# WHY ENGAGING PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IS CRITICAL TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

People sharing their lived experiences in child welfare provides critical insights that can inform systems change. To gather perspectives on how and where this is occurring, a NCWWI team interviewed people across the country with lived experience who work to strengthen their communities and shift child welfare policy and practice. Below are some of the important themes and actions that emerged.

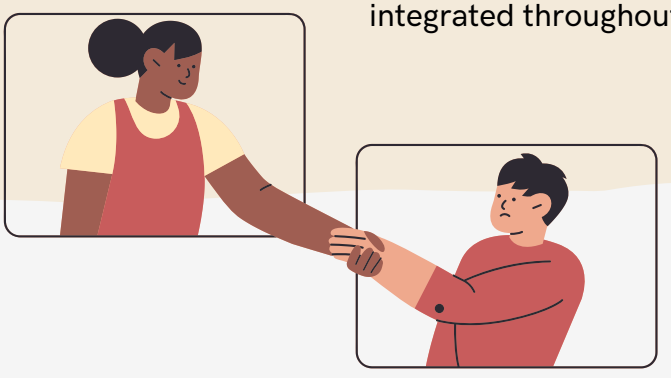
## Who has lived experience in child welfare?

Individuals directly impacted by the child welfare system through an investigation, open case, family separation, etc.

> When we start listening to the people who are affected the most in the child welfare system, which are the families and children, it changes how these organizations function, how we talk to and about people, and how we support them.

## How can we engage people with lived experience?

By intentionally involving people with lived experience through equitable partnerships that include transparent communication, processes, and activities. This means mitigating power imbalances so the people most impacted are leading our priorities and activities. Accountability, equity, and inclusion need to be integrated throughout the work.



> How do we learn from the experts that those systems are involving, and how do we put ourselves out of business, how do we solve the systemic issues that are putting people in need in the first place?

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## What makes meaningful engagement possible?

- Accessibility
- Building strong relationships
- Diverse and cross-systems partnerships
- Education and training
- Shared power and collaboration
- Valuing lived experience
- Responsive community engagement

### What impact can it have?

- Accountability
- Community strengthening
- Belonging
- Improved organizational practices
- Meaningful solutions
- Sustainable and transformative change

**Authentically engaging and valuing people with lived experience requires us to change how we do child welfare work. True system transformation will only happen when the most impacted people are leading the way.**

## What creates barriers to meaningful engagement?

- Lack of accountability
- Devaluing lived experience
- Systemic barriers
- Lack of resources
- Tokenizing and exclusionary practices
- Systemic racism
- Inconsistent support, expectations, and implementation

### What impact can it have?

- Further harm and trauma
- Temporary solutions
- Inequity
- Learning gaps

**Questions we can ask to examine our practices for partnering with people with lived experience:**

- Does our community engagement include organizational accountability and intentionality? Are people with lived experience supporting practice shifts and systems change?
- Are our practices inclusive, collaborative, and community-led? If not, are there beliefs or biases we need to interrogate?
- Are there supports and structures in place to have meaningful collaboration?
- How will we navigate harm, accountability, and difficult conversations?
- Have we examined where power is held and how it could be redistributed?
- Have we taken steps to implement community engagement, like regular feedback or advisory councils?

**Thank you to our many community partners whose wisdom and experiences informed this resource.**

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

SCCHILDREN.ORG/COALITIONS/PARENT-ADVISORY-COUNCIL/
MORRISONKIDS.ORG/PROGRAMS/PREVENTION-EDUCATION/PM/
SELFLESSLOVEFOUNDATION.ORG/OVI/
FLCHILDREN.ORG/PAGE/PARENTLEADERSHIP
WWW.SSYAF.ORG/FAMILY-YOUTH-PARTNERSHIP
CHILDLAWCENTER.ORG/PROJECT-FOSTER-POWER/
CTFALLIANCE.ORG/PARTNERING-WITH-PARENTS/ANPPC/

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