

Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare



While states and jurisdictions recognize the value of stakeholder engagement, many struggle with how to effectively engage and sustain the involvement of families and youth at the agency level. Many states also have questions about when and how to engage families and youth in a project or process. Some agencies may feel they do not have the time or resources to devote to stakeholder involvement when working on complex or time sensitive projects. Some agencies may invest time and resources into stakeholder engagement and learn that stakeholders they tried to involve do not feel valued or engaged.

Though resources are available in the field on the value and importance of stakeholder engagement, few provide strategies to engage families and youth effectively. This tip sheet addresses ways child welfare agencies can authentically engage families and youth and include their voice and valuable lived experiences at the agency level to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. Through key steps of engagement, tips and examples from the field, and a matrix of engagement along a continuum, this tip sheet provides tools and strategies for engaging families and youth at the agency level of child welfare.

Benefits of Family and Youth Voice in the Child Welfare System

For states and jurisdictions to truly integrate family and youth voice at the agency level, families and youth must serve on decision-making bodies; inform the development of agency policies, procedures, and practices; and lead trainings for agency staff on family engagement and inclusion (Williamson & Gray, 2011).

When families and youth are engaged as stakeholders early and throughout a process or project, they add:

- ▶ The voice of lived experience within the child welfare system, which may highlight system and practice strengths and improvement needs (e.g., inconsistent processes, communication gaps, service needs readily and not readily available)
- ▶ A unique perspective on policy and program development
- ▶ Innovative ideas with the potential to improve outcomes for families and youth
- ▶ A perspective on child welfare priorities informed by lived experience within the larger system
- ▶ Context and feedback that reflect the needs of the community the agency serves
- ▶ Accountability and transparency to the process, resulting in the delivery of more efficient and responsive services

Definitions

Parents, caregivers, and youth – parents, caregivers (including adoptive, foster, and kinship), and youth who have experience in or with child welfare services and who want to use that experience and the power of their voices to improve outcomes for children and families.

Authentic engagement – active, ongoing collaboration of families, youth, and other stakeholders with the child welfare system in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in effecting practice and system change.

Key Steps to Authentically Engage Families and Youth in Strategic Planning and Systems Change

These steps are introduced and discussed in greater detail in the brief “Strategic Planning in Child Welfare: Strategies for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement” (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018). This tip sheet focuses on these steps as they relate to family and youth engagement and pairs them with tips that lead to the greatest impact. Though the key steps are listed sequentially, agencies can start at whatever point they are at in the process of engaging families and youth. Wherever agencies start, the key is authentic engagement that is proactive not reactive. Authentic engagement seeks family and youth input at the beginning of a process, not after key decisions have been made. Exhibit 1 below identifies five key steps that can help agencies engage in a purposeful way with families and youth.

Exhibit 1: Key Steps of Family and Youth Engagement



1. Identify and Reach Out to Families and youth

Engaging families and youth is essential to all aspects of integrated planning and systems improvement processes (Children's Bureau, 2014b). For child welfare agencies, an initial challenge can be knowing where to find families and youth to participate as stakeholders and how and when to engage them. Cultivating family and youth engagement is an ongoing process that begins when a family first connects with the child welfare agency. Youth, birth families, and foster families who feel their voices are valued in their own cases are more likely to believe their voices will be heard at the agency level as well.

Tips for Identifying and Reaching Out to Families and Youth

- ▶ Seek out recommendations from caseworkers, foster care and foster parent licensing staff, independent living staff, peer mentors, foster parent associations, youth advisory boards, and community partners. Other associations and boards formed to focus on the child welfare system could serve as an avenue for authentic engagement. Consider also reaching out to kinship providers and adoptive parents.
- ▶ Be clear about “the ask” when seeking recommendations for family and youth members to participate in systems-level work. Consider, among other things:
 - Time of day – Can the agency accommodate meeting times for family and youth members or compensate them if they miss work?
 - Transportation – Do the youth or family members have transportation and, if not, can the agency provide it?
- ▶ Provide information, such as time commitment, purpose of project, and any skills needed, up front. Will family and youth work be considered voluntary, with no reimbursement for expenses? Some states consider such a group as consultants and might provide a small stipend. This, in some way, seems to demonstrate agency value of what is being done, i.e., “putting our money where are values are.”
- ▶ Match family and youth members to projects in their areas of interest and expertise.

(See “Authentic Engagement” in areas of initial ask and identification of skills required in matrix below.)

2. Level the Playing Field

To effectively involve diverse families and youth in planning and change efforts, agencies need to “level the playing field.” That is, they should develop partnerships based on equal participation and shared responsibilities. To level the playing field, agencies first must understand and acknowledge the unique power differential for many families and youth served by the system. Most youth and birth families did not seek out contact or services from a child welfare agency, and many do not view their experience as positive. Authentic engagement gives families and youth the opportunity to use these experiences to

improve child welfare services and outcomes. It is important that agencies seek out these voices and learn from families' and youths' lived experiences.

Authentic engagement of families and youth in child welfare begins with recognizing them as team members with equal standing. Organizations show a willingness to level the playing field by:

- ▶ Respecting and relating well to people from varied backgrounds
- ▶ Being open to diverse views presented in unique ways
- ▶ Providing support and opportunities to learn and grow
- ▶ Seeing diversity as an opportunity to see situations from different perspectives
- ▶ Challenging assumptions
- ▶ Seeking ongoing education on social and cultural issues
- ▶ Including more than one representative from a given group (parent, caregiver, youth)
- ▶ Listening and responding

Tips for Leveling the Playing Field

Since this might be a new and different role, actions can be taken to lessen the power differential and help make participants feel included and empowered from the start:

- ▶ Provide families and youth with information about the agency, its structure, and work up front so they can participate more fully and confidently.
- ▶ Orient participants on how their role as “consultants” will interface with and/or affect the agency and its functioning.
- ▶ Encourage agency staff (caseworkers, supervisors, or management) to personally welcome participants and their inclusion in this new role.
- ▶ Involve families and youth early in preplanning activities and goal setting.
- ▶ Ensure that communication is open, frequent, clear, and transparent.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for the whole team to debrief.
- ▶ Encourage and seek input and feedback using a variety of methods.
- ▶ Use clear and inclusive language free of acronyms and professional jargon.
- ▶ Answer any questions or concerns about confidentiality as it would apply to their participation.

As shown in the example below, a state seeking to improve its work with families engaged families and youth in a thoughtful and intentional way from the early stages of a project through the implementation stage.

Example From the Field

A state wanting to improve its performance around family engagement decided to incorporate a new family engagement training into its core training for new staff. A committee was formed to develop a curriculum. Committee members included an agency staff member, a birth parent, a foster parent, and a youth who aged out of care. The team wrote, reviewed, and edited the curriculum together, taking time to incorporate the perspectives of all members. When it was time for implementation, a staff trainer and parent cofacilitated the training.

(See “Authentic Engagement” in the areas of initial ask, timing of request, role, preparations and planning, debriefing, and addressing challenges in the matrix below.)

3. Set the Parameters for Purposeful and Actionable Engagement

Meaningful family and youth engagement works best when families and youth are clear about the team's goals, scope, timeframe, roles, and deliverables. Understanding these foundational aspects of a project can help stakeholders better understand how they can contribute to its success (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016). Family and youth members need to understand the role they are being asked to fill. Whether their role is to serve as a bridge between the agency and youth or family advisory groups, consult on a project, or partner with the agency on policy and program development, agencies must provide clear roles and expectations at the outset.

Tips for Setting Parameters for Purposeful and Actionable Engagement

- ▶ Create foundational documents to guide the work of an initiative, such as:
 - Team mission statement
 - Team charter
 - Communication plan
- ▶ Clarify roles and expectations with families, youth, and other team members early in the process.
- ▶ Provide families and youth with information on the culture of professional meetings.
- ▶ Provide families and youth with regular opportunities to share their ideas, thoughts, and opinions and to weigh in on vital decisions.
- ▶ Elicit and prioritize family and youth feedback.
- ▶ Acknowledge the courage demonstrated by families and youth to partner with the agency. Again, do any confidentiality issues need to be identified?
- ▶ Offer coaching and support before and after meetings and throughout the process or project.

(See “Authentic Engagement” in the areas of skills required, goals and objectives, and preparation and planning in the matrix below.)

4. Make Sure Everyone Stays Informed

To participate in agency processes effectively, families and youth need to have regular access to information about the processes as well as information and data to help inform their conclusions, suggestions, and team decision-making. Agencies should keep families and youth informed with concrete and digestible information. Provide information ahead of time for items to be discussed at the next

Tips for Keeping Everyone Informed

- ▶ Develop a plan for communicating with project team members, share it, and stick to it.
- ▶ Ask team members how to best communicate, understanding that using email or accessing a shared drive may not be an option for some families and youth.
- ▶ Provide family and youth team members with a team contact who can provide information, clarification, and context as needed.
- ▶ Provide agendas and prereading materials well in advance of meetings.
- ▶ Provide minutes soon after meetings, with actions items and next steps.
- ▶ Provide a central location for project-related information, and ensure all members of the team have access to it.
- ▶ Family and youth members on the project team may not be privy to informal conversations held between meetings within the child welfare agency. Make sure to share this information with the larger team, such as by setting aside time to provide updates and answer questions for a short portion of some meetings.

meeting. This allows family and youth members the opportunity to review the material and ask clarifying questions prior to the meeting.

The following example demonstrates how a simple, proactive strategy can help family and youth members participate effectively as equal members of a project team.

Example From the Field

As a state was beginning work on its Program Improvement Plan, it knew it wanted family and youth voice involved from the start. The state's Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) results indicated that it had significant need for improvement in family engagement. The state identified a staff member who had a strong track record of engaging families and youth. This staff person served as the point of contact for the young adult and family member participating on the project. They met prior to the initial meeting to address any questions about the CFSR findings and the scope of the project. The staff member talked about the important role the young adult and family member would have on the team as individuals with lived experience. Throughout the project, this staff person served as a consistent point of contact providing support, information, and opportunities to prepare before meetings and to debrief after meetings. The young adult and family member each described this support as critical to the success of their participation.

(See "Authentic Engagement" in the areas of goals and objective, role, debriefing, and addressing challenges in the matrix below.)

5. Provide Support and Feedback Mechanisms

To improve family and youth participation at the agency level, agencies need to reach out to families and youth throughout the year to describe how their input was and will be used. Agencies should regularly inform families and youth of the progress and outcome(s) of any process in which they have participated and next steps. This encourages families and youth to continue to connect with the engagement process, builds trust, and strengthens relationships established during the process. Consistent communication also provides an opportunity for families and youth to provide feedback regarding their participation and suggest areas for improvement. Agency staff should make a sustained effort to continue to actively listen to families and youth and incorporate their perspectives into system improvements. Over time, these strategies will begin to shift the organization toward a culture of family engagement.

Additional ways to strengthen support and feedback:

- Share agency performance results.
- Share updates on priorities, initiatives, and projects planned or in progress.
- Invite families and youth to participate in processes and projects.
- Discuss and align areas of shared priorities.
- Identify joint projects.
- Provide data to inform the work of families and youth.

Tips for Providing Support and Feedback

- ▶ Reach out regularly throughout the year to provide updates on how the project is progressing.
- ▶ Involve families and youth in the continuous quality improvement process or other evaluation efforts of the project.
- ▶ Organize and track family and youth feedback so it can be considered, shared, and updated.
- ▶ Maintain a current and accurate list of family and youth members interested in participating at the agency level, including their areas of interest and expertise.
- ▶ Highlight projects and initiatives in which families and youth participated in annual reports, publications, social media, and communications, and consider providing formal recognition or some other display of gratitude for their participation.
- ▶ Debrief with families and youth at the end of a project to gather lessons learned and areas in need of improvement.

(See "Authentic Engagement" in the areas of debriefing and addressing challenges in the matrix below.)

Achieving Authentic Engagement

Authentic engagement is the active, ongoing collaboration of youth, families, and other stakeholders with the child welfare system in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in achieving practice and system change. While this tip sheet has focused mainly on engaging families and youth in project work, the same strategies apply when engaging families and youth in ongoing process work such as participating on governing bodies, advisory boards, policy workgroups, and training development. The matrix tool below, “Achieving Authentic Engagement,” identifies four primary ways to engage youth, young adults, and families authentically. The previously discussed strategies, tips, and examples directly tie into the matrix. The matrix focuses on the impact of engagement and presents a continuum, from ineffective or low impact engagement, which will not achieve authentic engagement, to ideal engagement, which will support achievement of the desired impact. The matrix tool can help teams and individuals better understand and select the key elements of engagement that will produce the desired impact. Different approaches to engagement may be appropriate at different times.

When reviewing the matrix, consider the following example. In response to the reasonable and prudent parent standard, agencies engaged youth, birth families, and foster families in discussions on implementing the normalcy standard. Below are the examples of engagement across the continuum:

- ▶ **Ineffective or low impact** – Families and youth are asked to attend a normalcy meeting. Families and youth have no explicit role or voice in the meeting.
- ▶ **Limited engagement** – Families and youth are asked to review and provide feedback on a finished draft of the normalcy policy.
- ▶ **Better engagement** – Families and youth participate in the workgroup to develop the normalcy policy.
- ▶ **Authentic engagement** – Families and youth participate in the workgroup and provide implementation support.

Matrix: Achieving Authentic Engagement

Low Impact High Impact					
Engagement Activity	Low Engagement	Limited Engagement	Better Engagement	Authentic Engagement	Tasks of Family and Youth Engagement
Initial ask	The “ask” is vague.	The “ask” relates to a specific project already in progress.	A timely, planned discussion is held to identify upcoming opportunities for family and youth involvement.	Families and youth are included in conversations related to providing input on upcoming projects, workgroups, teams, etc.	Tasks 1, 2
Identification of skills required	There is no identification of or request for a specific skill set.	There is a requested skill set, but it is vague (e.g., youth who aged out of foster care, birth parent with substance misuse history).	Identification of a desired skill set: the requester solicits recommendations based on the task at hand and the specific, needed skills.	The requester can make informed and collaborative decisions about family and youth participants based on fit and skill set.	Tasks 1, 3
Timing of request	The request is last minute or seems like an afterthought.	Though the project has begun, the requester ensures there is time to get up to speed; timeline remains tight.	The request is made prior to project launch, with some time built in to prepare for participation.	The request is made prior to project launch, with some time built in to prepare for participation, and there is a clear and concise schedule of engagement.	Tasks 2, 3
Goals and objectives	The goals and objectives of the request are unclear or nonexistent.	There is some clarity of the project’s goals and objectives, but the role of the families, youth, and young adult remains unclear.	There are clearly defined goals and objectives, and the families, youth, and young adult are made aware of them.	The families, youth, young adult, and project lead co-create clearly defined goals and objectives.	Tasks 3, 4

Engagement Activity	Low Engagement	Limited Engagement	Better Engagement	Authentic engagement	Tasks of Family and youth Engagement
Family or youth role	Engagement of families and youth includes no defined role. The families, youth, and young adult are asked to provide input to voice agreement only.	The invitation for families and youth to share their story or sit on a panel is issued but often is limited by parameters that usually support a predetermined message or outcome.	There is a clearly defined and understood role for families and youth; families and youth are viewed as equal members of the project team.	The agency models authentic family and youth engagement in its work.	Tasks 2, 3, 4
Preparation and planning	There is limited time for preplanning calls between the project lead and the families, youth, and young adult.	There is time allotted for at least one preparation and planning call.	There is ample time allotted for preparation, preplanning, and status update calls.	There is ample time allotted for preparation, preplanning, and status update calls, and preparation and preplanning calls are noted in the schedule of engagement.	Tasks 2, 3
Debriefing	There are no opportunities provided to debrief.	There are short or limited opportunities for the team to debrief.	There are opportunities provided to all team members for a quality, formal debriefing.	All team members attend a quality, formal debriefing. Families and youth are provided an opportunity for individual debriefing.	Tasks 2, 4, 5
Addressing challenges	Challenges or issues that arise are not shared or resolved, and families and youth are not asked to participate in future projects.	The project lead shares challenges or issues that arise with families and youth in vague terms without resolution.	Challenges or issues are addressed proactively as they arise.	Regular follow-up with families and youth is done to invite sharing of challenges or issues, and any that emerge are addressed in a caring and supportive way during ongoing contact.	Tasks 2, 3, 4, 5

Engagement Activity	Low Engagement	Limited Engagement	Better Engagement	Authentic engagement	Tasks of Family and youth Engagement
Child welfare agency	Families and youth are asked for input only when a process or activity requires it.	The child welfare agency engages families and youth in certain processes; however, they ask the same individuals each time.	The child welfare agency engages diverse families and youth on many committees and processes.	The child welfare agency engages families and youth in system, policy, and practice change and evaluation process as a standard way of doing business.	Not applicable

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