



Parent Voice and Power in System Change: Ideas for Meaningful Constituent Involvement

Parents and youth with lived experience with the child welfare system best understand its problems and potential solutions and are leading movements for change. Parents and youth who have been directly impacted by systems, as well as impacted communities, can provide important insight into child welfare policy and practice design -- insight that may feel counterintuitive to professionals without lived system experience.

How and when decision-makers, policymakers and researchers include impacted parents and youth in problem-solving makes a big difference in whether they are able to contribute effectively. Research shows that ideas outside of a groups' norms are not easily heard. Without intentional planning and partnership, parents and youth who have felt powerless in facing the system individually and may have little professional experience will be less likely to be heard by professionals working within the system.

Unfortunately, too often, those impacted are engaged in superficial or token roles, rather than being recognized as valued and respected partners with knowledge and expertise that is essential to addressing systemic problems. In the past, Rise was frequently asked to host or join focus groups run by professionals who seemed to do little more than cherry-pick quotes from the discussion to bolster their existing perspective. Parents also were sought out to join committees whose real work took place outside of meetings, without their involvement.

We hope professionals who are beginning to seek involvement and feedback from impacted parents and youth can use this handout to choose more meaningful methods for learning about valuable new perspectives and building the power of constituents in policymaking and decision-making. This handout can be a resource for reflection as you partner with constituents in identifying problems and solutions. It may be used as a discussion tool to increase transparency during planning and debriefing, as you consider together the roles of professionals without lived experience and the roles of impacted parents and youth working on a specific project.

We also hope this handout helps organizations led by or serving impacted parents and youth to negotiate for meaningful inclusion in which you are valued as partners. At Rise, we no longer participate in partnerships that lack structures for including parents throughout the process or with ineffective, tokenizing forms of inclusion.

Please note: The word "*professional*" is used in this handout to refer to professionals *without* the expertise of lived experience, even though we recognize that impacted parents and youth are professionals, as well. Hiring parents and youth with lived experience can be an important step systems and agencies can take to strengthen their work -- to more compassionately and effectively serve parents and youth. Although we focus on parents, most of the considerations, suggestions and ideas can apply to impacted youth, as well.

Timing

When do you engage impacted parents? There are multiple opportunities for parent expertise to strengthen the work, throughout every process, from beginning to end:

- Conceiving of the problem that you're trying to solve and understanding its impact
- Identifying and exploring potential solutions to those problems
- Building the team that will address those problems
- Conducting research and learning more about problems and potential solutions
- Designing tools and strategies to solve the problem you've identified
- Implementing solutions / tools / strategies
- Gathering feedback on the effectiveness of the solution and on the process

Intensity and Roles

How much do you bring parents in and in what roles? There are many possibilities:

- Begin more inclusive work by hiring impacted parents to be involved in training leadership and staff on how to intentionally include parents' voices.
- Hire a parent to provide the invitations, reminder calls and reminder emails to other parents. The parent can send parents reminder calls and emails to express that you are looking forward to working together and can continue that messaging throughout the project.
- Hire and train parent leaders to run focus groups and present their feedback or to partner with professionals to co-facilitate focus groups. Provide mentorship and facilitator training to parent leaders.
- Loop back repeatedly throughout a project to share how feedback is being incorporated and get feedback on whether you're getting it right.
- Include 2 or more parents as advisors on a project otherwise run by professionals.
- Carefully prepare 2 or more parents to participate throughout a project otherwise run by professionals.
- Build and support a parent council to advise and provide ongoing input and feedback on multiple projects.
- Create a parent subcommittee that meets on its own, with 2 or more leaders from that group participating throughout the project and functioning as liaisons to bring the subcommittee's perspective into the project.
- Partner with a constituent leadership organization and carefully plan participation or co-leadership of some of their members in a project.
- Create parent-professional partnerships, with work co-led by parent-professional pairs.
- Professionals and impacted parents can co-present proposals, findings, and plans to leadership, partners, community members and policymakers.
- Hire and train a parent to lead a project that includes professionals and other constituents.

Power

How do you build conditions of safety and avoid reinforcing oppressive system dynamics? People do

better in structured groups that intentionally build members' trust and set clear goals. Here are some ideas and practices that can help:

- Set a positive tone by warmly welcoming parents in invitations and when parents enter the organization.
- Provide information about the bigger picture and overall goals of any project.
- Share detailed agendas in advance of meetings so parents can prepare.
- Ask for specific input and give parents time and support to prepare their feedback.
- Provide different options for providing feedback (verbal or written, in a group or individually, etc.).
- Before meetings, one or two professionals should pre-meet with parents so the professionals can learn from, process, and be prepared to amplify the parents' input and perspectives. Parents and professionals can agree on simple cues to help professionals create space for parents in meetings. Pre-meeting can help prepare professionals to amplify what parents want heard and align their comments with parents' priorities. This practice can help prevent parents from becoming isolated or siloed.
- Engage parents in planning meetings, including identifying and addressing potential barriers to participation.
- Ask parents what a safe, comfortable meeting space looks like for them. Take steps to meet in a space that works for them and to consider their comfort.
- Plan so that parents outnumber professionals if possible. Keep in mind that parents may still feel uncomfortable even if they outnumber professionals if other safety issues and power dynamics are not addressed.
- Encourage everyone to take equal turns so participation doesn't default to those who are most comfortable or experienced in holding power. Use circle practices that give everyone an opportunity to take a turn, with the option to "pass".
- Ask questions to be sure you understood what was said. Ask for clarification or confirmation as needed. Review next-steps and decisions at the end.
- Support parents in asserting their views and sharing their knowledge without speaking in detail about their individual stories. Prepare and provide resources to assist parents in deciding what parts of their story to share with whom.
- Create space for disagreement and respect differing or opposing viewpoints.
- Let parents know what actions you will take based on their feedback and why you will not take other actions.
- Plan to meet again so parents a) know that their feedback had an impact and b) can provide new input on how feedback has been put to use, c) have a chance to ask about feedback that was dropped.
- Create opportunities for parents to debrief and provide feedback about the process. Do they feel heard? Safe? Informed? What do they want to see change?
- Depending on the topics and nature of the research or roles, be prepared to connect parents to additional peer support and healing opportunities.
- Give parents proper credit, recognition and compensation for their work and ideas (while respecting any confidentiality agreements).

If you are using this handout as a discussion tool, you can talk together about what you want to add to this list!