



Supporting Parents as Leaders on the Policy Council

As a Head Start or Early Head Start program staff member, you play an important role in the experience parents have on the Policy Council. Explore this resource to learn how you can partner with parents and support their growth as leaders and advocates on the Policy Council—and beyond.

You may also want to read the tip sheet series, **Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families**. You can share the tip sheet series with parents.

Why Do Head Start Programs Have a Policy Council?

When Head Start began in 1965, its founders understood that parents are their children’s first and most important teachers. The founders viewed parents as essential partners in Head Start’s work to educate young children. They also believed that parents receiving Head Start services should help decide how those services could most benefit their family and other families in the community.

As a result, Head Start created a formal leadership and policy-making role for parents and community members, and in 1970 named this group the “Policy Council.” Today, every Head Start and Early Head Start agency must have a Policy Council as part of its shared leadership structure. The Head Start Program Performance Standards describe what Policy Councils do and who can be a member.

Policy Councils help advance the child and family outcomes in the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. Serving on the Policy Council strengthens parents’ leadership and advocacy skills as well as their connections to peers and the community. Parents often become more confident and develop skills they can use beyond their Head Start or Early Head Start program. When families are strong in these areas, their children learn more and experience healthier development.

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Partnering with Parents

Program staff engage with parents before they join the Policy Council, while they serve on the Policy Council, and when they leave the Policy Council. Read how you can partner with parents and family members throughout their Policy Council experience. Choose actions you would like to try with families in your program.

Before Parents Join the Policy Council

How do you share information about the Policy Council—and when? How do you help families answer their questions? How do you identify parents for the Policy Council?

Consider the following ways to partner with parents as they learn about the opportunity to serve on the Policy Council.

- Offer information about the Policy Council in a variety of ways:
 - Discuss the Policy Council during enrollment, the first home visit, or a parent group meeting
 - Post flyers about the Policy Council in the languages spoken by families in your program
 - Organize information sessions about the Policy Council
- Invite parents to ask questions about the Policy Council. Times might include at an information session or program meeting, during a home visit, or during morning arrival and end-of-day discussions.
- Reach out to parents and family members who represent the diversity of your program.
- Think about the different skills needed by members of the Policy Council. Talk with parents about how their skills, interests, and leadership experiences might be a match.
- Talk respectfully with individual parents about their family circumstances and situations. Discuss ways to address any concerns they have about serving on the Policy Council.
- Encourage participation in parent committees as a first step toward joining the Policy Council.
- Invite parents to attend a Policy Council meeting to observe and to meet other Policy Council members.
- Provide opportunities for parents who are current Policy Council members to share their experiences with interested parents.

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While Parents Serve on the Policy Council

How do you welcome and encourage parents to contribute to the Policy Council? How do you address their questions and concerns?

Consider the following ways to partner with parents who join the Policy Council.

- Offer Policy Council training. Ask parents for feedback. Use their input to enhance future training.
- Provide on-site child care and food during meetings. Arrange transportation to and from meetings.
- Create opportunities for parents to attend meetings through video conferencing or telephone conference calls if they cannot attend in person.
- Provide interpretation services and translate materials into languages spoken by families in the program.
- Encourage past parent Policy Council members to mentor new parent members.
- Reflect on how well your program collaborates with families and Policy Council parents. Look for opportunities to enhance that collaboration through meeting facilitation and a process for conflict resolution.

When Parents Leave the Policy Council

How do you talk with parents about stepping down from the Policy Council? What does your program do to thank members for serving? How do you encourage future leadership?

Consider the following ways to partner with parents who are leaving the Policy Council.

- Offer to talk with parents about their feelings about leaving the Policy Council. Recognize and honor the mixed feelings they might have.
- Highlight and celebrate parents' accomplishments and leadership. For example, present parents with certificates of appreciation for their service.
- Host an end-of-year party for Policy Council members.
- Work with parents to identify future opportunities to volunteer at Head Start, Early Head Start, or other organizations. Opportunities may include:
 - Becoming a mentor to new Policy Council members
 - Joining the program's governing body or board of directors
 - Volunteering for other community organizations they care about

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Reflection

Take time to reflect on how your program currently partners with parents on the Policy Council. Consider the following questions:

- What is working well?
- What can your program do better?
- How does your program support your work with Policy Council members?
- What is one new action you want to try to support parents throughout their Policy Council experience?

Related Resources

Learn more about the Policy Council and how to support parent leaders. You can find these resources on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

- Policy council and policy committee, 45 CFR §1301.3
- Head Start Leadership and Governance Training
- Head Start Program Governance—Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families
- Enhance Parents' Advocacy and Leadership Skills: A Guide for Head Start and Early Head Start Staff
- Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes—Research to Practice Series: Families as Advocates and Leaders

For more information about this resource, please contact us:
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