

Chapter 4 : Partnerships with the Community

Family Engagement Framework

The OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework is a guiding approach and includes a set of core principles that describe how the OhioKAN program and staff partner with kinship and adoptive families. Since the beginning of the process to design OhioKAN, kinship and adoptive families have played an important role in envisioning and identifying the services and supports they want and need. OhioKAN actively and intentionally partners with families through direct services and capacity building engagements. Both efforts build family's confidence, connections, and equip community systems to better support the unique needs of kinship and adoptive families. In partnership with families, the OhioKAN program advocates for services and systems that are inclusive, equitable, responsive, and accountable to kinship and adoptive families and communities.

Guiding Approach

OhioKAN's Family Engagement Framework is based on the Parent Leadership model developed by the FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention 51 . Families and staff work together as partners to make decisions about the OhioKAN program, policies, and practices that affect families, all while sharing responsibility, expertise, and leadership. The Parent Leadership model is a strengths-based approach built on the belief that parents and caregivers are the most knowledgeable about their families and communities.

Collaborative leadership, an aspect of the Parent Leadership model, is a decision-making process that is open to all, built on general agreement and uplifts the points of view of all people involved. Staff seek out, listen, and respect family voice, and recognize that parents, caregivers, and youth are experts on their family's strengths, experiences and needs. Through collaborative leadership, OhioKAN staff and families develop a true partnership to make the best decisions for both families served by the OhioKAN program and the broader kinship and adoptive community. The OhioKAN program and staff also value and celebrate the diversity of families and operate with cultural humility, as staff engage with the intention of honoring families' beliefs, traditions, customs, and values.

Core Principles

The OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework includes a set of core principles which are considered best practices to effectively engage, inspire, and uplift the voices of kinship and adoptive families in both service delivery and broader capacity building efforts.

- **Foster mutual respect and trusting relationships with strong reciprocal communication.** We develop positive relationships with families through authentic interactions over time that are

meaningful to everyone involved. We seek out, listen, and respect family voice, and recognize that parents, caregivers, and youth are experts on their own family's strengths, experiences, and needs. We apply our knowledge of the OhioKAN core practice skills to have open, on-going, and two-way communication with families, emphasizing families' strengths, interests, and perspectives. We value that families and communities know their children, culture, and community. We honor the diverse set of skills, expertise, and backgrounds that equip families with unique strengths and perspective. We are continuously in the process of building strong relationships with families 52 .

- **Partner with families through shared decision-making, responsibility, and leadership.** Grounded in a decision-making process, we embrace collaborative leadership that is open to all, built on consensus, and uplifts the points of view of kinship and adoptive families. We intentionally create space for families to bring their unique expertise and knowledge to decision-making about the services they receive and the priorities they address in their communities. Their deep knowledge and skills are complementary to those of staff and other stakeholders, an essential perspective to meeting the needs of kinship and adoptive families in Ohio.
- **Respect, value, and honor cultural and linguistic assets.** The OhioKAN program values and celebrates the diversity of families and practices cultural humility. Staff engage with the intention of learning about and honoring families' beliefs, traditions, customs, and values. We reflect on, name, and address inequities as well as preconceived ideas, judgements and/or beliefs in interactions with individuals, communities, and systems. We recognize the need to build and rebuild trust with families who are marginalized by systems and experience inequities and discrimination. We recognize the strengths of families; acknowledging, respecting, and learning from differences; and intentionally consider how to adapt our approach to service delivery, policy and program development so that it is culturally responsive and aligned with the values of the community.
- **Engage families where they are.** The OhioKAN program effectively engages with families in ways that are equitable, accessible, safe, and convenient for families. We ask families for their communication preferences, and use a variety of options such as phone, email, text, virtual meetings, or in-person meetings to ensure families are connecting with us in the ways that work best for them. We honor the time that families dedicate to engaging with the OhioKAN program by providing stipends to kinship and adoptive families who work with us as advisors 53 .

Culture of Engagement

OhioKAN is dedicated to a culture of meaningful engagement with families at their request and pace. At every level of the program, staff authentically engage and partner with young people and families as experts on their own experience, culture, and community. The partnership with families is embedded at every level of the organization with a sustained, targeted, and on-going focus.

Families add fundamental value to the program by sharing their experiences and insights as a kinship and/or adoptive caregiver, family member, or youth. The OhioKAN program invests in leadership skills of families through service and support planning, active participation of families in program development and opportunities for families' voices in system-wide capacity building efforts. Families and staff partner together to focus on these key areas to share responsibility, expertise, and accountability.

- **Service episode level.** Services are focused on a family-centered, trauma responsive, and strengths-based approach. Staff partner with families to make decisions, set goals and achieve desired outcomes throughout service delivery. Caregivers are the drivers of decision-making, determining the direction, type and level of services received from OhioKAN Navigators. In every aspect of the service episode, families feel heard, honored, and respected 54 . A family-centered and strengths-based approach of family engagement leads to an improved and shared understanding of family needs and thus leads to positive outcomes for children, families, and caregivers 55 .
- **Program level.** At the program or organization level, family members share their knowledge to improve program outcomes and enhance agency operations. Family members share their unique experiences to improve the effectiveness of the OhioKAN program. Ways to engage families at this level may include methods such as focus groups, surveys, interviews, and membership on Regional Advisory Councils 56 .
- **System level.** Families who engage with OhioKAN at the systems level have experience across and within a range of systems and have a desire to use that experience and the power of their voices to improve outcomes for children and families within the community. The voices of those with lived experience as a kinship and adoptive caregiver can highlight system and practice strengths and improvements necessary. Areas of improvement can include inconsistent processes, community gaps, and unmet service needs. In addition, families provide innovative solutions that reflect their experience and community perspective to policy and program development. To inform system level enhancements, families participate in activities such as: Regional or State Advisory Councils; training staff; contribute expertise in public forums; and membership on planning committees or implementation workgroups 57 .

Conclusion

The OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework embodies the dedication of the OhioKAN program to effectively engage, inspire, respond to, and amplify the voices of kinship and adoptive families. OhioKAN values the importance of creating and sustaining a culture of engagement in partnership with families that is inclusive and meaningful. OhioKAN staff partner with kinship and adoptive families through direct services, program development and system-wide capacity building efforts.

We continuously review family engagement through our continuous quality improvement processes, family satisfaction surveys and transparent accessible methods for families to provide feedback.

Kinship and adoptive families served by the OhioKAN program can provide feedback about OhioKAN's Services or Engagement efforts to the site supervisor and OhioKAN regional coach.

- 51 FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (2019). Retrieved from: <https://Friendsnrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Parent-Leadership-Gui..>
- 52 Massachusetts Department of Education (2020). Strengthening Partnerships: A framework for prenatal through young adulthood family engagement in Massachusetts. Retrieved from: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/family-engagement-framework.pdf>
- 53 Center for Health Care Strategies (2021). Engaging families in program and policy development to ensure equitable health outcomes for children. Retrieved from: <https://www.chcs.org/engaging-families-in-program-and-policy-developmen...>
- 54 Capacity Building Center for States (2016). Family Empowerment Implementation Manual. Retrieved from: <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/126...>
- 55 Berrick, J.D., Cohen, E., and Anthony, E. (2011). Partnering with parents: Promising approaches to improve reunification outcomes for children in foster care. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 11(1), 1–13.
- 56 Capacity Building Center for States (2016). Family Empowerment Implementation Manual. Retrieved from: <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/126...>
- 57 Capacity Building Center for States (2016). Family Empowerment Implementation Manual. Retrieved from: <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/126...>