

FAMILY PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Maine CDC, Division of Disease Prevention
Maternal and Child Health



March 2025

Table of Contents

- Preface 3
- Introduction 3
- Foundational Principles for Family-Professional Partnerships..... 5
- Family Partnership Framework Definitions 6
- Benefits of Partnering with Families 7
- Developing a Family Partnership Strategy..... 8
- Family Leadership Development Continuum..... 12
- Evaluation..... 12
- Readiness Assessments..... 13
- Conclusion..... 13

Preface

The Maine Maternal and Child Health Family Partnership Framework was developed in direct response to a call to action from families, as well as state and federal partners, highlighting the critical importance of elevating family voices in driving meaningful, systemic change. This initiative was made possible through the collaboration of members from the Maine Maternal and Child Health Program and local and national family leaders, each bringing decades of experience in working alongside families.

Together, this group formed a workgroup dedicated to this cause, conducting research and establishing a shared understanding of language, definitions, principles, and strategies that collectively serve as a foundation for implementing or enhancing family partnerships on a broader, system level. Designed with adaptability in mind, the framework offers flexibility, enabling programs to adjust it to meet the unique needs of their respective communities.

Our hope is that this framework will inspire programs, agencies, and organizations to reflect upon their current engagement with families and explore new opportunities to deepen and strengthen the relationships they share with the communities they serve.

Introduction

Creating a framework for strong family-professional partnerships is essential for delivering effective and equitable services. This framework emphasizes the importance of collaboration, mutual respect, and shared decision-making between families and professionals. It recognizes that families bring invaluable expertise about their family's needs, while providers, agency staff and organizations contribute specialized knowledge and resources. Fostering a partnership model can ensure programs and services are more responsive, inclusive, and better aligned with the unique needs of families. This framework outlines the principles, strategies, and practices that can guide the development and sustainment of these partnerships, with the goal of ultimately enhancing outcomes for children and families.

Establishing a framework for family-professional partnerships requires a clear roadmap that fosters trust, transparency, and active collaboration. Families are not only the primary advocates for their children but also valuable contributors to shaping services that impact their families. Family partner experience and insight can complement the expertise and policy knowledge that professionals bring. A partnership between these two groups ensures that services are holistic, multigenerational, culturally sensitive, and are tailored to the real needs of the community. The term “Family Partnership” will be used throughout this guide for consistency. However, family partnership is also sometimes referred to as parent engagement, family leadership, parent partnership, and other terms. When referring to family partnership, family leadership or family engagement, this does not mean participation in a program, compliance with a directive, or

attendance at an agency event. This term indicates family leadership at a decision-making level. Family roles have evolved from serving as volunteers in random activities to performing meaningful roles in various systems. Parents, and other caregivers, are working side-by-side with providers, agencies and organizations at all levels to develop, implement and evaluate programs, services, policies and systems. Federal funders have become more intentional in expecting family partners to be shared decision-makers within programs. While this guide focuses on family partnership, partnering with those who have lived experience in a particular area is also relevant. For example, programs and services that affect teens, or young adults would elevate the voice of that population. Building family partnerships in your school or agency requires the resources needed to establish a structure focused on building family leadership capacity. Family partners that represent the diversity of the community must be engaged in tailoring the agency's family engagement approach and in developing programs, policies and processes that reflect the needs and interests of all families served by the provider, agency, organization or school. Establishing strong parent/professional partnerships in your program takes time and requires the support and commitment of leadership and professional allies.

Family/professional partnership is most likely to gain traction at the system level when top leadership values and promotes family partnership and develops policies to support it as a core strategy that's essential to the organization's mission and goals. Family partnership is effective when families that represent the diversity of the community participate in authentic collaboration with agency partners in planning, designing, and evaluating system improvements that impact children, youth, families and their community. Whereas agency leaders and staff bring professional experience to the planning table, family members bring "lived experience." Lived experience represents the direct encounters that families have had with services, programs, policies, and systems as well as critical knowledge families have about their children and communities.

Foundational Principles for Family-Professional Partnerships



Mutual Respect and Trust

It is important to approach this partnership with respect for one another's perspectives, expertise, and roles. Building trust requires open communication and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children and families.

Transparency and Shared Decision-Making

Transparent processes in decision-making include access to information, encouraging open dialogue, and co-creating solutions during the development, implementation and evaluation of services. "Power sharing" in collaboration is the intentional distribution of decision-making authority and influence among all participating parties involved in a collaborative effort, ensuring that no single entity holds disproportionate power and allowing for diverse perspectives and contributions from everyone involved; it's about creating a more equitable and inclusive partnership where everyone has a voice in the process.

Cultural Competency and Inclusivity

Create an environment that is welcoming and respectful of all cultural identities and experiences. Respecting and integrating different cultural perspectives ensures that partnerships are culturally responsive and inclusive of families from various backgrounds and communities.

Ongoing Learning and Capacity Building

Continuous training and education around family-professional partnerships can enhance collaboration and lead to better outcomes.

Role Clarification, Expectations, and Feedback Loop

When fostering partnerships, role clarity ensures understanding of responsibilities and expectations, reduces conflict and increases trust and collaboration. Mechanisms for providing and acting on feedback are essential for continuous improvement. By adopting these principles, we can foster strong, sustainable partnerships that improve service delivery and outcomes. This collaborative approach ensures that the lived experiences of parents are integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of services, creating a more responsive system.

Definitions

Family: A broad definition of family includes a range of loved ones, such as children, parents, grandparents, spouses, significant others, siblings, and close friends. It can also include people who are bound together by mutual consent, birth, adoption, or placement. The definition of a parent can include a variety of people who care for a child, including biological and adoptive parents, foster parents, guardians, and others.

Family Partner/Leader: A family partner, or family leader, is a person with lived experience who actively collaborates with those at a systems level to support and advocate for the needs of their family, the community or the system. Family partners can leverage the lived experience of their family's needs, particularly regarding education, health, or well-being. Family partners are informed and solutions-oriented and play a crucial role in creating equitable partnerships built on mutual respect, trust and shared goals.

Professional: A person with a high level of knowledge or skill in a field, specialist, having or showing trained ability in a particular field of knowledge. Family partners are also often professionals in various fields, sometimes because of their lived experience.

Partnership: A partnership is a relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility for the achievement of a specified goal. Partnerships have been used as successful models in many disciplines.

Family-Professional Partnership: Authentic partnership between providers, agencies, or organizations and family partners who reflect the diversity of the communities they represent, working together at the systems level to develop and implement better policies and practices (Family Voices Framework for Assessing Family Engagement in Systems Change 2018).

Lived Experience: The things that someone has experienced themselves, especially when these give the person a knowledge or understanding that people who have only heard about such experiences do not have. For the purpose of this framework, lived experience refers to accessing programs and services related to health, education and well-being.

Benefits of Partnering with Families



Research consistently shows that partnering with families at a decision-making level within systems, like in education, healthcare, and child welfare, significantly improves outcomes for programs by leading to more tailored services, increased family engagement, and positive impacts on children and youth involved.

Key points supporting this evidence:

- **Improved child outcomes:** Studies demonstrate that when families are actively involved in decision-making regarding their children's services, it leads to better academic achievement, improved mental health, and positive behavioral changes.
- **Enhanced service delivery:** Family input at the decision-making level helps systems better understand and address specific family needs, leading to more relevant and effective service delivery.
- **Increased family empowerment:** When families are included in decision-making processes, they feel more empowered to advocate for their children and actively participate in their care.
- **Policy impact:** Family engagement at the system level can influence policy changes to better align with the needs of families.

Examples of how family partnership can improve outcomes:

- **Education:** Schools that actively involve parents in decision-making through committees or surveys often see improvements in student attendance, academic performance, and a positive school climate.
- **Child welfare:** Including families in case planning meetings and providing opportunities for feedback can lead to more effective interventions and reduced need for out-of-home placements.
- **Healthcare:** Shared decision-making between healthcare providers and families regarding treatment plans can lead to better patient adherence and overall health outcomes.

Developing a Family Partnership Strategy



Family Partnership Opportunities

Best practice would be to engage families in the development of policies and services, including developing a family partnership policy. Bring the family voice into the conversation from the beginning. Be intentional in determining how family partners can positively impact the program. Establish structured mechanisms for regular family partnership, such as advisory councils, focus groups, and feedback sessions. Provide family members with opportunities to co-lead discussions, evaluations, and decision-making processes to ensure their voices are central in shaping policies and services.

Suggested Strategies

- Ensure the organization has one or more champions of family engagement.
- Engage at least two-family leaders in the initiative.
- Use data to learn about the issues and concerns that children, youth, and families are experiencing.
- Develop an Action Plan to improve family engagement.

Assess Organizational Readiness

Assess readiness using a family partnership readiness assessment tool such as the *Framework for Assessing Family Engagement in Systems Change* developed by Family Voices and the Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health or the *Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit* an initiative by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. This process helps determine your next steps and provides a starting point for measuring success as you evaluate your progress. It also gives you a realistic view of your program's present capacity and where you want to increase capacity.

Suggested Strategies

- Partner with family leaders to conduct a needs assessment or other activities to identify and understand the issues children and families are facing.
- Use data to understand the demographics of the population the organization serves.

Establish a Compensation Policy

Establish a compensation policy and process and be clear about what those are. Make sure your budget reflects a realistic number to accommodate family partner compensation. Some programs have hired Family Partners or people with lived experience as staff members and have reported positive, sustained outcomes. It is helpful to have a way for family leaders to let programs know they are interested in partnering at a systems level. One suggestion is to create a Family Partnership Directory that allows family partners to sign on and give a summary of what areas they have a particular interest in and what skills they bring to the table. It also includes a section for agencies/organizations to put out a request for a family partner match for a specific activity.

Suggested Strategies

- Develop a mechanism for reimbursing family leaders for their time and/or other costs they incur.

Establish Clear Roles and Responsibilities

You welcome families into partnerships when you communicate openly and transparently about their roles, and responsibilities. Define the roles of both family members and professionals in the partnership process. Clearly outline how family partners will participate in advisory boards, planning meetings, and policy development efforts. Ensure family partners are empowered to be equal contributors by providing the necessary resources and support, such as stipends, mentoring and/or training. Check in frequently to review roles and responsibilities, as well as all partners' understanding of and satisfaction with the process. Some organizations have a formal Family Partnership Agreement that

clearly spells out roles and responsibilities that can be reviewed when questions arise.

Suggested Strategies

- Make sure all participants (family leaders and organization staff) have the information and support they need to participate to their maximum potential.
- Ensure staff have the information they need and time to participate in meetings; educate staff about new policies or practices.

Develop Two-Way Communication Protocols

Implement transparent, open, and accessible communication channels between family partners and professionals. Use multiple forms of communication (meetings, surveys, digital platforms) to ensure that all voices are heard, especially those of marginalized families, that are culturally sensitive, inclusive and accessible. Schedule regular updates and feedback loops to keep family partners informed about agency actions, service changes, and policy updates. Create a clear path for family partners to share concerns, ideas, and questions. Transparency assures access to the knowledge that allows all partners to fully participate in the process and maximize their own effectiveness. Take care not to give some partners information that others do not have.

Suggested Strategies

- Ensure staff have the information they need and time to participate in meetings; educate staff about new policies or practices.
- Ensure materials are written in plain language and are culturally and linguistically appropriate for all participants.
- Conduct polls to schedule meeting times and provide alternative ways for attendees to participate. Some meetings may need to be scheduled outside of typical work hours to accommodate parent or family leaders' ability to partner.

Provide Training and Capacity Building

Training and professional development of family partners are an important means by which organizations can strengthen their competencies and build meaningful, balanced partnerships. Offer training programs for both parents and professionals to foster collaborative skills. Professionals should be educated on cultural competency and family-centered practices, while parents should receive training on navigating agency processes and advocacy. Encourage joint workshops that bring parents and professionals together to learn and develop solutions collaboratively. Check in with family partners to ask what training or professional development they feel would be helpful.

Suggested Strategies

- Provide mentoring and skill-building opportunities for the families and organization staff who participate in systems-level initiatives.
- Acknowledge how family leaders contributed to system-level initiatives.

Create a Feedback and Evaluation System

Develop a formal system for continuous feedback and assessment of partnership outcomes. Allow family partners and professionals to regularly review the effectiveness of the partnership, using surveys, interviews, and open forums to gauge satisfaction and areas for improvement. Evaluation is an important component to better understanding the impact of family engagement opportunities. Evaluation should include qualitative and quantitative data collection methods that reflect both the number of opportunities provided and participants served as well as the impact that these opportunities have on outcomes for the intended audience. Doing a pre-assessment

can be helpful in developing an evaluation process.

Suggested Strategies

- Use family leaders' input to improve the initiative and document how family leaders contributed to the work.
- Use assessment and implementation tools to ensure proposed policies and other system-level initiatives are equitable and culturally responsive.

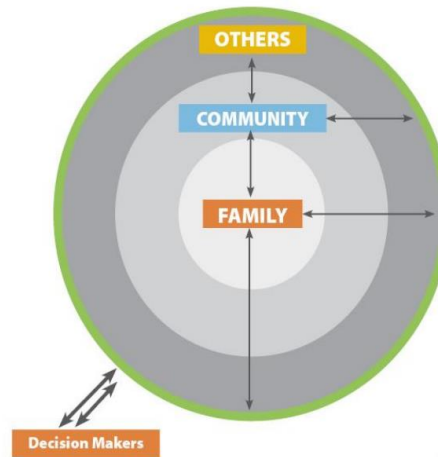
Institutionalizing Family-Provider Partnerships

Incorporate these partnerships into agency policies, ensuring they become an embedded practice rather than a one-time effort. Create positions or offices dedicated to family partnership to ensure ongoing support for the framework's implementation. Establish policies requiring family representation in all major agency decision-making processes. Embed family partnership training in staff onboarding activities.

Suggested Strategies

- Create a written policy that requires family engagement in systems-level initiatives.
- Acknowledge how family leaders contributed to system-level initiatives.
- Use data to learn about the issues and concerns that children, youth, and families are experiencing.

Progression of Family Leadership



Eileen Forlenza
Activating Causal Leadership

Families engage with agencies/organizations/systems in three distinct levels of partnership. These levels reflect how families are able and willing to collaborate. Understanding these levels is essential when building meaningful family partnerships, as it sets clear expectations for both the agency and the families involved. It is the agency's responsibility to clearly articulate the level of partnership they are seeking, while families should be transparent about their ability, capacity, and readiness to engage.

Recognizing these levels ensures effective collaboration between families and agencies at varying degrees of involvement.

Individual Level Inner Ring

At this level, the partnership is centered on a family's personal situation and needs. It often involves direct services or transactions that primarily benefit the family itself. Engagement activities focus on gathering and sharing insights about the family's experiences, challenges, and needs. This level of partnership helps identify barriers and gaps in services from the perspective of individual families. It is referred to as the inner ring.

Community Level Middle Ring

At this level, families engage in supporting their broader community, defining shared identities. Families collaborate with agencies to support and benefit their broader community. Families may define their community based on geography, shared experiences, or other common identities. Families are invested in decisions or activities that impact their community, even if they are not personally affected.

Policy Level Outer Ring

At this level, families participate in shaping policies with a broader impact. Families actively participate in shaping policies and decisions that have a broad impact. They work as partners in planning, implementing, and evaluating policies to ensure shared decision-making. Families bring informed perspectives and advocate on behalf of specific populations or constituencies.

Evaluation

Evaluation of family partnership efforts is an underdeveloped area of program improvement. Evaluation of partnerships with families will look different for each organization, depending on capacity and intended outcomes.

Some general things to keep in mind are:

- Do you make program decisions based on input from families?
- Were decisions changed as a result of family partnerships?
- What was the impact to your program/service as a result of partnering with families?
- How do you measure satisfaction with partnership (both family and organization. agency)?
- How do you measure success/barriers?

Readiness Assessments & Guides

Family Voices

- [Family Engagement in Systems \(FES\) Toolkit](#)
- Family Engagement in Systems Change: Assessment Tool (FESAT) User Guide

Center for the Study of Social Policy and the EC-LINC Outcomes and Metrics Initiative

- [Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit](#)

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

- [Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders: A Self-Assessment and Planning for Nonprofits and Schools](#)

The Center for Causal Leadership - Eileen Forlenza - Progression of Leadership

- [Progression of Leadership: Self-Assessment for Agencies](#)
- [Progression of Leadership: Self-Assessment for Families](#)
- [Progression of Leadership: Self-Assessment for Health Care Providers](#)

Conclusion

If you and your program are considering starting to create or increase your partnerships with families, be gentle with yourself. It takes time to create meaningful policies and protocols, and you will learn as you go what works for you and what doesn't. Expect trial and error. Programs have varying levels of capacity for this work and trying to "do it all" without the right tools, funding, and buy-in can be very frustrating. Also, programs and services change over time and your family partnership needs may change as well.

What is most important is to be genuine in your interactions with family partners, to be curious about their perspectives, and to be as transparent as possible about yours. You are all in this together. Weaving family voice into your program development, activities and evaluation can result in positive outcomes like more responsive services, equity and inclusion, more informed decision making, program innovation, increased relevance, more effectively allocated resources, easier reporting, and more. Families make up the fabric of our communities and when an organization elevates family voice into programs and services, communities are stronger, and families are better off.

Contact Information:

Maine CDC, Maternal and Child Health Program

Attn: Family Leadership Liaison

Email: MCH.CDC@maine.gov

Phone: 207-287-5357

TTY: Maine relay 711

Fax: (207) 287-5355

References

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2016, August). *Engaging parents, developing leaders: A self-assessment and planning tool for non-profits and schools.*

Center for the Study of Social Policy & Family Voices National. (2020, October). *Moving beyond the family engagement check box: An innovative partnership to promote authentic family engagement in systems change.*

Dworetzky, B., Hoover, E. A., & Klein Walker, D. (2023, March 13). *Family engagement at the systems level: A framework for action. Maternal and Child Health Journal.*

Forlenza, E. (2017, June). *Family and community engagement: A guide to accelerating partnerships.* Center for Causal Leadership.

Hoover, E. A., Paladino, A. D., Dworetzky, B., & Wells, N. (2018, April). *A framework for assessing family engagement in systems change – A family voices issue brief.*

Melz, H. (2021, September). *Evaluating family engagement in child welfare: A primer for evaluators on key issues in definition, measurement, and outcomes.*