

# State of Connecticut

## GENERAL ASSEMBLY



### COMMISSION ON CHILDREN



## State and Local Partnerships with Parents

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Parent Leadership Training Institute

Parents can partner with community agencies to improve child outcomes. Yet, most parents do not perceive themselves as a constituency and often lack the civic skills necessary for public impact. Similarly, most agencies do not know how to involve parents substantively in child policy or community development.

Some suggested steps for agencies to bolster parents as partners include a) a focus on civics, b) assure a family framework, c) know and practice the rudiments of change and shared leadership, d) remember yourself as a parent or family member.

### 1. Civics, Not Service

Parent leadership is about democratic practice and the family. Family civics is not a single action by a single agency, but rather a framework to bring voice to parents as a diverse and critical constituency for children.

- **Focus on civic engagement, not service, to bring parents in as partners.** Once civic tools are acquired, parent action is possible.
- **Bring together parents across differences.** Parent leadership successfully brings together families across race, class and culture for children.
- **Listen to parents.** Parents are used to being told how to parent differently and better. They are not used to being treated as authentic partners and assets;
- **Expect resistance.** When parents have the tools of public speaking, outcome data and a public policy context, they become a gauge for what works for children. Expect this to be challenging to some, as a new consumer voice arises;
- **Locate meetings with parents, when possible, in neighborhoods and civic settings such as libraries, parks and schools.** Agency may connote service. Civic locations may connote shared and equal community;.
- **Request parent participation where parent interest and skills are pivotal to resolving the policy issue.** Select a parent leader to invite parent participants to

work with you.

- **Consult parents before an action plan is begun.** Receive parent input from those who will be affected by policy, program or expansion. Base agendas on parent-defined need and language;
- **Design courses for agency staff on how to work with parents as assets.** Courses on changing family structure, family resilience, the new economy, changing demographics may lead to enhanced respect for the balancing act and tensions of contemporary families;
- **Remember that the agency is the bridge for the family.** The agency itself is not the customer. Create parent-based, rather than institution-based, policy and events.
- **Bring in civic partners for your strategic planning with parents,** such as librarians, barbers, business leaders, firemen, museum directors. Civic partners create a sense of neighborhood, equal access and a level playing field.
- **Respond substantively to parents who volunteer, facilitating their work.** Invite parents to present their findings and publish their work in your newsletters.

## 2. Provide a Family Framework and Family Supports for Meetings.

Parents are children's most important teachers, but are not often considered an asset or constituency in education, health or safety. Parents could be very strong assets. Though we rely on the customer in market choices and trends, we do not rely on the customer in child policy. Agency has largely replaced the family as the voice for children.

- **Offer parents family supports** such as dinner, child care and transportation. Assure that the stress of juggling work and family obligations does not keep parents from attending family civics events and trainings;
- **Create opportunities for parents to meet one another and for collective action.** When agencies work with parents one-on-one, the opportunity for the parent to meet other parents is diminished. This paints a vertical, individualized interpretation of issues, rather than a horizontal community analysis of gaps in services or needs;
- **Develop new messengers** that are upbeat, proud and dignified. Utilize art and life force images from the family, not service language and service messengers;
- **Collect data that looks at family life** from the lens of the parent or grandparent. Offer this information to the community;

- **Involve parents, the true customers and consumers, in policy and program choices** that impact families. Family policy is embedded in virtually every social and economic policy;
- **Design media strategy that includes parents.** Create podcasts, websites and talk shows that feature local parent and family analysis of information. Follow this input substantively so the community understands that the agency takes its lead from consumer dialogue;
- **Create environments where children see their parents as leaders.** Children are in awe of democracy and want to practice the core tenets with their parents. Children often come to family civics events with enthusiasm and reflect their understanding in many venues;
- **Assess parent skills and contacts within the neighborhood** and community. Reflect the values of your agency in community asset building and substantive family partnerships;
- **Honor family leaders.** Offer dinners, honorary membership, awards for family members who contribute to a policy. Invite the family and the family neighbors to attend the honoring.

### 3. Learn and Practice the Rudiments of Change and Leadership

There is a critical gap between parental desire to improve conditions for children and capacity. Parents are rarely encouraged to surmount barriers to leadership that are often seeded in family history or haunted by class, race or gender bias.

- **Assure that parents define goals for action.** Make parent input matter. Once parents have the skills to improve contexts and to partner for children, they are a strong consumer voice for equity, quality and access;
- **Train interested parents in leadership skills so they are not token, but serious messengers of families.** For parents to be partners on policy and program, ensure they truly understand pertinent policies, budget, the purpose and context for agency work, and the outcome data on families;
- **Do not organize parent leadership in isolation from other content and program areas regarding children.** Parent leadership is often seen as ancillary. Ask how and assure that parents have offered input into program and policy priorities you are moving forward for children;
- **Select parents to organize feedback on policies in environments where other parents can fully share their ideas.** Train parent facilitators to create parent memos with all parent feedback recorded for the agency to read and discuss;

- **Create a pyramid and widen the parent community when you can.** Assist parent leaders interested in improving child outcomes reach out to other parents;
- **Yield short-term and concrete parent successes routinely.** But don't confuse short-term with the long-term picture and goals. Chart both short and long term goals for your agency and parents as partners in change;
- **Involve agency staff members as students in civic leadership training.** It is as important to teach agency members the tools of change as it is to give parents a civic toolkit for child policy. Both must be in place to ensure family gains;
- **Learn civic skills together.** Most agency staff members do not understand public policy, budget, public speaking. Opportunities to work meaningfully with parents are missed. Discuss and teach these skills with both agency and parents together, as a learning community for shared goals.

#### 4. Remember Ourselves as Family-Honor Values, Ritual, Story

Family policy, without the family behind it, often lacks depth and public accountability. Parents can be taught the civic skills to lead deeply and gracefully, and to impact change for children and youth. Parents who are concerned with child need are concerned with child outcomes.

- **Acknowledge that we are all parents.** Parenting and the joy and challenges it brings, connect us. Enter conversations based on experiences in family life;
- **Talk normal.** Don't use professional in-house phrases such as “developmentally appropriate practice” when people care about love, nurturing and safety;
- **Develop environments that value values.** Parents care deeply about the decline of the social contract. They want vision and roots for their children. Family values to most parents imply sharing, responsibility, and caring for one another;
- **Do not be afraid of religion.** Religion is the branch many hold on to for dear life. It is often a base from which organizing can take place;
- **Allow for the psyche.** Parents’ views may vary and reflect opinions that are not always consonant with the inviting institution. Tolerate difference and move agendas and plans that incorporate multiple views, but shared values;
- **Bring in the fathers.** Fathers are critical to children’s cognition and vital to sense of self. Much public policy and program design leaves out the fathers;

- **Set up parent evaluation teams each year for agency review.** Utilize the opportunity to listen to parent language, values, goals and community expectations of the agency. Ask staff members if their values and expectations correspond with the parents they serve;
  - **Assure diversity in parent leadership.** Parents share passion for their children. They are inspired by shared narratives across culture and race for the best health, safety and learning for each and every child.
  - **Build intergenerational strategies.** The root of intergenerational means “tutelage” and “spirit.” Generations create a fabric to history. Something happens in the dialogue and events that offer story, humility, respect and wisdom. Intergenerational activity has positive effects on both staff and consumers;
  - **Allow for story, generation, history and dreams.** Where there is memory, there is also hope.
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- **Facilitate staff remembering their roles as parents and grandparents.** The more people work within the field of child and family policy there is the risk and irony of becoming less sensitive to true parent involvement and engagement in the work. Yeats line in *Among School Children* reminds us of this:

*"Oh body swayed to music, oh brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?"*