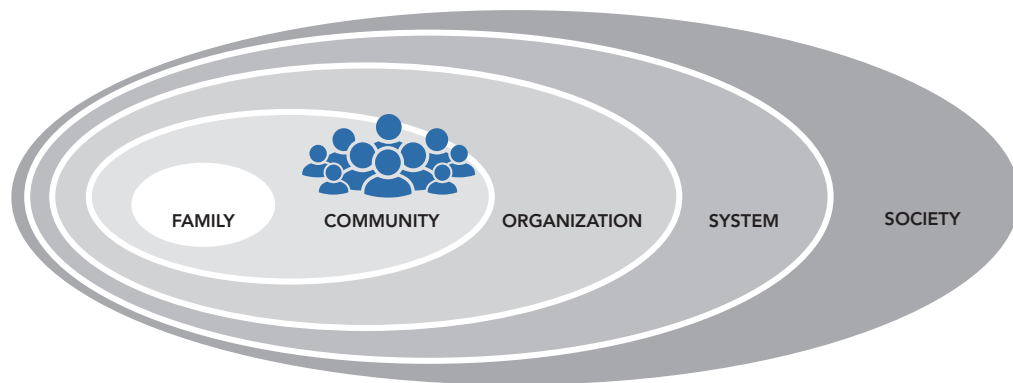

CHAPTER FIVE

Embracing Community and the Wisdom of Lived Experience



The fourth layer of the social-ecological model highlights the spaces where child abuse prevention and family support agencies interact and engage with the communities they serve. Community and family members with lived experience offer a unique perspective that, when heeded, can improve family engagement and ultimately increase the effectiveness of services.

We know that, despite our best efforts, child welfare systems continue to disproportionately intervene in families living in poverty and families of color, who generally have very little power or voice in a system that affects the most intimate aspects of their lives. Their involvement with the system too often results in additional trauma, instead of healing. Although direct service providers are on the front lines of work with families, the burden of this legacy cannot fall on their shoulders alone. Frontline workers, agency administrators, and community leaders alike must

IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Federal Focus: Head Start/Early Head Start Policy Councils
- Valuing Community Voice in Program Assessment, Implementation, and Evaluation
- Growing Authentic Partnerships With Parents, Caregivers, and Youth

commit to new ways of listening to the wisdom of people with lived experience and developing meaningful partnerships with the communities and families they serve.

Community members are best positioned to know the strengths their neighborhoods possess, understand the challenges they face, and propose innovative solutions. Effective systems value the knowledge and observations of community members about their own lived experience, their strengths and needs, and community capacities and seek to share power equitably.

Meaningful and authentic **partnership with families** and community members with lived experience goes far beyond seeking their input on initiatives or having them represented on committees or in meetings. It means giving parents, caregivers, and youth the opportunity to be heard and to actively contribute to all decisions that affect their lives at all levels of policy, research, and practice. It also

means soliciting and using the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of those with lived expertise to inform system-level improvements. Utilizing and integrating family, youth, and community voice in all aspects of decision-making is a strength-based approach that can increase engagement. Parents, caregivers, and youth should be compensated for their expertise and provided with whatever is needed to support their full involvement.

The strategies and examples highlighted in this chapter show that it is possible to tap into the tremendous wisdom and strength present in our communities, align our efforts with those of community leaders, and provide real opportunities that enhance the inherent strengths and leadership abilities of caregivers and youth. Doing so will benefit organizations, families, and the overall community, as we are all stronger when we work together toward a shared goal.

FEDERAL FOCUS: HEAD START/EARLY HEAD START POLICY COUNCILS

Head Start and Early Head Start are national models of early care and education with strong foundations in family engagement and community partnership. The founders of Head Start viewed parents as essential partners in the agency's work to educate young children and ensure their health and well-being. They believed that parents receiving Head Start services should help decide how those services could most benefit their family and other families in the community.

As a result, Head Start created a formal leadership and policymaking role for parents and community members, referred to in Head Start/Early Head Start programs as a "Policy Council." Today, every Head Start and Early Head Start agency is required to

have a Policy Council as part of its shared leadership structure. The [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#) describe what Policy Councils do and who can be a member.

Policy Council members make decisions about how the program operates, including areas such as approving the budget and hiring and firing staff. Parents who serve on the council receive training and support to ensure they are prepared to make those decisions. Serving on the Policy Council strengthens parents' leadership and advocacy skills as well as their connections to their peers and the community.

Head Start offers a number of useful [Policy Council resources](#) for both organizations and parents.

VALUING COMMUNITY VOICE IN PROGRAM ASSESSMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION

Successful prevention program implementation and assessment require a deep understanding of the communities you hope to serve. That means not only extending invitations but listening to and incorporating input from community leaders. This can best be achieved by attending to power dynamics and seeking ways to share power more equitably. Consider taking the following actions:

- **Make meaningful community engagement a priority.** Community engagement should not be limited to consultation on specific issues or campaigns. Seek opportunities to solicit and use the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of community members to make system-level improvements and to use their input in making critical decisions that affect their lives.
- **Partner “content experts”** (those with expertise about child abuse prevention and family support) **with “context experts”** (those with lived experience in the community). Value the knowledge and experience of both.
- **Implement [culturally competent EBPs](#).** Implemented well, EBPs can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes and satisfy funders who increasingly require this approach. However, it is important for selected practices to be effective for the targeted community. This requires the involvement of the community in identifying, assessing, and implementing strategies that are both supported by scientific research and consistent with the community’s culture and values.
- **Recognize promising practices.** Where possible, consider implementing or partnering with practices and services that are highly valued within the community but may lack the resources to establish a robust level of evidence required to meet EBP standards.
- **Engage community members in designing and completing program evaluations.** Community voice should help drive the questions asked and the criteria for determining whether a program is successful.
- **Seek out grassroots organizers.** Grassroots organizations are often more flexible in their use of funds, and organizers typically have a different view of and relationship with the community than service providers.
- **Compensate community experts and provide meaningful leadership opportunities.** Offering compensation and opportunities for growth, in addition to a “seat at the table,” shows you value the community and builds trust.
- **Hire staff that represent the community,** ideally including people with lived experience, but at minimum those who reflect the community served in race, ethnicity, and culture.
- **Be present in the communities you serve.** The more you live, play, and show up in the community you serve, the more the people of that community will trust you. Shop, recreate, and attend community and school events to break down artificial barriers.
- **Be open to transformative change—truly doing things differently.** Transformation is more likely when meaningful community engagement occurs, because community members may be less attached to the status quo.⁶ Organizations and systems will benefit most from community engagement when they are open to new perspectives and willing to engage in difficult conversations.

⁶ Smart, J. (2017). Critiques of collective impact: Need for policy and systems change. In: [Collective impact: Evidence and implications for practice](#). CFA Paper No. 45. Child Family Community Australia.

[Fresno County, CA](#), has reduced the disproportionate representation of African-American children and families in its child welfare system over time by strengthening the agency's commitment to equity and caseworkers' ability to be responsive to families and community.

Beginning in 2003, early efforts included analyzing and sharing data disaggregated by race to identify the problem, creating a Disproportionality Advisory Committee, and bringing Undoing Racism training to all Department of Social Services (DSS) staff. The county also implemented the [Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative](#) and created a cultural broker program through which community members were trained to advocate for families in the child welfare system.

By early 2009, these efforts had produced some positive results, but DSS leadership wanted to understand why many of the system deficits persisted. They partnered with CSSP to pilot an [institutional analysis \(IA\)](#). A trained team of local and national partners conducted iterative and structured interviews with parents and youth, agency leaders, community partners, and other stakeholders; observations; case reviews; and text analysis to better understand the organizational factors contributing to disparate outcomes for African-American children.

The report indicated that the system was not treating African-American families as individuals with unique needs and strengths; rather, it was moving them through an assembly line of workers to services that did not support families to be stable, heal, and safely care for their children. As a result, DSS leadership took immediate steps and instituted long-term reform strategies to improve casework and implement institutional change. Immediate steps included providing Racial Sobriety training to the entire workforce and expanded the use of cultural brokers or parent partners in joint responses to initial child maltreatment reports.

Along with other long-term strategies, such as implementing a practice model, aligning its system to support the model, and implementing continuous quality improvement, DSS continued to strengthen community engagement. Key community advisors and leaders provided advice to DSS leadership on disparity issues and the development of the new strategic plan and case practice model. The county also included community partners in assessing caseworkers' fidelity to the case practice model. DSS compensated community groups and members for their time.

In 2000, 24 percent of children and youth in the Fresno County foster care system were African American, despite the fact that African Americans composed only 6 percent of the county's population. By 2013, the disproportionality of the foster care population was greatly reduced (although not eliminated): African-American children made up 14 percent of the foster care population and 5 percent of the general population.

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters USA: Prioritizing Community Fit

[Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters \(HIPPY\)](#) works closely with host communities around the world to support parents in their critical role as their child's first and most important teacher. Local HIPPY affiliate programs are partnerships between those who know the curriculum and those

who know the community where the program will be implemented. Both are essential, which is why one of the key factors in starting a HIPPY program in a new community is finding the right organizational partner, where parents feel welcomed, comfortable, and respected. Depending on the community, this might be a school, family resource center, or community-based agency (e.g., public housing authority, hospital).

Organizations interested in bringing HIPPY to their community first conduct a needs assessment to determine the following:

- Why a HIPPY program is needed in the community
- How the HIPPY program will address community needs
- What the relationship will be between the HIPPY program and other community stakeholders

- How the HIPPY program will fit into the community history and culture

In addition to working closely with community stakeholders, [HIPPY places a high priority on hiring home visitors from the community.](#)

More than 50 percent of HIPPY home visitors are former program recipients.

GROWING AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND YOUTH

Today's human service leaders are recognizing that opportunities for meaningful engagement with current and past program recipients extend far beyond soliciting input, inviting representation at meetings, or hosting panel presentations at conferences. Parents, caregivers, and youth can play meaningful roles in all areas, including but not limited to the following:

- [Strategic sharing](#) of their lived experience
- Selecting and improving programs
- Developing practice models and standards
- Ensuring greater attention to the diverse cultural interests of families
- Providing direct services, such as through parent partner programs
- Participating in governance and hiring personnel
- Setting organizational policy
- Establishing research agendas
- Helping with publications and messaging
- Translating data into real-life experiences
- Educating policymakers
- Making funding decisions
- Advising and engaging in community collaboratives

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance (CTFA) outlines four stages of building and sustaining effective parent partnerships—similar strategies can apply to partnerships with other caregivers and/or youth:

1. **Strong partnerships begin with self-reflection.** Before engaging parents, caregivers, or youth, organizational leaders are encouraged to reflect on why the partnership is important; what strengths family members offer; what the organization can offer in return; and what benefits they hope to achieve for themselves, their programs, their organization, and the families they serve.
2. **Partnerships support participation in a variety of forms.** When parents, caregivers, and youth can contribute to a program in a way that builds on their unique strengths, it respects their voice and their culture, encourages their participation, and supports opportunities for growth.
3. **Partnerships link organizations to community.** Parent, caregiver, and youth partners can be strong allies in carrying the mission and messaging of an organization or program to the broader community. This can help build credibility and trust with other families. Many parents and youth

who come to the attention of a program director are already established leaders in their own communities. It is easier to build relationships if these community leaders feel their culture is respected and see the direct benefits their work with you can have in their own community.

4. **Partnerships invite experienced people with lived experience to mentor others.**

It is important to have more than one or two partners with lived experience so that the organization can benefit from diverse perspectives and individuals are not overextended. With support and encouragement, experienced parents, caregivers, and youth can become involved in State-level project design, grant reviews, policy development, hiring activities, and interagency activities. The best way to ensure a continuum of partnerships with people with lived experience is to create a wide variety of activities and encourage current partners and leaders to invite others to participate.

CTFA's website offers useful resources on [partnering with parents](#). FRIENDS also offers a [guidebook](#) for meaningful parent leadership and parent-practitioner collaboration.

Parent and Youth Advisory Councils Grow Leaders

Parent advisory councils are one way that many organizations create and sustain authentic roles for parent partners in shaping programs, policies, and strategies. They can help to institutionalize parent partnerships so that these relationships do not rely on a single staff person or an individual parent and can be sustained for the long term.

Youth also have valuable knowledge about the communities in which they live and the services designed for them. [Youth advisory boards and councils](#) can engage young people in examining programs, practices, and policies that affect their lives and in advocating for system improvement.

CTFA supports organizations in taking the following steps toward developing effective advisory councils:

- **Create a planning group** that includes both designated staff and parents (or youth) right from the beginning.
- **Establish the council's purpose, membership, and structure.** Some organizations feel an inclusive approach is best, while others find benefits in limiting membership (to foster or birth parents, for example, rather than both together).



“Prevention begins with authentic relationships in the community and with parents. The Birth Parent National Network seeks to push our country forward by elevating the voices of parents and organizations that are bold enough to scream ‘parents aren’t broken!’ We see parents as treasured leaders—wise and filled with hope. I encourage all to continue mining for gold, not digging for dirt. There’s a nugget inside of all of us. If you can’t find it, you’re not looking hard enough.”

—Corey Best, consultant and parent

- **Develop roles and responsibilities** for council members and the staff who will support them.
- **Identify staff and budget.** A designated staff position and a set-aside budget are cited as critical factors for sustainability.
- **Develop a recruitment plan and selection process.** Once established, council members can be responsible for joining with designated staff to recruit, interview, and select new members.
- **Hold orientation meetings and trainings.** CTFA works closely with organizations and council members to provide [orientation and trainings](#) on strategic sharing; successful partnerships; the protective factors framework; team building; leadership; and the programs, staffing, and policies of the organization.
- **Evaluate and revise strategies as needed for long-term success.** It is important for parents, caregivers, and youth to have a voice in designing and conducting the evaluation.

“Parent advisory councils are changing the norm in terms of systems beginning to incorporate the voices of parents. They are the way of the future and one of the most effective strategies we’ve seen. After the parents and staff get to know and trust each other and parents gain deeper understanding of the policies and practices that guide the system, they can identify many new ways to work together to create better outcomes for children, families, and communities.”

—Teresa Rafael, executive director, CTFA



STATE CBCAP
EXAMPLE

Arizona Office of Prevention

Arizona’s Office of Prevention, within the Department of Child Safety (DCS), used CBCAP funds to create and fund its [Parent Advisory Collaborative \(PAC\)](#) in 2018. This group was developed to increase parent leadership, provide feedback to DCS related to initiatives and improvement activities, and create an atmosphere of compassion, trust, and respect.

The collaborative is composed of parents from the community, former foster youth, kinship providers, adoptive parents, and former DCS clients and their family members. PAC members receive a stipend, a meal during the meeting, and reimbursement for child care and travel. The entire PAC meets quarterly. Seven subcommittees (on topics such as housing, incarcerated parents, safe sleep, and strengthening young parents) meet approximately monthly.

The insights provided by PAC members will increase DCS’s understanding of how the community responds to various prevention efforts and allow the Office of Prevention to adjust strategies accordingly. The group also reviews and provides feedback on CBCAP reports and applications.

