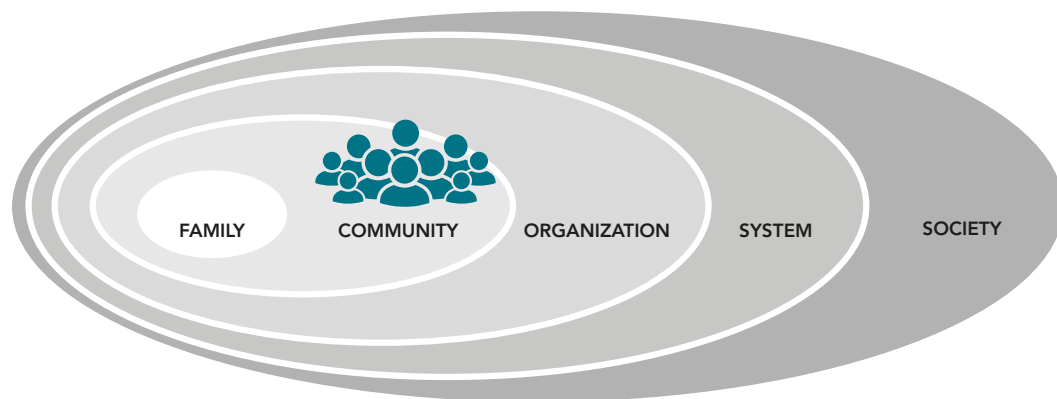

CHAPTER FIVE

Embracing Community and the Wisdom of Families With Lived Experience



The fourth level of the social-ecological model highlights the spaces where child abuse prevention and family support agencies interact and engage with the communities they serve. Family and community members with lived experience offer a unique perspective that, when embraced, can improve family engagement, increase the effectiveness of services, and ultimately change systems in ways that promote equity and reduce harm.

IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Federal Focus: Head Start/Early Head Start Policy Councils
- Growing Authentic Partnerships With Parents, Caregivers, and Youth
- Sharing Power With Communities
- Questions to Consider

We know that, despite our best efforts, child welfare systems continue to disproportionately intrude on families living in poverty and families of color, who generally have very little power or voice in a system that affects the most intimate aspects of their lives. Their involvement with the system too often results in additional trauma, instead of healing. Although direct-services providers are on the front lines of work with families, the burden of this legacy cannot fall on their shoulders alone. Direct-services providers, agency administrators, and community leaders alike must commit to [new ways](#) of listening to the wisdom of children, youth, and families with lived experience and developing meaningful partnerships with the communities they serve.

Families are best positioned to know their own strengths, be familiar with the natural supports available in their neighborhoods, understand the challenges they face, and propose innovative solutions. Effective systems value people’s knowledge and observations about their own lived experience, their strengths and needs, and community capacities and seek to share power equitably.

Meaningful and authentic partnership with families and community members with lived experience goes far beyond seeking their input on initiatives or having them represented on committees or in meetings. It means giving parents, caregivers, and youth the opportunity to be heard and to actively contribute to all decisions that affect their lives at all levels of policy, research, and practice. It also means soliciting and using the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of those

with lived expertise to inform system-level improvements. Utilizing and integrating family, youth, and community voice in all aspects of decision-making is a strengths-based approach that can increase engagement. Parents, caregivers, and youth should be compensated for their expertise and provided with whatever support is needed to enable their full involvement. This support is key to preparing those with lived expertise to be successful serving in a broad range of roles.

The strategies and examples highlighted in this chapter show the multitude of ways to tap into the tremendous wisdom and strength present in our communities, align our efforts with those of community leaders, and provide real opportunities that enhance the inherent strengths and leadership abilities of caregivers and youth. Doing so will benefit organizations, families, and the overall community as we are all stronger when we work together toward a shared goal.

“‘Seat at the table’ is a phrase that is often used, but as parents we would rather our voices be heard at the table and not just be offered a ‘seat.’”

—Mrs. Vadonna Williams,
FRIENDS Parent Advisory
Council

FEDERAL FOCUS: HEAD START/EARLY HEAD START POLICY COUNCILS

Head Start and Early Head Start are national models of early care and education with strong foundations in family engagement and community partnership. The founders of Head Start viewed parents as essential partners in the agency's work to educate young children and ensure their health and well-being. They believed that parents receiving Head Start services should help decide how those services could most benefit their family and other families in the community.

As a result, Head Start created a formal leadership and policymaking role for parents and community members, referred to in Head Start/Early Head Start programs as a "policy council." Today, every Head Start and Early Head Start agency is required to have a policy council as part of its shared leadership

structure. The [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#) describe what policy councils do and who can be a member.

Policy council members make decisions about how the program operates and give important input related to program funding and human resources, for example. Parents who serve on the council receive training and support to ensure they are prepared to make those decisions. Serving on the policy council strengthens parents' leadership and advocacy skills as well as their connections to their peers and the community.

Head Start offers a number of useful [policy council resources](#) for both organizations and parents.

GROWING AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND YOUTH

Today's human services leaders are recognizing that opportunities for meaningful engagement with current and past program recipients extend far beyond soliciting input, inviting representation at meetings, or hosting panel presentations at conferences. Parents, caregivers, and youth can play meaningful roles in all areas, including but not limited to the following:

- [Strategic sharing](#) of their lived experience
- Codesigning, selecting, and improving programs
- Developing practice models and standards
- Ensuring greater attention to the diverse cultural interests of families
- Providing direct services, such as through parent partner programs
- Participating in governance and hiring personnel

- Setting organizational policy
- Establishing research agendas, gathering data, and interpreting findings
- Helping with publications and messaging
- Educating policymakers and leading systems-change efforts
- Making funding decisions
- Advising and engaging in community collaboratives

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance (CTFA) outlines four stages of building and sustaining effective parent partnerships (Similar strategies can apply to partnerships with other caregivers and/or youth.):

1. **Strong partnerships begin with self-reflection.** Before engaging parents, caregivers, or youth, organizational leaders are encouraged to reflect on why the partnership is important; what strengths

family members offer; what the organization can offer in return; and what benefits they hope to achieve for themselves, their programs, their organization, and the families they serve.

2. **Partnerships support participation in a variety of forms.** When parents, caregivers, and youth can contribute to a program in a way that builds on their unique strengths, it respects their voice and their culture, encourages their participation, and supports opportunities for growth.
3. **Partnerships link organizations to community.** Parent, caregiver, and youth partners can be strong allies in carrying the mission and messaging of an organization or program to the broader community. This can help build credibility and trust with other families. Many parents and youth who come to the attention of a program director are already established leaders in their own communities. It is easier to build relationships if these community leaders feel their culture is respected and see the direct benefits their work with you can have in their own community.
4. **Partnerships invite people with lived experience to mentor others.** It is important to have more than one or two partners with lived experience—and to continually cultivate new lived experience leaders—so that the organization can benefit from diverse perspectives and individuals are not overextended. With support and encouragement, experienced parents, caregivers, and youth can become involved in State-level project design, grant reviews, policy development, hiring activities, and interagency activities. The best way to ensure a continuum of partnerships with people with lived experience is to create a wide variety of activities and encourage current partners and leaders to invite others to participate.

CTFA's website offers useful resources on [partnering with parents](#). FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention also offers a [guidebook](#) for meaningful parent leadership and parent-practitioner collaboration.

“Prevention begins with authentic relationships in the community and with parents. The Birth Parent National Network seeks to push our country forward by elevating the voices of parents and organizations that are bold enough to scream, ‘Parents aren’t broken!’ We see parents as treasured leaders—wise and filled with hope. I encourage all to continue mining for gold, not digging for dirt. There’s a nugget inside of all of us. If you can’t find it, you’re not looking hard enough.”

—Corey Best, member, Birth Parent National Network, founder, Mining for Gold



Community
Collaborations to
Strengthen and
Preserve Families

**Parents and
Children
Together-St.
Louis (MO)**

Parents and Children Together-St. Louis (PACT-STL) is a 5-year initiative funded by the Children’s Bureau in 2019 through a Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families grant. The project aims to reduce entries into foster care by linking families to the services they need before stressors become crises. PACT-STL maintains a strong commitment to centering the voices of parents with lived experience in all aspects of the project.

PACT-STL uses a parent-facilitated café model to encourage dialogue about the community’s most pressing issues and concerns. Gatherings include traditional parent cafés and dad cafés that focus on building the protective factors within families, as well as vitality cafés (focused on individual growth and well-being) and community cafés (focused on positive community change). Participant outcomes include improved communication skills, increased patience with children, and strengthened community support and connection.

When PACT-STL began to see a decline in participation in its café offerings, it turned to its Parent and Youth Advisory Council (PYAC) for insight. Open to all parents and caregivers who have experience with the child protection system, PYAC provides feedback on proposed activities, identifies systemic changes needed to better serve families, and helps promote PACT-STL activities. This group identified several strategies that were implemented in 2022 to increase café engagement, including more flexible scheduling, the use of social media and ambassadors to recruit participants, and a hybrid networking model.

PACT-STL is committed to supporting the growth and development of all community leaders and advocates. They offer frequent training opportunities to both parents and caregivers and service providers on topics such as Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services Standards, Parent Café Training Institutes, and Advocacy 101. In addition, the collaborative that is responsible for overseeing all PACT-STL activities must draw at least 10 percent of its members from PYAC to ensure that parents with lived experience are represented at all levels of PACT-STL.

SHARING POWER WITH COMMUNITIES

Successful prevention program implementation and assessment require a deep understanding of the communities you hope to serve. That means not only extending invitations but listening to and incorporating input from community leaders. This can best be achieved by attending to power dynamics and seeking ways to share power more equitably. Consider taking the following actions:

- **Make meaningful community engagement a priority.** Community engagement should not be limited to consultation on specific issues or campaigns. Seek opportunities to solicit and use the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of community members to make systems-level improvements and to use their input in making critical decisions that affect their lives.
- **Partner “content experts”** (those with expertise about child abuse prevention and family support) **with “context experts”** (those with lived experience in the community) early and continuously. Value the knowledge and experience of both.
- **Implement culturally relevant EBPs.** Implemented well, EBPs can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes and satisfy funders who increasingly require this approach. However, it is important for selected practices to be effective for the targeted community. This requires the involvement of the community in identifying, assessing, and implementing strategies that are both supported by scientific research and consistent with the community’s culture and values.
- **Recognize promising practices.** Where possible, consider implementing or partnering with practices and services that are highly valued within the community but may lack the resources to establish a robust level of evidence required to meet EBP standards.
- **Engage community members in designing and completing program evaluations.** Community voice should help drive the questions asked and the criteria for determining whether a program is successful.
- **Seek out grassroots organizers.** Grassroots organizations are often more flexible in their use of funds, and organizers typically have a different view of and relationship with the community than service providers.
- **Compensate community experts and provide meaningful leadership opportunities.** Offering compensation and opportunities for growth, in addition to a “seat at the table,” shows you value the community and builds trust.
- **Hire staff that represent the community.** Ideally, this should include people with lived experience but at minimum it should include those who reflect the community served in race, ethnicity, and culture.
- **Be present in the communities you serve.** The more you live, play, and show up in the community you serve, the more the people of that community will trust you. Shop, recreate, and attend community and school events to break down artificial barriers.
- **Be flexible in engagement strategies and with expected outcomes.** Youth and families don’t exist in the 9-to-5 world. If you want to share power, being accessible at times convenient for them is a must. Let go of what you think that engagement and power sharing are “supposed” to look like. Often what occurs is not what was expected, but it may be even better.

- **Be open to transformative change—truly doing things differently.**

Transformation is more likely when meaningful community engagement occurs because community members may be less attached to the status quo.¹²

Organizations and systems will benefit most from community engagement when they do their best to engage diverse members of the community, actively seek out new and different perspectives, and are willing to engage in difficult conversations.

Dear Leaders: Establishing Trust to Support Meaningful Cocreation

“Cocreation” or codesign is a participatory process of designing programs, services, and systems in which community members with lived expertise *collaborate equally with program leaders and staff*.

Agencies that wish to engage parents, youth, and community members in codesign efforts often face a common challenge—a lack of trust. In 2021, Alia convened a group of lived experts and child welfare leaders in a human-centered design process facilitated by the global design and innovation company IDEO to help child welfare systems connect with communities as they rebuild after COVID-19. The how-to guide to community codesign became a how-to guide for systems to become more trustworthy partners. The result is [Dear Leaders](#).

Dear Leaders is a resource designed to help systems create the conditions for bringing family voice and power to the system by guiding leaders and workers in systems to listen deeply without agenda, recognize harm, plan for accountability, and communicate with transparency. *Dear Leaders* comprises a

set of theme-based discussion prompts and activities and is organized into five principles:

- **Context** centers on truth and reconciliation, which requires leaning into this work from a place of humility and acknowledgement of harm done. It asks leaders to reflect on their role in the system and use that as a starting point for change.
- **Compassion** prioritizes psychological safety and well-being to support the human and emotional needs of leaders, staff, and families.
- **Change** requires personal and professional development in new ways. Change-oriented leaders reflect on the power they hold as individuals and the areas they need to grow to nurture their teams and their community.
- **Consistency** centers around follow up and follow through and talking less and doing more. Consistent leaders are brave in the face of discomfort and affirm their commitment by taking action despite challenges that stand in their way.
- **Collaboration** is about sharing power and creating ways to actively amplify and design with people with lived experience—without tokenizing them. Collaborative leaders strive to build relationships of mutuality and solidarity with their teams, families, and those impacted by the system to move the work forward.

You can find more information or download the tool on the [Alia website](#).

¹² Smart, J. (2017). Critiques of collective impact: Need for policy and systems change. In: [Collective impact: Evidence and implications for practice](#). CFCA Paper No. 45. Child Family Community Australia.



Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families

Promoting Equity Through Community Engaged Research (Larimer County, CO)

[Supported Families, Stronger Community](#) (SFSC) is a 5-year interagency effort led by the Larimer County (CO) Department of Human Services, supported by a Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families grant. The project relies on families as experts and utilizes a care coordination and system navigation model to help families develop and improve protective factors, increase support networks, and gain access to needed services and supports.

Community voices are at the center of the [evaluation](#) plan. For example, the evaluation team identified, engaged, and compensated an individual with lived expertise to serve on the evaluation team with specific responsibilities for qualitative data collection and analysis. The community consultant's perspectives also informed the instrument development, recruitment, and facilitation of interviews and focus groups. SFSC participants were offered multiple, flexible ways to participate in these data-collection activities, and they also were compensated for their time. As a result, family participation in the initiative has been enhanced.

Community-based participatory research methods are prioritized in every aspect of the evaluation. The evaluation team maintains open communication with implementation partners, including the community navigators who bring lived expertise to their roles, to ensure programming is driven by family needs, not metrics. A continuous quality improvement group of community partners helps the team cocreate easily digestible data visualizations that are contextualized within broader initiative goals and accessible to a wide audience. This is important because it allows the evaluation team to interpret data in partnership with community. This opens the process to new perspectives, questions, and challenges and promotes more effective power sharing. Considerations brought forth by community partners have impacted significant aspects of the initiative's implementation, including the decision to expand eligibility criteria from 2 county ZIP codes to all 28 county ZIP codes.



Family Support Through Primary Prevention

Ohio Children's Trust Fund

[Ohio Children's Trust Fund](#) (OCTF) received an FSPF grant in September 2021 to support cross-sector approaches to primary prevention at the State and local levels. Leaders from multiple State departments come together regularly to discuss how families are experiencing State systems and explore strategies that can be tested in county demonstration sites.

Intentional engagement of people with lived experience has been central to Ohio's approach. The State cross-sector group has a trichair structure that includes a representative from OCTF, one from the Governor's Children's Initiative, and a parent representative. In one of its earliest meetings, the group participated in a full-day retreat facilitated by Alia, drawing from the *Dear Leaders* toolkit (as previously described on [page 48](#)).

OCTF has been laying the groundwork for a high level of parent leadership for several years, through the creation of regional prevention councils and implementation of a parent advocacy training throughout the State. Providers and parents complete the training in pairs and then work together to train other parent and provider teams to advocate effectively for change within public systems. Ohio is also working to create a centralized lived-experience advisory council at the State level that would be charged with lifting up the perspectives and recommendations of various local and regional groups.

Questions to Consider

CHAPTER 5

The following are questions to consider as your organization enhances its partnerships and power sharing with people with lived expertise. They were designed to be used for reflection about direct practice with families and as a starting point for conversations within community groups, agencies, or jurisdictions.

Questions to Consider When Providing Services to Families:

- How might [personal biases](#) affect the way that staff interact with families? How could we learn more about our implicit biases?
- Do direct-services staff actively live in the communities they serve? If not, where are there opportunities to get involved or connected to activities in those communities outside of work?
- In our work with families, how do we seek out and demonstrate respect for the wisdom of their cultural and community leaders?
- Do direct-services staff know about opportunities to promote the voice and leadership of [parents,](#) [caregivers,](#) and [youth](#) in our agency or the communities we serve? How could we help create those opportunities if they do not exist?

Questions to Consider About Organizational Culture:

- How does our organization demonstrate that we value and incorporate **parent, caregiver, and youth voices**?
 - Does our organization have a parent or youth advisory council? If not, is our leadership open to starting one?
 - Are parents, caregivers, and youth offered a variety of meaningful ways to contribute their perceptions, experiences, and recommendations at all levels of planning and decision-making (according to their strengths and skills)? Are they compensated for their time and offered training for leadership roles?

- How does our organization demonstrate that we value **community voice**?
 - Does our organization seek out and compensate community members for their expertise?
 - How are community members, especially in communities negatively impacted by racial inequality, meaningfully involved in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their lives?
 - Does the composition of our staff reflect the communities we serve?