STATE OF
NEBRASKA
JUDICIAL BRANCH

Court Improvement Project

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Practical tools.
Meaningful connections.
Stronger futures.

This framework provides guidance for local Through the Eyes of the Child teams to strengthen meaningful child and youth participation in child welfare court proceedings. By improving communication, preparation, court practices, and stakeholder education, jurisdictions can create more meaningful opportunities for children and youth to participate in court proceedings. Increased youth engagement supports better understanding of the court process, stronger relationships with decision-makers, and improved child welfare outcomes.

The overall goal is to ensure children and youth are informed, prepared, supported, and empowered to participate in ways that are developmentally appropriate and comfortable for them.

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Please use this toolkit as you see fit for your community. Each section is designed to be used individually or in combination with any or all of the others.





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There are a variety of hyperlinks to Education Resources located throughout this document. All assessment forms can also be accessed by clicking the example of the document.

JCAMP

The Judicial, Court, and Attorney Measures of Performance (JCAMP) project was created by the Capacity Building Center for Courts who developed a set of performance measures to help the field understand and improve child welfare court practices. The targeted audience included individuals and organizations with an interest in improving child welfare court practices.

The JCAMP performance measures were designed to track practice over time—in the spirit of continuous quality improvement—and not to set standards for performance.

The JCAMP performance measures are organized into five categories:

- ✓ Family engagement
- ✓ Due process
- ✓ High-quality legal representation
- ✓ Safety
- ✓ Permanency

Each measurement category includes court process, professional practice, and family experience measures to complement the field's previous focus on outcome measures.

The Nebraska Court Improvement Project was one of 12 states selected and looked at Youth Participation in 3a Court hearings using JUSTICE and hearing audio recordings to determine if youth were present at their court hearing, how they attended the hearing, and information surrounding the Youth Court Questionnaire, the Guardian ad Litem reports and the judge's behavior.

The results and full JCAMP report can be found HERE.

Educational Resources

Court and Child Welfare Professionals:

- ✓ NCJFCJ Educational Modules
- ✓ A Presumption of Child and Youth Presence in All Dependency Proceedings
- ✓ With Me, Not Without Me: How to Involve Children in Court
- ✓ Four Ways That Courts Can Actively Engage Children and Youth Involved in Child Welfare Proceedings
- ✓ Engaging Children in Child Dependency Court Hearings
- ✓ Lancaster County Juvenile Court - Youth Attendance Court Rule

Adolescent Brain Development:

- ✓ How Adolescent Brain Science Supports Youth Engagement in Court Hearings and Case Planning
- ✓ Adolescent Brain Science - Case Scenarios

Caregivers and Foster Parents:

- ✓ A View From the Bench - Foster Parents
- ✓ Caregiver Information Form
- ✓ Your Role as a Foster Parent in Court: Advocating for Youth in Foster Care
- ✓ Guide for Foster Parents and Relative Caregivers
- ✓ A Guidebook for Families

Youth and Children:

- ✓ What Now? A Guide for Young People in Nebraska's Juvenile Court System
- ✓ Young Child Court Form
- ✓ Youth Court Questionnaire
- ✓ Foster Care Bill of Rights

Assess Current Practices

Questions to consider:

- ✓ How often do youth attend hearings?
- ✓ How are youth informed about hearings?
- ✓ How are youth prepared for hearings?
- ✓ What participation options currently exist?
- ✓ How are attendance and participation tracked?

Review the following resources to complete the Current Practices Assessment Worksheet:

- ○ Court attendance data
- ○ GAL & CASA reports
- ○ JUSTICE reports
- ○ Caregiver report forms
- ○ Youth surveys
- ○ FCRO data
- ○ Local policies and procedures
- ○ Court observations
- ○ Other _____

Question	Current Practice	Strengths	Areas for Improvement
How often are youth attending hearings?			
At what ages are youth encouraged to participate?			
How are youth notified of hearings?			
What preparation is provided before court?			
Are multiple participation options available?			
How do judges engage directly with youth?			
Are caregivers informed about participation expectations?			
Is participation tracked consistently?			
What youth feedback mechanisms exist?			

Identify Barriers

What prevents youth from fully participating in court proceedings in our community?

Use the Barriers Worksheet to identify barriers your community faces in youth attending court hearings.

Communication Barrier Examples:

- ✓ Legal language is difficult to understand
- ✓ Notices are not youth-friendly
- ✓ Youth do not receive enough information

Logistical Barrier Examples:

- ✓ Transportation issues
- ✓ School conflicts
- ✓ Placement instability
- ✓ Technology limitations

Relational and System Barrier Examples:

- ✓ Youth feel intimidated by court
- ✓ Adults discourage participation
- ✓ Limited preparation by professionals
- ✓ Prior negative experiences

Policy and Practice Barrier Examples:

- ✓ Lack of clear and local expectations
- ✓ Inconsistent, or lacking attendance tracking
- ✓ No standard preparation processes

Barrier Identified	Impact on Participation	Potential Solutions

Hearing Notification Practices

Discussion Questions:

- ✓ Would a teenager understand this notice?
- ✓ Does it explain why the hearing matters?
- ✓ Does it Explain participation options?
- ✓ Who is responsible for notification?
- ✓ How do youth currently receive notice?
- ✓ What happens when a youth changes placement?
- ✓ Are there alternative ways to provide notice?
    - ❖ Text reminders
    - ❖ Email notifications
    - ❖ Youth-Friendly letters
    - ❖ Visual notices
    - ❖ Caseworker reminders

Hearing Notification Resources:

- ✓ LA County - Noticing Process for Juvenile Court Proceedings
- ✓ Rule X - Miscellaneous Rules, Lancaster County
- ✓ Using Developmentally Appropriate Language
- ✓ Engaging Youth in Court: Sample Court Policy
- ✓ Stakeholder Facilitation for Systemic Improvements
- ✓ Nebraska Revised Statute 43-1314
- ✓ Sample Judicial Invitation
- ✓ Sample Judicial Invitation and Youth Tips

Complete the Hearing Notification Review Worksheet:

	Current Practice	Improvements Needed	Stakeholder Responsible
How are youth notified of hearings?			
Are notices youth friendly?			
Are reminders provided?			
How are caregivers notified?			
Are youth under 14 informed?			

Preparing for Court

Support Multiple Participation Methods:

- ✓ In-Person
- ✓ Virtual or Remote
- ✓ Youth Court Questionnaires
- ✓ Young Child Questionnaires
- ✓ Letters to the Judge
- ✓ Other methods as appropriate

Supportive Practices for Stakeholders:

- ✓ Explain participation options to youth
- ✓ Discuss youth preferences before hearings
- ✓ Assist with questionnaires
- ✓ Assist with alternative participation methods
- ✓ Encourage participation through supportive relationships

Questions to consider:

- ✓ How are youth currently prepared?
- ✓ Who is responsible for preparation?
- ✓ What information do youth need?
- ✓ Does anyone explain to the youth?
    - ❖ What to expect at hearings?
    - ❖ Roles of courtroom participants?
    - ❖ Participation options?

Preparing Youth for Court Resources:

- ✓ What Now? A Guide for Young People in Nebraska's Juvenile Court System
- ✓ Youth Court Questionnaire
- ✓ Young Child Court Form
- ✓ If I'm the Party, Where's the Cake? The Need for Comprehensive Child-Witness Court Preparation Programs

Assess Methods Available

Participation Method	Available	Effective?	Improvements Needed
In-Person	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Virtual	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Youth Questionnaire	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Young Child Questionnaire	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Letters to the Judge	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Other:	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Other:	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	
Other:	Yes ◯ No ◯	Yes ◯ No ◯	

Creating a Youth-Friendly Environment

Questions to consider:

- ✓ What does a youth see when entering the courthouse?
- ✓ What feels welcoming?
- ✓ What feels intimidating?

Consider:

Court Environment:

- ✓ Utilize Case for Toys resources
- ✓ Create child-friendly waiting areas
- ✓ Provide:
  - ❖ Snacks and drinks
  - ❖ Activity books and games
  - ❖ Comfort items

Judicial Engagement:

- ✓ Encourage Judges to engage directly with children and youth
- ✓ Use plain language scripts
- ✓ Ask developmentally appropriate questions
- ✓ Explain:
  - ❖ The purpose of the hearing
  - ❖ Court decisions
  - ❖ Next Steps

Youth Friendly Environment Educational Resources:

- ✓ Plain Language Guide
- ✓ Washington Judicial Colloquies Project: A Guide for Improving Communication and Understanding in Court
- ✓ Engaging Youth in the Courtroom
- ✓ An Innovative Approach to Designing a Friendly Environment
- ✓ Four Ways That Courts Can Actively Engage Children and Youth Involved in Child Welfare Proceedings

Assess Courthouse Environment

In your courthouse, assess:

What is currently available and what improvements could be made?

Waiting Areas:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Signage:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Privacy:

_____
_____
_____
_____

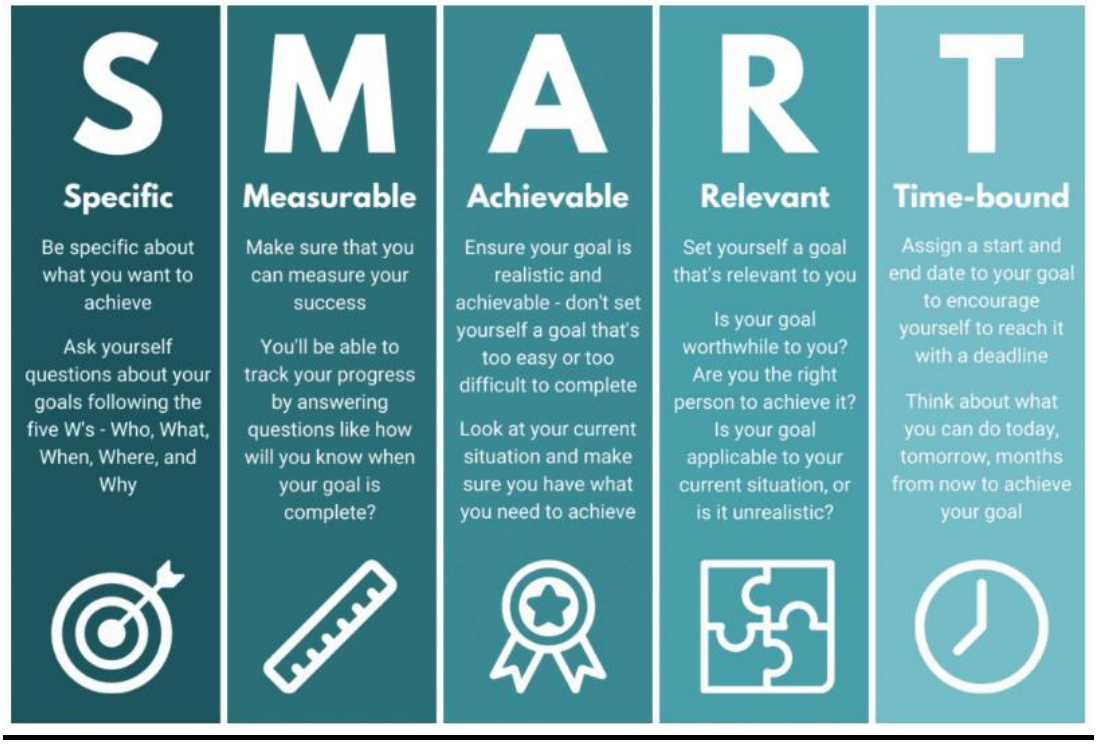
Comfort Areas:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Accessibility:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Identify SMART Goals



https://www.jobyay.co.uk/how-to-set-smart-goals/

Sample SMART Goals:

- ✓ Increase youth attendance at hearings by 25% within 12 months
- ✓ Ensure 90% of youth age 14 and older receive timely hearing notice
- ✓ Increase use of youth questionnaire by 50% within one year
- ✓ Implement youth participation tracking in all child welfare hearings

Identify your goals:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Use the Goal Planning Template to Action Plan:

Goal							
Write Goal Statement Here							
Action	**Party Responsible**	**Begin Date**	**End Date**	**Resources Required**	**Challenges/Barriers**	**Outcome**	**Evaluation Method**

Suggested Evaluation Measures:

- ✓ Youth attendance rates
- ✓ Notice compliance rates
- ✓ Questionnaire completion rates
- ✓ Number of youth participating remotely
- ✓ Youth understanding of court processes
- ✓ Satisfaction with participation opportunities
- ✓ Stakeholder confidence supporting youth participation
- ✓ Policy implementation progress
- ✓ Youth Feedback survey:
  - ❖ Did you understand what happened at court?
  - ❖ Did you have a chance to share your thoughts?
  - ❖ Did adults listen to you?
  - ❖ What would make court easier?

A Case for Toys

Created by child welfare advocate Maralee Bradley, a Case for Toys provides a tote filled with objects intended to provide joy and a moment of connection for kids and youth of any age– from board books, to stuffed animals, to blankets, to journals and pens. We want the gifts to be quality, but the gifts aren't really the point. They are a way to facilitate a connection. An interaction. A positive feeling.

A Case for Toys

Facebook: The Case for Toys

Instagram: The Case for Toys



