should be standard operating norms. Programs that effectively engage families focus on staff building strong, mutually respectful relationships with families and collaborating with them to identify their interests, needs, and aspirations. Providers may use what many researchers refer to as a "family partnership process," which is a tool that can be used to facilitate ongoing relationship building and is the basis for goal setting, individualized family services, and follow-up. (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018). Spencer and Casau (2021) advise that program leads and practitioners should create connections with their families that foster trust, acknowledge families' expertise, and demonstrate humility as they work to co-create suitable programs and supports (Spencer & Casau, 2021).

Ensure Two-Way Communication

A hallmark of any collaborative partnership is two-way communication. In order to initiate and maintain engagement, program providers should use collaboration to maintain two-way communication with parents. (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Guidance from the University of Wisconsin's WIDA indicates that communication should be reciprocal and bidirectional. For example, providers could use family-friendly wording, such as avoiding the use of jargon, acronyms (especially true for civilian family members),

or specific terminology, when speaking with or writing to parents (WIDA, 2023). In addition to clarity and a warm tone, effective two-way communication could include the following characteristics:

- encourages family-initiated contact;
- provides plenty of time before announced events; and
- offers regular, continuous, and ongoing opportunities for communication (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2023).

Support Joint Planning and Decision-Making

Another key component of high-functioning partnerships is shared planning and decision-making. Program providers who are committed to effectively engaging families often share opportunities with family members to co-create and co-develop different aspects of the program, such as building an agenda or setting priorities and goals. (Spencer & Casau, 2021). Creating this type of environment may also help families identify home-grown and culturally appropriate solutions for the issues being addressed (Spencer & Casau, 2021). Joint-planning strategies often foster a willingness to work together with providers to make decisions on tasks and treatments; doing so helps to form an alliance which increases retention rates (Ross & DeVoe, 2014, p.52). Power-sharing and collaborative planning may, at first, appear at odds in some programs. Yet, even when enacting externally initiated interventions, such as state programs like Child Protective Services, addiction programs, or the Family Advocacy Program, Horwitz and Marshall (2015) found that programs can engage participants and decrease adverse outcomes if, at the onset of the program, concerns and non-negotiables are candidly discussed so that intentions and jurisdictions are understood by all parties. To actively engage participants, providers could establish ground rules by listening to family members, identifying their needs, planning for future situations together, and acting as trusted partners in decision-making that could positively impact families' circumstances (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).

Build Relationships with Families Based on Dignity, Respect, and Trust

Maintain Positive Relationships

Effective communication and collaboration are bolstered when dignity and respect are used as foundational traits when forming partnerships with families. Researchers have

repeatedly determined that these types of positive relationships increase engagement. According to Barnes (2020), providers should show respect for and value each family's strengths, potential, and decision-making abilities in order to effectively engage families. This is equally true for programs that support military families. Work by Wadsworth (2014) reveals that programs "should not assume, oversimplify, or pathologize military families—there are many reasons to expect resilience" (p. 420). Even when the content may seem volatile and uncomfortable, or perhaps especially when it is so, program representatives must be trustworthy, attentive, and honest if they are to achieve high levels of engagement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Naturally, some programs will focus on tactical strategies and best practices, but, without soft skills (i.e., attributes that enable one to harmoniously interact with others) and without addressing the human component, the trust of the family may be lost. Wilkins (2018) observed that characteristics of trustworthiness in support programs include human attributes such as being empathetic, accessible, approachable, honest, respectful, attentive, and humble. That point cannot be overstated. If a provider intends to leverage the power of trust to facilitate engagement, he or she must invest at least as much time and energy into perfecting soft skills as the provider does in technical competence (Marques, 2014). This can be particularly true for historically underrepresented or marginalized groups in which building trust is crucial – when no trust exists in a relationship, effective engagement will not exist. (WIDA, 2023)

Act with Cultural Responsiveness

A key component to establishing positive relationships with underrepresented groups, or any group, is cultural responsiveness. "Cultural responsiveness involves understanding and appropriately including and responding to the combination of cultural variables and the full range of dimensions of diversity that an individual brings to interactions" (ASHA, 2023). This is important for program engagement because interventions that are perceived as "culturally compelling" are viewed as more relevant and attractive to parents (Panter-Brick, 2014). To capitalize on this component, program providers should use methods to learn about and understand their clients' culture (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation) (Lindsey et al, 2014). Program providers can accomplish this by using practices that are culturally responsive to a family and that exalt the family's strengths, values, and practices with respect to their culture while also pursuing program goals and requirements (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Deliver Targeted Content that is Relevant, Flexible, and Timely

Conduct Assessments that Help to Identify and Address Barriers

To better understand how to effectively engage with a target group or family, providers should conduct assessments that identify concrete needs, psychological barriers, and practical hindrances. For example, program representatives may work directly with a family to identify what the family sees as their concrete needs and consider how best to assist in meeting those needs, as they also explore barriers to positive change (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015). Providers may want to have discussions with families to identify barriers that may prevent family participation. These barriers could include practical issues such as transportation and scheduling, previous negative experiences with services, and the stigma of seeking help (Lindsey et al, 2014). Addressing stigmas and psychological barriers early and often should not be overlooked. As Ingoldsby (2010) observed, when suppliers addressed a family's psychological barriers (e.g., family members' resistance and beliefs about the treatment process), the family was more engaged. The provider should conduct the assessment process in collaboration with the family. This is important because, typically, the outside observer, regardless of how well trained or intentioned, will not be able to fully understand or address a given family's needs or barriers. Program representatives should spend adequate time with families to understand their situations as they conduct a thorough assessment and provide essential resources. Depending on the family makeup and program goals, the provider could incorporate an assessment process that engages all family members and examines many aspects of the family's circumstances, such as family strengths, cultural heritage, and extended family resources (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Focus on the Framing and Messaging of Content

Engaging in collaborative assessments can also help to communicate program intentions to the target families. Target families need to believe that their participation is important and worth their time, so effective messaging, framing, and advertisement are also key parts of a comprehensive engagement strategy (Ross & DeVoe, 2014). For example, a strong commitment to helping others is inherent in military culture. Prevention program providers can leverage this desire to help by focusing on conveying the importance of parents' mental health in supporting their child's mental health, by creating effective parenting practices, and by helping families build strong parent-child relationships (Ross & DeVoe, 2014). A parent may not do it for him or herself, but he or she may be willing to engage in programming for their children. Many programs effectively frame their services via social marketing, which researchers state is crucial to any marketing endeavor that intends to create behavior change (Dunne, 2017, p.493). Marketing theory posits that

programs should view target populations as audiences and create strategic plans that promote a desired behavior (e.g., non-drug use) that would be in competition with the benefits of the negative behavior (Dunne, 2017).

Program Content Should be Seen as Relevant to the Family

Marketing and effective messaging are important but are only effective at facilitating long-term engagement when the content offered by the program is perceived as relevant or useful to families. Leaders and providers should align goals with the needs of the families who are being targeted (Ross & DeVoe, 2014). Doing so helps to increase engagement and reduce attrition rates (Ross & DeVoe, 2014). Programs, within the United States Department of Health and Human Services, engaged families most effectively when the resources, materials, and services were perceived as timely and useful (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). One such service is a series of workshops that encourage the practical use of firsthand activities (Kelleher et al., 2017). In fact, researchers found that programs that offered practical sessions were more highly attended (Kelleher et al., 2017). Regardless of the specific offering, to attract individuals to a program and to motivate them to continue participating, they must perceive participation as important and worthwhile (Ross & DeVoe, 2014).

Allow for Flexibility in Meeting Families Where They Are

Within the domain of targeted and relevant content, programs should seek to offer their services with flexibility. As noted earlier, barriers to participation often exist, and one of the best ways to overcome time and location barriers is for programs to offer services and content at various places and times. For example, programs might use less traditional settings or approaches to family engagement and deliver interventions via smart technology and the use of mobile apps. (Aronson et al., 2018). Many researchers have found technology to be an enabler as it can be used to provide information and services and encourage contact with peers and community networks (Schreiber & McEnany, 2015). This may help to lessen stigma or physical and psychological obstacles as services could be accessed in the home, and anonymity could be preserved (Schreiber & McEnany, 2015). One study found that a majority of soldiers indicated they would be more willing to use a technology-based approach over in-person treatment (Schreiber & McEnany, 2015). Telehealth tools, in particular, can help to neutralize stigma in military populations because they can offer confidentiality and privacy and offer access to treatment for members who may be unable or unwilling to attend face-to-face options. In these populations, anonymity appears to be essential. Schreiber and McEnany (2015) found that programs that offered anonymous services had increased engagement.

Technology and telehealth are just two examples of flexible strategies. Providers who are willing to adjust to the needs of the family and utilize approaches to address daily stressors and barriers, such as additional sessions, may increase retention rates (Ross & DeVoe, 2014). Time conflicts and/or making time were specifically cited by parents as barriers to engagement. One parent interviewed by Baker et al. (2016) stated that "the greatest barrier to involvement was just time (p. 173)." Choosing a specific and convenient day of the week and start time and providing food were discussed as methods that could remedy time constraints (Baker et al., 2016). Preemptive efforts are another flexibility-based strategy to reach high-risk groups. For example, pre-deployment training and new recruits can be targeted to forestall self-stigma and reduce psychological barriers to engagement (Schreiber & McEnany, 2015). The key takeaway regarding flexibility is to make participation as easy and convenient as possible. Programs must try to accommodate families, schedules, and locations (National Institute for Children's Health Quality, 2023).

Train Program Representatives on Engagement and a Strengths-Based Mentality

Ensure Professional Development on Engagement

Facilitators, representatives, and providers who offer professional development should be trained on how to increase family engagement and participation (Aronson et al., 2018). Motivational interviewing, in particular, was mentioned in several studies for its ability to reduce treatment opposition and boost program involvement (Aronson et al, 2018). Ingoldsby (2010) states that program facilitators should be trained in several areas, such as motivational interviewing and coping support strategies. Facilitators should also be ready and skilled to work with co-parents or other caregivers and versed in methods that are sensitive to gender-specific concerns (Panter-Brick, 2014). Programs that were highly effective at engaging families often offered professional learning on cultural responsiveness, implicit bias, and social-emotional skills (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). According to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (2018), programs should create and maintain professional development systems that promote goal-oriented relationships, cultural respect, continuous learning, and workforce growth and encourage family, program, and community advancement.

Train with a Strengths-Based Approach

Professional development can help to strengthen the providers' approaches and abilities. In that same vein, the most effective programs tend to engage via a strengths-based

approach in which the focus is on a family's skills and strengths (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Providers should keep in mind that most parents want to be good parents, so one way to approach family development is by exhibiting a joint concern of the military-connected child. Taking a stance of cultural humility, in which programs seek to honor each family member's capabilities, personal story, and viewpoint helps to build positive relationships and increase engagement (Ross & DeVoe, 2014). A strengths-based, affirmative, forward-looking perspective, that is positive without ignoring the reality of family difficulties and challenges, builds family empowerment and engagement. (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).

Establish a Systematic Approach to Engagement from Policy to Practice

Efforts Should be Long-Term and Ongoing

Much of the discussion thus far has focused on operational and tactical strategies, yet engagement must be considered at all levels over a given timeline. Ideally, program leads should plan strategically over time. Jacques and Villegas (2018) purport that equitable family engagement requires staff to engage in long-term planning in order to alter family members' established opinions, ideas, and behaviors. In addition, programs should seek to engage family and community members in ongoing and recurring efforts. Families who have not yet built trust and communication with staff may find it challenging or intimidating to get involved. (Jacques & Villegas, 2018)

Require Interagency and Multisystem Collaboration

Collaboration within a program and across programs has also been shown as foundational to a comprehensive engagement strategy. The Child Welfare Information Gateway identified interagency and multisystem collaboration as one of eight common themes for effective engagement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Leaders should consciously promote collaboration across content areas and teams to ensure responsive and coordinated approaches to program goals (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018). Researchers have found that greater impact can be achieved by implementing interventions across multiple levels of engagement. For example, interventions that increase engagement at the policy-making level may increase engagement or improve outcomes in direct care (Carman et al., 2013).

Include Family Involvement at All Levels

Including families at all levels, from policy to practice, has been shown to increase engagement. Involving families in system-level decision-making, advisory panels, and committees can build better dialogue with families, create significant buy-in for further engagement, and contribute to better decisions. These outcomes, in turn, may create better connections between agencies and those they serve (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Another component to involvement is the direct benefit family members may experience by having their voices heard from the beginning – by empowering family voices. One example of this is when youth feel empowered through participation in program development. Include youth and families in program initiation and decision-making and focus on resilience rather than vulnerabilities (Dunne, 2017). Doing this creates a shared responsibility in which families, programs, and communities co-create growth pathways that benefit all three (Weiss & Lopez, 2015). Bringing family members together from the onset can create a synergistic environment that creates fertile ground for growth and potential that may not be possible otherwise.

Summary

This paper reviews research and guidance on strategies for engaging families in programs. The findings suggest that to effectively engage families, programs should view families as interconnected systems with unique strengths and challenges that exist within broader communities. Program providers should treat families with dignity, respect, and trust while seeking to empower family voices. The research also emphasizes the importance of providers identifying and leveraging existing networks, forming collaborative partnerships with families, and ensuring two-way communication. Program suppliers should also strive to deliver targeted and flexible content that is relevant to families and conduct assessments to identify and address barriers. Additionally, this review suggests that program providers be trained in a strengths-based approach and should establish a systematic method of engagement from policy to practice. Finally, the research stresses that efforts to engage families should be long term and ongoing, should require interagency and multisystem collaboration, and should involve family members at all levels.

Suggested Citation

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Additional Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Family Engagement Inventory (FEI)

- The Child Welfare Information Gateway's FEI illustrates how family engagement is defined and implemented across various fields of practice. The inventory breaks down strategies that have been shown to be effective at increasing family engagement in Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, Behavioral Health, and Education. Readers can use this inventory to quickly view and compare strategies that could be employed in their own programs.
- https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/Common-practice.pdf

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