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How do parent partner programs instill hope and support prevention and reunification?

Parents who have come to the attention of child protective services or have recently lost custody of their children are dealing with incredible stressors. They often experience a range of emotions, including fear, anger, and hopelessness. They may believe they are powerless and alone. And based on many prior life experiences, they may feel hostility toward the very people involved in providing services and making important decisions about their children.

Many child welfare agencies have taken steps to prioritize meaningful engagement with families. In doing so, they have come to recognize the inherent power differential between parents and caseworkers, and the importance of connecting families newly involved with the system to parents who have already experienced the child welfare system, who can mentor, encourage, and instill hope for the journey ahead. One innovative approach that has emerged over the past decade is the use of peer mentors, or “parent partners,” who serve to bridge the gap between birth parents and a complex, often challenging, and overwhelming system.



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What are the benefits for parents?

There are many positives associated with participating in parent partner programs:

- **Instill hope:** Parent partners share their own experiences overcoming significant obstacles in their life and changing behavioral patterns to achieve reunification. This gives birth parents the hope they need to believe that they, too, can change, overcome barriers, and successfully parent or reunite with their children.
- **Self-advocacy:** One of the essential roles of the parent partner is to help birth parents gain awareness of their rights and responsibilities. They advocate for the birth parent and serve as translators, breaking down the bureaucratic requirements into more accessible language. They also help build parents’ confidence to find their voice so that they can self-advocate in their case, as well as continue to advocate for themselves once they are no longer involved with child welfare.
- **Connection to services:** Caseworkers are often overburdened with high caseloads and do not have the capacity to follow up with parents to make sure they are engaging in services. Parent partners fill this gap. They form trusting relationships with birth parents, which allows them to check in regularly with parents and make sure they have the resources and information needed to complete their court-ordered services, such as substance abuse treatment, counseling, health care, housing, or rental assistance.
- **Agency culture shift:** Parent partners can also use their own experiences to inform agencies about how to engage more authentically with families. They can convey information on how to meaningfully instill family-centered and family-driven philosophy and principles into practice and policies. They may serve to help humanize parents, and facilitate a culture shift over time, as judges, caseworkers, and attorneys come to view birth parents in a more positive light and believe that they are capable of meaningful and lasting change.

“As a parent partner, it’s really not my job to save people from themselves. It’s my job to help them figure out how to help themselves. And to walk alongside them, to guide them, to give them tools, coach them, and help them learn how to advocate for what they need.

– TONI MINER, FAMILY SUPPORT PARTNER

What does the research tell us?

There is evidence of effectiveness of peer mentor and support programs in related fields, such as substance abuse, mental health, and pediatrics. An overview of veteran partner programs in pediatric health suggests that they may be effective in improving families’ coping skills, knowledge of their child’s physical or socioemotional conditions, and perceived access to resources.¹ Another study examining the effectiveness of substance abuse “recovery coaches” in Illinois found that parents who receive peer coaching are more likely to access substance abuse treatment services than parents in a control group.²

There is a small but growing number of empirical studies of parent partner programs in child welfare that reveal the following outcomes:

- Higher rates of reunification for those parents who have participated
- Lower rates of reentry for children involved in the program
- Increased participation in services and court hearings

See [Appendix A](#)³ for a snapshot of the research on individual parent partner programs.

Parent partner programs have also proven to be beneficial to the mentors. As mentors take on helping and leadership roles, they feel enhanced self-worth and sense of responsibility, build workplace skills, and are compensated for their efforts. While some parent partners may have records of substance use and criminal histories that limit employment options, serving as a parent partner also opens up new opportunities as they seek to re-establish connections in their communities and obtain new job skills.⁴

How are parent partner programs structured?

Parent partner programs generally pair parent partners, paraprofessionals who have experienced having a child placed in foster care and later have successfully reunified with that child, with parents currently involved in the child welfare system. Parent partner programs are founded on the premise that parents with lived experiences have unique expertise to serve as empathetic peers, mentors, guides, and advocates.

All Parent Partner program models provide peer-to-peer support but differ in their design and structure. Some programs (e.g., Yolo Crisis Nursery) focus on families involved with child welfare before a child has ever been removed, while others (e.g., Iowa’s Parent Partners Program) focus exclusively on parents whose children are in foster care. There do not appear to be any jurisdictions that provide both simultaneously.

In one model, such as the Parent Partner Program in Riverside County’s (California) Children Services Division, the child welfare agency hires and employs parent partners. They work directly with parents, as well as support other agency staff, by exploring service options tailored to parents’ needs. Deeply embedded in all decision-making processes, parent partners encourage staff to use practices that reflect respect for families’ voices and choices. In another approach, the parent partner program is embedded in the courts. For example, Washington’s Parents for Parents program is funded by the Washington State Legislature through the Office of Public Defense and Children’s Home Society of Washington provides technical assistance for implementation of new programs. Parents for Parents programs in Washington and elsewhere may be funded and managed by the courts or local community service agencies, and they always work in the courthouse where they meet parents.

Parent partners are compensated for their work with parents, including attending family team meetings, court hearings, and one-on-one meetings when requested by the parents. Parent partners sit at child welfare decision-making tables and create relationships with child welfare administrators, agency workers, service providers, judges, lawyers, court personnel, and community representatives.

Parent partners typically make initial contact with a parent at the first dependency hearing, a stressful and overwhelming experience for parents. At this point the parent partner informs them that they have been in their shoes and can relate to what they are going through, offering hope that success is possible and advice to achieve it. They let the parent know that they will be available to them through the entire experience of their court involvement to support them and help them navigate through the system so they can be reunited with their children.

Other parent partner programs provide support to parents during a CPS investigation or following a case opening to prevent their children from being removed. In some instances, parent partners go out on investigations with caseworkers, in order to help families better understand what is happening and offer suggestions based on how they successfully navigated the process. In other instances, such as [Ohio START](#) or Washington's [Parent Child Assistance Program \(PCAP\)](#), parents who are struggling with substance use are paired with peer recovery mentors who have themselves been through recovery. In these programs, the parent partner teams with the caseworker and assists the parents through the recovery process to help keep the children safely at home.

Once a birth parent decides to engage with a parent partner, the parent partner shares contact information and takes steps to develop a bond around their common experiences. Parent partners are available during regular and non-traditional service hours (evenings and weekends) and are tasked with engaging the parent and responding to parental needs. The parent partner is with them through appointments, court, and treatment until their support is no longer needed. They also attend court, Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings, and other meetings.

How are parent partner programs funded?

Funding is needed to support the administration of the program, compensation of parent partners, training, supplies, and office space. Programs typically begin on a shoestring budget and seek to use a combination of funding streams, including⁵:

- Foundation or nonprofit program support
- Grant programs (e.g., Court Improvement Project)
- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) funds
- Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program funds
- Title IV-E waiver funding
- Various state funding sources (services for child welfare, health, and mental health and substance abuse treatment)

Securing adequate funding has been a challenge for most parent partner programs around the country. Washington State, for example, was successful in using the positive outcomes from its pilot parent partner programs to advocate for state legislation to fund parent partner programs statewide.



There is nothing more impactful than to have someone that has walked that walk to walk beside you. It will ultimately help you understand a different way of being.

– COREY BEST, FAMILY SUPPORT PARTNER

What are some implementation considerations?

The effectiveness of a parent partner program depends on the structure, leadership, and management of the program. The program must be developed collaboratively with child welfare leadership and with full buy-in and support from agency and community partners.

- **Adequate recruitment:** Not all parents who have been reunified with their children would be effective parent partners. It is important to assess whether they have resolved issues stemming from their experiences with the system, in order to make sure they are emotionally prepared to serve in an advocacy role. Most programs require the parent to wait a certain amount of time after their case closes before they can become a mentor. Ultimately, it is important to recruit candidates with demonstrated personal commitment to collaboration as well as strong listening skills, compassion, and a positive attitude.
- **Meaningful training:** Becoming a parent partner represents a significant shift in roles: from being a client receiving supportive services, to being a professional mentor delivering them. Each parent partner program's design should include core training and other professional development opportunities for parent partners. In particular, training should be provided on the peer-to-peer support process, the mandates and operation of the child welfare system, and the rights and responsibilities of families involved in the system. Parent partners should also have opportunities to develop the leadership and communication skills that will enable them to engage other parents effectively and serve as equal partners with agency staff on decision-making bodies.
- **Culturally sensitive programming:** It is important that parent partners reflect the diversity of the population of parents that they are serving. Parent partners should see their work through a cultural lens and be aware of how a family's cultural or religious customs may play a role in how they interact with the child welfare system. Parent partner programs should incorporate cultural considerations into all levels of programming, including recruitment, hiring, and training.
- **Inclusion of fathers:** Traditionally, child welfare agencies have not effectively involved fathers in their efforts to address safety, permanency, and well-being. With the growing recognition of the important role fathers play in a child's healthy development, today's child welfare agencies are searching for strategies to more effectively engage fathers and paternal family members in ways that benefit children; parent partner programs can be one such strategy.⁶
- **Criminal backgrounds:** One common challenge to employing birth parents in the child welfare system is their potential child maltreatment and criminal histories. Some programs were able to obtain waivers to the rule prohibiting volunteers/employees with criminal histories from becoming official volunteers/employees of the agency. Other programs rely on contracts with nonprofits who do not have similar restrictions.



We must see parents' strengths. When child welfare becomes involved, parents are operating from a place of fear and emotional displacement. As a parent mentor I get to be a liaison between parents. I get to support them in understanding their case plan requirements. Having been there before I can relate in a way others cannot. I also get to help shift away from deficit crippling approaches to building protective factors.

– SHRONDA SELIVANOFF, PARENT MENTOR

What are some examples of parent partner programs?

The three examples below highlight different types of parent partner programs that have been evaluated and show promising outcomes. Please see [Appendix A](#) for more examples of parent partner programs that have been evaluated.

1. **Parents Anonymous®** is designed to be both a prevention and treatment program that strengthens families who are at risk of or currently involved in the child welfare system, have behavioral health challenges, or face other family issues. It is open to any parent or caregiver in a parenting role seeking support, positive nurturing, and parenting strategies regardless of the age or special challenges of their children or youth. Services include weekly support groups, parent partner services (such as advocacy, kinship navigator services, in-home parenting, and supportive services including linkages to community resources), and helpline services. The program aims to mitigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) for parents/caregivers and prevent the occurrence of ACEs in their children. The program also aims to build on the strengths of all family members and enhance family well-being by increasing protective factors through trauma-informed practices. Parents model and support one another in their leadership development through the process of shared leadership. A 2020 study found that participants in Parents Anonymous® were significantly less likely to have a subsequent child maltreatment referral and have a substantiated maltreatment finding at the 12-month follow-up period compared with parents who did not participate. In addition, substantiations decreased by half for parents who participated in Parents Anonymous®.⁷
2. **Kentucky Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team (START) Program** pairs specially trained child protective service (CPS) workers with family mentors, with at least three years of sobriety and previous involvement with CPS, to work with families. The program also partners with substance abuse treatment providers to ensure START participants have quick access to intensive treatment. Decision-making is shared among all team members, including the family and court. Essential elements of the model include quick entry into START services to safely maintain child placement in the home when possible and rapid access to intensive addiction/mental health assessment and treatment. Each START CPS worker-mentor pair has a capped caseload, allowing the team to work intensively with families, engage them in individualized wrap-around services, and identify natural supports with goals of child safety, permanency, and parental sobriety and capacity. START is now operating in five counties across the state and has served more than 1,000 families, including 1,690 adults and more than 2,200 children between 2006 and early 2018.⁸ Recent research has found that START is effective at keeping children at home: children in families served by START were half as likely to be placed in state custody compared with children in a matched control group. At case closure, more than 75 percent of children served by START remained with or were reunified with their parents.⁹ In addition, a 2015 study found that children were less likely to experience a recurrence of maltreatment or re-enter foster care if their parents participated in Kentucky START.¹⁰
3. **Iowa's Parent Partner Program** has been implemented statewide. Each local Parent Partner site matches a parent currently involved in the system with a parent partner, who has been involved with the child welfare agency and has been successfully reunited with their child for at least a year and/or has healed from the issues that initially brought them to the attention of DHS. Parent partners are compensated to mentor and help parents locate and secure community resources. Parent partners commit to working with a family for a minimum of seven to 10 hours per month and each parent partner can mentor up to 15 parents. Iowa went statewide with its parent partner program in 2012, and as of 2016, there are more than 150 parent partners mentoring 1,800 parents across the state.¹¹ A 2019 [evaluation](#) used a quasi-experimental design to compare families served by the program with similar families who were not provided a parent partner. Results indicated that the children of

program participants were significantly more likely to return home to their families than the children of matched non-participants. Additionally, Iowa Parent Partner program participants were significantly less likely to have a subsequent child removal within 12 months of the child returning home than matched non-participants. No significant differences were found between the children of program participants and children of matched nonparticipants in the total time in out of home care or subsequent child removal within 24 months of returning home.¹²

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- 2 Ryan, J. P., Marsh, J. C., Testa, M. F., & Louderman, R. (2006). Integrating substance abuse treatment and child welfare services: Findings from the Illinois Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Waiver Demonstration. *Social Work Research*, 30, 95-107.
- 3 See [Appendix A – Research Snapshot](#)
- 4 Leake, R., Longworth-Reed, L., Williams, N., & Potter, C. (2012). Exploring the benefits of a parent partner mentoring program in child welfare. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 12(1), 1–15. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1147&context=ifs>
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