

The Collaboration Continuum

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration shall be defined as a process to reach goals that cannot be achieved by one single agent. It includes the following components:

- Jointly developing and agreeing on a set of common goals and directions;
- Sharing responsibility for obtaining those goals;
- Working together to achieve those goals, using the expertise and resources of each collaborator.

Networking → Coordinating → Cooperating → Collaborating → Integrating

Networking: Exchanging information for mutual benefit. This is easy to do; it requires low initial level of trust, limited time availability and no sharing of turf.

Coordinating: Exchanging information and altering program activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Requires more organizational involvement than networking, higher level of trust and some access to one's turf.

Cooperating: Exchanging information, altering activities and sharing resources for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Increased organizational commitment, may involve written agreements, shared resources can involve human, financial and technical contributions. Requires a substantial amount of time, high level of trust and significant sharing of turf.

Collaborating: Exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and enhancing each other's capacity for mutual benefit and to achieve a common goal. The qualitative difference to cooperating is that organizations and individuals are willing to learn from each other to become better at what they do. Collaborating means that organizations share risks, responsibilities and rewards. It requires a substantial time commitment, very high level of trust, and sharing turf.

Integrating: Completely merging two organizations in regards to client operations as well as administrative structure.

It is important to understand that each of these strategies can be appropriate for particular circumstances. It can be sufficient for some service providers to network and consequently provide youth and families with correct and updated information on available services. In other circumstances, agencies might work on developing more complex linkages to be able to meet youth and family needs more effectively. These definitions will help agencies make appropriate choices about the working relationships they want to develop or strive towards in their communities.

Collaborative efforts are only successful in facilitating change if they are supported from the top down and the bottom up. Administrative support is needed to allow front line staff to make decisions about agency resources shared in a collaborative effort. Both, front line and administrative staff must be open and willing to go beyond "business as usual."