

# Creating Welcoming Tables

What does it mean to feel welcome? To feel wanted and valued? To feel included and as though your participation matters?

All of these words stir up intangible feelings, but the reality is we all know it when it's there. And we sense when it's missing.

These intangible feelings form the foundation for fostering successful family leadership. Whether it's a social gathering or a professional situation, we can sense when we have been invited to a space because someone truly wants us there or when we've been included out of a feeling of obligation. We can tell when we've been included because what we have to add is valued, needed, and wanted, or when our presence merely checks a box.

The impact that difference can make is striking. When you feel welcomed, wanted, and needed, you usually respond with excitement. You may feel honored to be included and often feel empowered to participate. You lean in to the situation and bring your best ideas and fullest self. Put simply, you feel like your presence matters and you are more likely to step in and contribute to that space.

But the reverse is also true. When a table doesn't feel welcoming and a participant feels like their participation isn't valued or wanted, it feels disempowering. It can make you feel small, dismissed, unimportant, and unappreciated. It makes you want to pull back and disengage. It makes it unlikely that you'll share your thoughts. You're more likely to feel that participating is a waste of your time and stop.

The good news is that we have a choice about the kinds of tables we create. With thought and pre-planning, we can create tables that make family leaders feel empowered and excited to be a part of the process.



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Think of a time you went to a friend's home to visit. Perhaps they went out of their way to make sure they had your favorite food or drink when you arrived. How did that make you feel? Most likely it made you feel thought of and planned for in advance. Which might have felt like a reflection of how important having you there was to them.

It's the same at decision-making tables we create. When we are thoughtful in our planning for family leaders to be involved, that feeling of care comes through and sets the stage for our future work together.

## Getting Started

Building a welcoming table starts with being clear with yourself, your staff and your partners about why you want family leaders at the table and ensuring that commitment and value is shared by all involved.

This value should come across when you extend an invitation to participate. When you invite family leaders to the table, it's important they know why you need them at the table. What is it about them, their experience, and perspective that makes their participation at the table so important? How will their participation make all the work stronger? What will be expected of them and what kind of support can they expect? *Materials such as the model invitation and model Family Partnership Agreement can go a long way in making family leaders feel valued from the start.*

Once a family leader agrees to join the shared effort, it's important to dedicate the time to getting to know them and helping them get to know you, your table, and organization and others they are likely to see at your table. Having a dedicated mentor who will support the family leader throughout the entire process is important. In those first one-to-ones, it's about getting to know each other, sharing context about the table and its goals, and identifying any barriers the family leader might have in fully participating. *For more information on these steps, please refer to the Supporting and Empowering Family Leaders factsheet and checklist, the Art of the One-to-One factsheet, and the barrier assessment checklist.*

Once you've identified your family leaders and spent some time getting to know them and any barriers they may face, you're ready to start planning for your first meeting.



## Preparing for Your First Meeting

There will be many considerations that you make when planning your first and subsequent meetings. It is good to regularly assess the following when planning your meetings as times, locations and type of meeting may change. It is useful to consult the Barrier Assessment Checklist as a guide to ensure you are considering the needs of parents all along the way.

**TIME:** Picking a date and time is usually the first step in meeting planning. To ensure family leader participation, it's important to gather their input on what dates and times work for them as well as the professionals at the table. Because family leaders are often juggling non-related jobs and caregiving responsibilities, the group may need to be open to meeting during lunch or outside of business hours in order to be inclusive.

**LOCATION:** Picking a location now may also mean deciding between a virtual or in-person meeting depending on the comfort-level of your participants and the situation in your community.

**If you go with virtual, some questions to consider include:**

- Have you asked family leaders explicitly about what their technology needs are?
- Have you considered access to broadband internet services that might prohibit remote access?
- Do you have a mitigation strategy for family leaders who do not have reliable internet access?
- Do you have a strategy to support family leaders who do not have a high level of confidence in their ability to use the technology effectively?

**If you choose to meet in-person, some questions include:**

- Have you considered if this space will be a trigger for families based on prior negative experiences? For some families, Department of Social Services buildings create concern.
- Is this a space that welcomes all people?
- Have you researched the space to ensure that there is not a negative relationship with communities of color?
- Is the space located in or near a facility that might be concerning to people with limited immigration status, such as immigrant detention facility, ICE office, or law enforcement facility?
- Have you considered spaces where families might already feel comfortable or have a prior positive relationship?
- Can you accommodate individuals who might have unique mobility needs?
- Are the family leaders traveling a large distance to the meetings?
- Is the location accessible by multiple modes of transportation?
- Are you offering a remote option for families?
- If you're providing child care onsite, is there a safe space in which to do that?

## **CHILD CARE, TRANSPORTATION, TRANSLATION, MEALS:**

As you plan for your meeting, it's important to address all the barriers that might have been identified in your one-to-one conversations. This may include planning to address child care and transportation needs, securing translation for materials and during the meeting, and more. If you plan to provide food, you should also check to ensure if any allergies, religious dietary restrictions or sensitivities exist that need to be accounted for in ordering.

**MATERIALS AND AGENDA:** Having materials far enough in advance to allow family leaders time to review and seek clarification enables them to feel prepared to fully participate when they come to the meeting. A few things to consider as you prepare materials:

- Be mindful of literacy levels, jargon, acronyms, and allow ample time for translation.
- Make sure your agenda is realistic. Overly full agendas don't allow time for meaningful discussion, questions, and stifle conversation when there is not sufficient time allocated for everyone to contribute.
- Include background documents that are helpful to have for context.
- If there are programs or acronyms that are commonly referred to, consider creating a glossary.
- Family leaders find it helpful to have reference sheets that include name, a photo, and a brief biography of other participants, and contact information. Biographies can, however, be intimidating and cause some family leaders to question their own expertise and whether they "belong" at the table. Consider asking all members to complete a short biography form in advance of the first meeting. Instead of sharing their full professional biography, ask each participant to share:
  - Name
  - Role (this could be family leader or organization and title)
  - What they hope to contribute to the table
  - Perhaps a silly question like favorite food, dog or cat person, etc.

**PRE-MEETING WITH MENTOR:** Once materials have been sent out and family leaders have had time to review them, mentors should schedule a brief check-in with each family leader. At this check-in, the mentor will see if the family leader has any questions or concerns about the materials or the upcoming meeting itself. This ensures that the family leader feels supported and that they are fully prepared for the meeting.



## During the meeting

Whether a meeting feels welcoming will ultimately depend on a mix of the tangible things you can plan for and the intangible energy that is present in the space. Being warm and friendly, using welcoming and open body language as you greet each participant is an important place to start. While this is more difficult in virtual spaces, it is still possible and makes a difference.

If you are needing translation, ensure this is set up and tested ahead of time and that instructions for all participants are provided at the beginning of the meeting. If there is an interpreter in an in-person space, make sure you are aware of how to speak to allow for the translation and/or interpretation services and how much time you need to allocate to ensure interpretation flows smoothly, and that those utilizing any translation and or interpretations services can actively participate.

During the meeting itself, there are a few components that help spaces feel welcoming and accessible for everyone:

- **Welcome:** Taking time to welcome everyone to the space and thank them for making the time to participate.
- **Revisit the purpose:** It can be helpful to take a moment to remind the entire group of the common purpose/ goals that brings the group together. This often serves as a bit of a centering moment for people as they enter the space.
- **Introduce yourselves:** Ask everyone to introduce themselves with their name, role/ title, pronouns, and an answer to a random question like favorite color, season, food, or some other question everyone can answer quickly. At in-person meetings, always have nametags for everyone.
- **Icebreaker:** Icebreakers are helpful to get people talking and warm the space. This is especially true when the icebreaker is in some way related to the work you're doing. For example, share a memory of a happy time with or as a child. It can be your own childhood memory, a memory with your own child, with a child in your life, or a child you serve. Another might be share someone who inspires you. You can do this in the full group, breakout rooms, or pairs. The main point is everyone talks and people share a bit of themselves.
- **Group norms:** Create group norms at your first meeting and revisit them at the beginning of every meeting.
- **Housekeeping:** This may include directions to bathrooms, reminders that if children, pets, etc, pop onscreen that's ok, and that participants should take care of their needs as their own needs as they arise.
- Highlight different types of expertise and their value:
  - Tables that involve family leaders are often made of a mix of participants with professional expertise and lived expertise. Professional experts can bring a more abstract lens, data driven perspectives, and expertise gained from the implementation side of a program. Family leaders can bring stories, lived experiences, and the perspective of what it is like to navigate programs. Both types of expertise are needed in developing programs/ policies that are effective and meet their intended goals. Key to fostering family leadership is helping both professional experts and family leaders to see family representatives as the experts they are.

- **Decision-making:** It's important that the group collectively agrees on a decision-making process early on and then revisits it regularly to ensure that it is still meeting the needs of the group. If not, the group can together decide to change or adjust. Various models of shared decision-making exist. The important piece is that it is constructed in such a way that family leaders feel their voices and perspectives are heard and reflected in the final decisions reached.

- **Making space:** This will likely be included in some way in the group norms. But it is particularly important for professionals who are used to sitting at these types of tables to consciously be aware of how much space we are taking. It can be helpful to encourage participants to practice "step up, step back" (if you are someone who often talks a lot, remember to pause and step back to make space for others) or "me, then three" (where every time you talk you try to make space for three after you before speaking again). However, it is important to avoid calling on family leaders to speak when they are not voluntarily speaking up. This can put them on the spot when they are not ready/ prepared to share. Instead, consider using the Elevating Voice protocol (see tool) to make sure everyone has a space to participate when discussing a specific topic should they choose to do so. It's also important for the facilitator to be aware of who is talking and pivoting/ redirecting as needed.



- **Check-ins:** Throughout the meeting it's helpful to do quick check-ins to ensure everyone understands what's being discussed and has an opportunity to ask any questions. It's also helpful to do temperature checks on how everyone is feeling about how things are going. In person this can be done by using thumbs as a barometer. In virtual spaces, you might consider asking people to share emojis. The purpose is simply to make sure you have a sense where everyone is at and can adjust as necessary.

- **Acronym keeper:** Identify a person from a partner organization to be the "acronym keeper". This person is on the lookout for when acronyms or jargon are used that everyone at the table might not understand. When that happens, they take a moment to interject and clarify. This is done in such a way that it doesn't feel like calling out the fact that a family leader might not know what something means or that a professional was in the wrong for using it, but rather it normalizes the importance of ensuring that everyone at the table understands what's being discussed.

## After the meeting

It's helpful for mentors to have a one-to-one meeting scheduled with each family leader as soon as possible following the large group meeting. This meeting can be done via phone or zoom and its purpose is to debrief the meeting while thoughts are still fresh. Questions covered should include:

- How did you feel about the meeting?
- Did you feel able to participate?
- Did you feel as though your voice was heard?
- Were there things you need clarified? Where do you need more information?
- What would you like to see done differently next time?

Welcoming tables don't just happen on their own. They are rooted in an understanding of the value of having family leaders at the table and require intentional thought and planning. But they form the foundation of successful family leadership and ultimately lead to better outcomes for children and families.