

How can we move towards systems transformation by sharing power with parents who have lived experience of child welfare?

This brief was developed in partnership with members of the [Rise](#) parent advocate community, including Felicia Alleyne, Cassandra Gonzalez, Leatha Jennings, Teresa Marrero, Shakira Paige, Zoraida Ramirez, and Jeanette Vega — all parents who have been impacted by the child welfare system. Co-developing this document was an opportunity for Casey Family Programs' staff to learn and think deeply about the process of co-design, and about what it means to genuinely share power. Transformation of the child welfare system will require centering the expertise of those most impacted and engaging them in the co-design of projects and strategies for systems change.

A movement is growing within child welfare to engage and share power with those who have lived experience within the system. The types of partnerships where parents can and should be able to share their expertise are [wide-ranging](#), from input on individual cases, to agency or systemwide input through participation on advisory councils, court committees, and specific projects. Decision-making power, however, often is held by staff and leadership at agencies and courts, and others extending the invitations for input from parents and other lived experts.



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Sharing power with parents impacted by the child welfare system, who live the realities of a jurisdiction's policies and practices, allows parents to have a true voice in shaping the decisions that affect their children's lives. It is not enough to simply listen or consider the insights that parents offer — their insights must be integrated into the decisions being made. When that happens, these partnerships have the potential to eliminate the trauma that the system itself causes, and bring about system transformation that truly supports child safety and strengthens child and family well-being.

Identifying barriers

While inviting parents to partner may stem from good intentions, parents find that sometimes those with power are not actually ready to share it, resulting in more harm than good. When parents are invited to join a partnership but power is withheld, they may feel as though the invitation was extended out of compliance or just for appearances. “There’s a lot of tokenizing,” says Felicia Alleyne, a Rise parent advocate. “Agencies like to use our quotes so that they can say that they are ‘parent friendly,’ but if they don’t actually change anything or do anything with our input, then that is not a true partnership.” This kind of experience can perpetuate parents’ lack of trust in the system and their reluctance to collaborate with agency staff or leadership.

The hesitation to share power with parents may stem from a lack of exploration and understanding regarding shared values and beliefs with parents; professionals not truly believing that parents bring needed expertise; or professionals not valuing lived experience in the same way they might value education or work experience. Agency representatives and the system as a whole may struggle to evolve beyond historical beliefs, for example, shifting from the view of “saving children from bad parents” to that of “supporting families to keep children safe and thriving.” Without making that shift, it is impossible to truly partner with parents and appreciate that while parents’ expertise may look different, it is no less valuable.

My involvement on committees is rewarding and necessary, especially for Black and brown families like mine. But I have encountered challenges, particularly in navigating power dynamics. For example, when I raised my hand in an online meeting to share my perspective on the topic being discussed, I was redirected to share my thoughts in a breakout room rather than with the entire group. I felt that this didn't allow me to fully share my concerns and that I was only welcome to speak if I would say something that aligned with predetermined expectations.

—CASSANDRA GONZALEZ,
PROGRAM SUPPORT MANAGER, RISE

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Technical and logistical barriers also can be problematic, such as agency policies that create obstacles toward compensating parents for their time and expertise, or processes that do not meaningfully engage parents — for example, conducting surveys of parents but then not communicating the findings and how they may be used, or even disregarding them altogether. Shakira Paige, a mother and Rise peer program manager, shared that “this makes it feel as if they don’t really want our voices. When we open our mouths, that gives us more power — but if they are scared, then they don’t want parents to have a voice and opinion about what they’re doing to us.” Similarly, parents may feel tokenized if they are invited into the partnership after decisions have been made and they are unable to have meaningful impact.

Examining agency policies and processes, both written and unwritten, is an important step to ensure that any organization is truly prepared and ready to genuinely partner with parents. Parents and agency leaders that have led the way in implementation and barrier-busting partnerships say policy and process challenges are not insurmountable, but rather that they need to be adapted or re-envisioned in order to move toward transformation and authentic engagement with parents. Some common challenges that agencies might experience and need to address include:

- Relying on only a limited number of lived experts versus the need to expand the pool.
- Creating guidelines for both criminal history and CPS history, and balancing traditional requirements with the need to include an array of parents with a diversity of lived experiences.
- Compensating parent advocates equally to other professionals.
- Providing clear expectations regarding communication, boundaries, and available support.

Sharing power and building partnerships

Sometimes those with power are willing to share it, but do not know how. A good place to start is to ask parents to describe what a meaningful, power-sharing partnership would look and feel like — to them.

Simply extending an invitation to participate in a project or on a committee is not sufficient to ensure meaningful engagement, let alone true power sharing. An important consideration is the level of commitment to build relationships and share power versus merely going through the motions of including lived experts at certain points in a process. This will require steps such as clearly outlining the purposes and goals of inviting parents to the work, and may even require creating new structures that don't yet exist.

The fundamental steps for sharing power, however, actually are not very novel or complicated. Basic gestures — such as asking everyone about their availability rather than just telling them when a meeting will be held, and inviting everyone's input into developing an agenda — can go a long way in creating an environment that is more welcoming to parents. Other strategies include:

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- Actively listening to parents to understand the trauma that children and families experience under the guise of child welfare support. Listen to their stories, concerns, and ideas for solutions.
- Acknowledging the harms parents are facing due to current system dynamics, especially within communities of color.
- Being mindful of the language used, as child welfare language often can cause harm.
- Asking parents what meaningful co-design or power sharing looks and feels like to them, as it may differ from how agencies and systems define it.
- Creating a space that feels safe enough¹ for parents to share stories, reflect on lived experiences, and brainstorm ideas so that communication can be open and transparent.
- Identifying shared values to provide a foundation for the partnership. This grounding can be especially helpful if there is disagreement regarding how to move the work forward.
- Co-designing projects together, from start to finish. This includes engaging parents in the brainstorming and planning phases, not just implementation.
- Making decisions collaboratively by considering everyone's scheduling needs, building a shared agenda together, voting on decisions, and seeking consensus from the group.
- Learning how to challenge each other respectfully and how to have uncomfortable conversations.
- Assessing continuously whether parent inclusion is truly genuine.

Moving toward systems transformation

Agency and system representatives developing policies and practices rarely face the realities of parents who historically have been impacted by them. As a result, acting alone without the input of parents fails to develop the right solutions. Decisions made based

Casey Family Programs is elevating the voices of parents by intentionally partnering with Rise. The power-sharing dynamics we have across our teams are evidence that different stakeholders with different experiences can make great progress in achieving shared goals when the partnership feels genuine and power is shared equally within the group.

—JEANETTE VEGA,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, RISE

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on information gathered without genuine parental engagement may result in changes that are not actually what children, families, and communities need. Power sharing is vital so that all stakeholders can work together to develop effective solutions that can ultimately lead toward transforming the child welfare system.

True partnership and power sharing should be embraced as a process. Regardless of where an agency or organization is along that process, it can be valuable to consider the following questions:

- How would your organization benefit from sharing power with parents?
- What are some concrete ways that your organization can share power with parents?
- What got in the way when your organization tried to share power with parents in the past? How can these barriers be addressed and eliminated?
- How can your organization encourage others to share power with parents more effectively?

We can do so much more when we come together as a collective body of people.

— LEATHA JENNINGS,
PARENT ADVOCATE, RISE

1 While the stated goal is often to create a “safe space” for lived experts, Rise parents shared that they often only experience spaces as safe when they are with other parent advocates and lived experts. Spaces they share with other child welfare professionals, however, can feel “safe enough” when everyone’s voice and opinion is validated, regardless of their background and experience, and everyone is respected.

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