

Quality Standards on Youth Engagement and Family Engagement: Defining Excellence for Engagement

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ABSTRACT

To enhance consistency in practicing meaningful engagement to improve services, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health co-developed quality standards on system-level youth and family engagement with agency representatives, researchers, youth, and families. These two quality standards encompass statements that describe high-quality engagement based on evidence.

Keywords: youth engagement, family engagement, quality standards, quality improvement

RÉSUMÉ

Afin d'accroître la cohérence dans l'exercice d'un engagement constructif en vue d'améliorer ses services, le Centre d'excellence de l'Ontario en santé mentale des enfants et des adolescents a élaboré, conjointement avec des représentants d'organismes, des chercheurs, des jeunes et des familles, des normes de qualité sur l'engagement des jeunes et des familles à l'échelle du système. Ces deux normes de qualité comprennent des énoncés qui décrivent un engagement de haute qualité fondé sur des données probantes.

Mots clés : engagement des jeunes, engagement des familles, normes de qualité, amélioration de la qualité

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In Ontario, community-based child and youth mental health agencies have been engaging youth and families to improve services, notably through advisory groups, evaluations, or consultations on community priorities. The focus on engaging youth and families has increased in recent years, particularly as engagement has been identified as a key process for the planning and delivery of child and youth mental health services. Youth engagement in child and youth mental health means “empowering all young people as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions that affect them personally or that they believe to be important” (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health [OCE CYMH], 2019a, p. 5); it involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral components with positive youth development as the long-term outcome. Family engagement is “an ongoing process that includes families as active decision-makers and partners at the organizational and system levels” (OCE CYMH, 2019b, p. 5).

Recent multi-dimensional frameworks of engagement, particularly those proposed by Carman and colleagues (e.g., Carman & Workman, 2017), describe it as occurring along a continuum (e.g., consultation, involvement, and partnership) across three levels (individual care, organizational, system). When examining current practices based on this framework, most efforts remain focused on engaging at the individual care level. Moreover, there is inconsistency in how engagement is understood and practiced, and how to move along the continuum from consultation to more collaborative partnerships with youth and families.

To enhance consistency across the child and youth mental health sector, formalize engagement principles and practices in a measurable way, validate the experiences of youth and families, and encourage current efforts towards system level engagement, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health co-developed with key stakeholders quality standards for youth engagement and family engagement (OCE CYMH, 2019a; 2019b). Representatives from the lead agency consortium of child and youth mental health agencies in Ontario, researchers on family engagement and youth engagement, family representatives from Parents for Children’s Mental Health, representatives from The New Mentality and OCE CYMH’s youth advisory council participated in the development of these standards, while other youth and family members involved with their local agencies informed the process.

METHOD

Based primarily on the process for developing quality standards set by Health Quality Ontario (HQP, 2016), the team at the OCE CYMH reviewed the literature and assembled advisory groups which met from August 2018 to March 2019 to develop an initial draft of each standard. During this period, there were two advisory groups (one for youth engagement and another on family engagement). From April 2019 to March 2020, the advisory groups were combined into one group to focus on the implementation and evaluation of the standards. Areas for the quality statements were identified through the review of the literature, then discussed and developed through an iterative, consensus-based process with the advisory group members.

The draft quality statements were vetted through a broad consultation process including focus groups and online surveys. The online survey was disseminated through the OCE CYMH website, members and participants of the 2018 conference of Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), and through snowball methods from the contacts of advisory group members and other OCE CYMH stakeholders. Through the online survey, we heard from 80 youth, 43 family members and 107 service providers across Ontario about

how to further refine the draft standards. Overall, 75% of youth and 82% of service providers agreed that the draft statements very much captured successful youth engagement. Similarly, 73% of family members and 78% of service providers considered the draft statements very much captured successful family engagement.

In-person focus groups were conducted in seven communities across Ontario with youth, family members and service providers. Seven focus groups were conducted on the youth engagement standard, with a total of 66 youth and 11 adult allies. Two focus groups were held on the family engagement standard with a total of nine family members as participants. Overall, participants provided both general and specific feedback on the statements, which we documented to inform the revised standards.

RESULTS

The quality standards comprise statements that reflect principles of family and youth engagement at the organizational and system levels. In this case, system level refers to engagement efforts that involve policy and governance across different organizations within a community (e.g., through local system planning groups), or the delivery of care beyond a single organization (e.g., integrated service delivery models).

The family engagement quality standard consists of eight statements addressing themes of co-development, commitment, communication, diversity and inclusion, empowerment, ongoing learning, partnerships, and research and evaluation (see Figure 1).

Similarly, the youth engagement quality standard consists of nine statements addressing themes of accessibility, authentic relationships, co-development, commitment, communication, diversity and inclusion, ongoing learning, research and evaluation, and safer spaces (see Figure 2).

For each quality statement, the perspective of youth or family members, the service provider, and decision makers are described. Best practices are also listed for each quality statement to illustrate the quality statement in action, along with relevant literature providing the supporting rationale.

For the evaluation of the standards, we co-developed indicators and measures with members of our advisory groups which included youth and families. We adopted a principles-focused approach (Patton, 2018) to identify structure, process, and outcome indicators. The lines of inquiry in this approach include asking questions about whether the principle has been explicitly defined and if there is a shared understanding, and how stakeholders see this being applied in practice. We are currently piloting snapshot surveys that assess the current state of youth engagement and family engagement with several agencies and their local system planning groups including youth and family members. We are also working with these communities to identify and develop implementation resources.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Quality standards can offer a roadmap to identify and prioritize improvements needed in the mental health system. With youth and families as key stakeholders, agencies need to ensure that they are meaningfully engaged at every level and in every relevant process. Engagement is critical in a healthcare system that is accountable and person-centred, particularly in a context where blame and stigma continue to impact service experience and utilization.

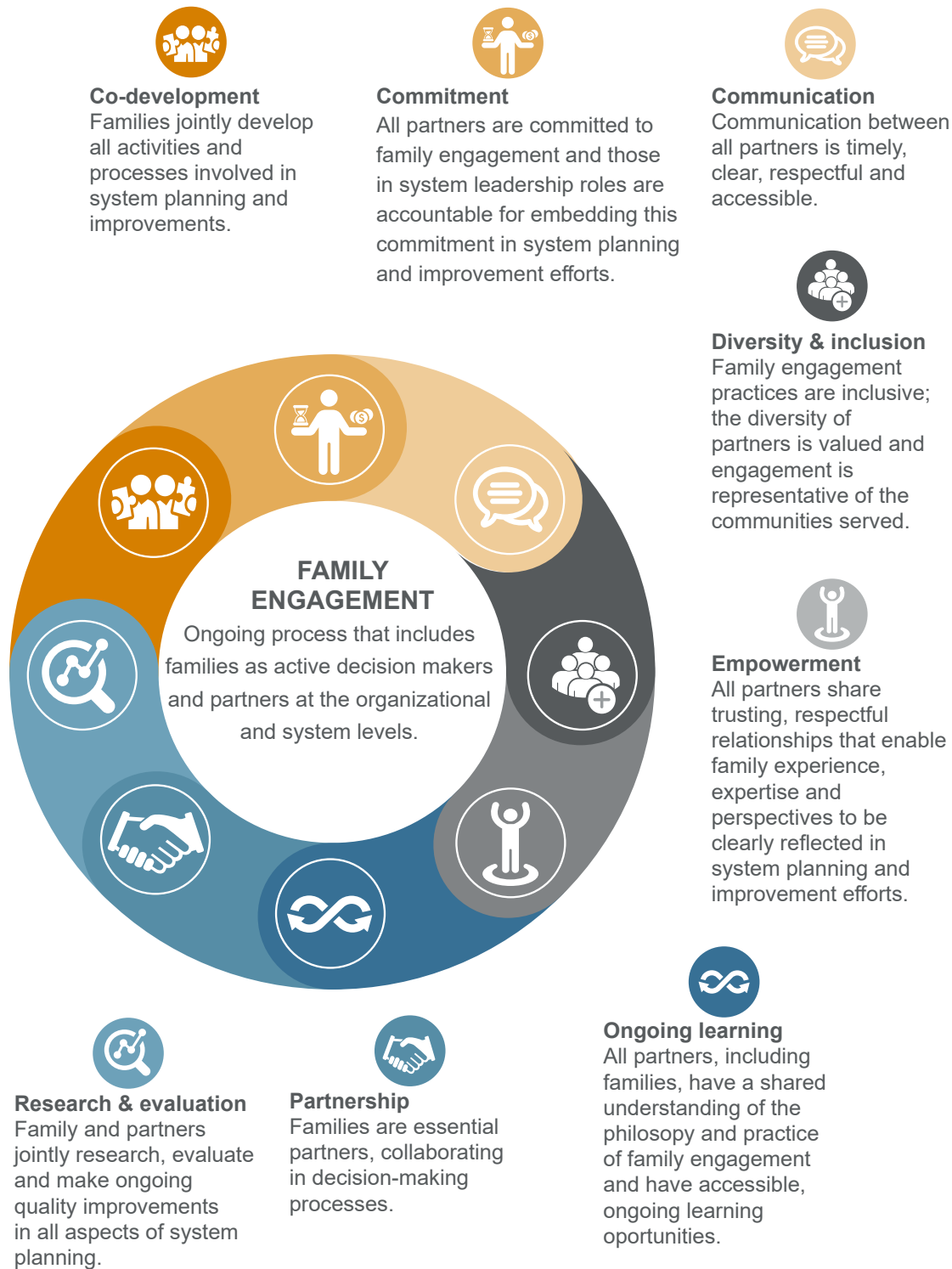
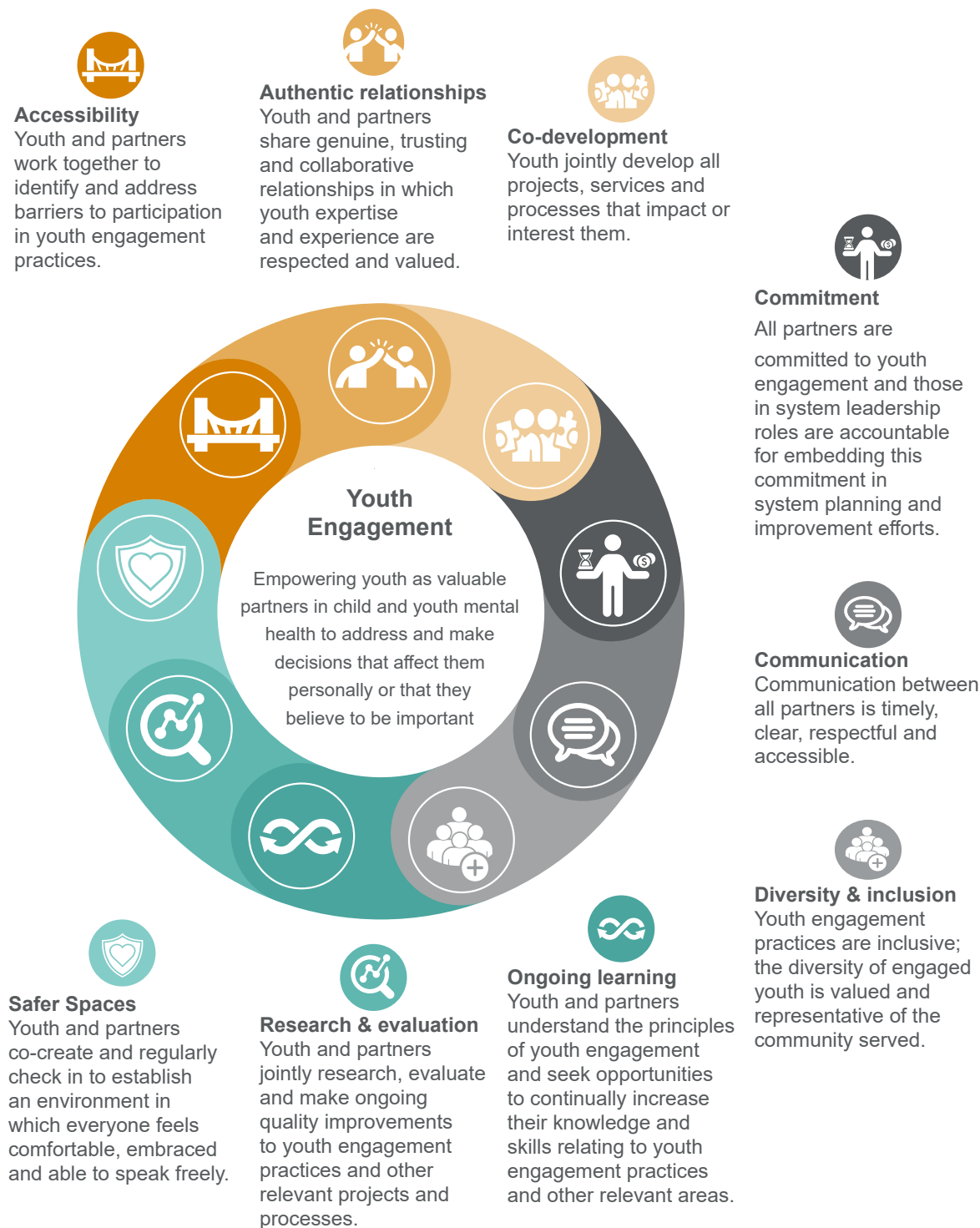
Figure 1**Quality Statements Comprising the System-Level Quality Standard on Family Engagement**

Figure 2**Quality Statements Comprising the System-Level Quality Standard on Youth Engagement**

The development of quality standards is necessary but not sufficient, however. Resources are also needed to support the implementation and evaluation of these standards. The OCE CYMH has developed various resources, such as a family engagement resource guide, and different tools for implementing youth engagement (available on our website in both English and French). More tools and resources are being developed through a pilot implementation of the standards in four communities across Ontario.

With patient engagement as a prominent focus in recent healthcare initiatives in Canada, these first-ever quality standards on youth engagement and family engagement position the child and youth mental health sector in leading, demonstrating, and raising the bar on meaningful engagement.

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