



QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

Program Implementation Primer

Missouri: MO Engaged Care

Program Implementation Primer

Missouri Engaged Care

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) Program Implementation Primer introduces Missouri Engaged Care (MO Engaged Care) and serves as a comprehensive guide for child welfare agencies considering its implementation. Designed for agencies ready to make a meaningful impact, this guide goes beyond a simple overview. It shares the insights and tools needed to assess interest, to ensure infrastructure readiness and to navigate implementation with confidence. It includes the following:

- **Logic Model:** a framework that illustrates how program resources and activities lead to intended outcomes
- **Core Components:** the essential functions and practices that need to be delivered consistently and with fidelity to ensure effectiveness
- **Program Delivery:** the amount and intensity of participant engagement necessary for achieving program success
- **Implementation Supports:** foundational resources that enable high-quality delivery (such as staffing, training, policies, supervision, partnerships and data systems)
- **Evaluation:** systematic measurement of fidelity in program delivery and of outcomes, performed to monitor progress and to demonstrate program impact
- **Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips:** common barriers to implementation and practical strategies for overcoming them
- **Additional Program Materials:** practical aids — program manuals, logic models, fidelity checklists, scripts and other resources — that support consistent and effective delivery

Table of Contents

SECTION 1:	
Program Overview	4
SECTION 2:	
Program Goals	6
Short-Term Outcomes	6
Long-Term Outcomes	7
SECTION 3:	
Logic Model	8
SECTION 4:	
Core Components	9
SECTION 5:	
Program Delivery (Intensity and Duration)	12
Program Timeline	12
SECTION 6:	
Implementation Supports	14
SECTION 7:	
Evaluation	19
SECTION 8:	
Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips	20
Program Planning and Preparation	20
Core Component-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips	23
SECTION 9:	
Additional Program Materials	26
REFERENCES	27

1. Program Overview

Decisions made in court hearings and case planning meetings directly impact youth in foster care. However, these young people often do not understand their rights to engage in these processes. They do not consistently receive encouragement and support to participate meaningfully. Research findings indicate that youths who engage in their own permanency planning gain decision-making skills, develop a sense of agency and become more likely to share information about their relationships and preferences that can support achieving permanency (Augsberger, 2014). Despite this evidence, youth participation in court and permanency-related meetings remains inconsistent across child welfare systems.

The MO Engaged Care program employs a structured approach to provide youths in care with an understanding of child welfare system

practices and processes. The program also aims to empower youths to advocate for themselves effectively. It accomplishes this by offering clear information tailored to each youth's developmental stage, guided opportunities to process and to reflect on that information, plus ongoing support through a trusting relationship with each youth's assigned caseworker.

Through *MO Engaged Care*, youths receive

- education about federal and state child welfare laws and policies that directly impact and protect youth rights;
- education about the child welfare system, the meaning of permanency, ways to participate in case planning and permanency planning processes, and the purposes of team meetings and court hearings;



"Going through the [handbooks] with my youth was a very positive experience for me as a caseworker. I learned a lot thought the process, and it helped us build a rapport while having more purposeful conversations about her journey in foster care."

- caseworker

- clarity about the roles of persons who serve on each youth's own family support team;
- opportunities to understand how to prepare for and to participate in team meetings and court hearings;
- encouragement, suggestions and guidance on ways to advocate for themselves while in foster care, including a process for elevating their concerns through the chain of command and when participating in team meetings;
- guidance on enlisting supportive adults to advocate on their behalf.

Implementing a program structured to promote youth engagement across all stages of a child welfare case supports young people in understanding system processes, developing self-advocacy skills and building self-confidence to participate authentically in decisions that affect their lives. Youth participation also benefits judges, caseworkers and other professionals by providing them with critical insights into youths'

experiences, needs and desires for their futures. These insights support well-informed decision-making to help achieve successful permanency outcomes.

The developers of MO Engaged Care based the program on content in *What's It All About: A Handbook for Youth in Alternative Care* (Missouri Department of Social Services, 2021), then transformed that handbook from a passive document into a series of structured engagement tools to guide discussions between youths and their caseworkers. Individuals with lived experience helped to make MO Engaged Care content more youth-friendly with clear, easy-to-understand language. They also helped to ensure that the program consistently reflects an authentic commitment to youth engagement. MO Engaged Care is informed further by the QIC-EY initiative and aligned with the *Transforming Engagement: Keeping Children and Youth at the Center of Our Work* (QIC-EY, 2025) training for child welfare professionals.



"Because of my youth's involvement in this process and the time we spent reviewing the [handbooks] together, she participated in her team meeting and we arranged a meeting where she spoke with her guardian ad litem regarding her permanency plan. I truly believe these steps would not have happened without the guidebook or her being intentionally included in the process."

- caseworker

2. Program Goals

Youths who understand permanency planning and court processes are more likely to share their perspectives, to participate meaningfully and to identify their supportive connections. These factors significantly increase youths' likelihood of achieving lasting legal and relational permanency (Farmer, 2008; Friend, 2009; Welti et al., 2021). *MO Engaged Care* strengthens youth engagement in permanency-related decision-making by providing clear information about the child welfare system and guiding youths through activities that link what they are learning to their own stories, goals and personal strengths. As a result, youths develop self-advocacy skills and become better prepared to influence their permanency outcomes.

THE MO ENGAGED CARE PROGRAM AIMS TO

- equip youths with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence needed to engage in permanency planning and court processes and to advocate for themselves throughout their cases;
- strengthen relationships between youths and their caseworkers and other support team members through transparent sharing of information and by providing opportunities for youths to ask questions for clarification;
- encourage youth driven decision making by elevating youth voice and preferences in planning meetings and court hearings;
- establish consistent, structured practices within the child welfare system that promote authentic engagement with youths appropriate for their developmental stages; and
- increase collaboration among youths, their caseworkers and their family support teams to ensure that youth rights are respected and that youths can express their desires either directly or through supportive team members.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

As a result of participating in the program, youths will have

- a better understanding of the foster care system, their own cases and their rights while in the system's care;
- a better understanding of the permanency planning process;
- a sense of empowerment and increased self-confidence in their own roles in case and permanency planning processes, plus ideas for how to participate in these processes;
- an improved understanding of the roles of child welfare staff and procedures, increasing the likelihood that youths will develop positive relationships with staff members;
- improved relationships with their caseworkers;
- improved alignment of each youth's permanency plan with the youth's desires, preferences and identified sources of support and strength;
- reduced tendency to run away and to go missing from the families fostering them; and
- reduced need for stays in residential treatment or shorter stays when these are necessary.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The program also aims to contribute over time to increases in each of the following:

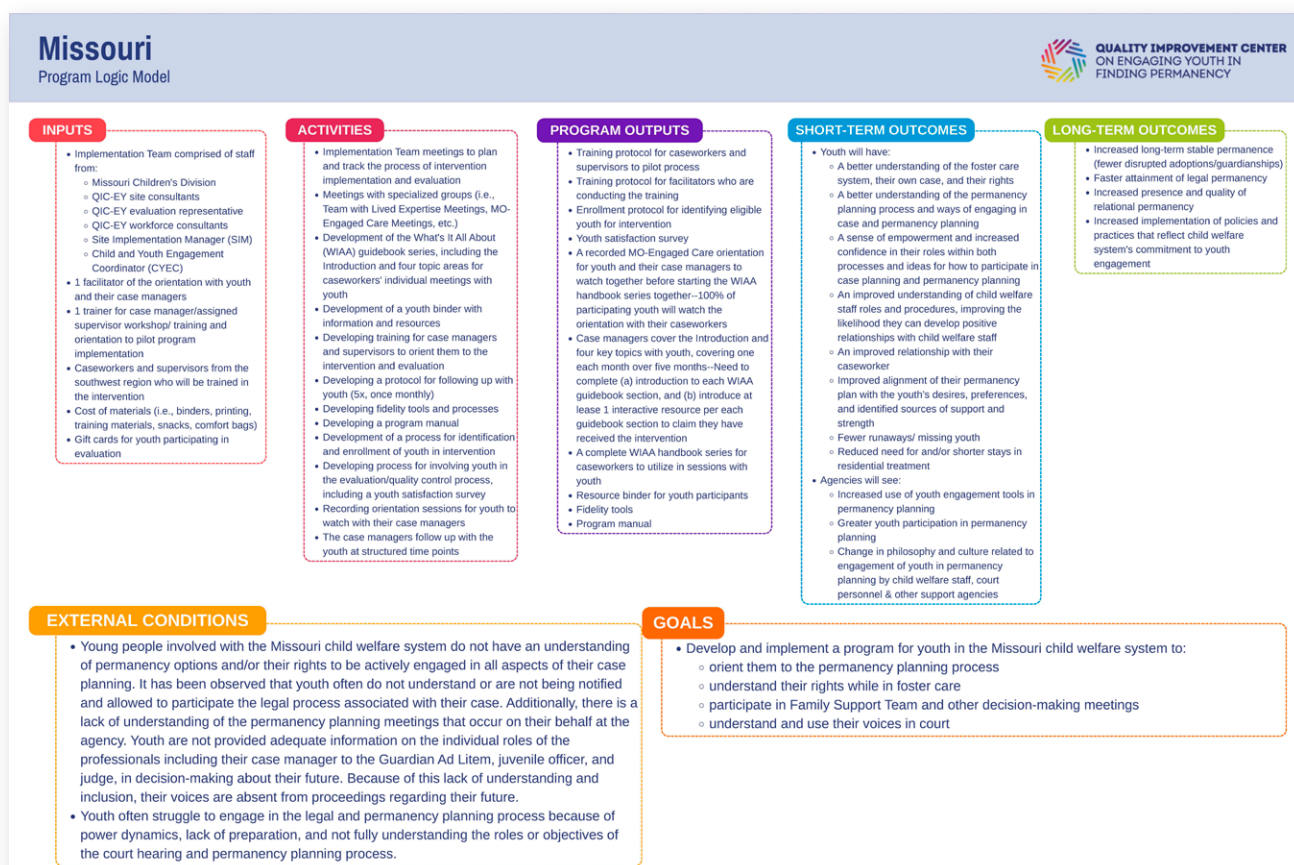
- rates of legal permanency for children and youth
- presence and quality of relational and cultural permanency
- implementation of policies and practices that reflect child welfare systems' commitment to youth engagement
- stable permanence



3. Logic Model

A logic model illustrates how to achieve expected outputs and outcomes of a program through implementation of its core components and activities. A logic model needs to explain clearly how specific activities and services are expected to produce or to influence their associated short- and long-term outcomes.

Agency resources, goals and other factors will impact the logic model. The Additional Program Materials section of this primer includes an example of a logic model, which can be modified to fit a particular agency's specific approach to implementation.



4. Core Components

Core components are critical to the identity and the aim of each program. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (Education Development Center, 2018), “Core components are the most essential and indispensable components of an intervention practice or program.” The core components of *MO Engaged Care* include the following:

Transparent Sharing of Information Appropriate for Each Youth’s Developmental Stage

Access to accurate and easy-to-understand information positions youths to make sense of their experiences and to engage meaningfully in planning and decision-making. This component ensures that youths receive clear, honest information – appropriate for each young person’s current developmental stage – about permanency, case planning and decision-making processes. Youths receive this information proactively and consistently, getting answers to common questions and explanations about common areas of confusion without waiting to ask. Tailored to each young person’s age, stage of cognitive development and lived experience, the program includes both factual explanations and guidance about what to expect that fits each youth’s individual situation. It emphasizes maintaining

- clarity and accessibility;
- transparency about processes, timelines and roles;
- consistency of messages across various settings and among various professionals; and
- responsiveness to youths’ questions and evolving informational needs.

Supported Processing, Preparation and Use of Information to Elevate Youth Voice

Through this program, youths receive support as they learn to process information, to reflect on its meaning and to use it to prepare for participating in case planning and decision-making. This component emphasizes intentionally providing opportunities for youths

- to explore their reactions to information,
- to decide which questions to ask,
- to express their personal preferences and concerns,
- to prepare for meetings and conversations,
- to practice expressing their perspectives, and
- to understand how and where their inputs can be shared.

Because information alone does not lead to engagement, the program uses standard materials, structured activities and guided preparation to help youths translate what they have learned into action at key decision points. The program provides content and support responsive to each young person’s developmental stage. This increases the likelihood that each youth will be able to participate authentically in ways that feel manageable and meaningful to the young person.

Consistent, Trusting Caseworker-Youth Partnership

The foundation for youth engagement in the program is a consistent, supportive relationship between each youth and the youth's caseworker. Caseworkers serve as trusted guides, educators and advocates throughout the permanency planning process for the youths assigned to them. Within this component, caseworkers create psychologically safe spaces for youths to ask questions and to express concerns. They reassure youths that emotional responses to information and experiences in the child welfare system are normal. They adapt their pace and their approach based on each youth's readiness and developmental needs. They partner with youths to identify each young person's own goals and options for how to participate in the planning process. They reinforce that youth voice is expected, valued and influential. Because engagement develops through consistency, trust and mutual respect, this relationship-centered approach sustains youth participation over time and integrates youth voice for the duration of each youth's case rather than limiting it to discrete activities or events.

Adherence to Structured Stages

The *MO Engaged Care* program is designed for delivery in two stages. It provides youths with two types of materials: a prerecorded, video orientation and a set of five handbooks, known as the *What's It All About* series. Each handbook has a corresponding guidebook for the caseworker.

STAGE 1: YOUTH ORIENTATION

During a regularly scheduled visit, each youth and the youth's caseworker view a prerecorded, video orientation together. This orientation aims to ensure that all youths participating in the program receive clear, consistent, accessible information about casework, the people involved in child welfare cases and the permanency planning process.

During the orientation, the youth learns answers to commonly asked questions, including the following:

- Who is on my support team, and what role does each team member play?
- What is happening in my case, especially about finding a permanent home and family for me?
- How does the foster care system work? What should I expect while I'm involved in it?
- How can I use my voice to express my goals and preferences in case and permanency planning meetings and court appearances?

The caseworker encourages the youth to pause the video at any time to ask questions, to explore concepts more deeply and to discuss how the information in the orientation applies to the youth's own situation.



STAGE 2: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT HANDBOOKS FOR YOUTHS AND GUIDEBOOKS FOR CASEWORKERS

Each *What's It All About* handbook is organized to help youths build their understanding of a specific child welfare process that affects permanency planning and to prepare them to participate in decisions about their lives. Presented in short, accessible sections, each handbook provides information in plain language with clear explanations. Its content prompts guided reflection and suggests activities for preparing to participate in case and permanency planning. The materials are designed for flexible use by caseworkers and youths before and between meetings to help youths deepen their understanding and to encourage them to keep building their readiness for participation.

The handbooks in the series include the following:

- *Introduction*
- *Your Rights in Foster Care*
- *What Is Permanency All About?*
- *Participating in Meetings*
- *Participating in Court Hearings*

The orientation and the *Introduction* handbook need to be presented first. A youth entering care likely will complete the rest of the handbooks in their original order. However, the handbooks are designed so that their sequence can be rearranged to align with the current activities in a particular youth's case. For example, the *Participating in Court Hearings* handbook may be the most appropriate next one to read for a youth with an upcoming court appearance. A youth also can choose the order of the handbooks to suit the young person's specific topics of interest.

The corresponding *What's It All About* guidebooks for caseworkers provide practical, step-by-step resources for caseworkers to use when reviewing the *What's It All About* handbooks with youths. These guidebooks mirror the handbooks for youths, translating key content into actionable guidance and strategies for adult facilitators to employ. The guidebooks also integrate detailed instructions for using the worksheets and forms in the youths' handbooks. The guidebooks for caseworkers consistently reinforce the principles of flexibility, youth-centered support and ongoing youth engagement. They prompt caseworkers to adapt the pace of working through the series of handbooks and to revisit topics as needed. The guidebooks explain that the worksheets are intended not only as recordkeeping tools but also as active instruments to help youths understand, participate in and influence the decisions that affect their lives.



5

5. Program Delivery (Intensity and Duration)

The *MO Engaged Care* program is designed for delivery over a five-month period. It begins with the caseworker introducing and viewing the prerecorded orientation with the youth. Immediately after the orientation, the caseworker reviews the first handbook in the *What's It All About* series with the youth. During subsequent monthly home visits, the caseworker introduces and reviews each of the other handbooks in a sequence that fits the youth's situation and interests. The five-month schedule for program implementation reflects the intent to deliver and to review one handbook during each monthly home visit. Consistent with youth-centered

practice, the caseworker may modify the pace, repeat content and extend discussions to support a youth's understanding and engagement. Therefore, duration of the program may exceed five months.

Estimated Total Contact Time:

- **Orientation:** approximately 1 to 1.5 hours to complete the orientation and the *Introduction* handbook's topic, allowing time for the youth's information processing and questions
- **Handbook Series:** 1 to 1.5 hours per topic

Program Timeline

STAGE	ACTIVITY	ESTIMATED DURATION	FREQUENCY	TYPICAL TIMING
1	Orientation and Introduction Handbook	1 to 1.5 hours	One time	Month 1
2	Your Rights in Foster Care Handbook	1 to 1.5 hours	One time	Month 2
2	What Is Permanency All About? Handbook	1 to 1.5 hours	One time	Month 3
2	Participating in Meetings Handbook	1 to 1.5 hours	One time	Month 4
2	Participating in Court Hearings Handbook	1 to 1.5 hours	One time	Month 5

Although the *MO Engaged Care* program's design schedules delivery of all five handbooks over a five-month period, ongoing reinforcement of youth voice and continued engagement are essential to sustaining the skills, self-confidence and self-advocacy practices developed during the program. From the outset, child welfare professionals need to establish clear expectations that youth engagement is not a time-limited activity but rather a foundational approach to permanency planning and decision-making. Following completion of the *What's It All About* handbook series, integration of youth participation goals and preferences into ongoing case planning and court-related discussions needs to continue. This ongoing emphasis reinforces that a foundational practice within the child welfare system is to ensure that youths are empowered with information and meaningful pathways to have their voices heard in shaping decisions that affect their lives.



6. Implementation Supports

Staffing

Effective program delivery requires qualified administrative and program staff who have the skills to support youth engagement, to facilitate orientation activities and to manage logistics. To implement this program effectively, child welfare agencies need to determine the necessary number of staff members, to consider staff-to-youth ratios and to plan for recruitment and retention. They also need to anticipate potential barriers to implementation, such as turnover, limited expertise and competing responsibilities.

The *MO Engaged Care* program is designed for delivery by each youth's assigned caseworker. In Missouri, caseworkers may meet the requirements for this role in either of two ways. A caseworker needs to have a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university, preferably in social work or a comparable field in human services, plus five or more years of professional experience. As an alternative, a caseworker needs to have a high school diploma or a high school equivalency diploma and nine or more years of professional experience.

Training and Coaching

Effective implementation of a program requires both training and coaching to ensure program fidelity and optimal quality. Plans for training need to describe the program's curriculum and to detail who will be trained, who will conduct the training, the length of the initial training and any booster sessions, plus certification requirements that may apply. Coaching and supervision provide support for staff members as they apply the model in practice; they also maintain

adherence to program standards. Coaching may include individual or group sessions scheduled at regular intervals. These sessions need clearly defined start and end times. Agency leaders need to determine the structure and frequency of coaching sessions to ensure that their staff members receive support consistently while delivering the program as intended.

Caseworkers and supervisors complete a structured *MO Engaged Care* training that establishes youth engagement as the goal of the program model. The training introduces the prerecorded orientation, the handbook series and the corresponding guidebooks for caseworkers.

Staff members may need additional training to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to support effective engagement. For example, the QIC-EY's *Transforming Engagement: Keeping Children and Youth at the Center of Our Work* training provides practical strategies for achieving authentic engagement with youth. It equips caseworkers and other staff to support youth participation in permanency planning and decision-making.

Ongoing coaching and supervision support maintaining fidelity to the *MO Engaged Care* program model. This occurs during regular supervisory sessions as supervisors ask caseworkers about their experiences using the handbook series. The supervisors also apply coaching strategies to strengthen ongoing caseworker dialogue with youths. During team meetings, supervisors can promote youth participation, demonstrating that the team values youths' perspectives.

Supervisors can employ tools and strategies described in the QIC-EY's *Coaching Guides* (QIC-EY, 2025) to infuse lessons from the *Transforming Engagement* training into the daily practices of child welfare staff. The Coaching Guidebook Introduction establishes the purpose and benefits of child welfare coaching, outlines the structure of the *Coaching Guides* and provides step-by-step instructions for using them to support ongoing skill development for staff members who have completed the QIC-EY's *Transforming Engagement* training.

Policies and Procedures

Clear policies and procedures are essential to support implementation of a program and to ensure fidelity in its delivery. This includes documentation of any adaptations required to integrate the model into existing agency practices. It also includes identification of potential barriers that could hinder implementation. Establishing formal guidance helps staff members to understand expectations, promotes consistency across the intervention group and supports successful delivery of the selected model.

The program must be supported and integrated within the agency's overall policies and practice expectations. It is important to consider whether policy modifications or additions are needed to administer this program.

Detailed procedural guidance for the program can be found in the Program Manual, located in the Additional Program Materials section of this primer. Some general considerations are noted below.

Policies need to define clearly which youths are eligible to participate in *MO Engaged Care* by specifying how and when eligibility is determined — whether at entry into care, upon reaching a certain age or at a key point in a youth's case. Procedures need to specify who is responsible for determining eligibility, documenting youth enrollment and communicating this information to caseworkers, supervisors and other members

of each youth's team. Establishing a process to use consistently ensures that no youth will be overlooked and that each youth's engagement in the program will begin as early as possible.

Written procedures need to outline expectations for all staff members involved in program delivery. Clearly defined roles help to make youth engagement a standard practice rather than an optional activity.

Caseworkers are responsible for all of the following:

- introducing youths to the program
- completing the orientation with each youth
- facilitating discussions and activities
- supporting youths as they progress through the handbook series
- documenting youths' goals and other inputs
- helping youths to understand the purposes of upcoming meetings and court processes and the steps in permanency planning

Supervisors are responsible for all of the following:

- monitoring completion of orientations and handbook activities
- coaching caseworkers on youth engagement strategies
- ensuring that youth voice is reflected in case planning
- reviewing documentation to confirm that youth inputs are elevated and captured accurately in the planning process

Procedures need to describe how to document, to share and to use in decision-making the information gathered through youth engagement. This includes youths' goals, preferences, concerns and needs. Youth inputs need to be recorded consistently in each case record and shared with the youth's full team. Team members include supervisors, resource providers, guardians ad litem (GAL), Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and other key partners. Youth inputs, captured in the youths' own words whenever

possible, need to be incorporated into case planning meetings, permanency discussions and court reports. Reviewing these inputs regularly helps to ensure that each youth's evolving goals continue to guide planning and decisions. These procedural steps ensure that youths' voices are not only collected but also are shaping the decisions that affect the young persons' lives.

Fidelity

To ensure implementation of this program as intended, fidelity measurements and protocols are used to assess whether practitioners are delivering the core components of the model. Fidelity tracking needs to include forms to capture key details about each session and meeting, such as start and end times, who delivered the program, the delivery format (in person, virtual, hybrid) and the time spent preparing for and following up after the session.

To maintain fidelity and to support the long-term success of the *MO Engaged Care* program, procedures also may include

- monitoring to confirm completion of orientation and handbook activities as intended within the model;
- review of case documentation for evidence that youth voice is being elicited, captured and used in decision-making;
- review of documentation that confirms youth participation in family support team meetings and court hearings, including who was present and how the youth's voice was expressed and considered;
- supervision and coaching that reinforce adherence to the program's core components, including information sharing, preparation and relationship-based engagement; and
- collection of feedback from youths and their caseworkers to assess whether their experiences implementing the model are those intended in the model's design.

Data Systems

Data systems are necessary to support program implementation and to ensure accurate monitoring of fidelity and outcomes. Effective data systems require clear processes for collecting and managing information about the delivery of core components as well as indicators of program impact and satisfaction. Necessary modifications to hardware, software and data format should be identified early, along with potential barriers to timely implementation (e.g., limitations of system flexibility or competing priorities of information technology staff). Well-defined expectations and technological tools promote consistent data collection, strengthen accountability and support continuous evaluation of the selected model.

Data systems need to capture and to organize data about program implementation and outcomes, including

- assignment of youths to *MO Engaged Care* and dates of their participation;
- frequency and type of youth contacts;
- completion of orientation and *What's It All About* handbook activities; and
- documentation of youth participation in court hearings and case planning meetings, including the form of participation selected by each youth.

Data systems also can support collection of data about short-term outcomes, such as youth-reported understanding of court and case planning processes, confidence in self-advocacy and perceptions of being heard during the decision-making process. Surveys and other structured feedback tools may be used to collect data from youths. These need to be administered in ways that take into account each youth's developmental stage and whether the youth requires assistance using the survey tool.

To the extent feasible, long-term outcomes related to permanency may be tracked by reviewing child welfare data previously collected by administrators or by using structured tools for case review. Such data may include indicators

of progress toward legal permanency and stability. This type of data typically is collected in collaboration with caseworkers and other program staff. Data can be used not only to monitor fidelity and outcomes but also to support continuous quality improvement, supervision and program refinement.

Program Experts

Each program expert brings specialized knowledge, experience or both in the design, implementation and ongoing delivery of the program. Experts may include the model developer, the model purveyor and other individuals who can provide guidance regarding program fidelity, best practices and effective strategies for implementation. Experts also may support adaptation of the program to fit local contexts, including cultural considerations and relational permanency practices. Experts help to ensure that the program is delivered as intended and that the needs of youth and their families are met.

For more information about implementation of *MO Engaged Care*, please contact René Brinkman, MA, Older Youth Unit Manager, Children's Division, Missouri Department of Social Services, at Rene.Brinkman@dss.mo.gov.

Partner Systems and Community Linkages

Successful implementation of a program by child welfare agencies relies on strong partnerships with external systems and collaborators, such as mental health providers, educational institutions, courts, substance use treatment providers and other relevant organizations. Child welfare agencies need to identify partners already engaged with them as well as those to be brought on board. Agency staff also need to determine the strategies, resources and support necessary to engage effectively with these partners. Strong collaboration ensures coordinated services, expands program reach and supports positive outcomes for youth and their families.

Effective implementation of *MO Engaged Care* depends primarily on the substance of conversations occurring between each youth, caseworker and the rest of the youth's support team. For the youth to feel authentically engaged and heard in decision-making, child welfare staff, court personnel and other key partners of the child welfare system need to collaborate in supporting the youth's voice in permanency planning and court processes. Strong partnerships ensure that each youth receives clear, consistent information instead of potentially conflicting messages about youth rights, participation and permanency options. This coordination supports meaningful integration of youth perspectives into decision-making.

Legal partners, including attorneys and other legal representatives as well as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), play critical roles in supporting youth participation in court proceedings. Collaboration with legal partners helps to align efforts to prepare youths for court hearings, to clarify expectations for youth involvement and to ensure the elevation of youth voice in ways that are appropriate for each young person's developmental stage and responsive to court practices.

Caregivers, including parents who are fostering and other placement providers, also are essential partners in supporting youth participation. Caregivers need to receive information about the purpose of the *MO Engaged Care* handbooks and activities and the benefits of youth participation, which include increased understanding of case processes, strengthened self-advocacy skills and improved engagement in permanency planning. Clear communication with caregivers produces a supportive environment for youth engagement and reinforces participation.

Other Resources (Meeting Space, Materials, etc.)

Implementation of a program often requires access to tangible resources, including space for orientation sessions and other meetings, materials and supplies for activities, plus technology for virtual or hybrid delivery. Additional considerations may include travel expenses, meals or snacks for participants and help with logistics that contribute to a welcoming and functional environment for staff and youth. Availability of these resources is essential for smooth program operation and participant engagement.

Implementation of *MO Engaged Care* requires access to the orientation video and copies of the *What's It All About* handbook series and guidebook series in both electronic and printed versions. (Each youth and each caseworker can select a preferred version).

Other resources may include informational materials for caregivers and other placement providers to increase their awareness of the activities in the *What's It All About* handbooks and the benefits of youth participation. Additional resources may include reference materials for court and other legal partners to support consistent expectations for youth engagement. Together, these resources promote the value of youth voice, encourage completion of the activities in the handbooks and reinforce elevation of youth voice as a core value and a practice shared throughout the child welfare system.



7. Evaluation

The developers of the *MO Engaged Care* program used *A Framework to Design, Test, Spread, and Sustain Effective Practice in Child Welfare* (Child Welfare Research & Evaluation Framework Workgroup, 2014), to guide the program’s development and implementation process. The framework outlines a structured process for building and strengthening interventions in child welfare systems using five phases—Identify and Explore, Develop and Test, Compare and Learn, Replicate and Adapt, and Apply and Improve. These phases guide the progression from identifying the problem to building evidence to integrating the intervention into sustained child welfare practice.

The *MO Engaged Care* program progressed through the Identify and Explore phase and into the Develop and Test phase, during which the model was designed and piloted. Key activities during this second phase included defining and refining core components, testing approaches to program installation and implementation, and developing processes for monitoring fidelity to assess whether the model was being delivered as intended.

Although a formal evaluation of outcomes was not conducted, these development and testing activities provided critical insights into the feasibility of program implementation. They also informed the refinement of program components and strengthened the model for future, more rigorous evaluation. Future efforts to implement *MO Engaged Care* may build on this foundation by incorporating evaluation tools designed to assess the program’s impact on youth engagement and permanency outcomes in comparison with other types of interventions.

8. Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips

Successful implementation of *MO Engaged Care* requires thoughtful planning, coordination and clear communication. The following guidance is organized into two parts:

- 1. Program Planning and Preparation:** overarching lessons learned related to setting up the program
- 2. Stage-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips:** practical guidance for implementing each stage of the program, from preorientation training of caseworkers through completion of the *What's It All About handbook series*

Program Planning and Preparation

Begin by establishing a strong foundation to ensure smooth execution of the program. Because the program prepares youths to participate actively in case planning, court processes and permanency decisions, early collaboration with external partners is critical to creating environments in which youth voice will be recognized and applied in decision-making.

FORMATION OF A PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

Lessons Learned

- Implementation requires attention not only to logistics, but also to providing ongoing coaching and support for caseworkers, aligning program content, and establishing methods for evaluating implementation.
- Clearly defined expectations for caseworkers, supervisors and partners are essential for consistent delivery of the program.
- Formal mechanisms for gathering feedback from child welfare staff as well as participating youths strengthen the program.
- External partners, particularly court personnel, benefit from understanding how youths are being prepared for participation so these partners can respond in ways that reinforce and support authentic youth voice.

FORMATION OF A PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION TEAM (CONT...)

Tips

- Form a planning team that includes the following:
 - » child welfare professionals
 - » individuals who have lived experience
 - » agency leaders
 - » Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) or evaluation staff
 - » court partners
- Define responsibilities early, including who will
 - » support caseworker training,
 - » coach supervisors,
 - » monitor fidelity, and
 - » gather and respond to feedback.
- Establish regular check-ins with the planning team to review progress, to troubleshoot barriers encountered and to maintain shared ownership of program accountability.
- Build a feedback loop that allows caseworkers and youths to share what is working, what feels challenging and which adjustments may be needed.
- Share relevant insights from program implementation with court and other legal partners so that expectations about youth participation remain aligned in various settings.

IDENTIFICATION OF KEY PARTNERS

Lessons Learned

- Program success depends on early and ongoing collaboration with internal and external partners.
- Individuals with lived experience offer critical guidance about how youths respond to engagement strategies employed on them.
- Supervisory engagement is necessary to reinforce expectations and to sustain changes made in child welfare practice.
- When court and other legal partners understand the program's approach to youth engagement, participating youths experience greater consistency in how they are prepared and how their inputs are received during hearings and permanency planning meetings.

Tips

- Identify and engage with partners such as the following:
 - » caseworkers, supervisors and child welfare agency leaders
 - » trainers
 - » CQI staff
 - » judges, guardians ad litem and Court Appointed Special Advocates
 - » advocacy organizations
- Include supervisors early in conversations about planning for program implementation so they understand their role in reinforcing practice, monitoring completion and coaching staff members.
- Provide orientation or other informational opportunities for court personnel and other legal partners so they become familiar with the language, preparation activities and expectations that youths may bring into court hearings.
- Involve youths currently or formerly in foster care to inform implementation and communication strategies.

PLAN FOR PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND LOGISTICS

Lessons Learned

- Decisions need to be made before program launch about how to access materials, to deliver them and to document their delivery.
- Youths and caseworkers may have different preferences regarding how they want information shared with them.
- Without clear processes, youth participation can become inconsistent.
- To be credible and useful to youths, program materials need to reflect current state policies, court processes and the array of services available.
- Even when resources already exist, they may need updating, realignment and a review of their readability.
- Caseworkers need guidance that matches the materials that youths receive.

Tips

- Prepare a logistics plan that includes the following:
 - » sequence and flow of activities
 - » materials and supplies (e.g., youth handbooks and caseworker guidebooks)
 - » expectations for documentation
 - » method for tracking completion of program activities
- Establish and clearly communicate processes for referral and enrollment of youths into the program.
- Plan how supervisors will confirm that orientations and activities described in the handbooks are occurring as intended.
- Determine how to capture information from youths – their questions, goals and preferences – and how to share it with team members.
- Use the Missouri Department of Social Services, Children's Division orientation and handbook series as templates, but adapt their content to ensure accuracy and relevance to the particular state, tribe or territory in which the program is being implemented.
- Review existing resources for youths (e.g., handbooks, bills of rights, permanency guides) to determine which of them can be incorporated into MO Engaged Care implementation.
- Leverage universal worksheets, which can be integrated across jurisdictions with minimal modification.
- Conduct a review to ensure the following:
 - » policy alignment
 - » legal accuracy
 - » developmental-stage appropriateness
 - » use of plain language
- If guidebooks for caseworkers are desired, develop or tailor them to correspond directly to the materials that youths will use.
- Treat the adaptation step as part of core infrastructure for fidelity, not an optional enhancement.

Stage-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips

STAGE 1: YOUTH ORIENTATION

Lessons Learned

- The structured program typically lasts for five months. The orientation video sets the foundation for sustaining youth engagement.
- Normalizing and encouraging completion of the orientation video and the activities in each handbook within monthly home visits fosters a trusting relationship between the caseworker and the youth. This also minimizes demands on the caseworker's already busy schedule while providing a structure for home visits.
- A prerecorded, video orientation that a caseworker can share with each youth individually allows the flexibility to view it during a regularly scheduled home visit. It also enables the caseworker to pause the video, as needed, to accommodate each youth's particular learning style and information processing needs. Viewing the orientation individually avoids the scheduling challenges that trying to arrange a group orientation may entail.
- Introducing the orientation to youths who enter care at age 14 or older may require a different approach than introducing it to youths who turn 14 while in care. The information shared in the orientation may be repetitive or may seem elementary to youths in the latter population.
- After completion of the formal course of activities in the handbooks, child welfare staff need to give ongoing support for youth voice and engagement as a routine part of their case practice.

Tips

- Integrate the orientation as well as the activities in the handbooks into already planned contacts with youths, such as monthly home visits. This will help to ensure that the caseworker intentionally devotes maximum time for youth engagement during each visit.
- Use the materials in the handbooks, the program's overview, the worksheets and a contact log as resources to guide discussion and to set expectations for activities in the *What's It All About* handbook series.
- As a caseworker, observe the youth while viewing the orientation video together. Pause the video as needed to give opportunities for the young person to process information and to ask questions.
- Support caseworkers as they help each youth to process information in a way that fits the youth's developmental stage.
- Discuss participation options so that youths understand what they will learn about permanency and court processes, what their roles in these processes will be and how they can use these processes to contribute to their own permanency planning.
- Encourage partnership with youths by exploring how they want their own voices reflected in permanency planning meetings and court appearances.
- Adjust the orientation for youths who turn 14 while in care, as needed, so that it is not overly repetitive for them. However, make sure that these youths understand their rights; and encourage their involvement in case meetings and court hearings to advocate in their own behalf.
- Set expectations early with caseworkers, supervisors and youths that the practice of building youth voice will continue throughout and after the program implementation.

STAGE 2: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT HANDBOOK SERIES

Lessons Learned

- Flexibility in how information in the handbooks is introduced and discussed is important. This is necessary to accommodate variations among individual youths in their developmental stages and emotional readiness to process the information.
- Completion of the handbook activities is intended to increase each youth's comfort using one's own voice routinely to express oneself.
- Youths may respond differently to the information in the handbooks, depending on their unique experiences. Normalizing their reactions helps to validate their feelings and to encourage their ongoing engagement.
- Not all information will be relevant immediately to every youth. Focusing on what matters most in the moment to each youth prevents the young person from feeling overwhelmed and supports meaningful participation.
- The handbooks were developed with input from individuals with lived experience in foster care. However, each youth's experience is unique. Inviting questions and challenges stated respectfully will help the caseworker to tailor the content to each youth's own situation.
- Youths who have been in the child welfare system for many years may consider introductory content too basic, leading them to perceive that they are being talked down to or that their experiences are being underestimated. Although the materials are designed to be accessible and age-appropriate, prior lived experience influences how each youth receives and engages with the content.

Tips

- Supervisors need to coach their caseworkers to pay attention to signs that a youth is understanding the material being presented in each activity, to ask questions to confirm the youth's comprehension and to revisit the information later if the young person needs reinforcement.
- Sharing information with youths who learn differently from most of their peers can be challenging. Caseworkers may need coaching to collaborate with their supervisors to find individualized approaches for engaging with these youths. Normalize the practice of encouraging caseworkers to seek additional insights from a youth's Individualized Education Program (IEP), teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, family members and mental health professionals.
- Use the materials in each handbook as a framework for ongoing discussions rather than a one-time presentation. Maintain an open dialogue with youths. Continue to capture their inputs throughout their cases.
- Encourage youths to speak up, to express their preferences and to advocate for themselves while framing discussions in a way that validates their unique perspectives and experiences.
- Acknowledge to youths who have lived experience that it is normal for some content in the handbooks to seem familiar or basic to them. Invite these youths to share their own experiences and to compare these with the material in the handbooks. Emphasize that the handbooks are frameworks rather than reflections of what youths "don't know." Reinforce that each youth's knowledge and insights are valued.
- Invite youths to challenge or to expand on content in the handbooks. Encourage them to contribute examples from their own lives. This will validate their expertise and keep their engagement meaningful.

COMPONENT 3: SUPPORT FOR YOUTH VOICE, PARTICIPATION AND REFLECTION

Lessons Learned

- Youths benefit from having meaningful control in choosing how they will participate, whether in person, virtually or through alternative methods.
- Support before and during meetings increases self-confidence of youths and reduces their anxiety.
- Some youths may need help processing their case outcomes and emotional responses following meetings or hearings.
- Balancing words of encouragement with realistic expectations about court hearing results and case planning outcomes is important.
- Follow-up communication with each youth's caseworker supports continuity and reinforces youth engagement after court hearings and case planning meetings.
- The formal program concludes after six months, but efforts to elevate youth voice need to continue as part of standard child welfare practice.

Tips

- Support youths when they select their preferred levels and methods of participation.
- Maintain contact with youths before and on the days of their permanency planning meetings and court hearings to ensure that they feel prepared and supported.
- Coordinate logistics with placement providers and other partners to reduce barriers to youth participation.
- Debrief after meetings and hearings as soon as appropriate while staying responsive to each youth's emotional readiness.
- Balance encouragement with realistic discussion of outcomes and next steps.
- To support continuity, promptly share relevant outcomes and next action steps with caseworkers.

9. Additional Program Materials

Find program materials that
support implementation here:

SCAN HERE



CLICK HERE



References

Augsberger, A. (2014, August). Strategies for engaging foster care youth in permanency planning family team conferences. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 43, 51-57.

Child Welfare Research & Evaluation Framework Workgroup. (2014, February). *A framework to design, test, spread, and sustain effective practice in child welfare*. United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/pii_ttap_framework.pdf

Education Development Center. (2018, September 4). *What are core components...and why do they matter?* Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. https://solutions.edc.org/sites/default/files/What-Are-Core-Components%20and-Why-Do-They-Matter_0_0.pdf

Farmer, A. (2008). Making the right match: One agency's efforts to move hard-to-place teens into foster homes offers lessons for the entire system. *Child Welfare Watch*, 16, 11–14.

Friend, B. (2009, Spring). California Permanency for Youth project: An overview. In T. LaLiberte & E. Snyder (Eds.), *Permanency or aging out: Adolescents in the child welfare system* (CW360°) (p. 35). Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, School of Social Work, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/ae4cc55c-3efd-4669-afce-28579df41813/content>

Missouri Department of Social Services (2021, November). *What's it all about? A handbook for youth in alternative care*. <https://dss.mo.gov/cd/foster-care/pdf/foster-youth-handbook.pdf>

Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (2025, June). *Transforming engagement: Keeping children and youth at the center of our work implementation manual*. United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://qic-ey.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/QIC-EY-Implementation-Manual-Final.pdf>

Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (2025, October 31) *Coaching guidebooks*. <https://qic-ey.org/curriculum/coaching-materials/>

Welti, K., Wilkins, A., & Malm, K. (2021, February). Evaluation of upfront family finding: Phase 2. Child Trends. [https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/0234f496-d2b7-00b6-17a4-b43e949b70a2/82518574-2d10-424a-9aab-1b1f279a63df/Evaluation%20of%20Upfront%20Family%20Finding%20Phase%202%20\(Full%20Report\)%20\(Child%20Trends%202002-2021\).pdf](https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/0234f496-d2b7-00b6-17a4-b43e949b70a2/82518574-2d10-424a-9aab-1b1f279a63df/Evaluation%20of%20Upfront%20Family%20Finding%20Phase%202%20(Full%20Report)%20(Child%20Trends%202002-2021).pdf)



QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

This project is supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$5,000,000 with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS.

The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements#book_content_7.