



Parent Leadership: Successful Strategies

Although public policies governing education, health and human services and family support have promoted parent leadership for years, State and local programs often have encountered many challenges in engaging parents in leadership roles. This “successful strategies” document shares lessons from parents and organizations that have led the way. It is designed to help Community-Based Family Resource and Support (CBFRS) programs promote and expand parent leadership.

What Is Parent Leadership?

Parent leadership is a value-based approach to family support that is grounded in the philosophy that families are knowledgeable consumers and significant resources for programmatic as well as community change on behalf of children and families. Parent leadership is a process or path, but it is a destination as well. It begins by supporting parents in acquiring the skills associated with becoming leaders and helping to overcome barriers to their participation.

When parents are leaders their potential to effect change for themselves and others is tremendous. Once comfortable in leadership positions, parents may facilitate important program or neighborhood change and eventually take leadership positions within their States and communities. They may be involved in raising funds or starting their own centers. This is the destination—the “end product” called parent leadership.

Engaging parents and families in the overall governance of programs is crucial to building and sustaining family support programs. This approach is a fundamental shift from the way many child and family serving programs originally were designed and administered, which excluded parents and families from critical decision-making with regard to program development and delivery of services, ongoing operations and administration. First and foremost, administrators and professional staff involved with child and family programs and service systems must learn to accept and relate to parents as leaders. To truly enhance the quality of programs,

professionals must relinquish some control to parents and recognize them as equal partners in determining what works for families.

Parent leadership occurs in numerous ways. Parents can become leaders by taking on various roles in planning, implementing and evaluating family support programs, and also by participating in broader systems reform efforts. Following is a brief list of some suggested roles and specific activities.

- 1) Organizational: being a decision maker by serving on
 - Grant-making boards or committees
 - Agency advisory boards or councils
 - State or local boards or councils
- 2) Policy/Program Development: participating in activities such as
 - Needs assessments and strategic planning
 - Program monitoring, evaluation (e.g., peer review) and quality improvement
 - Grant application reviews and selection
 - Testifying before policy-making bodies
- 3) Training and Technical Assistance: sharing expertise by
 - Training staff and volunteers
 - Providing specific knowledge and support to programs
 - Serving as a mentor for other families
- 4) Administrative: assisting in managing programs by
 - Recruiting volunteers
 - Participating in hiring processes for staff
 - Writing and reviewing written and audiovisual materials
 - Fundraising

When families provide leadership and work collaboratively with staff, programs benefit from their knowledge and expertise. Parent leadership is best exemplified when families

- Are involved in problem-solving and decision-making processes
- Master the behaviors they need to interact with others effectively to achieve goals for their children and families

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- Have access to and control over the resources they need

Why is Parent Leadership Needed?

Parents and other caregivers are powerful advocates. By educating other leaders and decision makers about the needs of children and families, parents can help shape program policies and effect changes in the systems with which they interface. Parent leadership is a common-sense approach for ensuring that families get the resources they need to raise healthy children and protect their well-being. It is driven by the principle that the democratic involvement of parents is integral to better outcomes for families and communities.

What Challenges Does Parent Leadership Present?

Over the past 30 years as changes in public policy promoted the deinstitutionalization of individuals with disabilities, parent involvement and leadership became a key principle for these individuals to maintain independence and autonomy within their families and communities. This was affirmed by the Administration on Developmental Disabilities in 1990 and continues to be affirmed by other children, youth and family programs today:

“Families should be involved in planning, designing, and evaluating family support at all levels of the system including Federal, State, and local.”

Many national, State and local efforts to foster parent involvement and leadership have identified challenges in implementing this fundamental principle. Some of these include the following:

- Lack of a family-centered ethic at both the State and local levels
- Lack of family-friendly systems and procedures to reinforce parent involvement and leadership

development

- Resistance among administrative and professional staff to accept parents in leadership roles
- Difficulty in having families involved in specific roles
- Difficulty determining whether compensation can and should be provided
- Difficulty in effectively soliciting information from parents and in using the information received to change or improve planning, practices, and policies

For families, some of the challenges include the following:

- Meeting times and places that do not always match their availability and formats that do not meet their comfort levels
- Difficulty understanding the professional jargon or terminology used by the staff and contained in program literature
- Having expectations that by participating they will be able to get changes to happen quickly
- Availability of childcare
- Overcoming preconceptions from previous encounters with programs that may not have been accepting of parent leadership

Although getting parents involved is difficult, parents and staff who have persevered have found it is not only doable but is necessary in enhancing the health of their communities and the programs’ sustainability.

How Can Parent Leadership be Promoted?

Involving parents in leadership roles is a slow process that requires nurturing. *Family Support Magazine* recently outlined three phases of parent participation. Understanding these phases and their identified activities can help program leaders better understand the evolution of parent leadership.

Engagement Phase	Involvement Phase	Empowerment Phase
Outreach One-on-one trust building Invitation Exploration	Orientation Training Recognition Education	Evaluation Assessments Personal power to create change

Phases of Parent Participation

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In the engagement phase, meaningful discussions between program staff and families are necessary to initiate and promote collaborative relationships. These interactions give parents the opportunity to define their interests and needs and provide information to staff on the diversity of parents with whom they will partner. Involve a variety of parents with different backgrounds and interests who can represent the diverse groups within a community, but remember that no single parent can represent all parents. Also, it is important to create opportunities for parents with personal issues about programs, agencies, or systems to be heard. Professionals need to be willing and able to hear and receive the frustration and anger, although it may not be directed toward them. In this way, they will be able to effectively address parents' frustrations and challenges and create the opportunity to move forward.

Once parents are initially involved, orientation and ongoing training are necessary for them to be able to contribute effectively. Training for parents is critical to maintaining their involvement, addressing emerging challenges and promoting leadership. Training for administrators and professional staff is crucial as well. The best training programs focus on the strengths of families, so administrators and staff can learn how to effectively use and rely on parents' skills in program and policy development. See the *Resources* section for a list of organizations with training expertise.

Within each phase, parent input on activities is invaluable to the process of improving programs. Having a range of opportunities for parent involvement is key to engaging and involving people with all kinds of abilities. For the match between parent and task to be a good "fit" for all parties, it is essential that staff and parents work together in identifying the best candidates for each task. For parents, being involved in programs puts an additional demand on their time and takes them away from their children. Whenever possible, programs should create activities for children to maximize family involvement.

A key result of parent leadership is whether families exhibit power to create change. Results of parent

leadership can be identified in the empowerment phase through various strategies associated with evaluation and assessments. See *Resources* and *References* for more information.

In follow-up to this overview of the phases of parent engagement, program administrators and staff have identified additional issues they need to address in order to advance parents' leadership, including:

- Finding ways to engage indigent parents who live in the communities being served
- Destigmatizing program/organizational mission so parents can participate without being "labeled"
- Learning what questions to ask parents and how to best utilize their responses

To effectively promote and advance parent leadership, training cannot be overemphasized, especially training for administrators and professional staff. They need to be equal partners in the training with parents. Training can be developed collaboratively and encompass the same issues. Developing or reviewing training curricula can be a major task at the engagement phase that will move participants to the involvement phase and on to other leadership roles (e.g., trainer/mentor). This will provide a specific starting point for dialogue and discussion in the exchange of information between staff and families, setting the direction for them to work together.

What Guidance on Leadership Do Parents Give?

The following suggestions come from parents who have become involved and are strong leaders, as well as from organizations that have extensive experience engaging parents—and keeping them engaged.

Build Trust

- Promote dialogue between staff and families to exchange information and ideas.
- Invite families to define ways they can be involved and lead.
- Support parents in their organizational styles and decision-making processes.

Establish a Plan for Engaging Parents

- Survey parents to find ways to engage them.
- Conduct outreach to state and local parenting groups.

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- Create a database of parents' skills and interests and use the information to solicit parents for boards and committees.

Be Flexible

- Make meeting times and locations convenient for parents.
- Keep attendance requirements lenient.

Remove Barriers

- Make sites accessible and safe.
- Provide childcare and transportation when needed.

Prepare and Support Parents

- Conduct orientation and ongoing training.
- Provide information on the vision, mission and purpose of the work to be done.
- Provide translation and communication services when needed.
- Have parents organize by establishing rules and agreeing on the times and space.
- Encourage parents to select their own representatives to participate with other collaborating groups.
- Support parents in their learning by being available to respond to their questions and needs.

Provide General Supports

- Share roles, jobs and tasks.
- Provide information about developments in the agency and program on a regular basis.

Offer Meaningful Avenues for Participation

- Provide and reinforce a variety of options for participation and leadership.
- Have tasks that are important and meaningful to parents.

Watch Out for Jargon

- Provide a glossary of frequently used terms and acronyms.
- Verify parents' understanding of terminology during meetings.

Provide Compensation and Recognition

- Provide a range of options, including childcare, stipends, and scholarships as well as monetary and in-kind reimbursements.

- Offer food at meetings.
- Sponsor parties and other events that recognize parents' work.

Be Respectful

- Understand parents' varied needs, participation levels, and available time.
- Allow parents their feelings.
- Be open to parents' ideas and their ways of engaging with each other.
- Accept varied styles of leadership and organizing approaches.

Communicate Clearly

- Be honest and open in communications.
- Seek parent input on a regular basis.
- Provide specific guidance regarding parents' roles, rights and responsibilities, the time required and length of service.

Be Considerate

- Maintain focus on family strengths.
- Know the special needs of families.
- Spread the work—don't expect one parent to represent all.

Parents cite the guidance above to describe very specifically what it takes to support their leadership. Each general category and suggestions should be reviewed carefully and regularly. Providing the list of suggestions to parents would be another way to gather further input on what works for families in your programs.

Evaluating Parent Leadership Efforts—What Outcomes Can be Expected?

As agencies and programs work toward the goal of parent leadership, new policies or procedures come forth. For example, peer review, a requirement of the CBFRS program, is a new strategy that directly leads parents into leadership activities. Peer review, as defined by the FRIENDS National Resource Center for CBFRS programs, is evaluation by equals of all activities funded by CBFRS. Peers are those with equal standing and include consumers of services, i.e., parents/families of family support programs. While CBFRS program evaluation may encompass a review of many different program

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components (e.g. networks, training, administrative practices, service procedures), parents are to be included in all program evaluation areas.

Evaluating parent leadership is a key component of program development. Although the evaluation of parent leadership is still in early development, a number of outcomes have been identified by family support organizations and public and private programs. When consumers of family support services (i.e., parents and other family members) are an integral part of planning and program development, the following has been found:

- Services are better delivered, more cost effective, and more culturally sensitive
- Customer satisfaction is improved
- The likelihood of positive family outcomes is higher
- The system is more responsive
- Families are better able to use services and help other families
- Families build skills
- Communities are healthier as their capacities to better support families are enhanced
- Parents model for children ways they can be involved and contribute

A list of suggestions from parents can serve as a beginning framework for programs to establish an evaluation process of parent leadership. Staff and parents can assess each item, separately or collectively, to determine how well program administrators and staff are helping to achieve the goal of parent leadership. This will assist in the assessment of the broader outcomes identified above.

Summary

As time has proven, the multitude of problems experienced by families cannot be resolved by professionals and bureaucracies alone. Today, Federal, State, and local policies promote the concept that family support programs will be improved—and better outcomes for children and youth will be achieved—by tapping into the knowledge and skills of all vested parties: professionals, policymakers, business leaders and parents.

While the concept of parent leadership has great merit, some efforts to engage parents in leadership positions have been more successful than others. Some programs have been able to foster strong parent leaders who have become invaluable resources for their families and their communities. Others have encountered obstacles that hinder them from progressing from involvement to leadership. Parents have helped promote parent leadership efforts by making their needs understood and advocating for appropriate supports, including training for themselves and the administrators and professional staff with whom they engage. Implementing a peer review process for evaluating family support programs will expand parent involvement and leadership. As more administrators and professional staff see parents as contributors and communicators, more opportunities will unfold for parents to become involved and assume leadership roles. Engaging parents in providing direction and guidance is critical to making health and human services systems more responsive, coordinated, culturally sensitive and cost-effective.

Resources

ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center, <www.archrespite.org>

Family Support America, <www.familysupportamerica.org>

- *Partnerships for Change*: 2 videos plus 50-page guide, 1997
- *Learning to Be Partners*, 250 pp. training manual, 1997

National PTA, <www.pta.org>

- *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement*, 1998

Minnesota Parent Association, <www.parentleadership.org>

Parents Anonymous, <www.parentsanonymous-natl.org>

Parent Leadership Training Institute, <www.cga.state.ct.us/coc/parent.htm>

Partners in Policymaking <www.ddpc.state.ny.us>

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Linking Our Voices, Head Start Publications Management Center, <www.hs-kids-tmsc.org/cgi-bin/catpubstore.cfm>

Prevent Child Abuse America and National Family Support Roundtable Partnership, <www.preventchildabuse.org/programs/self_help.htm>

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This fact sheet was produced by the FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Family Resource and Support Programs, a project of the Chapel Hill Training-Outreach Project in partnership with Family Support America. FRIENDS is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funders, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This information is in the public domain. Readers are encouraged to copy and share it, but please credit the FRIENDS National Resource Center.