



## **Giving Voice to Vulnerable Families**

A summary of effective parental engagement programs  
conducted by Lori Rubenstein for Brisbane Partnerships  
November 2015





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# Giving Voice to Vulnerable Families

This is a summary of effective parental engagement programs carried out by Lori Rubenstein for the Brisbane Partnerships in November 2015.

## Introduction to Brisbane Partnerships

The Australian Department of Social Services has funded a three-year collaborative project called **Brisbane Partnerships – Giving a Voice to Vulnerable Families**. The project brings together a coalition of four organisations that together provide local community services and advocacy resources to families and children experiencing disadvantage and/or vulnerability in the Brisbane local government area. The Partnerships comprises:

- Community Living Association
- Jabiru Community Youth Children's Services
- Kyabra Community Association
- Micah Projects Inc.

The partnership is built on long-standing relationships among community-based multi-service providers that are committed to a community development approach, early intervention and family support within a social justice framework. The aims of the Brisbane Partnership in relation to the *Giving a Voice to Vulnerable Families* project are:

- To give parents, children and young people experiencing disadvantage and/or vulnerability opportunities to participate in the design and delivery of early intervention and prevention services.
- To build the capacity of families to engage with local community and self-help processes, including local and wider advocacy for change that would affect their lives.
- To give families a greater voice in influencing the shape of future social policies about community and self-help forms of early intervention and prevention.
- To collaborate with the Family Inclusion Network in South East Queensland (FIN SEQ) to strengthen engagement of parents in all facets of child and family support for those facing challenges in the Child Protection system.



## Purpose

This review seeks to define successful participatory processes that may influence service and policy design and lead to improved outcomes for families and children experiencing disadvantage in Brisbane. Exemplars of parental engagement models most relevant to the *Giving a Voice to Vulnerable Families* project have been outlined through these findings.

## Defining parent engagement

Parent engagement is defined by the *Center for the Study of Social Policy*<sup>1</sup> as an overarching principle and approach for involving families in decisions about themselves, their children, services, and their communities. Parent engagement includes a wide array of activities, such as:

- Direct relationships with service providers
- Mutual support shared among parents
- Advocacy by parents on behalf of their families
- Decision-making and advisory roles in agencies
- Leadership in the community.

## The case for parent engagement

Parent engagement has a range of positive outcomes for families and communities, service providers and government policy makers. The CEO of the *Marguerite Casey Foundation* in the USA, Vega-Marquis says that families know what they need, so through parental engagement and participation, they are able to contribute directly to a system of policies, programs and services that actually help the target populations and families<sup>2</sup> (insert reference). When parents are supported and engaged to lead for their children and others, can strengthen programs and policies for children, to achieve better outcomes. According to the Connecticut Commission for Children, “Strong families generate strong communities. Reciprocally, when a community is strong, so will its youth be”<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Centre for the Study of Social Policy , Growing and Sustaining Parent Engagement Toolkit, 2010 accessed from <http://www.cssp.org/publications/growingandsustainingparentengagementtoolkit.pdf> March 2016

2 Annie E. Casey, Community Change Lessons from Making Connections, 2013 accessed from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/community-change-lessons-from-making-connections/> March 2016.

3 Children’s Commission of Connecticut. *Voices for Change for Connecticut’s Children: Promoting Parent Leadership and Civic Literacy*. <http://www.cga.ct.gov>.



Parent engagement can also counterbalance disproportionate influence of elite opinion, strengthen accountability and facilitate the development of coalitions to influence the policy agenda.<sup>4</sup> According to the *Citizens' engagement in policymaking and the design of public services*<sup>5</sup> meaningful parent engagement used over time can help to define important complex problems that have eluded past attempts, whilst focusing on key priorities and agendas. The benefits of bringing all stakeholders together helps to draw upon diverse expertise and sources of knowledge. The process also values the practical experience of those working in the field, where learnings can be gained in developing improved practice models to build on community strengths. Potential champions, sponsors, donors and funders may also be leveraged. The Table below is an adapted version of Arnstein's Participation Ladder, first developed in 1969 to illustrate the spectrum of community engagement.

## The Spectrum of Community Engagement

INCREASING IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING				
INFORMING	CONSULTING	INVOLVING	COLLABORATING	EMPOWERING
Providing balanced and objective information about new programs or services, and about the reasons for choosing them. Providing updates during implementation.	Inviting feedback on alternatives, analyses, and decisions related to new programs or services. Letting people know how their feedback has influenced program decisions.	Working with community members to ensure that their aspirations and concerns are considered at every stage of planning and decision-making. Letting people know how their involvement has influenced program decisions.	Enabling community members to participate in every aspect of planning and decision-making for new programs or services.	Giving community members sole decision-making authority over new programs or services, and allowing professionals to serve only in consultative and supportive roles.

Adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, developed by the International Association for Public Participation.

Note: Engagement activities can include community surveys, neighborhood outreach projects, partnerships with grassroots organizations, public meetings, and efforts to select community representatives

4 Stewart (2009). *The Dilemmas of Engagement: The role of consultation in governance*, ANU E-Press, p. 3. [http://epress.anu.edu.au/anzsog/dilemmas/pdf/whole\\_book.pdf](http://epress.anu.edu.au/anzsog/dilemmas/pdf/whole_book.pdf)

5 Holmes, B (2011). *Citizens' engagement in policymaking and the design of public services*. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.



## Parent engagement in child protection

Brisbane Partnerships Giving Vulnerable Families a Voice is integrating work across child and family focussed initiatives in the child protection space. The Family Inclusion Network SEQ (FINSEQ) is co-located with Brisbane Partnerships office (Micah Projects Inc) and is a project partner currently working with parents and family members, as well as at the organizational and system level to increase participation of family members in the Queensland Child and Family Reforms. There are a number of other important initiatives running in our community, which overlap with the Brisbane Partnerships agenda.

These consultations require that parents understand complex systems, organizational change, acronyms, legal language, reform processes etc., or are otherwise reliant on the dissemination of information from secondary parties which may compromise the information provided. As outlined in this literature review, PLTI has demonstrated a successful model for replication in Australia, that may to contribute to the long-term, generational outcomes that Queensland Child and Family reforms require.

Parent engagement is believed to reinforce restorative justice practices in the child protection system: “In a child protection context, restorative approaches acknowledge harm done, restore safety to the child, restore confidence to the parent, heal damaged relationships and offer hope for the future”<sup>6</sup>. Ivec’s report, *A Necessary Engagement: An international review of parent and family engagement in child protection*<sup>7</sup> discusses practices to increase engagement with parents in the child protection system. It refers to Key Operating Principles which arise at each and every level of this work, and are essential ingredients in the engagement of parents. These are:

- Participation and inclusion in processes even if decisions are not in their favour
- Effective communication, listening
- Respecting rights (including cultural)
- Shared decision-making for solutions
- Sustained support and time to change.

For meaningful and long-term engagement of families in the reform process, FIN SEQ has identified that the Parent Leadership and Training Institute (PLTI) program from the U.S.A, the model of which is outlined in this review. will facilitate engagement that will assist in creating better outcomes for families through local service providers and QLD Department of Communities in Brisbane.

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<sup>6</sup> Ivec, M (2013). *A necessary engagement: An international review of parent and family engagement in child protection*. Tasmania: Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania. <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/sites/anglicare-tas.org.au/files/a-necessary-engagement---an-international-review-of-parent-and-family-engagement-in-child-protection.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ivec, M. *A necessary engagement: An international review of parent and family engagement in child protection*. Tasmania: Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania, 2013.





## Key practices for effective parent engagement

The US State of Connecticut Commission on Children identified six basic steps in facilitating parent engagement<sup>8</sup>.

1. **Begin by asking yourself “why” you want to engage the community.** Goals should determine the process. Organizations frequently skip this step and go straight to the “how,” but doing so weakens the efforts and can result in a frustrating and confusing process for both the “engagers” and the “engaged”.
2. **Determine the appropriate process based on your goals.** Meaningful engagement can empower a community to have autonomy in decision-making. It requires an iterative approach. Community engagement is a process, not an event or one-off consultation.
3. **Listen.** If you don’t begin by listening, then it’s probably not engagement. Listening is always a critical step in community engagement, but is more important when working collaboratively. Consider the perspectives of all stakeholders early in the process, and analyse findings to identify key themes then share the learnings.
4. **Acknowledge the past.** Acknowledgement and listening is a strong first step, particularly where public trust has been diminished. It may be necessary to differentiate your efforts from previous failures.
5. **Establish feedback loops.** Establishing feedback loops has significant benefits. Not only do they continuously deliver information about how different stakeholders perceive your efforts, but also how they acknowledge the community’s true perspectives. This creates trust.
6. **Ensure decision making is democratic.** Community decision-making works best when it helps communities establish and monitor progress toward clearly defined community development objectives and authentically involves all residents, families and other community members. Democratic decision-making involves engagement with informal social networks as well as formal systems to support family and community well-being. It accurately assesses community context and resources to effectively coordinate local assets. Regularly reporting progress back to the community is also emphasised.

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<sup>8</sup> State of Connecticut, Commission on Children; also <http://tamarackcci.ca/blogs/isaacrowlett/five-principles-community-engagement-collective-impact>; accessed March 2016.



## Frameworks for parent engagement

Below is a summary of findings relevant to influencing approaches to engagement for the *Giving Vulnerable Families a Voice* project. International case studies are drawn upon here which have been proven to support successful democratic, yet purposeful parent engagement models.

### US National Academy for State Health Policy

*Ahsan, N and Rosenthal, J (2010). Engaging Parents as Partners to Support Early Child Health and Development.*

The US National Academy for State Health Policy has developed a three-part framework for engaging parents in supporting healthy child development<sup>9</sup>. While specifically developed for use in primary health care, the following strategies have demonstrated effectiveness in the area of child safety:

- **Case-level family involvement.** Integrates family-centred practices to promote full engagement of parents and families throughout the development, implementation, and assessment of their case plans.
- **Peer-level family involvement.** Features implementation of a peer-support model in which family members who have been involved in the child welfare system serve as mentors, partners, or resource guides to help other parents navigate the child welfare system and meet their case plan goals.
- **Systems-level family involvement.** Family members participate on decision-making bodies with agency training staff and emphasise the importance of incorporating family voice into policies, procedures, and practice.

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<sup>9</sup> Ahsan, N and Rosenthal, J (2010). *Engaging Parents as Partners to Support Early Child Health and Development. Briefing* (a publication of the National Academy for State Health Policy)



## Connecticut Commission on Children (CCC) and National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI)

*Voices for Change for Connecticut's Children: Promoting parent leadership and civic literacy, 2015.*

Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI)<sup>10</sup> enables parents who wish to improve the lifelong health, safety and learning for their children to become advocates for children. The model evolved through the Connecticut Commission on Children as a result of state-wide parent focus groups in 1992.

Parents define the curriculum and participate in its evaluation and outcomes. Family supports, such as child care, are included. Each class of parents mentors the next, creating a pyramid effect of community caring and developing a coalition of parent leaders.

- **PLTI is intergenerational.** It recognizes that multiple generations raise children. Communities offer leadership training to parents and grandparents. Children participate in child care while their parents are in class. This parent-child participation in leadership enhances children's visions of their own potential to effect change.
- **PLTI expands its circle of effect.** Parent graduates serve as mentors for the next class of students. Parents participate, advise, speak and mentor other parents and programs seeking to work towards shared goals with parents as partners.
- **PLTI selection is parent-based.** Parents are selected on individual merit, based on their application and interview. Some applicants are self-referred, while others are referred by PLTI graduates, religious institutions, schools or community agencies.

In a 2014 evaluation, the PLTI model was reported to be “a highly successful initiative for generating parent leaders and promoting sustained, civic engagement in communities and at the state level”<sup>11</sup>. Other benefits for children, families and communities were observed through use of the model, such as greater participation in community activities, improved self-confidence and they developed a belief that change is possible. Families were also reported to have felt more connected to other families. They experienced improved communication skills, ability to solve problems, and were able to improve relationships within the family through greater self-determination so they could reach shared goals and objectives. Communities experienced new and improved services. Schools and neighbourhoods were safer. Substance abuse was reduced. There was also an increased community awareness of issues such as homeless teenagers, bullying and housing issues<sup>12</sup>.

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10 Connecticut Commission for Children. *Voices for Change for Connecticut's Children: Promoting parent leadership and civic literacy*. Accessed from [http://www.cga.ct.gov/gov/coc/plti\\_results.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/gov/coc/plti_results.htm) March 2016

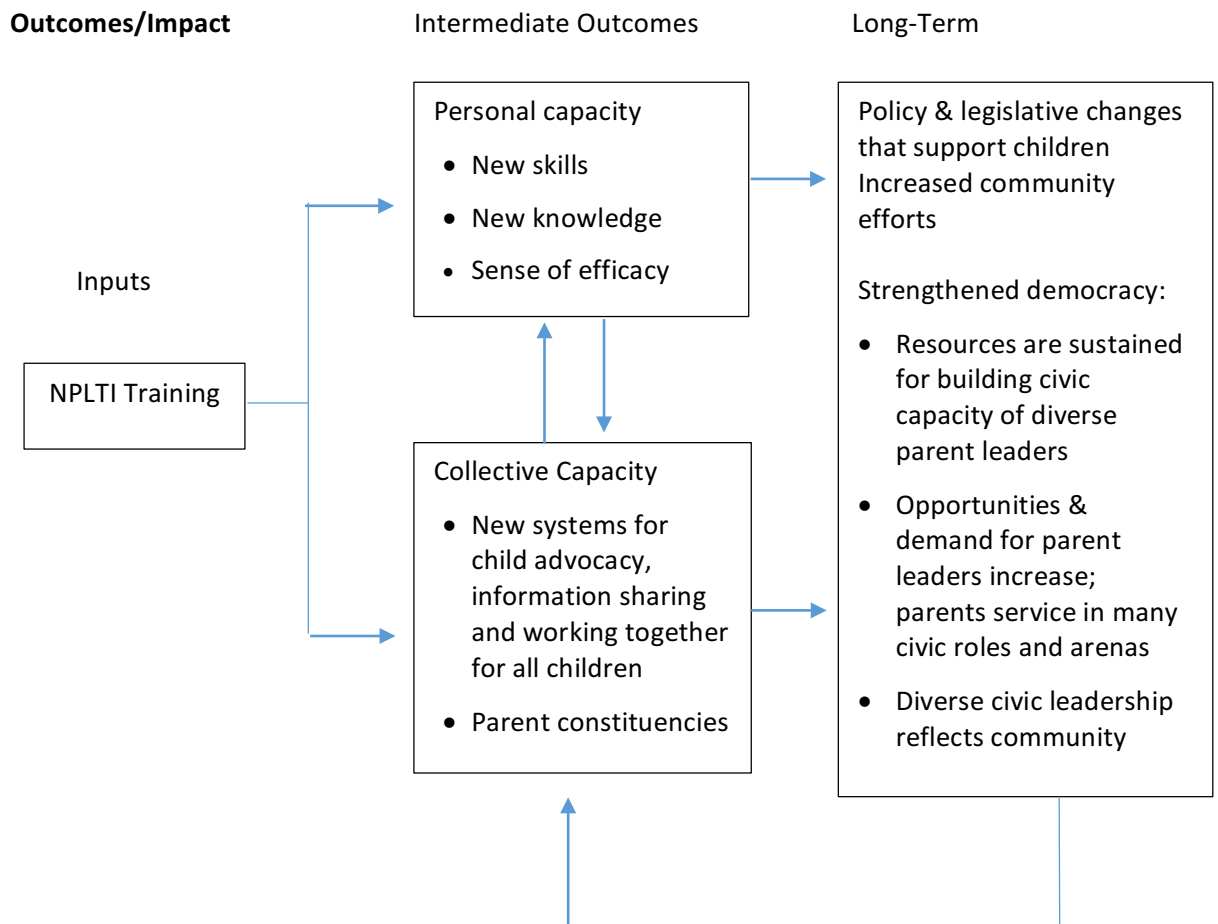
11 2013-2014 National Parent Leadership Institute Evaluation, RMC Research Corporation

12 Frankel, S, Kressley, KG and Henderson, A. (2014). *National Parent Leadership Training Institute Evaluation, 2012-2013*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research.



Theory of Change for Parent Leadership Training is illustrated in this diagram.

Source: *National Parent Leadership Training Evaluation, 2014.*



The success of this program indicates the importance of a focused, skill-building program to underpin sustainable engagement of parents<sup>13</sup>. According to the Connecticut Commission on Children, parents will participate when they know they are part of something successful and have the ability to see that they can make a difference in children's lives. Program recipients receive hands-on training and guidance which allow them to feel supported, respected and acknowledged for their time and efforts. Parents and children are also assisted to participate through the provision of free child care, food and transportation.

13 Connecticut Commission for Children (2006). *How Community Leaders Can Reap Parent Involvement*. [http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/plti\\_about.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/plti_about.htm).



According to Connecticut Commission on Children, the following factors are critical in facilitating leadership among parents:

1. An inclusive environment that does not marginalise parents.
2. Opportunities for parents to meet civic leaders in different ways
3. Training that can be applied in variety of settings
4. A strong peer network
5. Follow up actions that take place outside of the group
6. An environment for sharing and listening.

### US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start

*The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. Arlington, VA: Head Start Resource Center, 2011.*

The Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework (PFCE) used in Head Start in the US is intended as a road map for progress in achieving outcomes that lead to positive and enduring change for children and families. It has made parent engagement a key focus from its beginning in 1965<sup>14</sup>. Head Start supports the mental, social, and emotional development of children from birth to age five. In addition to education services, programs provide children and their families with health, nutrition, social, and other services. Head Start services are responsive to each child and family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. Programs build relationships with families that support positive parent-child relationships, family well-being, and connections to peers and community. Head Start is arguably the most comprehensively studied social service program still in existence today, and includes longitudinal assessment of the impact of parent and family engagement. Participation in Head Start is about building relationships that support family well-being, to create strong relationships between parents and their children, offering ongoing learning and development for both parents and children.

### Annie E. Casey Foundation

*Annie E. Casey, Community Change Lessons from Making Connections, 2013*

In 1999, The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched *Making Connections*, one of the most ambitious philanthropic family engagement programs ever to be implemented in the US. It focuses on family development and community transformation to improve the lives of children through a family engagement framework with five interlocking strategies<sup>15</sup>:

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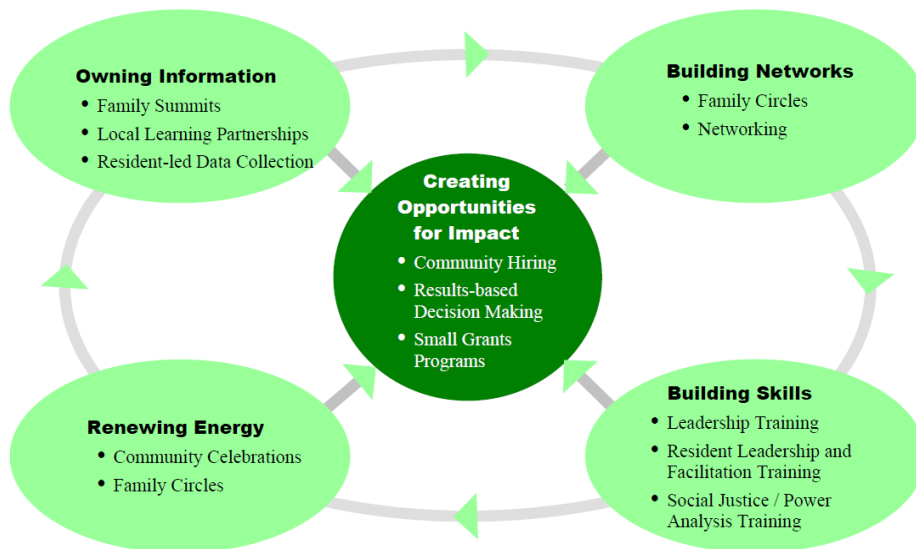
14 US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start (2011). *The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework*. Arlington, VA: Head Start Resource Center.

15 Annie E. Casey, *Community Change Lessons from Making Connections*, 2013 accessed from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/community-change-lessons-from-making-connections/> March 2016.



1. **Creating opportunities for impact.** Giving people control of resources and opportunities to serve in key decision-making roles is central to true partnership and engagement.
2. **Owning information.** Parents should be in control of information about their communities. Forums, focus groups and summit meetings of families help build ownership and use of data.
3. **Building networks.** Change only occurs when many people come together to put their knowledge and expertise to work, Building and sustaining networks is part of the necessary infrastructure to support ongoing engagement
4. **Building skills.** Training in facilitation and leadership, mentoring and opportunities to learn helps parents acquire important skills that build the confidence to participate in decision-making roles.
5. **Renewing energy.** Opportunities to discuss the benefits of strong communities for children and families and to celebrate successes and progress are important to countering burnout.

The following diagram is adapted from a parent engagement guide from Annie E. Casey Foundation found in *Building sustainable parent engagement*, from The Centre for Public Policy, 2010. It depicts the interactions of these elements in supporting parent and family engagement.



Evaluation report: Taking it to the People: Engaging residents in community change efforts executive summary, 2004 accessed from <http://www.cssp.org/community/constituents-co-invested-in-change/other-resources/taking-it-to-the-people-engaging-residents-in-community-change-efforts-executive-summary.pdf> March 2016.



## Partnerships for Families (PFF): Center for the Study of Social Policy

*Partnerships for Families* (PFF) is an initiative designed to keep young children safe and their families strong. Funded by *First 5 LA*, the program is designed to prevent abuse and neglect of vulnerable, young children from birth through to age five. The Program combines evidence based programs and practices with the power of community-grown networks of support. The PFF model requires the joint efforts of many partners. It builds on the idea that the capacity and accomplishments of partners are augmented when they work together toward a shared goal.

The initiative leverages *First 5 LA Local Collaboratives*, and families themselves. In the process, children and families gain access to opportunities, supports, and services, so that these communities become places where all children and families are more likely to thrive. Although families referred to PFF have children at high risk of abuse or neglect, participation is voluntary. PFF “Collaboratives” develop a greater will to join with parents and other family members to keep their children safe and their families strong. PFF Collaboratives use the following parent engagement strategies:

- **Joining with parents and multi-generational family members as learning partners** – relationships with frontline workers are key to their progress. Participation of fathers, other male family members and mothers’ partners; participation of multi-generational kin; program is culturally sensitive to forums which involve multiple generations and extended family members.
- **Focusing on the strengths within families** – research about Protective Factors shows that resiliency helps to keep children safe. A resilient and positive attitude is central to achieving goals that parents set for themselves. A strengths-based approach.
- **Providing access to a comprehensive array of services and supports** – Voluntary and flexible options to fit family needs and circumstances, providing at customized and respectful in-home services; “concrete” assistance that meet families most urgent needs – such as food, emergency housings, rental assistance, essential household items, job transportation or medical care – rapidly helps to boost child safety and family well-being. Most collaboratives use “flex funds” similar to no interest loans.
- **Employing culturally respectful and inclusive practices** – PFF highlights the importance of prevention strategies that embody respect for each family’s culture, race, ethnicity, language, and gender composition. The program encompasses mutual learning activities around customs and culture. Parents also explore how local norms can be useful and integrated into their family life.



## The Right Question

The Right Question Institute offers a unique parent and family engagement strategy that has been successfully implemented in communities around the country including Austin, TX, Paterson, NJ, Indianapolis, IN, and Sacramento, CA. The Right Question Project (RQP) is a small, nonprofit organization that promotes parent and community involvement in schools by building parents' skills to effectively support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education. RQP works primarily with low- and moderate income communities that historically have been marginalized from the educational process. The Right Question Project believes that parents must be able to ask the "right questions" to be active partners in their children's education. This is the primary skill that the organization helps parents acquire. Rather than giving parents a checklist of questions, RQP helps parents identify issues that are important to them and develop their own questions. The practice of formulating questions is a centerpiece in helping parents to prioritize their issues and build effective communication skills<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The Right Question as described in Policy Brief No.3, 2004, Family Strengthening Policy Centre, <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/NHSA-ParentalInvolvementinEducation-2004.pdf>





## Key features of successful parent engagement models

The US Department of Health and Human Services funded a five-year demonstration project in multiple communities to test a new approach (*Systems of Care*) to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. The results of an evaluation identified the lessons learned<sup>17</sup>.

- **Developing policies requiring family involvement** at all levels of the child welfare agency, including enacting legislation and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that mandate family involvement, give family members roles in policymaking bodies, and ensure integration and sustainability of family involvement efforts throughout the child welfare system. These policies not only help ensure that family representatives are included in agency work groups and committees but also provide a mechanism to facilitate allocation of fiscal resources necessary to support family involvement at the systems and organizational levels. There are shared decision making and shared goals.
- **Identifying and making available dedicated full-time staff** to manage and coordinate the implementation of family involvement activities is critical to providing these programs the support and resources necessary for systemic integration of family involvement in the child welfare system.
- **Staff assigned to coordinate peer mentoring programs** should consider developing structures and mechanisms that allow for a direct feedback loop between child welfare staff, people assigned to provide mentoring services, and system-involved families. This will help ensure that case managers, supervisors, peer mentors, and families have a vehicle for voicing concerns and providing constructive feedback that facilitates continuous refinement and improvement of peer mentoring programs.
- **Information gathering activities** that include needs assessments and examining family involvement efforts in other settings and communities can help child welfare agencies design programs and activities that take into account the unique contexts and meet the particular needs of their communities.
- **Provision of training** to child welfare and other child- and family-serving agency staff can help garner support for family involvement activities by dispelling misconceptions about system-involved families and developing an environment that facilitates integration of family voices into child welfare policies, practices, and procedures.
- **Family members must have access to comprehensive training opportunities** that will help increase their capacity and enable them to succeed in their roles as peer mentors and advocates for system-involved families, and as leaders in decision-making bodies. In particular, family members must develop an understanding of the mandates and operation of the child welfare system, including roles and responsibilities of case managers, the court system, and the rights and responsibilities of families touched by the system.

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<sup>17</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services (2010). *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through System of Care Initiative*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.



- **Providing access to a comprehensive array of services and supports** – Voluntary and flexible options to fit family needs and circumstances, providing at customized and respectful in-home services; “concrete” assistance that meet families most urgent needs – such as food, emergency housings, rental assistance, essential household items, job transportation or medical care – rapidly helps to boost child safety and family well-being. Most collaboratives use “flex funds” similar to no interest loans.
- **To ensure successful family involvement** programs, agency leaders must develop clear standards and guidelines related to the requirements of peer mentor/advocate positions, supervision, and compensation.
- **Engaging multiple family members** to serve as peer mentors, Parent Partners, governance board members, committee members, and advocates is essential to ensuring that multiple family experiences inform child welfare policy decisions and guarding against burnout among participating families. To achieve this goal, agency leaders must work to build trust among families and provide opportunities where they can serve as equal partners along with child welfare and other child- and family-serving staff.
- **Evaluation of family involvement programs is critically important** to their success and sustainability. Program evaluation is an opportunity to assess implementation, modify family involvement activities to ensure they are meeting their goals, and identify the extent to which family involvement results in improved outcomes at the systems, organisational, and individual or case levels. In addition, agency leaders can conduct cost-benefit analyses to compare the resources required to operate family involvement programs to the outcomes achieved.