

# Family Engagement and Leadership: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

## **“Nothing about us without us.”**

You may have heard the phrase, “Nothing about us without us.” Originating in the disability activism community, this concept is equally relevant to an authentic commitment to family leadership and should be a cornerstone for all policy making that impacts children and families.

Families look different and have a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. In developing engagement and leadership opportunities and inviting family input, it is essential that the definition of family leaders be drawn widely enough to encompass the diversity of relationships that exist in families. The individuals engaged may be parents, step-parents, grandparents, kinship care providers, foster

parents, or anyone in a parenting role. Having a variety of perspectives can be beneficial because individuals may experience a program or policy differently depending on their various vantage points.

When making decisions that affect families, decision makers in both the programmatic and legislative spheres should from the outset create opportunities to hear from family leaders and to engage them as part of the decision-making process.

### **So, what does this mean in practice? It means:**

- Recognizing family leaders’ expertise and treating them as more than a checkbox or a rubber stamp.
- Creating multiple avenues of engagement for family leaders to weigh in and for their voices to be heard.
- Inviting ALL family leaders to the table-not just parents/caregivers of convenience, but digging hard for diverse community representation and minimizing barriers to their meaningful participation.
- Creating welcoming, empowering tables where family leaders are actually heard and their input matters.
- Developing decision-making processes that incorporate family leader input.



Family leaders' time is valuable. Whether you have meaningful engagement depends on the intentionality of the table and the degree to which family leader input is valued and planned for in the decision-making process.

## Why does family engagement and leadership matter?

Family leaders are experts on their own lives and experiences and their perspective is necessary to create effective programs and systems. Through including family leaders' voices and perspectives, decision makers can gain a better sense of:

- How does the program/system work in practice?
- Where are programs/systems succeeding? Unexpected benefits?
- Where are the barriers? What are the challenges?
- How do different families experience the program/system?
- What does it mean for families when the program/system doesn't work?
- What improvements could be made?
- How does this work intersect with other needs/experiences of families?

Whatever their reasons for wanting to participate, family leaders are often stretched thin with many trying to balance breadwinning along with sometimes multiple caregiving needs. This means it is incumbent on organizations to remove as many barriers to participation as possible and proactively plan and budget to support meaningful family leadership and engagement.

There is an Indian parable of a group of blind men who had never before encountered an elephant. They try to describe the elephant by having each man feel and describe a different body part such as the ear, leg, tusk, tail. Obviously each man had a different perception, each rooted in a different experience. But it was not until all the pieces were put together could they develop a complete description of the elephant. It is much the same in decision-making about programs and policies affecting families; without the family perspective, the picture is incomplete.



## Recognizing Family Leader Expertise

Key to fostering family leadership is helping both professional experts and family leaders to see family representatives as the experts they are. Family leaders can bring stories, lived experiences, and the perspective of what it is like to navigate programs. Professional experts can bring a more abstract lens, data driven perspectives, and expertise gained from the implementation side of a program. Both types of expertise are needed in developing programs/policies that are effective and meet their intended goals.

A critical role of the staff mentor is to ensure that the professional experts understand the value of family experts and hear their feedback in the spirit in which it is intended and without being defensive if it is different than what they expected. The other side is that the mentor must ensure family leaders understand how valuable their participation is to the success of the program and the ways in which their input will be incorporated in decisions so they will be encouraged to fully participate.

## Engagement vs Leadership

In 2019, with funding from the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative and support from the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), and a 12-person Accelerator Team, the State Family Engagement and Leadership Coalition was formed as a 74-person coalition of NC early childhood providers from both state and local levels, as well as parents. This cross-sector group met consistently over six months to develop and refine the guiding principles and concepts featured in *NC's Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework*, developed to guide improvement practices as well as policy and systems change to support early childhood systems that are family-centered and equitable, serving children in the context of their families and communities.

As described in *NC's Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework*, family engagement and family leadership are related but distinct points along the family engagement continuum

**Family engagement** is the process of building genuine relationships with families to help children grow and thrive. Family engagement means doing with—not for—families.

- At the program level, family engagement is an interactive process centered around providers building mutually respectful, positive, goal-oriented relationships with parents, with shared responsibility for the success of children.
- At the systems levels, family leaders partner with agencies to provide feedback on services, help with program planning and improvement, and advance a family-centered approach within rules, regulations, and service delivery.
- At both the program and state systems levels, providers work together with families, professionals, and community partners to advance equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

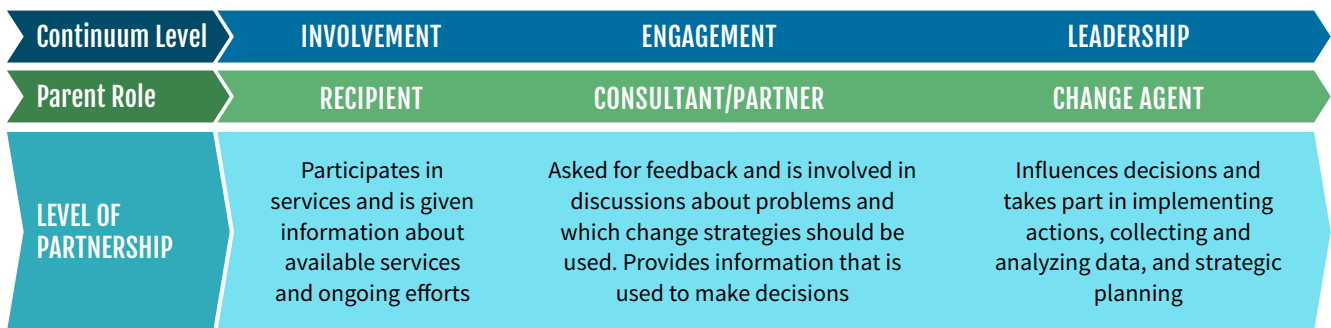
*Adapted from Head Start/National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement [childcareta.acf.hhs.gov](http://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov)*

**Family leadership** occurs when parents and family members have the knowledge, skills, and opportunity to represent a “parent voice” to help shape their communities, programs, and policies at the local or state level.

Family leaders help early childhood programs, schools, social services, health care providers, and other entities become more responsive to and supportive of children and families. They may be parents, grandparents, kinship care providers, foster parents, or anyone in a parenting role. They are speaking from their own experience and are not speaking or acting in a staff role for an organization or other entity. Every family member has the potential to become a family leader. Example roles include:

- Ambassadors who share information about early intervention, early childhood; education, or health services through community outreach or social media;
- Activists who champion community improvements for young children, such as practices and policies that support family well-being and equity;
- Change makers who identify problems and help create systemic improvements in early learning, health, and development. *Adapted from Parents Anonymous www.parentsanonymous.org*

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM



*NC Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework*

## Guiding Principles

### RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Families experience responsive relationships with the people who work with them, in which family story and partnership is valued

### SHARED DECISIONS

Families are equal partners and active participants in goals and decisions about their child’s well-being, development and learning.

### WELCOMING ENVIRONMENTS

Spaces are created to feel welcoming and safe for families

### COMMUNICATION

Communication is a two-way street, easy to understand, and ongoing

### ADVOCACY

Families are empowered to advocate for themselves and their communities

### PROGRAM PLANNING

Families help with the planning and improvement process of programs

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Partner organizations are held accountable on how well they include families in their self-assessment and planning

*NC Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework*

# Conditions for Success

## How Do Agencies Support Family Engagement and Leadership?

Four “Conditions for Success” have been identified for successful family engagement to take place in systems, agencies and communities . Agencies can use the descriptions under each condition to evaluate their organization’s present effectiveness or to shape their vision for family engagement.

*Adapted from: Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit*

### FAMILY-CENTERED

- Agencies prioritize engaging families as partners as a central strategy to achieving positive, equitable and sustainable outcomes for children and families.
- Agencies and communities intentionally engage a “mindset shift” in which all community members view families as capable and engaged partners, creating an
- environment of mutual trust. Parents are valued for their skills, expertise, knowledge and lived experiences.
- Agency teams consistently examine their own policies, procedures, values and implicit biases in order to promote a shift in power from agency-centered to family-centered.
- Families and staff work together to design, implement, and evaluate agency programming, policies, and practices.

### EQUITY-DRIVEN

- Agencies make it a priority to understand families’ experiences and break down barriers created by structural and individual racism and other types of discrimination.
- Agencies prioritize addressing bias, racial equity, cultural competency and inclusion by building it into professional development, policies, practices, and operations.
- Equity is distinguished from equality in its meaning and intent.
- Agencies and policies are culturally responsive: families representing the diversity of the community are actively included, share power, and act to support positive change.



## COLLABORATIVE

- Agencies make program decisions with, not for, families, by partnering with families and parent-led organizations from the start and continually.
- Agencies and parents work together to create feedback loops and identify opportunities to advocate for better policies and practices.
- Agencies collaborate with parent-led organizations for recruitment, training, and support of parent/family leadership.
- Agencies across sectors intentionally align with each other around high-quality family engagement standards and practices.

## TRANSPARENT

- Agencies ensure families have access to information and supports that make it possible for them to fully participate and influence agency and system-level change processes.
- Agencies ensure key materials related to decision-making processes are available and accessible to family leaders in formats, language and literacy level that they can understand.
- Family leaders partner in all phases of agency and systems-level change, from brainstorming to ongoing evaluation of programs and practices.
- Formal boards and committees include at least 20% family leaders.
- Agencies consistently communicate to families that their input is valid and how their engagement influences decisions.

*NC Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework*

