

NATIONAL CENTER FOR

Family & Parent Leadership

Powered by: Early Childhood Investment Corporation

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National Center for Family and Parent Leadership

The National Center for Family and Parent Leadership powered by the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) provides a comprehensive array of capacity-building opportunities and resources to help states, organizations and communities embed equity-focused family and parent leadership as their new way of operating.

At ECIC, we believe we can strengthen early childhood systems, programming and policies by elevating parent leadership and centering the realities of communities and families.

Who are parent leaders?

At ECIC, we refer to parents and families interchangeably to mean all adults who have a primary role caring for a child.

This includes biological, adoptive, foster and stepparents, grandparents and other caregiving kin, and legal and informal guardians. It could also include parents who do not live with the child and are still involved in raising the child and thus have important perspectives as a parent.

When parents are supported as leaders, the benefits are clear: families are stronger; children, families and programs have better outcomes; and systems are more effective because families help shape decisions to be more equitable, culturally relevant, and customer centric.

What is Family and Parent Leadership?

Family and Parent Leadership is a set of intentional practices, values, and steps that systems, agencies, and organizations adopt to build the structures that allow parents to influence systemic decisions about early childhood services and programs they use or need.

Family and parent leadership can take on many forms, for example, with parents serving as equal decision-makers within early childhood systems, developing parent leader networks, building leadership capacity of other parent leaders, or taking actions to bring about change and hold systems accountable.¹ Authentic efforts to engage systems in family and parent leadership must center equity, ensuring all families receive the services they need based on their individual circumstances.

Family and Parent Leadership is different than family engagement, which focuses on the relationship between families and program staff or providers, who are responsible for “serving” them within the context of a program in which their children are participating (i.e., state funded pre-K).^{2,3}

REFERENCES

¹Stark, D. R. (2020). *Stepping Up and Speaking Out: The Evolution of Parent Leadership in Michigan*. Lansing, MI: Early Childhood Investment Corporation & Michigan Home Visiting Initiative.

²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2018). *Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework*.

³Gruendel, J.M. (2021). *A Deep Dive into Parent Leadership and Advocacy: A Parents Rising! Technical Report*.

Pathway to Family and Parent Leadership:

Parent Leaders can collaborate with states, organizations, and communities in a variety of ways to promote change. Systems must build their capacity and change practices in ways that provide opportunities for parents to advise, collaborate and lead efforts at the same time, or at different points in time, depending on their interest and availability.

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ADVISE

- Provide input through surveys, focus groups, and interviews.
- Participate on advisory boards to help guide program, agency, and/or system decision-making.
- Parents can see how their and other families' input is being used.

If this is the only leadership role parents are invited to engage in, it can feel disempowering.

COLLABORATE

- Sit “at the table” and collaborate with system leaders to make decisions, set priorities, co-design programs and strategies, and carry out actions.
- Co-facilitate trainings and partner on community outreach efforts.
- Serve on boards of organizations and coalitions locally, regionally or at the state level.

This role is more empowering because parents have more direct influence over decisions and actions affecting their lives and those of other families.

LEAD

- Serve as change agents to transform systems and communities by directly leading efforts to identify local needs.
- Set their own agendas and priorities, design strategies, and carry out actions.

This role is most empowering for parents as they are the ones driving change. It also helps to build community capacity to pursue bigger types of change.



Capacity-Building Focused on Five Core Practices:

Since 2005, the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) has worked with local, regional, state, and national organizations, agencies, departments, and systems to engage in five practices to embed family and parent leadership. Equity is a central focus of all these practice areas.

The five practices are developmental in nature, meaning entities can build their capacity and expand their scope in each area as they revisit them over time. The practices are also interdependent and are most effective when used simultaneously.

To best realize these practices, systems and organizations must set intentional goals for embedding family and parent leadership into their early childhood system.

Embedding Equity-Focused Family and Parent Leadership

PRACTICE 1:

Build buy-in and shared equity-focused goals around family parent leadership.

- ☐ Build shared understanding and buy-in.
- ☐ Develop goals and an action plan.

PRACTICE 2:

Increase organizational readiness for goals.

- ☐ Assess and improve internal structures, policies, practices, and funding mechanisms.

PRACTICE 3:

Equitably recruit, prepare, and support parent leaders for success.

- ☐ Partner with organizations, initiatives, and stakeholders.
- ☐ Offer parents and agency staff opportunities for leadership development.

PRACTICE 4:

Equitably empower parent leaders and systems to promote transformation.

- ☐ Match parents with leadership opportunities.
- ☐ Empower parents and agency staff to create system changes.

PRACTICE 5:

Measure progress and promote continuous improvement.

- ☐ Identify equity-informed outcomes.
- ☐ Create processes and methods for tracking.
- ☐ Share and use information on progress for continuous learning and improvement.