

Engage Foster Parents in Decision-Making

CHAMPS, which stands for Children Need Amazing Parents, is a policy campaign focused nationally and in states to promote high quality foster parenting. CHAMPS is based on the understanding that all children need and do best in families. Foster parents, including kinship caregivers, play a primary role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. In fact, stable, quality foster parenting is one of the most powerful ways we can help children in foster care to heal and thrive. It is associated with a range of better outcomes for children, such as greater success in school, healthy relationships with family, and improved health and safety.

The CHAMPS policy playbook highlights six priorities for policy change, including engaging foster parents in decision-making.

Why is it important to engage foster parents in decision-making?

Foster families spend more time with children in foster care than any other professional partner. Foster parents have valuable information that should assist with case planning, permanency planning, and health care and education decision-making. Accordingly, foster parents should be treated as priority partners on the child's care and treatment team and their input should be considered as seriously as that of professionals such as clinicians, attorneys and caseworkers. Caregivers also have first-hand experience with the effects of agency foster care policies and procedures and can play an important role in agency decision-making.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- When foster parents are involved as part of the child welfare team and included in decision making, their desire to continue fostering increases. In addition, a lack of efficacy and sense of helplessness were cited as primary reasons foster parents considered discontinuing providing care.¹
- Foster parents are satisfied when their relationship with the agency and other personnel is characterized by sharing of information, respect, and positive regard. A reconceptualization of foster parents as para-professionals would afford a higher degree of trust, regard, and respect.²
- A key challenge to retaining foster parents is that foster parents desire a greater opportunity to voice their concerns. Foster parents shared that they have many expectations placed on them but are frustrated that they have no voice in many important decisions regarding the lives of the foster children in their care.³

¹ Geiger, J.M., Hayes, M.J. & Lietz, C.A. (2013). Should I stay or should I go? A mixed methods study examining the factors influencing foster parents' decisions to continue or discontinue providing foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(9), 1356-1365.

² Denby, R., Rindfleisch, N., & Bean, G. (1999). Predictors of foster parents' satisfaction and intent to continue to foster. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 23, 287-303.

³ Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2002). Retaining foster parents. Retrieved from: <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-07-00-00601.pdf>

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Through policy and supportive practice, we can engage foster parents in decision-making. Strategies that work:

- **Support foster parent advisory boards.** State and regional advisory boards are an important vehicle for foster parents to be active participants in policy development at the agency and legislative levels. Advisory boards also raise public awareness of the important service that foster parents provide, promote foster parent involvement in local child welfare-related planning, and promote the statewide exchange of information.
- **Include foster parents in team meetings.** Policy should be clear that foster parents are essential members of the team of experts supporting the child and family. Every effort should be made to facilitate participation, including allowing foster parents to participate by phone, if necessary.
- **Notify and follow up with foster parents regarding court hearings.** Federal law requires foster parents to be notified of court hearings and be provided an opportunity to be heard. However, this does not always occur. State policy should reinforce the importance of foster parents' participation in court hearings and require agencies and courts facilitate participation.
- **Develop clear training and policy guidance for information sharing.** Federal law requires that foster parents be provided certain information regarding children's health and education. Such information is crucial to enable foster parents to provide quality care for children. Sometimes, however, too often this information is not shared because of misconceptions about confidentiality restrictions. Policy and caseworker training should clarify what must be shared and what cannot be shared so that foster parents get the information they need.

TAKING ACTION

CHAMPS calls on child welfare leaders, legislators and other decision makers to ensure foster parents are engaged in decision-making. Suggestions for getting started:

- **Agency and program leaders** can review existing policies and practices for how foster parents are intentionally engaged in decision-making, including policies and practices related to notification of court hearings and information sharing. Convene foster parents, including kinship caregivers, and caseworkers to identify gaps and barriers and generate solutions.
- **Legislators** can hold a hearing or listening session to learn more about how foster parents are engaged in decision-making. Foster parents, agency leaders and caseworkers can be invited to share their experiences and discuss opportunities and challenges.
- **Advocates, families and community leaders** can bring together foster and kinship families, youth, agency leaders to raise awareness about the importance of engaging foster parents in decision-making. Consider engaging medical professionals who have worked with foster families. They have a unique and valuable perspective on the critical role of foster parents and the need for information sharing.

CHAMPS RESOURCES

- **For more information on CHAMPS,** go to www.fosteringchamps.org
- **For administrative and legislative policy examples** related to engaging foster parents in decision-making, check out the CHAMPS policy playbook at <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org>
- **Learn more about CHAMPS technical assistance options** at <http://fosteringchamps.org/champs-technical-assistance/>
- **Contact CHAMPS at** info@fosteringchamps.org