

**Title:** Honoring family: Engaging parent partners in strengthening a child welfare coaching program

**Authors:** Dunkerley, McArthur, Akin, & Brown

**Cluster/Topic:** Child Welfare Services, Systems, and Workforce

**Background/Purpose:**

Engaging voices of individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system can be a powerful strategy for program development and improvement (Children's Bureau, 2019). Parent partners, individuals who have personal child welfare experience and are now in a mentoring role with child welfare-involved parents, may offer a unique perspective on developing and strengthening programs. This study used data from focus groups with parent partners to examine shared principles of a newly implemented skills-based coaching program with child welfare supervisors. Our research questions were: (1) How do shared principles of the skills-based coaching program reflect the perspectives of parents? How do they not reflect parents' perspectives?; (2) How might the shared principles be changed to reflect parents' perspectives?; and (3) What would it look like to see the shared principles in practice?

**Method:**

This study's sample included individuals who are parent partners in multiple locations at three organizations in a Midwestern state. A purposive sampling approach was used to engage study participants. Parent partners who were part of the project steering committee were used as gatekeepers to recruit parent partners from their organizations to participate in the study. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and two focus groups were held with parent partners. The first focus group ( $N = 17$ ) focused on the initial input of parent partners regarding the shared principles developed to inform the coaching program. The second focus group ( $N = 14$ ) served as a member checking session where initial themes from the original focus group were shared and parent partners provided feedback on whether those themes accurately portrayed their input and offered additional comments. Trustworthiness and rigor were increased through the use of multiple coders, peer debriefing, and member checking (Padgett, 2017). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze data.

**Findings:**

Parent partners offered their perspectives on how the shared principles developed to guide the coaching program aligned with their own experiences and observations with parents involved in child welfare services. Three primary themes developed from the focus groups: (a) understanding parent context, (b) bridging shared principles and practice, and (c) activating engagement. Common among parent partners were subthemes of understanding the cultural context, family circumstances, and parents' emotional responses to child welfare system involvement. Parent partners also identified areas of disconnection between the shared principles and what they observed between parents and kin caregivers and child welfare caseworkers. In addition, participants described strategies for engaging parents and kin in child welfare services, particularly emphasizing clear communication, nonjudgmental attitudes, and including parents/kin in decision-making.

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**Conclusions:**

This study contributes to the literature in at least three important ways. First, parent partners identified critical differences in shared principles of the coaching program and practices they observed on the frontline. Second, these findings align with prior research that communication, nonjudgmental attitudes, and support are important to improve parent and kin engagement in services. Finally, these parent partners have lived experience of the child welfare system and offer a critical perspective in improving program development.