



GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Family Engagement in Child Welfare Services

The Children's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services calls for the meaningful engagement of families in the design, planning, and implementation of services at all levels of the child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2019).

What is meaningful family engagement?

- ▶ It is a family-centered and strengths-based approach to making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes (Children's Bureau, 2019).
- ▶ It emphasizes relationships and communication between child welfare staff and families (Charest-Belzile et al., 2020).
- ▶ It is rooted in an environment of warmth, empathy, and genuineness that enables a family to enter into a helping relationship and actively work toward change (Altman, 2008).

Family engagement may include parents, children, extended family, and others from the family's support network, known as fictive kin. Potential benefits for families include improved interpersonal relationships (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015), increased family buy-in to case planning and management (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015), and improved quality of caseworker visits (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017).

This Grantee Spotlight highlights family engagement strategies of selected child welfare organizations that have received Children's Bureau discretionary grants. Their work incorporates engagement at the case, program, and system levels and may provide useful examples for other agencies seeking to strengthen engagement.

At a Glance

Audience: Child welfare program staff, administrators, researchers, and evaluators

Purpose: Share examples of strategies to strengthen family engagement

Highlighted Strategies

- ▶ Family Navigators
- ▶ Parent Cafés
- ▶ Parent and Youth Advisory Councils
- ▶ Reforms to permanency planning, case management, and communication processes

Fostering Engagement Through Family Navigation Services



Project: Luqu Kenu (Everyone Is Family), Cook Inlet Tribal Council


Grant cluster: Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families, 2018–2023

Cook Inlet Tribal Council is a nonprofit organization serving American Indian/Alaska Native people in southcentral Alaska. Its Luqu Kenu project engages families in prevention services grounded in four principles:

- ▶ Present focused: Participants reflect on what their families need.
- ▶ Relationship driven: Trusting relationships and healthy connections with others increase the potential for change.
- ▶ Light touch: Families engage at their own pace at a level that feels comfortable for them.
- ▶ Strengths based: Services build on families' inherent strengths and capacities.

Family Navigation services lie at the heart of the organization's family engagement philosophy. Using a tool called the Five Factors Assessment, Family Navigators help participants set and measure goals and priorities in five life domains: financial stability, education and training, cultural and spiritual wellness, healthy lifestyles, and relationships that lead to family success. They engage families in services that include voluntary check-ins, referrals to resources and supports, and peer activities such as social gatherings and classes in traditional arts and cooking. Behavioral wellness consultations guide parents and children in calming, self-regulation, and mindfulness techniques.

"With traditional therapy," one project team member observed, "we are asking people to unpack years and years of lifelong trauma and then go home and be present and calm for their children." Luqu Kenu's approach gives parents the tools they need to "be in the moment and focus on what their families need right now."



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Empowering Parents



Project: Strong Families–Community Change Initiative, El Paso Center for Children
Grant cluster: Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families, 2018–2023

El Paso Center for Children has been providing early childhood, youth outreach, counseling, foster care, and family support services for over 100 years, particularly to the area's military and Latino communities. The center's Strong Families–Community Change Initiative engages families at risk of child welfare system involvement to improve safety and well-being outcomes.

Parent Cafés are the cornerstone of the project, providing opportunities for parents and caregivers to relax, reflect, and share the joys and challenges of raising a family. Typically structured as 2-hour sessions in settings such as churches or schools or online, the cafés are often led by parents trained to facilitate authentic conversations and peer learning that draws on their own experiences. They educate families about protective factors¹ that reduce child maltreatment risk and link them to community resources. Reflecting on her experience with cafés, one parent observed that they “allow us to connect with other parents and see that we're not alone, that other parents face similar situations and challenges that we face.”

Parents are further empowered through a Family Advisory Council made up of caregivers and other community members that is involved in—

- ▶ Planning and hosting Parent Cafés
- ▶ Reporting on issues of local concern and administering a community needs survey
- ▶ Providing feedback on a public awareness campaign about the project
- ▶ Bringing fresh insights and viewpoints to project planning and decision making

“Empowerment is mutual,” noted Project Director Jennifer Phelps. “That’s the model we live by for this program—put out what you want to get back and give parents a real voice and seat at the table. It’s more sustainable when you have family engagement because families are going to be around longer than any particular grant or project.”



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¹ For more information, see [Protective factors to promote well-being and prevent child abuse and neglect](#), Children’s Bureau.

Highlighting Parent and Community Perspectives



Project: Parents and Children Together St. Louis (PACT–STL),
Vision for Children at Risk

Grant cluster: Community Collaborations to Strengthen and
Preserve Families, 2019–2024


Since its establishment as a nonprofit organization in 1991, Vision for Children at Risk has been galvanizing community action to support the healthy development of children affected by poverty. Family engagement is integral to the organization’s programming, including its PACT–STL project.

The project’s Parent Cafés, open to all local caregivers, use a peer-to-peer support model focused on protective factors that promote child well-being and prevent child abuse and neglect. Parents trained through the [Parent Café Training Institute](#) can host cafés independently and facilitate conversations about issues that affect community safety and family well-being.

The project also uses the café approach to drive its decision making. Through a series of Community Cafés, it convenes caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system to learn about their challenges with raising families and their perspectives on what works and what could be improved in the region’s services. The results have informed an action plan and changes to child welfare policies and practices.

PACT–STL further centers family voices in decision making through Parent Advisory Council meetings where café participants and other community members receive updates on project activities and provide input on family needs and the project’s direction. Several members of the council also serve on the larger PACT–STL Collaborative, which includes the St. Louis Child Abuse and Neglect Board, project staff, and key service partners. That gives families a direct role in decisions about strategies, policies, and overall direction.

“Meaningful parent engagement takes a lot of investment of staff time and resources to build trust and relationships,” observed Executive Director Sanaria Sulaiman. “But once you build that relationship and trust, families will come out and feel comfortable sharing their stories and perspectives...We poured our hearts into building those relationships but then it really pays off.” She noted that the Community Café engagement model “really empowers families and makes them a real part of the decision-making process...Through their voices and ideas, we can make meaningful change happen in our community.”



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Amplifying Youth Voice



Project: Kansas Strong, University of Kansas School of Social Welfare

Grant cluster: Strengthening Child Welfare Systems to Achieve Expected Child and Family Outcomes, 2018–2023

In collaboration with the Kansas Department for Children and Families and the state's network of private foster and adoption services providers, the University of Kansas established Kansas Strong to engage parents and youth in efforts to improve social work skills and child welfare system policies and practices. The goal is to reduce entries into out-of-home care while increasing both reunifications and adoptions.

At the case level, the project engages youth in service planning and decision making. A trained facilitator works with each enrolled parent and teenage child to identify problems that put the child at risk of entering foster care or juvenile detention. The parent and child then work out a written agreement that includes preventive actions both will take, ensuring that the child has a voice and is accountable for fulfilling the terms of the agreement.

At the project level, youth voices are amplified through the Kansas Youth Advisory Council, whose members include young people who have been involved in the child welfare system. One council initiative, an arts-based participatory research project, captured the experiences of youth in foster care through writing, painting, drawing, sculpture, music, and photography. For example, as part of a focus group, participants wrote individual poems and then wove them together into a relational poem that incorporated their diverse perspectives on family, trauma, and the child welfare system. One of the poems was featured in a [Child Welfare Information Gateway newsletter](#) and at a state conference on child abuse and neglect.

Giving youth a voice “levels the playing field a little by giving them some power in their day-to-day lives,” noted Kaela Byers, the lead evaluator for Kansas Strong. “But it also sets some boundaries and limits that the parent can live with so they can continue to live together.”



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Supporting Family Leadership in Permanency Planning



Project: Permanency From Day One, Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families

Grant cluster: Strengthening Child Welfare Systems to Achieve Expected Child and Family Outcomes, 2018–2023

The Permanency From Day One initiative grew out of a recognition that inadequate family engagement was contributing to poor outcomes for children in foster care. To achieve more timely and appropriate reunifications and other permanent placements, Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families set out to involve parents earlier and more actively in case planning and decision making while aligning these efforts with caseworkers' concurrent planning activities and the state's court improvement program.

"Concurrent planning meetings were happening, but we were doing them only for our agency and only with agency partners, and not always involving families," explained Debbie Marker, the grant administrator for Permanency From Day One. "So we focused on the need to bring everybody in from the beginning and get parents involved in their case planning. Instead of talking at them, we started talking with them."

Key features of the revamped permanency planning meeting process reflect the central role of family engagement:

- ▶ **Independent facilitators:** Meetings are planned and led by neutral permanency outcomes facilitators who do not represent the interests or perspectives of the caseworker or the agency. This ensures that everyone has a voice and that the agenda items are covered—including issues that are a priority for parents. The facilitators value transparency and treat parents with dignity and respect. Before each meeting, they reach out to the parents to develop the agenda together and set a convenient meeting time. Parents feel better prepared and less overwhelmed.
- ▶ **Family supports:** Parents can invite relatives or others from their support network to attend the meeting. The facilitators proactively follow up to identify and understand the constellation of individuals who may be able to help support the family or serve as permanency resources.
- ▶ **Private family discussions:** The meeting agenda includes time for family members to privately discuss their preferences and recommendations for the permanency plan before a discussion with the larger group takes place.

"I really like coming to these [concurrent planning] meetings because I never knew before how many people care about me," said one youth in out-of-home placement. "Every child needs to have these meetings; they are so kind and supportive. The why is always for the family, and they deserve to know there is a team championing for them," echoed a family caregiver.

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Promoting Engagement Through Organizational Change



Project: Four Oaks Family and Children's Services—Partners United for Supportive Housing in Cedar Rapids (PUSH–CR)

Grant cluster: Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System, 2012–2017

Four Oaks implemented PUSH–CR to serve homeless families with young children. The goal was to test supportive housing—affordable housing combined with intensive support services—for families involved in the child welfare system due to chronic or recurring homelessness and other serious issues such as mental illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Key partners included the Iowa Department of Human Services, Cedar Rapids Housing Services Division, and over two dozen community organizations.

Successful implementation required the development of an organizational culture that prioritized family engagement. Key activities included—

- ▶ Motivational interviewing (MI): Service coordinators developed essential engagement skills through training in MI, a communication approach rooted in compassion and commitment to change.²
- ▶ Case management and communication tools:
 - A Project Management Index to measure families' progress
 - A communication protocol to promptly share key information with partners, such as a decision to place a child into foster care
 - A consolidated family service plan to improve service coordination and prioritize action steps with families
 - A practice guide to ensure consistent case management across partners

“We really see engagement with families to be our job,” noted Program Director Kelli Malone. For some participants, the default behavior was to “sabotage or give up on themselves,” added Project Manager Debbie Craig. “But we needed to be that constant in their lives, the ones who didn’t give up.”



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² For more information, see [The potential of motivational interviewing: Implementing a practice that shifts the center of gravity in child welfare](#), Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Public Consulting Group.

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