



National Center for Family and Parent Leadership

Powered by: Early Childhood Investment Corporation

Parent Advocates or Leaders?

The intent of this document is to help initiatives distinguish what is meant by parent advocates and parent leaders. Throughout the early childhood field, often the terms parent advocate and parent leader have been used interchangeably. While this can simply be an issue of semantics (wording), we believe that there is a distinction that is important to be made. We acknowledge that often initiatives refer to parent leaders as many things including parent advocates. While we see no major issues with that, it is important to unpack the differences between a parent advocate and parent leader.

The work of the National Center for Family and Parent Leadership is based on three pillars of engagement: advise, collaborate, and lead. These pillars are not mutually exclusive of each other, yet they do represent different levels of engagement, power, and agency for parents.

Here are brief definitions of each of the pillars:

- **Advise:** Parents are expected to provide advice and input that is based on their own lived experiences often through surveys, focus groups, interviews, speaking/presenting to a group/body or by participating in an advisory group/board.
- **Collaborate:** Parents are “at the table” with system leaders to make decisions, set priorities, be involved in the design and development of programs, strategies, or initiatives. They may co-facilitate events or trainings and may also serve on boards of organizations. In their role they have an active voice and represent their communities, serving as a means of communicating the lived experiences of many parents and families.
- **Lead:** Parents are serving as change agents to transform the systems and their communities by being involved in leading efforts to identify and assess the needs, wants and priorities of their local community. They are involved as a leader and co-creating the plans and strategies as well as being involved in the decision-making taking place at the table.

Parent Advocate

- Parents who attend a one time focus group, roundtable or parent café
- Parents who participate in surveys or give feedback on specific issues
- Parents who show up and speak out on policies that impact the Early Childhood sector

Parent Leader

- Parents who serve on ongoing committees, boards, or initiatives with specific roles
- Parents who co-design programs, initiatives and strategic planning efforts
- Parents who are paid as Early Childhood Systems consultants for an extended time



Another way to think about the 3 pillars is:

1. Parents advise = their voice informs the work = engagement
2. Parents collaborate = partners in planning and implementation = engagement and some power
3. Parents lead = integral part of the decision-making process = engagement, power, and agency



Nothing about us, without us



There are key differences between engaging parents as advocates and engaging them as leaders.

Parent advocates are important as they bring their lived experience and expertise on certain topics, focus areas or experiences with specific policies or elements of a system of services or supports. Parent advocates sharing their stories and experiences allows policymakers and other leaders to learn what works, what does not, and what needs to be different by hearing the real-life experiences of those who are most impacted by a policy or practice being done or considered. Sharing their story or lived experience can be empowering for parent advocates. Being heard and seen as the experts in their own lives and experiences of policies, programs and supports that are part of their everyday lives and the opportunity to gather with and hear other parent's stories breaks isolation and can create community. For some parents the role of being a parent advocate is exactly how they want to contribute to change in their community and they will feel empowered by the experience. For parents that want a deeper level of involvement, more than being engaged, being a parent advocate can feel disempowering if they want to be more involved in creating change in their community.

Parent leaders often speak out as advocates on specific issues and topics. They also bring their lived experience and expertise to their work as parent leaders. Their seat at the table is continuous and focused on using their experience and knowledge of policies, programs or supports to work collaboratively with those in leadership. They help to identify and understand the impact of policies, programs, and initiatives in terms of evaluating how they do or do not achieve their intended outcomes. Identifying what the challenges and barriers are and identifying how to remove the challenges and barriers. Parent leaders work collaboratively as part of a team, they are involved in planning, development, implementation, evaluation and decision-making. In many cases parent leaders are leading projects, chairing/co-chairing groups and they are receiving ongoing support in building their knowledge, skills and capacity for being in a leadership role. Parent leaders, as standard best practice, receive compensation for their time commitment and work as a parent leader. As they are bringing their lived expertise to a professional (non-profit or government) body as an equal participant that is leading/driving social change and impact. For many parents being in a parent leader role is the first step on a path to achieving higher education such as an AA or BA, for some it leads to a position in a non-profit organization or public agency and for some it is a path to becoming an elected official in their community.

Reflection questions:

- 1. Why do we want parents involved in our work?**
- 2. What are our expectations of parent engagement and/or involvement?**
- 3. Do we want parents as co-creators and co-developers and the constructors of the change we seek to achieve?**

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