

# Family Leaders:

## FEELING AND FLEXING OUR POWER TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Nobody knows the needs of families as well as families themselves. Families are directly impacted by decisions on programs and policies that are made in our communities, at the state capital, and in Washington, DC, but don't always have a chance to give feedback on how these decisions affect their families' lives.

Decision makers and program leaders need to hear from YOU! As a family expert, you can provide a unique perspective, needed feedback, and creative ideas to impact the decisions that affect families.

Family leaders bring stories, lived experiences, and know what it's like to navigate programs and policies. Professional experts bring a more abstract lens, data, and knowledge from implementing programs. Both types of expertise are needed to develop programs and policies that are successful and effective.



### **By listening to family leaders like you, decision makers can get a better sense of:**

- What families need
- How programs and policies actually work
- Where programs and policies are succeeding and what unexpected benefits might exist
- Where there are barriers and challenges that could be addressed
- How different families experience the program or policy
- What it means for families when programs/ policies don't work
- What improvements could be made
- How this work overlaps with other needs or experiences of families



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**As a family leader, you may have lots of reasons for volunteering to help bring family voices to decision-making tables:**

- You or your family may have benefited from a program and want to support it.
- You may have had challenges with a program or getting your child what they needed, so you hope that your participation will change things so other families don't have to experience what you did.
- You may believe families' voices should matter in making decisions about programs that affect families.
- Or you may want to be a voice for other parents and family members who are unable to be there but need to be heard.

Whatever your reason for being here, your voice is incredibly important in building better programs and policies. Whether this is the first time you've sat at a decision-making table or you're an experienced family advocate, your perspective is powerful and greatly needed!

As you enter this new role, here are a few tips you may find helpful.

**Recognize your own expertise, but don't feel pressured to speak for all families.**

Your lived experiences bring value that is critical in creating programs and policies that meet families where they are and effectively meets their needs. Your voice is every bit as important as that of those with professional or academic expertise – don't be afraid to use it!

At the same time, you don't need to feel the pressure of having to speak for "all" families. You can't. None of us can. We all bring different experiences and perspectives to the table. While it's important when possible to not just focus on what your family experienced but rather how other families may face similar challenges, you shouldn't feel the pressure of having to represent all families in a space.

If you have heard feedback on a topic from other families, you should feel free to share that information. If you do, treat the other family's story with confidentiality the same way you might want your own story treated. Leave out details that might make them identifiable unless they have explicitly given you permission to share their story.

**Never be afraid to ask questions.**

You don't have to be an expert in the policy or the program. No one expects you to be. You bring a different insight into how the policy or program functions in practice than what others can bring.



But it can be helpful for you to know background information about the program and how it operates. No one expects you to know that coming in. That's why you have a mentor. Don't be afraid to ask. There are no stupid questions. And, chances are, if you don't know, someone else in the room doesn't know either. Don't ever be afraid to ask for more information or clarification. You may need to ask about the program or policy, the history, or what an abbreviation or a word means.

Don't be afraid to rely on your mentor. Developing a team relationship with your mentor is the goal. Decide what form of communication works best for the two of you. Ask questions and go over materials so you feel comfortable and confident chiming in at the meeting.

### **Draw from your personal experience to make change.**

Try to take your own experience and think about it beyond the personal ways it impacted you or your family. Expand your thinking out to consider the larger change you'd like to see made to benefit not just your family but all families served by the program or impacted by the policy.

For example, imagine you are a family who qualified for pre-K but struggled because the program could not provide transportation. You can talk about how it harmed your family personally – perhaps you had to turn down an available slot or your child missed more days than you would have liked because of transportation challenges.

There is also the broader system question. If this challenge impacted your family in this way, how might it be impacting other families in the community? Have you heard from other families in the community about how not having transportation provided may have impacted them? What would you like to see done differently in the program so other families don't experience the same challenges you do?

Our individual experiences are powerful. And when multiple families share experiencing the same types of challenges with a program or policy, their stories reflect a broader problem that we can fix through systemic solutions. Storytelling can both identify opportunities for change and help create it.

Whatever your experience, sharing it can be helpful in ensuring those making the decisions understand the impact of their choices and become aware of ways decisions might be improved to better meet the needs of families.

### **As you come to the table, evaluate your own experience related to the topics being covered. Ask yourself:**

- What worked well?
- What didn't work and might not work for other families as well?
- What could have made it a more positive experience or created better outcomes?
- How did your experience make you feel?
- What would you like to see change?

## Grow your network and skills.

While you are meeting an important need in your community by participating in decision making tables on family-related issues, this is also an opportunity to grow your own network and skills.

Stories are powerful and we know they connect people. As you get to know other participants, think about whose stories make you feel more connected or

interest you and reach out to them. In addition to your mentor, others you meet at the table can also help answer any questions you may have. Many family leaders share that one of the most beneficial aspects of being part of these kinds of efforts is the friendships they build with other family leaders or community partners that can last beyond the tables themselves.

These types of experiences can also help you develop new skills and connections that may be helpful in meeting your own professional goals or advocating for your own family. If there are specific skills you hope to develop, mention them to your mentor during a check in.

## Be committed to the work while also taking care of yourself.

Make every effort to be at the meetings you have committed to attending. But also recognize that life can and will happen. The best laid plans can easily go astray, especially when you are already spread thin balancing multiple roles. When things happen like you unexpectedly get called into work or your child gets sick, don't beat yourself up. Let your mentor know as soon as you know and make arrangements to catch up when you can.

If you are experiencing challenges in participating such as child care challenges, time challenges, difficulty with interpretation, problems with technology or internet access, let your mentor know so they can help you overcome those barriers to be able to fully participate. If you don't have what you need to be ready and successful for the meeting, let your mentor know as soon as possible. Don't wait. The key here is communication.

Don't feel pressured to share your story when you don't want to share it. It's your story to tell. You own it and have control over if, when, and how you share it. No one should ever pressure you to share your story or share it without your permission. If this happens, talk to your mentor.





Sharing stories can involve reliving trauma. Don't harm yourself by telling your story. And if you experience trauma related to your involvement in the table or this work, let your mentor know so they can support you and provide resources.

If you have concerns about safety related to your participation in the group or concerns over repercussions of how being honest in the group might impact your family or your child, let your mentor know. You should never feel unsafe at a table or concerned that what you share may negatively impact you or your family.



### **Be authentically yourself.**

You were invited to this table because you have an important perspective and what you have to share is valuable and needed. Don't feel like you need to change who you are in any way. Don't ever be embarrassed or ashamed of your story. We all have unique stories that brought us to this place.

Sharing your story can be powerful. It can also be incredibly difficult, and it's always okay if you don't feel comfortable sharing for any reason.

By showing up at this table, you are already taking a powerful step toward making our communities and world better for kids and families, and we are grateful for whatever you are able to do.