



Engaging Families in Policy Change

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ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Families' lived experience gives them critical expertise in the services and support they need for their children to thrive. Too often, the policymaking process fails to authentically include those who are most directly impacted by policies designed to serve infants, toddlers and their families. Centering their voices in policy design, advocacy and implementation results in policies that are more reflective of the needs of children and families — and therefore more effective. Recognizing the expertise of families based on their lived experience and providing the resources and support to enable them to participate fully in the policymaking process are critical components of effective efforts to disrupt systemic racism and advance equity through improved policies for babies and their families. This brief provides an overview of strategies for engaging families in the policy change process.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES

There are many strategies for engaging families, the right strategy or combination of strategies, depends on the context of the project and the families you are seeking to engage.

Pathways for Engagement

Pathways for engagement are the mechanism by which you invite families into the policymaking process. Depending upon the nature and scale of the project, it may be effective to create multiple engagement pathways such as:

- Surveys in multiple languages and formats.
- Focus groups.
- Recruitment to participate in relevant committees and workgroups.
- Supporting the development of family groups that meet separately from other committees and workgroups for the purpose of advising, developing priorities, learning or engaging in advocacy.
- Hiring family leaders as members of your team, in part-time or full-time positions.

Reducing Barriers and Recognizing Expertise

Regardless of the pathway for engagement, strategies to reduce barriers and recognize expertise are essential. Examples include:

- Providing stipends as compensation for the time and expertise contributed by families.
- Allocating resources to reduce barriers to family participation, such as transportation costs, child care costs, etc.
- Ensuring that translation and interpretation are available.
- Holding meetings at times and locations convenient for families.
- Including online participation options.
- Designating someone from your team to meet with families in advance of meetings to ensure they have the information they need to participate fully and to debrief with them afterward.



Reaching Families

Inviting families to the table requires intentionality. Internally, this includes examining where existing ways of operating may need to change to meaningfully include families in decision making. Once you are ready to engage families, intentional outreach and recruitment strategies are important. Strategies include:

- Partnering with trusted community organizations to conduct outreach with families they serve.
- Outreach through digital channels, including social media.
- Engaging family leaders to support outreach to other families in their communities.
- Investing in dedicated staff capacity to support family outreach and engagement, with a focus on individual relationship building.
- Seeking to identify places where families already gather. (This can include reaching out to national organizations that may be able to connect you with state affiliate chapters.)

PRINCIPLES

- ▶ Families have valuable expertise.
- ▶ While families may choose to share their stories, they are in control of how those stories are used.
- ▶ Families are ongoing partners and should be engaged early in developing policy strategies to help inform direction.
- ▶ It is the responsibility of government and organizations to create spaces and processes that enable meaningful family participation.
- ▶ Families have a right to know the outcomes of their participation, such as decisions made or policy change.
- ▶ Relationship building is the foundation of authentic engagement.
- ▶ Authentic partnership with families means shared ownership of the outcomes, including both triumphs and setbacks.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ENGAGING FAMILIES

Below are several considerations for developing and implementing strategies to engage families that have been gleaned from the experiences of states across a variety of projects:

- **Ask Families What They Need** — The details of what families need to reduce barriers to their participation vary. In addition, compensation has the potential to negatively impact families' eligibility for benefits on which they depend. The best way to ensure that families' needs are met and avoid unintended consequences is to ask families directly what they need and what will work best for them.
- **Relationships Matter** — Trusting relationships are at the heart of successful efforts to engage families in policy. Investing the time and capacity to build relationships pays dividends down the line. Transparency about such issues as available resources, how decisions will be made and possible outcomes is critical for building and maintaining trust.
- **Learn and Adapt** — Building and maintaining strategies for authentic partnership with families is a learning journey. A critical component is ensuring that the relationship is mutually beneficial. Taking time to learn about the goals that families bring to this work enables you to tailor your approach to be more effective. Creating time and space for reflection and strategy revision is part of the process.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Addressing Bias and Advancing Equity in State Policy](#) explores the many ways in which states can address and are addressing racial equity in problem solving and policy-making, including engaging families and providers.
- [Breaking the Silence and Bringing Good Noise: Parents and Advocates Come Together to Center Lived Experience](#) highlights experiences and lessons learned from five states as they worked to develop sustainable parent partnership models with shared power and reexamine methods of early childhood advocacy with a more intentional equity lens.
- [Building Strong Foundations for Families \(BSFF\) Project Video: Centering Family Voices](#) highlights how some of the BSFF states responded when asked about their experiences in elevating family voices and giving families power in making policy decisions.

