



National Federation of Families  
for Children's Mental Health

## Tips for Meaningful Family Engagement

### 1. Demonstrate that You Value Families' Time and Input

- Whenever possible, provide compensation. Offer stipends, food, child care and free parking.
- Ensure that family members hear directly from system leadership that their input is needed to make improvements to service and support delivery.
- Give family members the opportunity to request and make suggestions on agenda items.
- Structure meetings to be interactive and choose content that is intended for parent input.
- Require decision makers to attend meetings.
- Follow up with family members on their input. What was important about the information they provided? What was the response or impact? If the organization is unable to act on their feedback, explain why. When family members see change as a result of their feedback, they want to come back.
- Listen. Then listen some more.

### 2. Provide Ongoing Training and Support for Family Members

- As part of the recruitment process, hold an information session for identified family members. Define roles and expectations of Family Advisory Committee (FAC) members. "This is what the advisory group is. This is what the advisory group isn't." Training starts *before* the family member joins the committee.
- Train new family members on policies and practices of the advisory committee. Outline the "do's and don'ts" of serving on a FAC.
- Provide mentorship to family members. The FAC chair should be a family member. He/she should be available to other family members serving on the committee to debrief after meetings and/or connect by phone in between meetings for support and meeting preparation.
- Provide family members with information, resources, and tools related to the agency, organization, or community-based services involved with the FAC to help them be more successful in their advisory roles.

### 3. Provide Support to the Family Member Chairing the Committee

- Assign a mentor or point person at the organization to support the FAC committee chair. This person may be a staff liaison to the committee or sit on the committee as a representative of the organization.
- Ensure buy-in from the organization. Support for the committee and committee chair should come from the administration / leadership.

### 4. Family Member Chair Models Appropriate Facilitation and Participation

- Manage the time. Set a time limit for each agenda item, including public comments. Adhere to the time limits. Be prepared to move the meeting along when the time limit is up. Ask members if an agenda item should be included on the next meeting agenda to continue any unfinished discussions.
- Manage the meeting topics. Adhere to the set agenda items. Gently remind the committee about staying on topic when a member gets off track from an agenda item. Be prepared to refer family members to the appropriate resource for support or complaints if personal issues arise.
- Have a contingency plan for responding to time, topic, or participation issues.  
Examples:
  - If a family member is frustrated / angered by an agenda item, give a reminder that the committee is not a place to air grievances or show disrespect.
  - If a family member is emotionally triggered by an agenda item, be prepared (have a designated person) to offer emotional support outside of the meeting.
  - Be prepared to encourage participation. If the chair asks a question and no one answers, it may be necessary to provide an example to initiate discussion.

### 5. Chair Builds Community, Cohesion, and Trust with Other Family Members

- The FAC chair and/or co-chair position should be filled by a family member. Family members are more comfortable with other family members. A family member chair is empathetic and therefore more approachable for other parents. A family member chair encourages buy-in from parents.
- Provide snacks or a meal before the meeting. (Covered by the organization.) All FAC members, both family members and organization staff, should attend, providing a chance for committee members to mingle. Family members may feel more comfortable participating in the meeting when given the opportunity to socialize beforehand.
- Create a safe space. If possible, balance the ratio of parents and professional staff at each meeting so parents are not outnumbered and feel more comfortable. Rotating staff who are seeking input from the committee based on the agenda may help.
- Practice transparency between family members and organization staff. Encouraging open communication helps develop trust and build relationships.

Adapted from: [Five Top Tips for Engaging Families in Advisory Roles – Advice from a Family Leader](#) | Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health