

Parent Leaders Are Vital for Stronger Early Childhood Systems

Infant-Toddler Court Program
National Resource Center




What is a Parent Leader?

Parent leaders are individuals who are committed to making positive changes in their family, community, at the state, and national level by using their experiences as participants. Parent leaders build upon their knowledge and skills to take on meaningful leadership roles within programs, agencies, and communities. They serve as a “parent voice” to help shape the direction of services for themselves and other families. Parent leaders are parents with lived experience as parents who have navigated the reunification process within the child welfare system. Their focus is on incorporating the lived experience at the child welfare and court systems level.

What is a parent mentor/Parent Partner?

Parent mentors/Parent Partners are individuals who have lived experience navigating the child welfare system as a parent, understand how the child welfare system works, and have no open case and demonstrate their own personal and family stability. In the Safe Babies approach, Parent Partners provide mentoring to parents navigating the child welfare system by attending family team meetings and meeting with parents individually to provide support and resources. The parent leader role is different from the parent mentor/Parent Partner role; however, the same individuals could serve in both roles.

The purpose of Parent Leadership is to:

-  **Give voice to parent experience in the early childhood system**
-  **Integrate parent voice into policy and practice**
-  **Increase equity and decision-making power**



An **early childhood system** brings together health (holistically defined and for all members of the family), child welfare including the dependency court, early care and education, other human services, and family support program partners - as well as community leaders, families, and other partners - to achieve agreed-upon goals for thriving children and families.

Parent leaders have valuable expertise to offer an Infant Toddler Court Team (as defined by the State Team, State Advisory Team, Site Implementation Team, or National Resource Center). Partnerships between parent leaders and other professionals can help to keep the baby, parent, and parent-child relationship at the center of the development and implementation of the state advisory team. It is suggested that parent leaders are intentionally involved from the beginning of the initiative.

Who are ideal Parent Leaders?

- Parent leaders are individuals that can articulate their lived experience in a way that can inform policy and practice change that center on the child and family.
- Parent leaders are individuals who have navigated their own child welfare case as a parent.
- Parent leaders are representative of the races, ethnicities, gender, and cultures of the state/site demographics.
- Parent leaders are individuals who have navigated early childhood systems and can utilize this experience to advise the group regarding system integration.
- Parent leaders are comfortable sharing about their story in the early childhood system.

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How will we know that we are successfully implementing Parent Leaders in an infant toddler court program?

- There is a high level of commitment needed to support parent leadership.
- There are at least two parent leaders needed to support each other and representation of parent voice at the site, state, or national level.
- There is an identified staff support person within the program committed to parent leaders that can provide a reflective space and can ensure parent leaders have adequate preparation, time to debrief, and support within the ITC team.
- There is clarity of everyone's role, and it is clearly explained to all including parent leaders.
- Parent leaders have the resources they need to participate (for example, virtual accessibility, interpreters, etc.).
- Parent leaders are provided the information they need to participate.
- Parent leaders have equal voice/partnership with the other professionals on the team.
- Parent leaders are representative of the races, ethnicities, gender, cultures of the state/site demographics.
- Parent leaders are able to bridge the gap between families and other professionals in the decision-making process of practice change.
- Parent leaders are active participants in the State Advisory Group, Site Implementation Team, Active Community Team, National Resource Center and other initiatives/collaboratives that might be priorities in a given state.