

Ascend at the Aspen Institute on Parent Engagement

Parent engagement is at the heart of two-generation approaches. Parents are the experts in their own lives, and therefore experts on the policies, practice, research, and systems change essential to supporting them. There are several approaches one can take in engaging parents in informing 2Gen efforts, but starting from a set of principles is critical:

Engage Parents as Experts

Parents have the clearest perspective of what families need -- they know better than anyone how and why family supportive programs and policies fall short, and what changes can be made to improve program and policy outcomes. This expertise derived from their lived experience is essential, and should be treated as such: parents should receive market-rate stipends for their time and expertise; relevant resources and background so they can prepare to give thoughtful responses to our questions; and time and space to share their feedback and recommendations.

Ensure Equity

Structural barriers such as labor market discrimination and lack of access to educational and economic opportunities affects communities of color disproportionately. As a result, while families of a wide range of geographies, education levels, and racial and ethnic background have faced economic insecurity, communities of color have been most affected. Organizations are encouraged to show the diversity of the families all over the country that face hardships and fight to overcome them without reinforcing stereotypes for one community over the other in convenings, as members of advisory groups, as experts in materials, and as the faces of publications. Additionally, consider other ways to highlight to promote equity by showcasing different family structures, abilities, and geographic origin.

Build a Partnership with Parents

Meaningful engagement throughout program and policy design, implementation and assessment is critical and helps organizations build a thought partnership with parents and families. After all, their experiences and recommendations are strategic guidance for the work of the organization. It is important to request feedback from them at each step of the way and respond to any learnings by making changes to protocols, messaging, and approach.

Create Conditions that Ensure Parent Safety, Authenticity, and Autonomy

Parents should feel honored, respected, and heard. Support parents as they think about how to tell their story but do not censor them and avoid using language that could make them feel negatively about what they have been through or how those experiences have shaped their lives and the lives of their families. Encourage them to voice their opinions but be creative about how to do this – Identify ways for introverted parents to share their thoughts if they do not feel comfortable sharing out loud. An effective strategy for this is to provide note cards and assign someone to read them out loud to address them. Additionally, if the room includes people who are not parents, be mindful of power

dynamics and check in privately with the parents to ensure they feel comfortable and respected.

Prioritize Social Capital Building

At Ascend, we call social capital the “secret sauce” of the 2Gen approach. Social capital manifests itself as peer support; contact with family, friends, and neighbors; participation in community and faith-based organizations; school and workplace contacts; leadership and empowerment programs; use of case managers or career coaches; and other social networks such as cohort models and learning communities. Such support appears to be a powerful success factor in programs that help move families beyond poverty. When engaging with Ascend or other organizations, parents have an opportunity to make connections with others in the room, participate in conversations, and ask questions. Ascend recommends that in addition to fomenting social capital while engaging with parents, organizations keep in touch with the parents they work with to engage them in future work and connect them to resources, networks, and other opportunities.

Compensate Parents Appropriately

Similar to content experts, parents are ‘contextual experts’ about how programs and policies play out for their family and in their community. It is important that practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and funders compensate parents for their expertise. Parents take time off from work and rearrange family time to be thought partners and their time and expertise deserves appropriate compensation. Stipend should first consider the actual time (hours and/or days) spent providing expertise provided to the organization. Stipend amounts should compensate parents for any out-of-pocket costs and be determined through analysis of local market costs for child care and the local living wage rate. Organizations should be transparent with parents about their compensation model and consult their finance department to explore the best provision of the stipend to ensure compliance with tax law. Through this approach, parents are appropriately compensated financially for their time and expertise, and organizations ensure that they are modeling how to value parent voices and their expertise.