

Dos and Do Nots for Engaging Family Leaders

(FROM FAMILY LEADERS THEMSELVES!)

The best tips for engaging family leaders come directly from these leaders themselves. Below is a compilation of suggestions shared by family leaders from their own experience.

DO:

- Always invite family leaders to the table when discussing issues that impact families.
- Meet family leaders where they are by:
 - providing interpretation and translation for all type of materials
 - writing at reading levels where family leaders of all education levels can understand
 - providing child care or support to secure child care
 - offering dinner or food, especially when meeting during meal times
 - finding out what times work for family leaders and adjust to ensure they can participate
 - being thoughtful about locations in terms of transportation, comfort/safety of the space
 - ensuring family leaders have and know how to navigate any needed technology
- Get to know the family leader before the meeting, not minutes before or during the meeting – ask about their personal story, their family dynamic, etc. Be willing to be vulnerable and share yourself.
- Think about family leaders as a team member and a partner, not a token or a check box.
- Try to always have more than one family leader present. This reduces the pressure to feel like you are expected to speak for all parents.
- Value the trust, the relationships, the time, the dedication of family leaders.



- Encourage family leaders, motivate them, remind them their input is important. Many family leaders are struggling or have struggled. Encouragement is welcome and appreciated.

- Stand alongside family leaders to support them. Allow family leaders to ask questions, admit what they don't know, navigate options and solutions with you. Take turns "driving" as you navigate together.

- Use nametags and provide relatable bios with pictures when possible. Often all

the experts at tables know each other already and the family leader can feel like the odd one out or overwhelmed by the number of new faces to learn.

- Check in during meetings to make sure family leaders understand what's happening and have the information they need to fully engage.

- Follow up with family leaders after the meeting to see how they felt, answer any questions.

- Create a culture where family leader expertise and lived experiences are valued. Everyone is an expert on their experience.

- Commit to being respectful of diverse experiences and backgrounds and ensure this happens.

- Making sure family leaders know what to expect and what is expected of them before the meeting.

- Provide background information. Don't assume family leaders know what programs exist, their history, or how they operate.

- Be willing to go slow. There is no stupid question.

- Avoid jargon.

- Allow time for family leaders to express their thoughts.

- Acknowledge the vulnerability and risk parents are taking. Family leaders often worry that being honest can have repercussions for themselves and their families. Create internal systems to make this a safe environment.

- If virtual, create group expectations that it's ok if a child pops on screen or a family leader needs to multitask or turn their camera off to participate.



- Recognize that storytelling can be emotional and can add additional trauma. Be prepared to provide support as needed.
- Commit to being willing to be uncomfortable and not be defensive. It's okay to be uncomfortable. It's not ok to question a parent's unique authentic experience because it's not what you want to hear or wasn't what you expected.
- If group work is required or done during these meetings, it's encouraged to have another person with whom this family leader is comfortable in the same group for the first time. Trust is developed over time.

DO NOT:

- Invite family leaders only because it looks good on paper or to check a box for a grant.
- Invite family leaders without having or providing what they need to be prepared and able to fully participate.
- Create spaces where family leaders are supposed to be seen but not really heard. Family leaders have too many things going on to be invited with the expectation they will be statues.
- Underestimate family leaders.
- Sit far away from the family leaders in a space when you are their mentor or they only know you.
- Put parents on the spot.
- Share a family leader's story without their permission in any space. Family leaders need to be able to be in charge of how and when they share their story. What is shared needs to be held in confidence unless there is explicit permission.
- Use abbreviations during the meeting unless you provide a glossary for family leaders beforehand, and even then it should be avoided.
- Make people codeswitch, or speak in a way different than they normally would, to be heard and respected. Create a space where people can safely speak authentically and have their contribution heard.
- Tokenize. A family leader can't speak for every family. And you need several family leaders so no individual feels the pressure of speaking for everyone.
- Patronize family leaders - they are your partners in making change.

NEXT STEPS

As organizations and individuals dedicated to creating welcoming tables and supporting authentic family leadership, we can take the feedback provided by family leaders to create experiences where everyone feels valued and able to make a meaningful contribution.

Tools for meeting the needs and addressing the concerns raised here by the family leaders can be found in the materials provided as part of this toolkit. These tools can be grouped into four broad themes as described below.



Developing shared understanding, commitment, and pre-planning

Being clear on why you want and need family leaders at the table and making sure everyone involved is bought into this approach is essential to laying a strong foundation and ensuring families feel valued.

The tool *Family Engagement and Leadership: What It Is and Why it Matters* lays out what the difference is between engagement and leadership while the tool *Pre-Planning for Effective Family Leadership and Engagement* and its accompanying checklist addresses how to build a shared commitment and how to budget, create policies, and provide resources to ensure that a strong framework for family leadership is in place from the beginning.

Recruiting and supporting family leaders

Much of the feedback shared by family leaders speaks to their need to be invited to tables in ways that are thoughtful and recognize their individual worth, the importance of building trust with mentors and members of the group, and having what they need to feel supported.

You can find resources related to recruitment in the *Recruitment* tool and the *Sample Introduction and Invitation Emails*.

The *Family Leadership and Engagement Initiative Partnership Agreement* is a useful resource for helping family leaders know what would be expected of them while also making clear the support they can expect in return. This emphasizes that this is a partnership with the family leader while clearly outlining expectations for both parties.

The Art of Effective One to Ones: Building Relationships & Growing Trust and the *Supporting and Empowering Family Leaders* tool and checklist provide skills and guidance that can be helpful as you initiate and grow the

relationship between the family leader and their mentor while creating an ongoing cycle of support. These documents also address several of the concerns family leaders raised about having and understanding the materials, having someone who will have their backs, and having a safe, judgement-free place to ask questions.

Addressing barriers

Several of the tips mentioned by family leaders refer to barriers that they may face in fully participating. You can anticipate and plan for overcoming these barriers by using the *Pre-Planning for Effective Family Leadership and Engagement* tool and its accompanying checklist and the *Barrier Assessment Checklist*. Planning to address barriers, talking with family leaders early about what challenges they anticipate experiencing, and circling back often to revisit and address barriers as they arise will go a long way to addressing these concerns.

Creating welcoming, respectful, and safe tables

A number of the flags raised by family leaders refer to the processes and group culture that exist within the meetings themselves. From things like having materials and knowing what to expect, to creating a culture that respects and makes space for the contributions of family leaders of all backgrounds, to issues of vulnerability and confidentiality, the message that family leaders share with us is that the framework and guidelines we create for working together in meetings will have a big impact on how comfortable they feel in participating.

Tools such as *Group Agreements: The Cornerstone of Group Dynamics*, the *Elevating Voice Continuum: A Guide to Equitable Facilitation*, *Creating Welcoming Tables*, and *Decision-Making with Family Leaders* all provide suggestions for practical tools you can use in creating spaces where family leaders can thrive as full partners.

Listen to Family Leaders

Whenever family leaders trust us enough to share their hopes and concerns, it's up to us to hear what they're saying and commit to meeting them where they are. When we ensure family leaders have what they need to meaningfully participate, we are also investing in better outcomes for the entire process.

Our hope is that these tools will help you make that a reality in the spaces where you work.