



Parent Engagement and Leadership

What is parent leadership?

Parent Leadership is a strength-based approach to family support that is founded on the belief that parents are knowledgeable about their families and communities and can provide valuable insight into programmatic and community changes to benefit children and families. Parent leadership is successful when parents and staff work together to make decisions that affect families and communities, sharing responsibility, expertise and leadership.¹ Parent leadership begins when organizations support parents' development of leadership skills and eliminate barriers to active parent participation in organization dialogue.

Who can be a parent leader?

A parent leader is someone who represents the needs and perspectives of parents without speaking or acting in a staff role for an organization or institution. Parent leaders are parents who have addressed the challenges of parenting, preferably utilized support or training to address the challenges of parenting, gained the knowledge and skills to function in meaningful leadership roles and serve as a "parent voice" to help shape the direction of their families, programs and communities.² Parent leaders can be parents, step-parents, grand parents, foster or adoptive parents, or any one who is in a primary caregiver role.

Parent Involvement & Empowerment

Developing parent leadership is a progressive process. Parents may find themselves at different stages at different times. Parent involvement, awareness, and acceptance of responsibility begins

when a parent enters a program. Parent involvement strengthens families and improves outcomes for children. As parents learn and practice new skills, they gain a sense of empowerment. The positive self concept developed through empowerment may help individuals manage stress, maintain high self-esteem, feel in control of their lives or improve their sense of competence in parenting³.

Shared Leadership

To fully understand parent leadership, it is important to understand the principles and benefits of shared leadership. Shared leadership involves a true partnership between parents and staff members who share responsibility for the process and outcomes of the group or team. Specific leadership roles are carried out by different members of the group at different times.

Principles of Shared Leadership

- Parents and staff members are equal partners
- No one person has all of the solutions; it depends on how people act together to make sense of the situations that face them
- Mutual respect, trust and open-mindedness
- Collective action based upon shared vision, ownership and accountability
- Consensus building instead of a democratic process

¹ Circle of Parents. (2006) Parent Leadership Ambassador Resource Section of Training Manual

² Parents Anonymous, Parent and Shared Leadership, Retrieved from <http://www.parentsanonymous.org/pahtml/leadDefining.html> (2007)

³ Research, Evaluation, and Systems Unit, Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida. (2006, October). Mutual self-help parent support groups in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Benefits of Using Parent Leaders within a Shared Leadership Model

Benefits to parents and their families:

- Builds knowledge and skills
- Increases sense of personal achievement
- Opens doors for employment
- Offers leadership role models for other families
- Models community involvement and empowerment for own children and family
- Prevents child abuse and neglect

Benefits to providers:

- Enhances relationships between families and providers
- Increases appreciation of various cultures
- Improves the quality of programs and services
- Develops a fresh perspective on how services should be delivered

Parent Involvement and Leadership at Every Level

The role of a parent leader is constantly evolving. Leadership roles can begin within a program, such as a parent support group, and evolve, with nurturing, support, and training, into leadership roles within the organization and the community. A parent leader may eventually advocate for systemic change on behalf of children and families. Some specific roles a parent leader may assume are listed below.

Within a parenting group, a parent leader can act as a:

- New member liaison. Parent leaders can take calls from perspective members, introduce new members during meetings and provide new members with program and resource information.
- Meeting space specialist. Parent leaders can arrange for space, make sure the room is set-up for the meeting and cleaned up after the meeting. They can also make sure resource materials are set-up for group members.

- Greeter. Parent leaders can make sure each member feels welcome by greeting each parent that comes. They can also start the group with opening statements, and end with closing statements.
- Transportation coordinator. Parent leaders can make sure everyone has transportation to the group meeting and home from the meeting.
- Secretary. Parent leaders can take attendance and help with note taking for the group. They can also help with attendance of the children's program, if applicable.

Within a program or the organization, parent leaders can:

- Review and provide input for development of parent materials
- Assist with training facilitators, parent leaders and children's program staff
- Help with local events and fundraisers
- Mentor other families enrolled in programs
- Become members of task forces, advisory councils or board of directors

Within the community, parent leaders can:

- Generate public awareness about the importance of family support programs in the community
- Serve on community councils and advisory boards
- Volunteer in local events for child abuse prevention month and year round events
- Advocate for family support programs and prevention services
- Submit letters to the editor and opinion editorials on the importance of parent leadership and involvement with their children.

How do you identify a parent leader for the group, program or agency?

There are different strategies for selecting parent leaders. Some parents may volunteer to become a parent leader as their way of giving back to a program that supported them during their time of need. Some parents may also feel compelled to help other parents overcome challenges similar to their own. Another strategy is to ask for volunteers to take on certain roles and allow them to step forward, or to have the group elect someone for the leadership role. Sometimes parents need to be asked to take a leadership role. Atmosphere and philosophy should value and promote parent leadership within your programs and organization.

All parents have at least one leadership characteristic that can be nurtured. Some characteristic traits of parent leaders include:

- Trustworthy
- Enthusiastic
- Confident
- Tolerant
- Ability to think analytically
- Committed to excellence
- Caring
- Inspiring
- Competent

Some parents may not see themselves as a leader until someone else does. Here are some signs a parent may want to be a leader:

- Asks for help
- Asks questions about the mission, policies, and/or operation of the agency
- Volunteers to take on more tasks or responsibilities
- Asks about other parents or families involved in the agency
- Voices another family's concerns and/or goals
- Notices and encourages progress and growth within themselves and others

- Shares ideas for activities, fundraisers, or other projects
- Shares information and resources with others in their family or community
- Encourages other parents to take opportunities
- Respects and models the rules or policies of the program
- Takes on leadership roles in the community or other programs or agencies

Parent Leadership Training

For both parents and providers to receive the optimal benefits of parent leadership, parents and staff must receive ongoing nurturing, support and training. There are several organizations that conduct training on parent leadership in the family support field. Providers will also need to develop clear goals and objectives of what and how they would like parents to be involved in their programs or agency. Ideally, this is done with parent input and involvement.

Some examples of the types of training that will help develop leadership skills are:

- Public speaking
- Thriving and working with diversity
- Assessing and defining problems – thinking critically
- Using the media
- Learning how to use and maximize community resources
- Advocacy through communication with local, state and federal policy makers

In addition, it is also important to provide parents with:

- Plenty of positive feedback
- Recognition, both formal and informal
- A process for sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences
- Help to assess their strengths and challenges
- Opportunities for skill- and knowledge-building

- Access to community resources to help them develop their talents
- A clear message when it's not "working out"
- Mentorship as a new parent leader and the opportunity to provide mentorship to others as an experienced parent leader.

For training resources, FRIENDS has a Parent Leadership Ambassador Training Guide prepared by Circle of Parents who offers periodic training on parent leadership to CBCAP leads. Many CBCAP Agencies have utilized the Shared Leadership in Action Program of Parents Anonymous® Inc. that includes evidence-based strategies with evaluation tools to achieve meaningful parent leadership as specified in CAPTA requirements. The following is a list of organizations and programs that offer information about parent leadership training:

Circle of Parents®

500 North Michigan Avenue, 2nd Floor
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 334-6828
www.circleofparents.org

Parents Anonymous® Inc.

675 West Foothill Blvd., Suite 220
Claremont, CA 91711-3475
(909) 621-6184
www.parentsanonymous.org

Parent Leadership Network

Two Wachovia Center
301 South Tyron Street, Ste 1725
Charlotte, NC 28282
(704) 335-0100
www.theparentleadershipnetwork.org

The Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI)

18-20 Trinity Street
Hartford, CT 06106-1591
(860) 240-0290
<http://www.cga.ct.gov/COC/plti.htm>

About the Author

Christie Ferris is the Director of Prevention Services at The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida.



© September 2007. The FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, under Cooperative Agreement 90CA1729. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funders, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This information is in the public domain. Readers are encouraged to copy portions of the text which are not the property of copyright holders and share them, but please credit the FRIENDS National Resource Center for CBCAP.