

Child, youth, or parent participation during the selection of an evidence-based practice (EBP) can help to ensure that the newly adopted practice fits with their culture, norms, and values which is critical for the success and sustainability of an EBP. Shared decision-making can also produce many other positive organizational benefits, including increased service use, improved interactions between staff and clients, and personal education and development among clients participating in decision-making (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Ramey, 2013). There are many considerations when establishing meaningful client participation in organizational decision-making. This document is intended to aid child welfare and community-based agencies with planning and supporting the involvement of children, youth, or parents in policy and implementation decision-making.

How can your agency prepare for the inclusion of children, youth, or parents in decision-making?

**Secure leadership buy-in** – Incorporating client participation in an implementation team or other formal decision-making process can be a drastic change for some agencies and may even require additional resources and work. It is vital that agency leadership, and others involved in the decision-making process, are fully aware of the plan and the needed resources/work, and fully support client involvement in the implementation team.

**Consider some criteria for the selection of participants** – All children, youth, and parents should receive equal opportunity to participate in the decision-making that directly impacts their lives, however, participation should also be considered together with client well-being. Potter (2010) states that unaddressed serious mental health or personal issues can limit effective participation in the decision-making process. Some client characteristics shown to promote successful client participation include having an experiential voice, the ability to identify the collective needs of other clients, being untainted by politics, and the ability to act as a community advocate/mobilizer (Potter, 2010).

**Develop policies & procedures to support meaningful client participation** – Agencies should consider expanding client involvement beyond implementation teams in order to fully integrate client participation into their agency. Agencies that view participation as an add-on risk tokenizing their clients. According to Shier (2001), tokenizing occurs when clients are only asked what they think and are given no choice in how they express their views or the scope of ideas they present. Meaningful participation can be promoted through policies and practices that support clients with expressing their views in multiple ways, taking those views into account, involving them in all aspects of the decision-making processes, and, ultimately, sharing power and responsibility for decision-making with agency leaders (Shier, 2001).

**Provide incentives, when appropriate** – Incentives can help increase interest and motivation to participate and show appreciation for their time. The type and amount of incentive can vary depending on the level of involvement.

## How will your staff fully prepare the child, youth, or parent to participate in decision-making?

**Provide orientations to new participants** – An orientation should be informative and transparent about the decision-making process for new participants, including all expectations for the client participant and their potential level of influence. An agency only looking for a client representative to consult on a decision already made should inform the client of their limited level of influence. Involvement on an implementation team should always be voluntary. An implementation team should use client-friendly language to explain any important definitions, the goals of the team, and the impact the final decision will have on the lives of other children, youth, and families.

**Determine potential barriers to participation** - Be sure to gather information on the prospective child, youth, or parent's practical needs for participating in the implementation team, including if their work and/or school schedule conflicts with any meeting times, if they require childcare, or if transportation assistance is needed (bus passes, gas vouchers, rides, etc.).

## How will your agency ensure the child, youth, or parent engages in the decision-making process?

**Offer multiple ways for clients to voice their thoughts** – A child, youth, or a parent may be uncomfortable or have difficulty speaking with strangers in a large meeting. It is important that agencies provide multiple means and opportunities that can help children, youth, and parents articulate their thoughts (Shier, 2001). Additional methods could include a private one-on-one meeting or submitting their thoughts in writing or through a more creative mean.

**Regularly evaluate client participation to improve the process** – Agencies should take steps to determine if client participation in the implementation team is working effectively, including if the clients and other decision-makers have any concerns or ideas that could improve the process. Methods to evaluate the client participation process can include interviews, focus groups, or surveys.

**Provide long-term mentoring** – Involving clients in implementation teams presents many personal development opportunities for children, youth, and parents. An agency should consider designating a staff member as a mentor in order to provide clients with advice, feedback and education on the agency's inner workings; in addition to helping the client develop important competencies, such as advocacy and public speaking skills. A mentorship can also help build a positive working relationship between your agency and the child, youth, or parent. Forming inclusive and respectful relationships are critical for implementing meaningful participation.

## Additional Resources

- **Competency: Creativity and Innovation - Listening to the Family Voice** (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute) - A tool for assessing how well organizations are operating in alignment with family-centered principles and practices. Available at [http://toolkit.ncwwi.org/worksheets/worksheet1aA3\\_Listening.pdf](http://toolkit.ncwwi.org/worksheets/worksheet1aA3_Listening.pdf)
- **Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders: Self-Assessment & Planning Tool** (The Annie E. Casey Foundation) - An assessment and planning tool to evaluate and enhance parent engagement efforts. Available at <http://www.aecf.org/resources/engaging-parents-developing-leaders/>
- **Family-Youth-Provider Partnerships** (National Child Trauma Stress Network) - Provides information and resources to promote partnerships between trauma-informed service providers and the youth, families, and caregivers receiving services. Available at <http://nctsn.org/resources/topics/youth-and-family-partnerships>
- **It Takes a Family: An Analysis of Family Participation in Policymaking for Public Programs Serving Children with Special Health Care Needs in California** (Lucile Packard Foundation) - A detailed report with information and recommendations on family participation in policymaking and implementation decisions in California state and county level government entities that serve children with special health care needs. Available at <http://www.lpfch.org/publication/it-takes-family-analysis-family-participation-policymaking-public-programs-serving>
- **Webinar Recording: How Nonprofits Can Assess and Improve Their Parent Engagement Efforts** (The Annie E. Casey Foundation) - A webinar on improving engagement efforts which includes how to use the *Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders: Self-Assessment & Planning Tool*. Available at <http://www.aecf.org/blog/webinar-recording-how-nonprofits-can-assess-and-improve-their-parent-engagement-efforts>

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