

STASH, Vol. 20(12) - Family engagement in substance use services for justice-involved youth

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The United States has [over 420,000 juvenile delinquency cases](#) each year. Justice-involved youth are [more likely to have substance use disorders](#), and if their substance use is left untreated, they also are [more likely to continue offending](#). Among justice-involved youth, family engagement in substance use services is associated with a [higher likelihood of substance use treatment completion](#). This week, STASH reviews a [study by Kaitlin N. Piper and colleagues](#) that identified processes for, and barriers to, engaging families in substance use services for justice-involved youth.

What were the research questions?

(1) How do juvenile justice and behavioral health staff engage families of justice-involved youth in their substance use services? (2) What are barriers to family engagement in these services?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers facilitated focus groups at 33 juvenile probation sites across seven states. A total of 263 juvenile justice staff and behavioral health providers participated in the focus groups. The researchers asked focus group participants about their experiences with substance use screening, referrals, treatment, and monitoring for justice-involved youth. Then, the researchers transcribed the focus group responses and [identified key themes](#) related to family engagement.

What did they find?

Participants used a variety of processes to engage families in substance use screening, referrals, treatment, and monitoring for justice-involved youth (see Figure). Barriers to family engagement included family discomfort, difficulties accessing services, lack of substance use education, and distrust of staff.

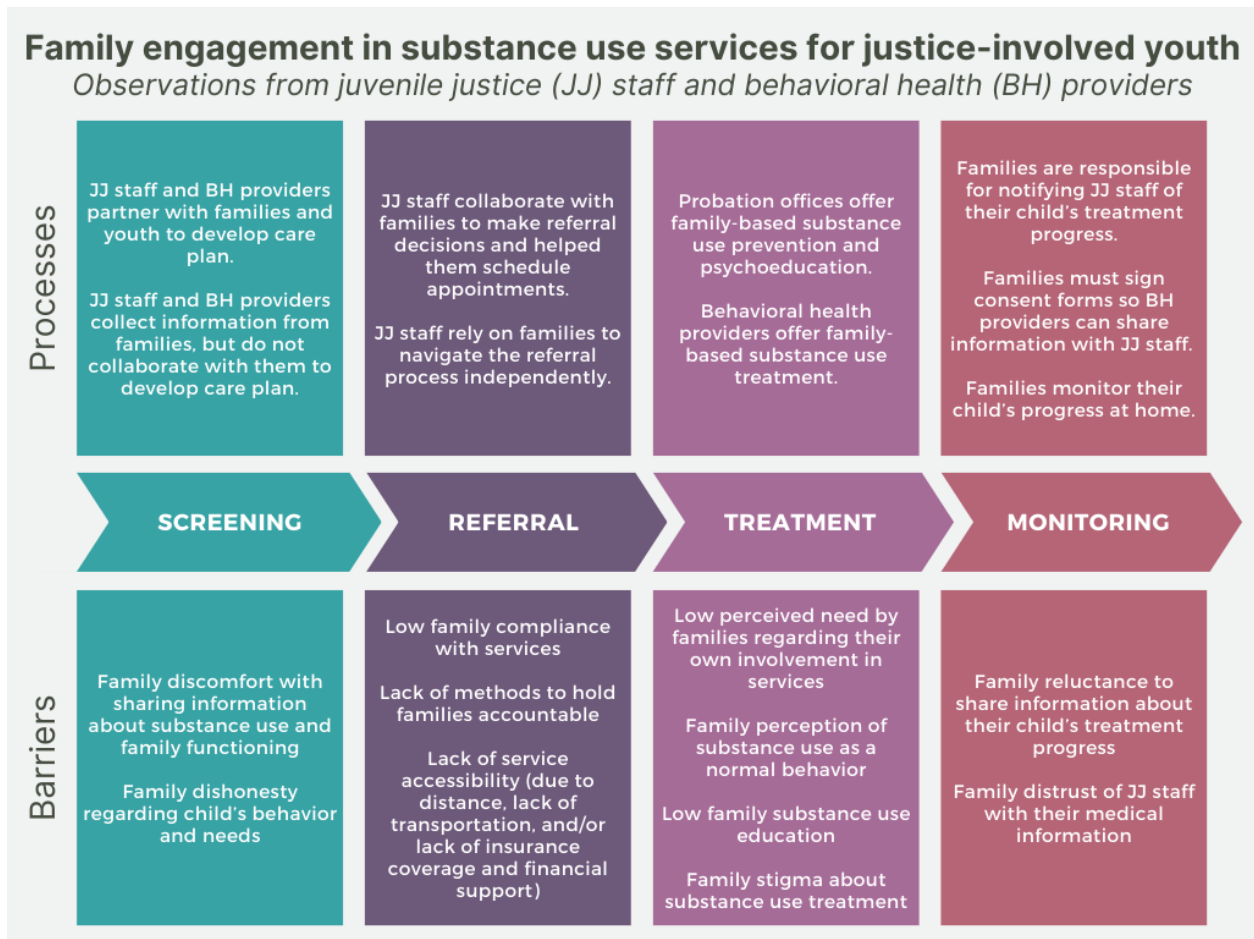


Figure. Processes for and barriers to family engagement in substance use services for justice-involved youth, as observed by juvenile justice and behavioral health staff. Adapted from [Piper et al. \(2024\)](#). Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Family engagement in substance use services varies across juvenile probation sites, and there are many barriers that limit collaboration between staff and families. To address these barriers and improve family engagement, juvenile justice settings should implement [family-centered care](#), which helps build relationships between staff and families, actively invites families to be involved in their child's care, and encourages shared decision-making.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?

The researchers did not include justice-involved youth or their family members in the focus groups, so we do not know how youth and families perceive family engagement processes or whether they agree with the barriers identified by juvenile justice staff and behavioral health providers.

For more information:

If you are worried that you or someone you know is experiencing addiction, the

[SAMHSA National Helpline](#) is a free treatment and information service available 24/7. For more details about addiction, visit our [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Caitlyn Matykiewicz, MPH
