

**WANTED!**

# Parents on Family Support Advisory Boards

Keys to Recruiting & Supporting Parent Participation

## Why is parent involvement so important?

Simply put, parents have power. Families have proven they are capable of persuading policy makers that Family Support is the right thing to do. If we are going to put Family Support on the political agenda, parent leadership is essential. In addition, parent input allows for real consumer input, more efficient planning, promotes respectful parent-professional partnerships, and offers a forum for developing creative, cost-effective solutions. When families and providers work side-by-side, both are enriched.

## But how do we get parents to the table?

This can be a challenge, but with a clear strategy, it is not only possible, it can be hugely successful! Here are some tips:

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## We tried, but it just didn't work.

An effective family/provider partnership is not an easy thing to accomplish! The most important factor to ensure success is commitment to the idea. Providers need a deeply held belief that families have unique expertise and knowledge and that their participation is essential.

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- Π Ask families who are already involved if they know a friend who may be interested.
- Π Ask providers to identify families.
- Π Post notices in appropriate languages on bulletin boards in waiting areas in clinics and emergency rooms.
- Π Contact local or statewide parent-to-parent organizations and other support groups.
- Π Include information on opportunities for parent involvement in program surveys.
- Π Place a story in community newspapers.
- Π Send notices to social and cultural clubs in the community.
- Π Send a letter home with school children.
- Π Make an effort to recruit fathers.
- Π Invite families personally – and with excitement!
- Π Parents may need to miss meetings due to concerns with their child. Recruit a larger group than you think you'll need.
- Π When there is a "crisis" in the system, parents will come! Advertise the facts and figures.
- Π Assure busy parents it's their input you want. It won't be a huge time commitment.

## Other Secrets to Success:

- Π Provide training and support to families.
- Π Be aware of parental burnout.
- Π Hold meetings in a community place.
- Π Be as informal as possible.
- Π Take time to get to know each other.
- Π Compensate families for their expertise. Consider rewards (gift certificates, stipends, token gifts).
- Π Reduce the burdens of participating. Have monies available "up front" to reimburse for child care and travel.
- Π Check with families ahead of time to find out if they need their reimbursement by check or in cash.
- Π Keep families apprised of project happenings through newsletters and mailings.
- Π Check "cultural times" and religious holidays before scheduling meetings.
- Π Show appreciation for families' roles as advisors.
- Π Make the location and time convenient for families – consider offering "flex time" for employees who attend.
- Π Advertise the meetings as a chance to meet other families.
- Π Allow parents to take leave when other demands arise.
- Π Allow parents to share leadership roles and co-chair committees.
- Π Encourage parents to set boundaries around their availability.
- Π Provide clerical support and office space to parents.
- Π Pair new leaders with "veteran" parents for mentoring.
- Π Ensure opportunities for parents to network and gain support from other leaders.
- Π Support staff in developing an understanding of the value of family participation.
- Π Provide materials to families in their preferred language.
- Π Provide clear information about the goals of the committee and parent roles.
- Π Provide child care or transportation to meetings.
- Π Ensure diversity among membership.
- Π Believe family participation is essential.
- Π Take committee minutes to home visits with families.
- Π Let parents know there are other ways to give input if they can't serve, i.e. e-mail.

- Π Most families are eager to participate in leadership roles. Their commitment to improving the system is strong.
- Π It is exhausting to play both public and private roles simultaneously – participating and giving input at meetings while drawing upon deep emotional experiences.
- Π Families must be supported in balancing the demands of their personal lives along with the expectations of the advisory role.
- Π Educational opportunities for parents can provide “perks” and allow them to enhance their abilities and re-energize.
- Π When families are absent due to illness or just needing a break, include them through phone calls so they can still feel a part of things.

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**10 Things Families Want You to Know**

**How can we make meetings PRODUCTIVE and FUN?**  
 Meetings set the stage for all provider-parent interactions and need to be well organized, welcoming and positive. Consider including these elements in your meeting.

- Π Start with participant introductions.
- Π Encourage parents to share family stories.
- Π Provide an overview of the facility and services – perhaps include a tour.
- Π Top administrators should give brief presentations to show their interest and commitment.
- Π Review the bylaws, responsibilities and goals of the group.
- Π Elect a chairperson who is open and positive and can draw out quieter members.
- Π Allow time for members to socialize.
- Π Plan the next meeting together.
- Π Make sure to elect officers to shift responsibility and “ownership” to parents.
- Π Use a meeting room that is large enough to fit everyone.
- Π Develop a shared understanding on what is expected regarding meeting attendance.
- Π Provide FOOD!
- Π Keep agendas to 5 or 6 items. Spend no more than 15 minutes on one item and FOLLOW THE AGENDA!
- Π “Hook” parents quickly by giving them tasks to do.
- Π Begin and end meetings on time.

**CONSIDER** **Beware of Parental Burn Out!**  
 Just as professionals can “burn-out” on a job, parents, who are personally invested, are at even greater risk.

1. Families of children with special needs need sufficient time to make child care arrangements to attend meetings.
2. Child care for children with special needs may be difficult to find and is usually expensive.
3. Many families do not have access to fax machines and computers.
4. Some families do not have telephones.
5. Many families do not have credit cards or ATM cards.
6. Many families rely on public transportation.
7. Some families do not have bank accounts.
8. Some families have never traveled out of their home community.
9. Some families may require special physical supports.
10. Many families are simply not able to wait for reimbursement for their expenses.

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**Folks who have had great success organizing families offer advice for others attempting the same.**

*First of all, don't get discouraged. Building an effective network of family advocates takes time.*

*Secondly, meet parents where they are. Accept what they are able to do and thank them for it. Recognize your successes – regardless of their size.*

*Finally, keep it simple. Start small, but think BIG!*

*Sources for this document include: Essential Allies: Families as Advisors, Elizabeth Jeppson and Josie Thomas; Family Support Centers: A Program Manager's Toolkit, Family Support America; The National Center for Family Support.*