

**BUILDING AND SUSTAINING  
EFFECTIVE PARENT PARTNERSHIPS:  
STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT**



NATIONAL ALLIANCE  
~of~  
**CHILDREN'S TRUST & PREVENTION**  
FUNDS

## INTRODUCTION



I never expected to become involved with Child Abuse Prevention in Utah. I was a former teacher and Assistant Principal and then a stay-at-home mom. As I took the trash can to the curb one night my neighbor asked if I would be interested in becoming a member of the Child Abuse and Neglect Advisory Council (CAN Council). I decided to give it a shot but didn't feel like I had much to offer. In the 8 years on the CAN Council I found my voice and learned how vital a parent's perspective is. When they nominated me to be on the NPPC I was surprised and honored.

~ Heidi Valdez,  
Utah, NPPC Member

With appreciation to Robin Higa, Alliance parent leader consultant and lead author, and the National Parent Partnership Council who assisted in the development of this paper.

**THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE** of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds (the Alliance) was created in 1989 to provide extensive support to children's trust funds (CTFs) in all aspects of their work. Children's trust funds comprise the nation's largest funders of community-based family strengthening and child abuse prevention programs. The Alliance represents CTFs in national policy and practice discussions about strengthening families and preventing child abuse and neglect. This includes promoting and supporting a system of services, laws, practices and attitudes that support families by enabling them to provide their children with safe, healthy and nurturing childhoods. Through our work with national, state and local initiatives across the country we've learned that high-quality programs and effective policies require the voices of parents as partners in all aspects of planning, implementation, oversight and evaluation. Partnerships with parents are integral to promoting better outcomes for families and communities. The strongest prevention programs facilitate parent leadership at all levels of the ecological model, from self leadership to broad policy changes. The transformation of a parent's self image from a service recipient to a positive change agent provides lasting benefits for the entire system.

In 2006, the Alliance contracted with a parent leader consultant who was initially charged with gathering parent input for the development of the Alliance's Five-Year Plan. In 2007, under the leadership of the parent leader consultant, the Alliance established its National Parent Partnership Council (NPPC), which consists of parent leaders who are familiar with the work of their state CTFs and who have the experience and expertise to support that work on the national level. The Council works with the Alliance to develop and strengthen partnerships

with parents at the local, state and national level. This guide, *Building and Sustaining Effective Parent Partnerships: Stages of Development*, is part of a series of resources developed by the Alliance and the National Parent Partnership Council to support CTFs, their partners and grantees and parents in creating powerful partnerships to support positive outcomes for children and families. In this discussion, the word "parent" is used broadly to include any person identifying themselves as a primary caregiver. In most instances, this document also refers to primary caregivers who are or have been participants in programs to strengthen and support themselves and their families.

**PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS** amplify family strengthening efforts. These partnerships develop in four distinct stages: self leadership, participation, community involvement and mentorship. Partnering with parents inspires growth throughout the ecological system, which includes the individual parents, the community, society at large and public policy. Moreover, the experiences, wisdom and skills of parents are affirmed through these relationships. Parent stories bring valuable knowledge and resources to programs and agencies with the potential to improve policies, programs and evaluation. Who better understands how to empower resiliency, build social connections, increase knowledge, meet emergent needs and engage in successful outreach approaches than parents working in partnership with others?

Partnerships with parents spark leadership, participation, community involvement and mentorship. The Alliance, along with its National Parent Partnership Council, is committed to assisting CTFs and their partners and grantees in building strong partnerships with parents and to supporting parents in taking on these roles.

## PARTNERSHIPS BEGIN WITH SELF LEADERSHIP

**A PARTNERSHIP IS AN ACTIVE CHOICE** to sustain a meaningful relationship toward an agreed upon goal. Recognizing our personal and collective capacity to create positive change is the foundation for healthy partnerships. Before beginning a strategy to develop relationships with parents, policy and practice leaders must consider that, as with any effective partnership, self care and reflection is a critical beginning. Here are some basic questions that may arise:

- ❖ Why is partnering with parents important to me?
- ❖ How will I benefit?
- ❖ What actions do I think this effort will initiate?
- ❖ What strengths can I build upon?
- ❖ What do I want to learn?
- ❖ Who could help me with this?
- ❖ What difference would it make for me and my program, organization or agency?

A typical initial encounter and opportunity for partnership is when staff provides a compelling invitation for parents to attend a family strengthening or child maltreatment program. The staff role in this beginning stage is to maintain a safe container for growth and learning together. At this program level, parent leadership activities shift to partnering with parents when parents are acknowledged as the experts in what is needed for their family and that both staff and parents are learning from the relationship. Rather than asking, “What can I provide to create positive outcomes for your family?” the shift in thinking is “What can we do together that creates

positive outcomes for your family and this community?” This framework acknowledges that we all contribute to the community’s capacity to support families and children. CTFs foster parent partnerships when they:

- ❖ Spotlight successful practices, including innovative program practices for staff self care and training
- ❖ Explore the language of “strengthening families” as it relates to “preventing child abuse and neglect” and other reframing efforts
- ❖ Explore the use of a protective factor framework as well as reducing risk factors
- ❖ Sponsor Parent Leadership Month and Child Abuse Prevention Month
- ❖ Promote the importance of parent partnerships and the cost effectiveness of funding prevention strategies
- ❖ Encourage program hiring practices that reflect the demographics and culture of the families in attendance
- ❖ Promote family support premises and principles, the Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework ([www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org).) and other family strengthening approaches



I am honored to be one of the selected parents for the Alliance’s National Parent Partnership Council. Parents lack the clout and resources that Trust Funds have and Trust Funds lack the parent contact. It seems that we are working towards the same goal to prevent child abuse and strengthen families but we are coming at it at a different angle. Working together in partnerships is a logical solution to the problem by using each other’s strengths.

~ Julie Day,  
New Hampshire,  
NPPC Member



Parents have to be at the heart of our work because they are key to the prevention of child abuse. Our work to engage parents and develop parent leadership is at an early stage but I am excited about what I am hearing. Parents are learning what they have in common, that they have a right to the protective factors and that they are the ones who will make a difference in their kid’s and the community’s kids lives. I am looking forward to what comes next!

~ Roger Sherman,  
Executive Director, Idaho Children’s Trust Fund

## PARTNERSHIPS INVITE VARIED WAYS TO PARTICIPATE



As a member of the NPPC, I am proud to work with the Children's Trust Fund in Minnesota. Our CTF is under the division of Child Safety and Permanency within the Minnesota Department of Human Services. In partnership with parent leaders we will launch a statewide parent leader team. These volunteer parent consultants will work to improve the child welfare system throughout Minnesota. When Erin Sullivan Sutton, director of Child Safety and Permanency, announced this plan in the department's weekly newsletter she stated, families are best served when families, communities and government work in partnership to keep children safe.

~ Roxy Foster,  
Minnesota, NPPC  
Member

**AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT** in building relationships with parents is designing invitations for parents to participate beyond attending programs or activities. When parents contribute to a program in a way that builds on their strengths, it respects their voice and supports opportunities for ongoing and varied contributions and skills building.

Significant areas of work include inviting parent input in program practice. Parent partnerships occur when activities are planned and implemented together and at the end of an activity an invitation is made to maintain contact, demonstrating the intention to develop a relationship and to inform parents about the importance of their impact on programs or practices. For example, staff can invite a parent to review a draft of the questions for a focus group or to help lead the focus group. Then, it's important to share a copy of the survey results and write a follow up letter explaining the impact of the parent's efforts. These seemingly small but powerful steps will help ensure that many parents will feel invited and welcome to share their expertise and join in partnership with staff.

CTF support can include developing budget line items for mileage, stipends for attendance, child care and meals. These allowances help maintain relationships by reducing the impact on family resources and allow parents to be more present at the activity. A gratitude stipend for participation in focus groups or meetings recognizes the parent leader as a consultant to the project and honors the

contribution he or she is making.

Displaying art and fabric from different cultures at the meeting space or using a circle format during meetings helps to make a positive first impression because it nonverbally communicates the intention to honor diversity. CTFs, agencies and community-based organizations can also use parent stories as a form of feedback and evaluation. In addition to helping with program activities and providing feedback, create opportunities for parent voice and contributions by:

- ✦ Using different media to give and receive feedback and information
- ✦ Communicating standards of practice and suggesting program policies for parent partnerships
- ✦ Describing, in grant applications, parent partnership criteria, including submission of a training plan
- ✦ Inviting programs to maintain a skills bank of parent participants
- ✦ Supporting the value of partnering parents in meetings with organizational partners
- ✦ Influencing agency policy to make parent partnerships a funding requirement
- ✦ Getting diverse parent feedback on the readability of literature and appeal of advertising
- ✦ Welcoming and inviting conversations regarding diversity
- ✦ Reinforcing feedback loops with parents, programs and partners

We believe families are best served when families, communities and government partner to keep children safe. Working with parent leaders is an essential partnership and is a meaningful coordinated strategy to further our commitment to all Minnesota children.

~ Carole Johnson, Prevention and Research Supervisor,  
Minnesota Department of Human Services

Our challenge as a state agency is to use the perspective and knowledge that parent leaders bring to improve program supports and delivery at the government level. Parent leaders are an important part of expanding Minnesota's child abuse prevention.

~ Theresa Davis, Children's Trust Fund Program  
Consultant, Minnesota Department of Human Services

## PARTNERSHIPS LINK ORGANIZATIONS TO COMMUNITY

### WHY ARE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS linked with partnering with parents?

Many parents who come to the attention of a CTF director are already recognized as leaders in their own community. Such parents may be working to develop a community vision, multi-system consensus, collaborative design, or innovation that meets the unique emergent needs of a particular community. Parent-Teacher Associations, faith-based institutions and Head Start Councils are networks where parents often begin their community involvement. Shared values are verbalized and modeled and there is a continuous feedback loop between parents and program staff. It's easier to build a partnership if parent leaders see the link between their CTF work and the direct benefits it can have in their own community.

Ideally, CTF staff are accessible and have an open line of verbal and electronic communication with at least one parent leader. Effective partnerships with parents can occur only when a staff person devotes time to developing collegial relationships with diverse parent representatives. Parent leader colleagues need the same support of informal conversation time, meeting debriefs and shared process time that professional colleagues do. Common partnership activities include:

- ❖ Attendance at meetings and activities held with other agency partners
- ❖ Participation on program review committees
- ❖ Input on designs of requests for proposals (RFPs)
- ❖ Service on grant review panels

- ❖ Participation in meetings, monitoring and evaluation activities
- ❖ Opportunities for dialogue between staff and parent leaders
- ❖ Attendance at workshops and other training opportunities
- ❖ Integration of partnerships with parents and communities in agency strategic plans
- ❖ Availability of mini-grants for parent/staff training, funding for peer training activities and resources to support at least two parent leaders to attend meetings and project work

Training opportunities are important not only to increase the skill level of parent volunteers but also to support the dissemination of cutting-edge information to grass-roots efforts. Parent volunteers should have clear expectations at the beginning, including what support can be provided for them to participate and how they can use the training to further their work. One benefit of clear expectations and the provision of resources and training opportunities is to spread interest to more parent leaders when others in the community hear of the opportunities being provided to parent partners.

Each person has a significant role in the life of a child regardless of gender. As families come in all shapes, sizes and configurations, it is important to address our efforts in ways that recognize and appreciate that knowledge. This should include fathers, grandparents, mothers, stepparents and or whoever may have an emotional claim that is of benefit to the child. Our state's Children's Trust Fund has been instrumental in helping each parent feel as though they can make a difference for not only their child, but for every child. As a dad, it is great to be able to work with and encourage other men to find the advocate within each of us.

~ Bernie Dorsey,  
Washington, NPPC  
Member



The Alaska Children's Trust, as a member of the Strengthening Families Alaska Team, is working to strengthen families by building strong and sustainable state structures through parent partnerships. It is imperative that we do not perpetuate the top down, paternalistic and ethnocentric approach when working with families, but instead engage parents as partners in the decision making process in order to make a difference in the lives of Alaska's children and families.

~ Panu Lucier,  
Executive Director, Alaska Children's Trust

## PARTNERSHIPS TO MENTOR OTHERS



In Georgia, parents working in partnership with the Trust Fund started a parent group (Emerging Parents) that coordinates and plans youth programs for their community. In another community, Barbara Harris developed the Kitchen Table Workshop, a project that she facilitates in her home with other parents and volunteer teachers to support students preparing to graduate. Last year it had a 100% success rate. It was highlighted in a local publication and Congressman Bishop loved the concept and supported it with funding as a pilot program in a non-traditional setting.

~ Jessie Coleman,  
Georgia, NPPC Member

**ANOTHER ESSENTIAL** but longer term goal is partnering with parents so they can mentor others to develop a relationship with their CTF. This type of partnering has the potential to build diverse constituency bases and parent advocates for an array of CTF efforts. When CTFs are thoughtful about including a diverse representation of parent leaders in their activities, they are helping to ensure that the decisions are culturally relevant to the diversity of the constituency represented in their programs and surrounding communities.

Once parents have developed a constituency base at the program or neighborhood level, CTFs can provide legislative information, invite seasoned parent leaders to policy and program development meetings and introduce parent leaders to key stakeholders. Parents can become involved in state level project design, grant reviews, hiring activities and interagency activities. There is no limit to the activities in which a parent leader can be involved when they are comfortable impacting state policy and influencing systems. It is important for CTFs to create the invitation and then allow parents to decide on their level of involvement – remembering always that parents come with the expertise of having participated in programs and services and that their input provides staff and policy leaders with invaluable knowledge.

The best way to ensure a continuum of parent partnerships is to create a wide variety of activities and encourage parent partners to invite others to participate. It's important to have more than one or two parent leaders as partners in the work so that parents are not overextended and to ensure that there are always new parents

who are prepared, capable and available to be involved.

CTFs can further promote parent partnerships by:

- ✘ Publicly reinforcing the value of parent partnerships to staff, in publications and at meetings with agency partners
- ✘ Advocating for parent leader positions on their board
- ✘ Including partnering with parents in their strategic planning and provide a budget to support these activities
- ✘ Creating opportunities to recognize the specific achievements and contributions of parent leaders and the added value of partnering with parents
- ✘ Introducing parent leaders to other agency partners and sharing information regarding their work and communication styles and how the linkages help to achieve work goals
- ✘ Noticing what's working to expand diversity and inclusiveness in program activities and disseminating that information to other programs
- ✘ Creating opportunities to co-present as a parent/staff team at conferences and meetings
- ✘ Providing ongoing skill development opportunities for parents by keeping them on an email information list, sponsoring their attendance at conferences, providing access to publications and access to information shared at meetings, etc.
- ✘ Linking parent partners with other parent leaders and advocates

It is at this stage of the partnership that parent leaders may get hired into paid positions or contracted with as

If parents don't need and want to work with us, there is little point in what we provide. We ask all our grantees to include meaningful parent leadership opportunities as part of the services they deliver. We listen and act when parents tell us what will help their families and communities thrive.

~ Jeanne Brooks,  
Director, Tennessee Children's Trust Fund

para-professionals or as consultants. This change can present challenges and requires thoughtful attention and discussion. Staff members are required to have the best interest of their program or agency in mind while parent leaders have the freedom to use their voices only in the best interest of their families, other parents and their broader constituencies. This is a critical difference in staff and parent leader roles and demonstrates why it is not sufficient to have “staff who are also parents” considered the same as having a parent voice at the table.

It is likely that parent leaders who have invested a great deal of time in local and state leadership activities will wish to expand their efforts to have a larger national impact. In many cases, CTFs will have powerful allies who can speak to the progress in their state, share their stories and give voice to parents on the national stage. When partnering with parents, it is common to find:

- ❖ Improvements in family outcomes of parents who are in leadership roles. Some of the results may

include employment and education opportunities, creation of social networks, reduction of barriers to accessing support, building lines of communication, increased referrals and use of services and children who learn civic duty

- ❖ More parents wanting to advocate for the work of the CTF and the work of funded programs, which results in a network of parent leaders to call upon when it’s time to describe agency efforts to policy makers
- ❖ More parents volunteering for an organization
- ❖ More program staff satisfaction from witnessing visible outcomes in the families served
- ❖ Policies, strategies and programs being influenced by parent voices
- ❖ The creation of a new environment where programs and parents eliminate the “us and them” dynamic and work together with reciprocity and respect to improve lives for children



We would have never received the local support to begin Community Cafés if it weren’t for the support of our Trust Fund. Their faith in us helped our local board be able to take a risk with a new idea. It didn’t cost the Trust Fund anything to endorse our idea but with their support we were able to garner resources to start nine new sites!

~ Robin Higa,  
Parent Leader  
Consultant, National  
Alliance of Children’s  
Trust and Prevention  
Funds, and parent  
volunteer for the  
Washington Children’s  
Trust Fund



The Council for Children & Families/ Children’s Trust Fund of Washington recently completed a “Theory of Change” process to articulate the essential elements of our work and how they leverage achievement of our long term goals. Right in the center of our theory of change is “Increased partnership with parents.” We see partnering with parents as an absolutely essential factor in achieving the outcome to which all the short and long term outcomes build: “Increased public will to support family strengthening” and our goals: “Reduced incidence of

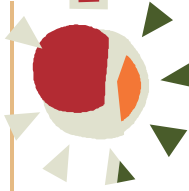
child abuse and neglect; optimal child health, safety and development; and the broad societal benefits that will be derived from achieving these.” In short, we believe that powerful parent voices and actions are critical to achieving the practice, programmatic, policy and system changes needed to deliver enduring, positive benefits for vulnerable children and families and for us all.

~ Joan Sharp,  
Executive Director, Council for Children  
and Families/Washington Children’s  
Trust Fund



It's important for the Alliance to partner with parents as it helps us achieve better results from our efforts. The expertise that is contributed by parents in planning, implementing and evaluating our work can't be provided by any other group. This paper is an excellent example of the many contributions of the Alliance's National Parent Partnership Council in support of our common goals.

*~ Teresa Rafael,  
Executive Director,  
National Alliance of  
Children's Trust &  
Prevention Funds*



**STATE CHILDREN'S TRUST and Prevention Funds** comprise the nation's largest funders of community-based family strengthening and child abuse prevention programs and other strategies.

Collectively, they distribute more than \$100 million annually to thousands of state and local programs. They also build capacity in local programs, facilitate

broad collaborations with state partners and help incubate new and promising practices.

The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds is the only national organization that provides support to all aspects of the work of state CTFs. The Alliance represents CTFs in national policy and practice discussions and joins in dynamic partnerships with CTFs, federal agencies, foundations, state governments, other national organizations and parent leaders.



*Strengthening Families for 20 Years*  
**www.ctfalliance.org**