

Levels of Engagement Defined

*Individual family or youth-level engagement or Practice Level Engagement.* Individual level engagement is focused on the fundamental relationships at the individual level. It recognizes that the relationship between the caseworker or other child welfare professional and the family or youth is critical to accomplishing the goals of safety, permanency, and well-being. It supports the belief that all aspects of child welfare be used as a method to create a strength-based approach to establishing and maintaining relationships to accomplish change together. At the individual or practice level, this includes setting goals, developing case plans, making joint decisions. Individual level engagement achieves buy-in and empowers individuals to drive the decision-making process.

*Peer Level or Peer-Led.* Peer mentoring programs enlist individuals who were once involved with child welfare services (lived experience) to help others involved with the child welfare system meet case plan goals and navigate the system. Parent, caregiver, and youth mentors assist through mutual sharing, support, and advocacy. Peer-led services are becoming a common best practice in child welfare. Parent and youth partner programs are founded on the premise that these experiences provide parents and caregivers with unique qualifications to help by serving as empathetic peers, mentors, guides, and advocates.

*System Level.* Systems-level engagement occurs with the intentional inclusion of family and youth/ young adults who are or were formerly involved with child welfare services as active participants in systems change activities. At the system level, they advocate for policy changes, serve on decision-making boards, evaluate child welfare services and programs, employ them as practice advisors and consultants, and recruit them to conduct trainings and participate in social marketing campaigns.

Terms and Concepts

*Family Empowerment.* The act of engaging, involving, and lifting up the voice of families throughout all areas in child welfare. This is the process of encouraging families to take an active role in participating with a child welfare agency. Family members share their knowledge to improve outcomes for children and families and support the enhancement of agency operations.

*Family Engagement.* Family engagement is a family-centered and strengths-based approach to making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes for children and families.

*Family Leaders.* Parents, including birth, adoptive, foster and kinship, who have experience in the child welfare system who want to use that experience and the power of their voices to improve outcomes for children and families.

*Parenting Partners/Navigator.* Fathers, mothers, and other adults in a parenting role with prior child welfare experience who are selected and trained to provide peer-to-peer support to parents currently involved with the system. Some programs call them parent partners/navigators, while others call them family partners, parent advocates, family allies, or parent mentors.

*Peer-to-Peer.* Peer-to-peer are supports offered by those who are of similar age, similar in experiences, and are able to help a youth or family navigate a child and family serving system or a helping relationship based on shared experience. Peer support services are delivered by individuals who have common life experiences with the people they are serving.

*Positive Youth Development.* Positive Youth Development or PYD is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, <https://youth.gov/www.youth.gov>).

*Youth Engagement.* Youth involvement or engagement is a strengths-based approach to working with youth that focuses on preparing them to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent.

*Youth/ Adult Partnerships.* A youth/adult partnership is when youth and adults partner with each other to plan together, advocate for change, or otherwise work together towards a common goal. Youth/ adult partnerships are based on shared power, acknowledging expertise and experience, and mutuality of the relationship.

*Youth-led.* The ability of a youth to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinion and behavior of other people, and show the way by going in advance.