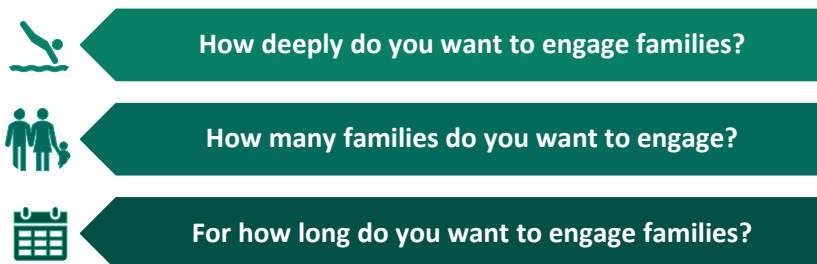


Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

4: An Overview of Family Engagement in Program Improvement

Because of the variation in TANF cash assistance and child support programs, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engaging families in program improvement. The approach that program administrators and staff take should make sense for their program’s circumstances. Considering the following questions can help determine the approach that is right for your program:



I. How deeply do you want to engage families in program improvement?

Deeper engagement means increased collaboration and communication with families over the program improvement effort. It also means sharing more decision-making power with families about how to change the program. The deeper the engagement, the more the program promises to not only listen to families’ feedback, but to act on it as well.

We adapted the [IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation](#)¹ to describe the variation in how deeply programs engage families. From lightest-touch to deepest engagement, the levels of the spectrum are **inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower**. These levels are intended to help program staff understand the different ways they can engage with families, but are not meant to be strict categories that neatly define all types of engagements. Exhibit 4.1 describes each level, starting with the lightest touch form of engagement and ending with the deepest engagement.

Most programs already “inform” families about program improvements. However, many programs may feel limited in their ability to shift final decision-making power to families and “empower” families. The resources and tools included here can help programs begin to take steps towards shifting power to families, so they focus on consulting with, involving, and collaborating with families. These levels of engagement are likely aspirational, but still attainable, for most TANF and child support programs looking to develop and expand their incorporation of family input into their work.

¹ We adapted this model to be more specific to TANF and child support programs, including how they are likely to engage families in continuous quality improvement processes.

Exhibit 4.1. Spectrum of family engagement in TANF and child support program improvement

Inform families about program improvement



Programs **inform** families about program and policy changes, how changes affect families, and where families can find resources describing these changes.



Programs **promise** to keep families informed about changes.



Example: A program mails a form letter to current participants notifying them of an upcoming change in how orientation sessions will be offered.

Consult with families for program improvement



Programs **consult** families when they systematically gather family feedback about a topic or range of topics and share that feedback with program staff—and sometimes the public.



Programs **promise** to consider family input and will share how the input influenced program changes.



Example: A program holds a focus group with current participants to understand what they like and do not like about the program’s orientation session.

Involve families in program improvement



Programs **involve** families by providing multiple opportunities for two-way communication with families. Although programs often decide *what* to change, they offer families ways to share their ideas and feedback about the proposed changes.



Programs **promise** that families will have access to the decision processes and decision makers, will have the opportunity to give input throughout the process, and will know how their input helped influence program changes.



Example: A work group of program staff and participants identify ways to improve the program’s orientation session and provide recommendations about improvements to program leadership.

Collaborate with families for program improvement



Programs **collaborate** when families share their feedback about the program and the program’s proposed solutions. Families and program staff can then collaborate to create solutions or improvement strategies based on that feedback.



Programs **promise** to engage families in all improvement activities and decisions and will aim to incorporate solutions and strategies that families propose.



Example: A program convenes a work group of program staff and participants to identify ways to improve the program’s orientation, test improvements, and make some decisions about which improvements are implemented.

Empower families in program improvement



Programs **empower** families by giving families the autonomy to make final decisions about changes to the program’s policies, service delivery, or processes.



Programs **promise** to implement what the families decide.



Example: A program convenes an advisory board of program participants. The advisory board identifies the need to improve orientation, identifies ways to improve it, and has decision-making power about which improvements will be implemented.

Learn more about these levels in the following sections:

- Section 7: Getting Started on Gathering and Using Family Input describes how to consult with families.
- Section 8: Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement describes how to involve families.
- Section 9: Sharing Power with Families to Drive Continuous Improvement describes how to collaborate with families.

Remember:

The levels of engagement we describe above are intended to help you understand the different ways you can engage with families, but are not meant to be strict categories that neatly define all types of engagements.

Whether your program engages families by informing them or by collaborating with them, we encourage you to engage families more deeply by including them in more parts of the program improvement process and by sharing more decision-making power with them.

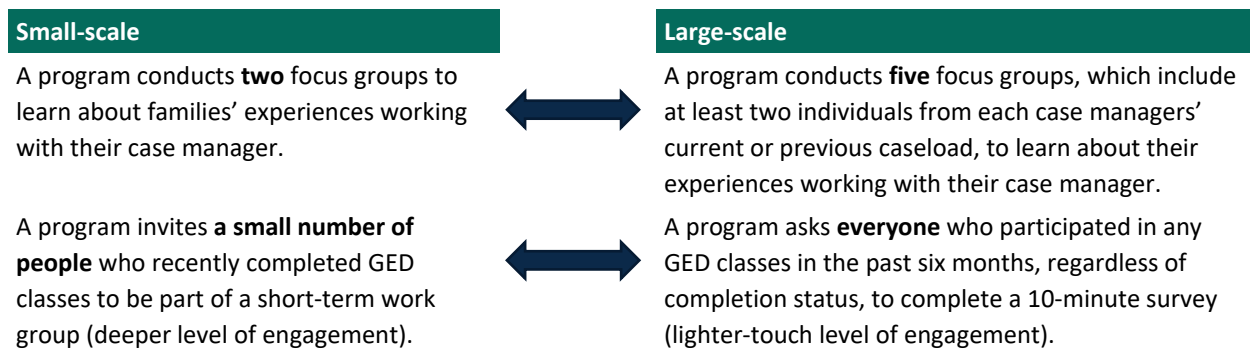
To see how program staff might consult, involve, and collaborate with families across the phases of program improvement, see the [Engaging Families in a Program Improvement Process](#) tool in Section 10.



II. How many families do you want to engage in program improvement?

Another way that program staff and administrators can think about engaging families in program improvement is in terms of how small- or large-scale you want the effort to be. The scale of an engagement depends on how many family perspectives program staff and leaders would like to hear from during their program improvement effort. Program staff can aim to include input from as few as one family member or as many as all participating families, depending on the goal of the engagement. Exhibit 4.2 includes examples of small- and large-scale family engagement efforts.

Exhibit 4.2. Examples of small- and large-scale family engagements




The first example in Exhibit 4.2 shows how the scale can vary when the desired depth of engagement is the same. Typically, however, programs that want a large-scale approach (that is, they want to hear from a wide variety of families) select a lighter-touch level of engagement, such as consulting families through a survey. This is illustrated in the second example in Exhibit 4.2. Deeper levels of engagement, such as collaborating with or empowering families, may require more time and effort from both program staff and the families involved; therefore, the program may choose a smaller scale approach that engages fewer families in these cases.

III. For how long do you want to engage families in program improvement?

When program staff and administrators think about how deeply they want to engage families in program improvement and how many families they want to engage, you might consider the time commitment for engaging families. The time commitment of an engagement refers to how long the program needs to prepare for and engage with the same group of families to gather and use their input. Exhibit 4.3 includes examples of family engagement efforts with varying time commitments for program staff, including before and after directly engaging families.

Deeper levels of engagement might require greater commitments by staff and families because they typically involve repeated engagement over a longer period of time and more preparation. Lighter touch engagements are usually the least time intensive.

Exhibit 4.3. Examples of family engagements of varying time commitments

	Example	Time commitment for program staff
 <p>Less time</p> <p>More time</p>	A program administers a survey to all participants who have received employment counseling services in the past three months.	It takes one month to develop the survey, one month to collect data, and two weeks to analyze the data.
	A program establishes a temporary work group made up of families that will help identify areas for improvement in service delivery and make recommendations for changes.	The work group takes six months to establish and will conduct its work over the course of one year.
	A program establishes a permanent Parent Advisory Council that will advise on state-level policy.	The program spends 8-12 months establishing the Council, including the development of processes for engaging the Council, recruiting, and training members. The program expects to work with the Council for the foreseeable future.

Want to know more about how TANF, Tribal TANF, child support, and other human services programs have engaged families for their input in program improvement?



Check out this brief: [Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field](#)

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