



Ascend Parent Advisors gathered at the September 2023 alumni convening.
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ASCENDING WITH PARENTS:

A Guide to Centering Parent Voice
in Policy and Practice



María Isabel Ramos Martínez, an Ascend Parent Advisor, with her son at the September 2023 alumni convening. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Dan Bayer

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DEAR COLLEAGUE,

In late 2013, I had the great privilege of meeting Tameka Henry, who was then a parent advisory council member at Ascend Network Partner [Acelero Learning](#), a national Head Start organization run by Ascend Fellow Henry Wilde. Tameka is a force: she and her husband have raised four children outside Las Vegas, Nevada while managing health challenges and an unstable economy. Tameka is a community organizer and a small business owner, and, in 2020, she was a leading candidate for the Clark County Board of Trustees. At Ascend convenings and webinars, she has brought clear recommendations to policymakers and practitioners. Her insights have helped shape new thinking and approaches at national foundations and in early learning sites.

Tameka is very special, and the wisdom and leadership she possesses are all around us in parents with lived experience. Families know what they need to thrive, and their voice is an essential ingredient that gives us a real shot at ending poverty and building lasting cycles of prosperity. Parental involvement in shared governance strategies and decision making is the key to advancing policies and programs that support families' strengths and needs.

Since its inception, Ascend has engaged the voices of families and has worked with more than 60 parents, practitioners, and policymakers across all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico to move the idea of centering parent voices and lived expertise from the exception to the rule. From our launch in 2011, we centered parent voice, not just through our parent leaders but also through bipartisan focus groups and polling and the country's first two-generation analysis of the Census data, a partnership with Child Trends. Our work builds on the efforts of many others, especially those organizations in the [Ascend Network](#), that have connected us to parents and families and shared their lessons to make our work stronger. We have learned a great deal in our journey and share these insights and strategies in this Guide to Centering Parent Voice in Policy and Practice. We use the term "families" in this guide to represent how families define themselves. We use the term "parents" as well, and this is intended to be inclusive of all caregivers, some of whom may identify as someone other than a parent. In the following pages, you will find the principles that guide our work with parents based on three core ideals:

- 1. Honor parental expertise;**
- 2. Parent participation is essential - not an afterthought; and**
- 3. With parents as partners, we get better results and stronger leaders.**

We hope this guide helps you tap into the incredible passion and wisdom of parents in your community and does so in a way that honors their leadership and expertise.

This guide would not have been possible without the more than 50 parent advisors who generously shared their time and feedback with us. We would like to particularly thank the parent reviewers of this guide – [Tameka Henry](#), [Drayton Jackson](#), Brianna Humphrey, and [Michaela Martin](#) – and the parents who read and provided feedback on the draft guide at our inaugural, 2023 Ascend Parent Advisor Convening in Aspen, Colorado:

Yoslin Amaya
Amber Angel
Ignacio Angel Jr.
Dominique Baker
Jesus Benitez
Brittany Block
Lesley Del Rio
Melba Henao
Tameka Henry
Ashley Hill Hamilton
Drayton Jackson
Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin

Mikah Jorgensen
Lona Juarez
Shana Kelly
Karlee Knuth
Rashika Lee
Jan Manla
Mirah Marcus-Garcia
Valeria Martinez
Michaela Martin
Janine McMahon
Kimberly Mitchell
Christian Ortiz

Isis Patterson
Jessica Pelton
Maria Isabel Ramos Martinez
Leslie Reyes
Kimberly Salazar
Rynn Sango
Savannah Steiger
Anjanette Vaidya
Ariel Ventura-Lazo
Waukecha Wilkerson



Anne Mosle with Tameka Henry, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and Tameka's mother (left) and son (right) at the 2022 Aspen Ideas Festival.

We are also grateful for the [philanthropic partners](#) who have trusted our vision. Finally, we thank the entire Ascend team for making this happen.

With appreciation,
Anne Mosle and the Ascend Team

TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES CENTER PARENT VOICE

First coined in the late 1980s, [two-generation](#) (2Gen) approaches build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously supporting children and parents together. These approaches acknowledge that the outcomes of parents and children are intrinsically linked and cannot be siloed, therefore programming should not be siloed. They also recognize that family members engage in mutual motivation – when a child thrives, it has a positive impact on and is motivating for the parent, and when children see their parent thriving, it is motivating for the children.

2Gen approaches can be a powerful tool to foster intergenerational family prosperity and well-being across generations, but they require a higher level of intensity and intentionality. Specifically, 2Gen approaches aim to adhere to the following [five guiding principles](#):

- 1 **Measure and account for the outcomes of both children and their parents (or adults in their lives)**
- 2 **Engage and listen to the voices of families**
- 3 **Ensure equity**
- 4 **Align and link systems and funding streams**
- 5 **Foster innovation and evidence together**

This guide focuses on the second guiding principle: engage and listen to the voices of families. Ascend knows that with a combination of parent voice, data and research, and best practices we can achieve strong policy and systems changes that benefit all families. Over the years, practitioners and policymakers have sought to strengthen outcomes for families by engaging parents in the development, implementation, and assessment of programs and policies. Many Ascend Network Partners have proven success in increasing program uptake and retention by using strong feedback loops about program services with their parent participants.

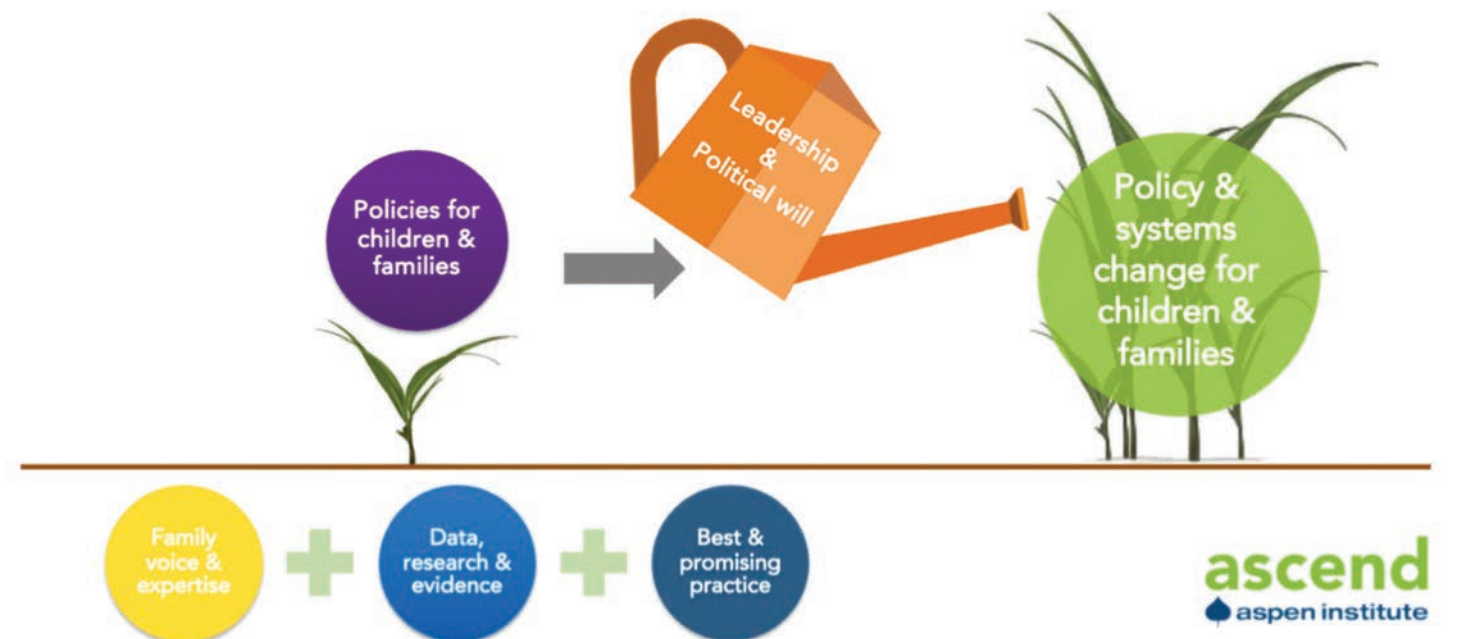
Parent Voice refers to the inclusion of parents' perspectives, experiences, and recommendations in the development and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their children and families. This concept goes beyond listening to parents' stories and recognizes parents as critical partners in designing 2Gen approaches to build family well-being and prosperity.



Jessica Engstrom, an Ascend Parent Advisor, at the 2023 Aspen Forum on Children and Families in Washington, DC alongside fellow session panelists Nasser Paydar, Dr. Daria Willis, and Chastity Lord. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Stephen Jaffe.

Ascend's 2Gen Theory of Policy and Systems Change makes this important link for organizations looking to serve families holistically. Parent voice is key to ensuring strong outcomes for these programs and policies.







THEORY OF POLICY & SYSTEMS CHANGE



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide seeks to illuminate effective strategies organizations can implement to engage parent voice in their work at varying levels of intensity. The following Principles for Engaging Parent Voice can help ensure that organizations carry out these strategies with the level of intentionality and care required to truly partner with parents and caregivers.

We encourage you to carefully consider each strategy and tool shared in this guide to determine which of them best suit your organization and the parents you engage. Most of the featured strategies and tools can be applied to most principles; to help make this guide as accessible as possible, we have included below our recommendations for the top three strategies and tools relevant to each Principle for Engaging Parent Voice:

		Strategies and Tools					
		 Surveys	 Focus Groups	 Convenings	 Advisors	 Compensation	 Ethical Storytelling
Principles for Engaging Parent Voice							
1	Engage Parents as Experts		X		X	X	
2	Ensure Equity		X		X		X
3	Partner with Parents and Gain the Trust of Parents	X			X		X
4	Foster Parent Safety, Authenticity, and Autonomy		X		X		X
5	Prioritize Social Capital		X	X	X		
6	Compensate Parents Appropriately	X	X			X	
7	Cultivate Learning and Evaluation	X	X		X		
8	Thank and Recognize Parents			X	X		X

RELATIONAL TRUST CHECKLIST

The following checklist adapted from Carnegie Corporation¹ emphasizes that building relational trust with parents is rooted in four key elements: respect, integrity, competence, and personal regard. As your organization engages parent voice, use this checklist as a touchstone to measure the efficacy of your practice.

- RESPECT:** Am I seeking input from, and do I listen to and value, what parents and families have to say?
- COMPETENCE:** Am I demonstrating to parents and families that I am competent and that I see them as competent and valuable caretakers?
- INTEGRITY:** Do I keep my word with parents and families?
- PERSONAL REGARD:** Do I show parents and families that I value and care about them as people?

¹ https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/f6/04/f604e672-1d4b-4dc3-903d-3b619a00cd01/fe_report_fin.pdf

PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING PARENT VOICE

A key goal of bringing parent voice to 2Gen approaches in policy, practice, systems change efforts, research recommendations, and leadership efforts is to ensure they are informed by and reflect the real experiences and recommendations of families. The eight principles detailed below provide a roadmap to engage parents in 2Gen approaches. The principles draw on insights from parents Ascend has gathered over the course of more than 40 convenings, forums, listening sessions, and site visits. Parents have shared their perspectives not only on how Ascend can better partner with parents, but also on how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can more effectively engage parents to strengthen their impact. These principles were reviewed by a group of parents and Ascend Network partners before becoming part of this guide.

“**I don't just want to be a voice, I want to be part of the action.**”

– EBONY BEALS
Springboard to Opportunities,
Mother of two, Jackson, MS



Vanessa Eiland, Parent Advisor, Bold Futures, Alamogordo, NM speaking on a narrative change panel alongside Oriana Sandoval, Jessica Helen Lopez, and Javier Martinez. © The Aspen Institute: photo by David Lienemann

1 Engage Parents as Experts

Parents have the clearest perspective of what families need – they know better than anyone how and why family-supportive programs and policies fall short, and what changes can be made to improve program and policy outcomes. This expertise, derived from their lived experience, gives parents a deeper understanding of the challenges presented by some policies and practices and is an essential perspective for any program or policy that affects families. Parents deserve a market-rate stipend for their time and unique expertise, whether as reviewers of a report or as participants in a convening. Like any experts, they also need relevant resources and background, such as guidance on an agenda, so they can prepare thoughtful responses to questions. It is also important to provide time and space for parents to ask questions and share feedback in a supportive environment that is free of judgment if they do not have an opinion or perspective on something outside their area of knowledge.

2 Ensure Equity

Structural barriers such as labor market discrimination, lack of housing, and lack of access to educational and economic opportunities disproportionately affect communities of color. As a result, while families of a wide range of geographies, education levels, and racial and ethnic backgrounds are impacted by economic inequality, too often external materials frame the issue as solely impacting families of color.² Organizations are encouraged to show the diversity of the families that face hardships and work to address them without reinforcing stereotypes for one community over the other in convenings, as members of advisory groups, as experts in materials, and as the faces of publications. Additionally, it is vital to consider other ways to increase equity by engaging families that represent diversity in family structure, orientation, status, ability, and geographic origin.

3 Partner with and Gain the Trust of Parents

Building trust and a partnership with parents is necessary for authentic engagement and centering of parent voice throughout program and policy design, implementation, and assessment. Partnerships develop when parents know that their voices are truthfully heard and thoughtfully used in program design and policy implementation. Centering parent voice is not a performative exercise. It is important that parents are not just asked to provide their opinions but also given leadership opportunities and decision-making power. Partnerships can be fostered by ensuring leadership roles for parents and providing support for them before, during, and after the engagement. Authentic partnerships include developing mechanisms to get feedback from parents, as well as building an internal culture equipped to make changes based on that feedback (such as shifts in messages or policies, including transparency around how or why a change may not take place). These partnerships require dedicated investments in activities with parents and staff capacity for this work.

4 Foster Parent Safety, Authenticity, and Autonomy

A key outcome of this work – and a result of utilizing this guide – is that parents feel honored, respected, and heard. During Ascend convenings and feedback loops like surveys, Ascend Parent Advisors express a strong desire for autonomy, which includes respect for their expertise and the provision of spaces to be heard and honored. Organizations can support parents as they think about how to tell their story but not censor them, and avoid using language that could make them feel negatively about what they have been through or how those experiences have shaped their lives and the lives of their families. Practice reflective questioning training instead of declarative statements about a parent's experience. Encourage them to voice their opinions but be creative about how to do this. Identify ways for introverted parents

² U.S. Census Bureau - Poverty Rate and Percentage Point Change by Selected Characteristics: People (2018) <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2019/demo/p60-266/figure8.pdf>

to share their thoughts if they do not feel comfortable sharing out loud – like providing note cards and assigning someone else, approved by the parent, to read them out loud. Additionally, if the room includes people who are not parents, be mindful of how the demographics and existing power dynamics of an audience can affect parents. It can be unwelcoming and disempowering for parents to enter a room full of people of privilege. Ensure the demographics of those in the room are reflective of the community you serve. Also, consider working with multiple parents to foster a feeling of safety and support. Be sure to check in privately with them on a regular basis to ensure they feel comfortable and respected.

5 Prioritize Social Capital

Social capital is considered by Ascend to be the [“secret sauce” of the 2Gen approach](#). It manifests itself as increased peer support and a sense of community; connections to family, friends, and neighbors; participation in community and faith-based organizations; school and workplace outreach; leadership and professional development programs; engagement with case managers or career coaches; and other social networks such as cohort models and learning communities. Such support appears to be a powerful success factor in programs that help families in moving toward economic security. When engaging with Ascend or other organizations, parents have an opportunity to make connections with others in the room, participate in conversations, and ask questions. In addition to fomenting social capital while engaging with parents, it is useful for organizations to keep in touch with the parents they work with to connect them to future work, resources, networks, and other opportunities. For example, Ascend Parent Advisor Lesley Del Rio met Sarah Saxton-Frump of Texas-based nonprofit PelotonU at an Ascend convening in September 2018; Lesley felt that PelotonU’s model of supporting students enrolled in online, competency-based academic programs would work well for her re-enrollment in college. Because of that connection, PelotonU expanded its model to include Lesley (even though she was based outside of the focus area of Austin), and Lesley completed her associate’s degree in the newly inclusive program.

“Meeting Sarah Saxton-Frump helped me start my associate’s degree at Southern New Hampshire University with the support and partnership at PelotonU and connected me to AdvanceEDU, where I was able to complete my associate’s degree and start my bachelor’s degree at Southern New Hampshire University.”

– LESLEY DEL RIO, Ascend Parent Advisor



Lesley Del Rio, an Ascend Parent Advisor, speaking during the September 2023 Ascend Parent Advisor Alumni convening. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Dan Bayer

6 Compensate Parents Appropriately

Just as some professionals have expertise in economics or public health, parents are “contextual experts” about how programs and policies play out for their family and in their community. It is important that practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and funders compensate parents for their expertise. Parents take time off from work and rearrange family time to be thought partners; their time and expertise deserve appropriate compensation. When providing a stipend, organizations can first consider the actual time (hours and/or days) parents will spend providing expertise. Additionally, stipend amounts strive to compensate parents for any out-of-pocket costs and should be determined through analysis of local market costs for child care and the local living wage rate. Organizations are encouraged to be transparent with parents about their compensation model and consult their finance department to explore the best provision of the stipend to ensure compliance with tax law. Through this approach, parents are appropriately compensated financially for their time and recommendations, and organizations ensure that they are modeling how to value parents’ voices and expertise. In some instances, parents are also in the process of building businesses, strengthening their workforce training, and/or on the job hunt. Organizations partnering with parents can consider mechanisms to support their entrepreneurial and workforce efforts. During a March 2022 convening in Los Angeles County, an Ascend Parent Advisor shared information about her baking company, which she launched to earn income while parenting her small child. Ascend shared information with convening participants about how to place orders with the company as part of the strategic follow-up to the convening.

Considerations when compensating parents –benefits cliff and tax implications:

Organizations compensating parents can advocate for parent payments to be tax-exempt. Avoid penalizing parents for contributing their expertise. Parents who are civically engaged and receiving compensation for that expertise face structural barriers in the tax and benefits systems. Due to tax laws and eligibility requirements, many parents find themselves refraining from engagement because receiving the compensation could have negative effects on their overall household income. Other parents who may not be receiving government benefits are, at times, placed in a different tax bracket and their returns are significantly lowered because they no longer qualify for tax credits.

When paying parents, organizations can partner with the parents and, as needed, an eligibility counselor, to ensure they are not penalized for contributing to the work of improving systems. They should not have to decide on whether they are civically engaged or keeping food on the table. This in itself is an issue, on top of the other issues they are asked to address, and it is a barrier to engagement. In some cases, organizations may want to engage a pro bono benefits manager to enable parents to understand how payments may affect benefits eligibility (subsequent sections of this brief explore compensation and accounting protocols).



7 Cultivate Learning and Evaluation

To engage and center parents, organizations need solid capacity to conduct outreach, identify parent participants and leaders, adjust organizational culture to support and center parents, and evaluate these initiatives and efforts. Organizations can document their efforts with parents to create a knowledge base that can be transferred from team member to team member. They can also dedicate resources to training staff on the best way to support parents while prioritizing the parent's development and without falling into paternalistic patterns. The organization may also evaluate its efforts by soliciting feedback from families, documenting this feedback, and adjusting programming accordingly. In this learning journey, it is also important to develop strong feedback loops and inform parents about these evaluation efforts and the measures taken as a result of their contributions. Elsewhere in this guide we provide specific strategies with which to measure and evaluate the efficacy of parent engagement in a range of programs.

8 Thank and Recognize Parents

Express gratitude and appreciation to parents for their work and recognize their contributions publicly. Parents contribute significant, often less visible, expertise to the 2Gen field. Consider highlighting processes involving parents on newsletters or in the organization's website through a parent partner section that highlights information about the parents and ways in which they contributed. If they provided feedback to a publication, be sure to acknowledge them in the publication itself, and if they spoke at a convening, include their headshot and bio in the program as you would for any other speaker. This recognition demonstrates the equitable inclusion of parents as experts, and establishes a public track record of their leadership, which they can use for future professional opportunities.

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS: OPERATIONALIZING THE PRINCIPLES

The following strategies and accompanying tools are meant to support practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders bringing parent voices to their 2Gen policies and programming. These tools are designed to support organizations and leaders in operationalizing the principles listed in this guide and in the stand-alone [Principles for Engaging Parents](#).³ Use these tools freely, adapt them to your work, and share them with your networks.

Cultural Competency - a precondition for working with parents

Cultural competence refers to a person's ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures.⁴ Parents and caregivers come from different cultures, social and economic backgrounds; have different notions of what families look like; and present with different needs. It is important for staff working with parents to understand how to do their work in culturally competent ways. Feedback from parent participants themselves is an important tool to gauge how and when staff and organizational procedures are not culturally competent and how to make shifts that improve them. However, organizations are encouraged to be more proactive around cultural competency by hiring diverse staff; increasing pay to ensure all staff receive a living wage; sharing and implementing resources on diversity, equity and inclusion; and investing in internal trainings, which may include parent experts, aimed at developing cultural competency skills.



SURVEYS

Administering surveys to parents is an important tool used in the field of 2Gen to gather feedback on programming and evaluate the impact of initiatives. Additionally, surveys give an avenue for unbiased opinions, especially for parents who may be more introverted and may not want to share their thoughts in a public forum. Although this section is focused on best practices for creating surveys, it is worth noting that organizations are encouraged to use surveys to gather feedback and evaluate the other strategies shared later in this guide.

1. Consider Accessibility in Dissemination Strategy: In an increasingly technology-driven world, it is very common to administer surveys through electronic means. When opting for an e-survey, ensure that the survey is accessible and easy to navigate from a computer browser as well as from a mobile device, as many families may only be able to access the internet through a cell phone. Moreover, remember that e-surveys are not always synonymous with accessibility.

³ These principles are reflected in this Guide, which expands on the use and implementation of the Principles.

⁴ <https://www.humanservicesedu.org/cultural-competency/>

Whenever possible, offer paper surveys in addition to e-surveys to give an alternative to parents who may not feel comfortable with technology. When thinking about dissemination, remember that every parent processes and shares information differently.

- 2. Explain the Purpose of the Survey:** When inviting parents to take the survey, explain its purpose clearly. Knowing why they are being asked these questions will help parents give thoughtful answers that will help you gather the information you need.
- 3. Be Clear and Concise:** Clear and concise questions will improve the answers you will get from survey participants. Cut out unnecessary jargon from the text of the question and be direct in what you're asking, to reduce the possibility of confusing the parents who are taking the survey.
- 4. Limit the Number of Questions:** A survey is not an intake form; it is a means of gathering feedback from participants on a specific issue, program, or process. To increase uptake and improve the quality of the answers, it is recommended that the survey be short. Fewer questions, but ones that are more substantial and direct, will yield better feedback than questions that are not.
- 5. Share Back the Results of the Survey:** Sharing back the results of surveys you administer to parents, along with possible changes that might be made because of these results, is a great way to keep parents engaged and to show them the power of your partnership.



Yarely Quintana-Chavez, an Ascend Parent Advisor, speaking on a panel during the *Ascending Together: A Vision for Young Families* in New Mexico convening in May 2023 alongside Secretary Elizabeth Groginsky, Alvin Warren, and Alex Horton. © The Aspen Institute: photo by David Lienemann

NETWORK PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

LIFT

LIFT is a national organization that works with parents to improve their personal well-being, increase their social connections, and strengthen them financially through coaching and direct financial assistance. LIFT has a national office as well as four field offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. In 2013, LIFT started to use surveys to bring constituent voices to its work. Lessons from the first three years using this model are captured in their Listening Better report, which is cited below, but as they have expanded on their model, the group's survey work has deepened.

LIFT administers feedback surveys to its participants regularly, but its main survey push happens twice a year with a questionnaire designed to uncover participants' attitudes towards LIFT and the programming they receive. Containing 12 questions on average, this survey is administered by all field offices following the same timeline. The surveys must keep a balance between what is important for the national office for evaluation purposes and what each field office needs for programming. Understanding this tension, the National office recommends a set of questions but works with each site to tailor the survey to the site's specific feedback needs. If the site wants to add more questions, the question bank, included in the "Additional Resources" section below, offers suggestions.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, members would fill out the survey right before leaving the LIFT office on a tablet located in a semi-private kiosk. Currently, LIFT sends the survey link through email and text to all program participants. This year has seen a decrease in the response rate compared with other years, and this can be attributed to the lower response rate that email and text surveys have compared to on-site ones. However, to improve this, staff have started to collect surveys over the phone.

After the survey is completed and the responses have been analyzed, each site receives a report with the national averages as well as the breakdown of responses in their specific site. From these answers, the organization suggests actions, which vary from site to site, and can be anything from offering immigration referrals to hosting more community building activities for the parents to get to know each other better. Each site then analyzes these suggested actions and takes steps to address them as it deems fit. Parents in each site are able to see these reports and learn more about the answers they provided and how that feedback will be used. In this process, parents not only provide answers, but they can also see how their voices influence programming decisions. This encourages them to continue to share their opinions honestly.

NETWORK PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

The Excel Center, Operated by Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana, Inc.

The Excel Center is a tuition-free, public charter high school for adults operated by Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana. The Excel Center helps remove barriers to education and empowers individuals to achieve their high school diploma as well as postsecondary credits and industry-recognized certification goals by providing support services such as on-site child care and transportation assistance through the school coaching model – all at no cost.

The Excel Center has created a culture of feedback from participants around surveys. The Center sends parents one survey when they enroll, one survey when they complete the program, and several surveys throughout the program, depending on the type of feedback needed. After receiving a survey, parents also receive regular reminders to fill out the survey via email and from their coaches, who reinforce the importance of providing feedback by filling out these questionnaires. Surveys at the Center are used to improve programming, but they are also an important tool to improve direct supports to each participant. Depending on the response, a coach might be prompted to follow up with the parent if their responses indicate that they need connections to additional resources to support their educational journey. This exchange encourages the parents to be open and honest because it signals that their responses can be used to directly benefit them in addition to the changes they will bring to the program.

When the pandemic started, the Excel Center sent out a survey to understand the needs of their participants. Through their responses, they discovered that one third of their students were lacking access to reliable internet and a vast majority lacked a device to access the internet. This finding enabled the Excel Center team to immediately deploy laptops and hotspots to students and their families and is motivating the team to consider how to shift the model to give each student a laptop and a hotspot to support their learning. When it came to technology, the surveys also highlighted the importance of increasing training for teachers and coaches around the technology and platforms that are making this virtual world possible as it will help the teachers better deliver content. Finally, parents also shared their struggle around child care in the pandemic. Normally, parents had to be on-campus to access the Center’s on-site child care, but with the pandemic and the move to virtual classes, the child care center was closed. To respond to this, the Center opened their child care as a drop-in facility for students who needed it.

The Excel Center has created a culture of feedback through the surveys they administer to the parents who participate in their programs. The Center is proactive about making adjustments to programming thoughtfully and promptly depending on the feedback they receive, and it also leverages those answers to provide additional supports to the parents who need them.

Additional Resources

- **[Listening Better: 10 Lessons from LIFT’s Member Feedback Survey:](#)**
In this report, Ascend Network Partner LIFT shares key lessons from their first three years implementing their model of Constituent Voice across their national network. They also identify 10 best practices for designing and implementing a member feedback survey.
- **[LIFT Feedback Survey Questions](#)**
- **[LIFT Member Voice Requests & Compensation Policy:](#)**
LIFT values elevating members’ voices in areas in which they have experience and expertise to contribute to research, program improvement, and policy change. Under LIFT’s Member Voice Compensation Policy, LIFT compensates members for sharing their voice (e.g., when presenting at conferences and providing interviews) and asks partners to do the same. This policy, grounded in LIFT’s Pay Equity structure, demonstrates a commitment to live their values of advancing equity and inclusion for all.



Drayton Jackson, an Ascend Parent Advisor, speaking at the 2Gen FunderXChange in February of 2023 alongside Natalya Walker and Jmelle Harris from LIFT-DC as well as Dr. Raquel Hatter. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Ralph Alswang



FOCUS GROUPS

One important resource for surfacing parent perspectives is focus groups, where parents can help an organization determine messaging, provide policy or programmatic recommendations, and provide strategic guidance. Focus groups are also opportunities to challenge organizational assumptions, and in some instances the groups can build social capital among parents themselves.

It is important for organizational leadership and staff to reflect on the goals and impact of focus groups before launching sessions. Questions to explore internally include: What are ways to systematize the groups for consistency and clarity? What are the best conditions to ensure parents can speak openly and honestly? How can you design the groups without leading participants to your own foregone conclusions? In asking these questions, organizations can mitigate issues that may arise for parents, from the need for gas or transportation funds to ensuring questions are culturally competent and not “leading.” The recommendations below can guide your organization when designing focus groups for parents, and specific examples of these recommendations follow this section:

1. Establish Clear Goals and Design the Questions with the Parents in Mind:

What is the goal of the focus group, and how are the focus groups supporting those goals? These goals can be around programmatic assessments, strategic guidance, or general attitudes, but each goal will likely require different questions to attain the right information. Draft questions for the focus groups that align with these goals but remain open enough to ensure that responses reflect authentic parent perspectives. Use language familiar to the participants – avoid jargon, abbreviations, etc. Consider the order of your questions carefully, so you establish a foundation and build upon it.

Recommendations for Nurturing a Comfortable Environment for Your Focus Group:

- Host the focus group in a neutral location or choose a location that will be convenient for most participants.
- Provide food (a meal or snacks and beverages) and child care when and if appropriate.
- Design an ice breaker or introductory activity that lets the participants get to know each other and become more comfortable. However, be sensitive to the questions asked; for example, be careful asking about vacation plans when parents on the call may not be able to take a vacation. If the participants already know each other, try an opening activity that has a team-building element.
- Start with “easy” questions focused on positive experiences, then move to challenges.
- It is important to follow the script, but facilitators should also leave space for the participants to guide/drive the conversation.

2. Create Official Documents for the Focus Group: Draft invitations for all participants and a session script, known as a “focus group guide.” Such a script will keep the session organized and consistent across multiple sessions.

3. Host the Focus Group with an Official Partner or External Facilitator if Possible: An official partner will create some separation between your organization and the focus group, and this distance can make it easier for participants to share honest feedback.

4. Ensure Confidentiality: Parents often hold back from sharing feedback because they are afraid that their answers will affect their ability to access programs and services in the future. Reiterate that everything said in the focus group will be treated as confidential. A good way to do this is through a consent form, which confirms confidentiality and reassures parents that their responses will not impact program eligibility or provision of services.

5. Take Notes and Record: It is important to both take notes and record during the focus group. Notes will help you remember some of the points you want to dive deeper into during the conversations and see the larger themes in the conversation. However, it is recommended that you record and then transcribe the conversation as well so you can refer to exact quotes if needed. If you record the session, let parents know it will be recorded and why. Confirm they are comfortable with being recorded (see the sample consent form in the “Additional Resources” section below).

6. Follow up with Participants: This includes sending parents a thank you letter for their participation as well as summary analysis of what was shared and how that information will be used to inform/change practices. If possible, notify them when changes happen and share how their opinions drove those changes or reforms. Additionally, compensate parents for the time they spent in your focus group. Suggestions for how to provide fair compensation are in the “Compensation” section of this guide.



A breakout room of attendees at the *Ascending Together: A Vision for Families in DC* convening in November of 2023.
© The Aspen Institute: photo by Allison Shelley



Tips When Hiring an External Facilitator

- Hire an external facilitator who understands your goals and is responsive to guidance even during the focus group itself to achieve the types of responses you're seeking.
- Ask about their recruitment strategy and what kind of relationships or avenues they will leverage to find the types of focus group participants you need.
- Have the facilitator match the demographics of the focus group. This will help participants feel more comfortable answering your questions.

Karina Lara from Valley Settlement speaking at VisionXChange in July 2023. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Dan Bayer

7. Provide Interpretation and/or Language-Specific Focus Groups: Many organizations provide services to families in multiple languages or for families with limited English language proficiency. Host more than one focus group if you need to solicit input from participants in various languages. Including a translator (or multiple translators), and attempting to manage group feedback in more than one language, is difficult and breaks up the flow of conversation for participants.

8. Take Action on Feedback Received: Organizations may have assumptions they seek to corroborate or plans they seek to reinforce through focus groups. How can you respond or pivot if those assumptions or plans are not reinforced? If parents share their perspectives and do not feel heard, they are unlikely to want to participate in a focus group or share feedback again. It is always best to go into a focus group open and ready to act upon whatever information you receive.

“I am still floating on clouds since the Aspen Forum on Children and Families. I always leave so much more inspired to keep going, fighting, and advocating for my family and others throughout the nation.”

– TAMEKA HENRY
The Obodo Collective,
mother of four, North Las Vegas, NV



DeAngelo Robinson, an Ascend Parent Advisor, at the *Ascending Together: A Vision for Families in DC* convening in November of 2023. Credit: © The Aspen Institute: photo by Ralph Alswang.

NETWORK PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

Generational Opportunities to Achieve Long-Term Success (GOALS)

Generational Opportunities to Achieve Long-Term Success (GOALS) is an initiative of Arapahoe County (Colorado) Department of Human Services and Family Tree that takes a 2Gen approach to improve the overall well-being of families experiencing homelessness by enhancing self-sufficiency through residentially based whole family services (parent, child, and family). This program, which was launched in 2019, is designed to be a short-term intensive intervention for nine to 14 families for four to nine months.

Parent voice was a foundational element of the GOALS initiative. When Arapahoe County DHS and Family Tree were designing this project, they partnered with the [Center for Policy Research](#) (CPR) to host focus groups that would inform the design of this initiative and to evaluate the program's success. CPR held three focus groups with parents who had experienced homelessness or had been close to it to gauge interest in this type of program, better understand the needs of families facing homelessness, and ensure that the proposed structure could meet those needs.

The focus groups shed light on families' service needs, such as: what drives families to seek a communal living and service environment; what some barriers are to communal living; and what types of services and programming would put families on a path to economic self-sufficiency. Although families mentioned many

challenges to economic self-sufficiency, the issues mentioned the most were related to transportation, child care, and mental health. When it came to the proposed community aspects of the GOALS program, parents shared an interest in serving on a residents' council or performing other service work. Parents also expressed a desire to have a voice that impacts their community's success.

Through these focus groups, Arapahoe County DHS and Family Tree were made aware of the importance of expanding their model, originally designed for single mothers, to single fathers and two-parent families. The focus groups also helped the program set a goal of having most of its services on-site to make everything as accessible as possible to participants, given how much of a challenge transportation was to families. They also created a weekly Family Voice meeting, open to all GOALS residents, that has become a critical source of communal support and a tool to solve community issues and promote shared responsibility. These focus groups have not been the only source of feedback for the GOALS program as the program continues to gather feedback through the Family Voice meetings and from those who have successfully graduated from the program. However, these focus groups were integral in ensuring that the design of the program was informed by the voices of parents who had experienced homelessness and could serve their complex needs.



Ascend Parent Advisors Christian Ortiz, Kimberly Mitchell, and Valeria Martinez in a conversation moderated by Jennifer Ng'andu during the 2023 Aspen Forum on Children and Families in Washington, DC. © The Aspen Institute; photo by Stephen Jaffe.

Additional Resources

- [Sample Focus Groups Guide: 2016 Ascend Big Ideas Draft Question Guide](#)
- [Overview of GOALS Program \(Generational Opportunities to Achieve Long-term Success\)](#)
- [Integrating Family Voice into 2Gen Program Design \(GOALS\)](#)
- [Sample Consent Form \(GOALS\)](#)

CONVENINGS

Convenings⁵ are one effective way to lift up the voices and experiences of parents and families as active informants of policy and practice efforts and to reach new and important audiences. The recommendations included in this section are focused on engaging parents during a convening and apply to both in-person and virtual convenings. For more guidance on how to design a 2Gen convening, please look at *Designing Your Own 2Gen Convening*, a guide we created to share lessons from Ascend and Network Partners convenings and best practices to maximize their impact.

When you attend a convening, how does the opening speaker impact how you take in the subsequent content? Hearing from parents early on in an agenda can anchor attendees in the experiences of the people affected the most by the issues discussed; it also underscores the importance of including those perspectives in this work. Weaving parent voices into as many sessions in a convening as possible reinforces their leadership and often surfaces new ideas that other speakers may not have considered.

Public speaking can be an intimidating, exciting, and new opportunity for many parents. While some parents may not have experience with public speaking, the role of the organizer is to ensure that approaches, tools, and time are set aside to prepare and support parents in their speaking and participatory roles. Below are lessons to keep in mind when working with parent speakers:

1. **Inviting Parents to be Speakers:** Make the invitation as detailed as possible. Include strategic as well as logistical information, such as the convening's goals, format, audience, and desired outcomes. Provide an overview of the session the parents will be participating in and explain their role and why you think they are a good fit for this engagement.
2. **Preparing Parents:** Organizations that convene frequently recognize the importance of being detailed and explicit in guidance for speakers through materials such as a session outline, a run of show, suggested talking points, and information on other speakers. Some parents will be comfortable taking the stage, but others who may not speak publicly as part of their regular jobs will need additional support to feel comfortable in this role. It is essential to provide clarity and specificity. In addition to the prep packet, host a call with the parent speakers, and try to include all speakers if they are part of a panel. This gives everyone the opportunity to learn about each other's stories and suggest questions to highlight experiences that are important for the conversation.

⁵ Ascend at the Aspen Institute defines convening as a strategic gathering that brings together new and established partners and organizations to explore, co-create, and implement solutions for families with low incomes (Source: *Designing Your Own 2Gen Convening*).

3. Providing Opportunities to Co-Create: How can your session reflect and include parents' questions, suggestions, and experience? Parents have shared with Ascend that talking points are a useful place to start, and that allowing time and opportunity for modification of those points based on the parents' feedback is reassuring. During the prep call and in other conversations, organizations can offer opportunities for parents to make changes and add anything they want to share that was not covered by the questions outlined. If the parents want to change or make additions, offer suggestions for how to weave them into the existing questions or create an additional question to probe those points.

4. Ensuring Availability and Flexibility of Staff: Depending on the level of experience and comfort with public speaking, parents might feel uneasy even after the prep call. Ascend has developed strategies to mitigate stress and increase comfort with public speaking for parents: assign one staffer whose role is to support the parent speakers, including providing direct contact info when possible. Sometimes parents do not reach out on their own, so it is helpful for the staffer to be proactive and reach out to them. Our team has found that more communication is always preferred, because parents often end up having unanticipated questions. Any question can be anxiety-inducing if left unanswered, so encourage communication as much as possible.

5. Supporting Parents During the Convening: All of us need and appreciate consistency. If a parent is working with an organization's staffer, it is useful for that person to be their point of contact on-site. Have they met their moderator? Do they know where they can get food and something to drink before or after the event? Do they need someone to hold their phone or keep an eye on their belongings? How might the parent connect with other leaders at the convening, and what introductions might help them? Each of these questions are ones we now ask ourselves after years of learning from, and working with, Ascend Parent Advisors.

6. Gathering Feedback After the Convening: Connect with the parents after the convening and ask for their thoughts on the content covered, the people they spoke to, the logistics of the convening, and the support they received. Gathering this feedback will be useful for evaluation efforts and provide guidance on how existing practices can be shifted for future events.

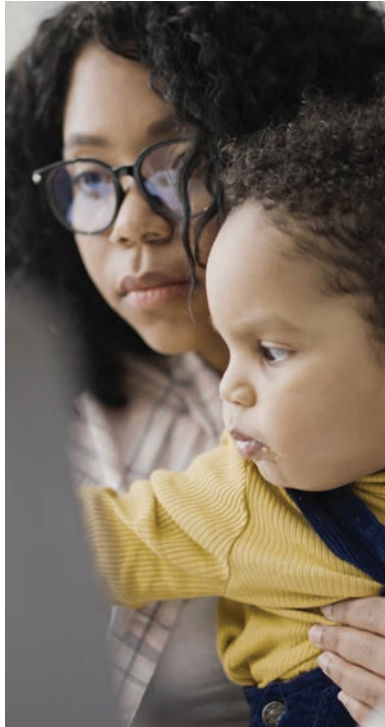
Travel and logistics

Having parents as speakers in a convening may require asking the parent to travel to the convening. The tips below will help you lay out better protocols to support them. Keep in mind that the onus is on your organization to prepare the parent for travel and provide additional support they might need during their journey.

- **Cover travel, including "hidden" costs:** Travel coverage includes flights but also expenses incurred while flying such as airport transfers and meals. Be explicit early on about what is covered, what can be reimbursed, and any spending limits. The [federal per diem rates](#) can be a great starting point for determining these spending levels.
- **Provide guidance on travel details:** Provide details to parents around what is covered by the plane ticket, luggage restrictions, and possible credit card usage. Remind parents about the time they need to arrive at the airport and items to keep in mind for TSA checks. Be clear about what parents will need to cover during their journey – meals while traveling, baggage fees, transportation to and from the airport, etc. This will help them plan and budget accordingly. Also, remind them that airlines don't take cash so they will need a credit card to pay for additional luggage and on-flight meals and snacks; and offer solutions if they don't have a credit or debit card. Providing a prepaid card for travel can be an option for organizations.
- **Check in with them around accessibility:** Some parents may need additional leg room on their flights, and others may need help getting around the airport. It is important that conveners know these details to plan ahead and provide instructions on how to find the right people to support them.
- **Consider parent/caregiving-specific travel concerns:** Some parents will need to travel with their children. Provide detailed guidance on what equipment is permitted on planes, explain gate check procedures for strollers and car seats, and clarify if any specific items are needed for travel and accommodations (e.g., a crib at the hotel). In addition to ensuring access to a nursing room during a convening, inquiring about the need for and coverage of milk shipping is both important and an increasingly common offering among employers.



Marjorie Sims thanking Ascend Parent Advisors for their recommendations on how to improve policy and systems change for young families in New Mexico. © The Aspen Institute: photo by David Lienemann



A Note on Child Care

Lack of child care often prevents parents from participating in activities like convenings, focus groups, and advisory groups. Given how expensive child care can be, we recommend that organizations factor this cost in the compensation they provide to parents for their participation (more on this in the “Compensation” section). However, if organizations can provide child care on-site for parents, they are encouraged to do so. This will make it easier for parents to participate fully in the activity and reduce some of the logistical issues they face when attending.

Please note that child care is highly regulated at the state level and often requires licensing with the appropriate authority; it also poses significant risk management considerations, including medical protocols, food allergies, and ratios of adults to children. With this in mind, it is recommended that only those organizations with existing child care capacities or partnerships provide child care for parents participating in their initiatives.

Jaqueline Monsanto, an Ascend Parent Ambassador from All Our Kin, at the Family Prosperity Convening in May of 2022. © The Aspen Institute

Additional Resources

- **Sample Session Prep Sheet:** This is an example prep sheet we sent to parents who participated as panel speakers in one of our events.
- **Tip Sheet for Parents from ThinkXChange:** The Ascend team developed this Tip Sheet for parents who attended ThinkXChange, one of our large convenings in Aspen, Colorado. It was designed based on the questions we received from parents and with key reminders in mind.
- **Designing Your 2Gen Convening:** This guide considers concrete examples from many 2Gen convenings and illuminates the lessons learned and best practices developed with the aim to at once maximize the impact and minimize any inefficiency in developing and hosting convenings.



ADVISORS

Engaging parents as formal advisors is a form of deep, authentic partnership. In comparison to the other forms of engagement included in this guide, this strategy takes the most bandwidth for an organization to execute because engagement is designed to be more direct, more intensive, and more structured. When these strategies and resources are applied, organizations benefit from valuable feedback from parents on programmatic strategy in a more structured and continuous way. They form a stronger partnership with parents who provide honest feedback about what hinders the success of programs, and they co-create solutions that work for the families and all other stakeholders in the organization. Below are some points to consider when designing an advisory group:

1. **Determine the Structure of the Group:** A vital early decision to make is whether the parent advisors will serve on a separate council/advisory group or be part of an existing one. Each strategy has its benefits – developing a parent-only council can bring in more parent voices to an organization and creates an environment where parents are not influenced or intimidated by conventional power dynamics. Additionally, with a parent-only council, the structure of the group can be co-created with the parents. In contrast, including parents in existing councils/advisory groups, such as a board of trustees, ensures that parent voices carry the same weight as the voices of other experts in the group; however, parents may not feel compelled to speak openly about the challenges their families face and their recommended solutions.
2. **Be Clear About the Scope of Work:** Clarify the purpose of the advisory group – is it a single project/initiative or is it the strategy for the entire organization? The level of engagement will vary depending on the answer to that question. Single projects are easier to manage but can feel more limiting for parents. Advisory groups for the entire organization take more time to structure but will inform all areas of the work creating strong feedback loops. Be clear about what activities this engagement will include – webinars, meetings, convenings, blogs, etc. Include as much information as possible in the invitation so parents understand the time commitment. The commitment form for the Parent Advisors to Ascend’s Postsecondary Success for Parents (PSP) initiative is included in the resources below as an example of how to explain the full scope of work to parents.



Ascend Parent Advisors at the 2023 Aspen Forum on Children and Families in Washington, DC. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Stephen Jaffe.

3. Prioritize Equity When Selecting the Group: An equity lens is essential when identifying and selecting parents to engage as advisors. Parent advisors reflect the composition of the parents you work with, but their experience is not uniform. Choose people who bring different perspectives to the table, engage different types of caretakers, and consider diversity, in terms not only of gender and race/ethnicity but also of different experiences, abilities, political ideology, areas of expertise and interest, family structure, faith, and geographic origin.

4. Establish a Baseline of Understanding: Once the group is selected, ensure the parent advisors understand the conditions and factors that influence the way the work you do is organized and executed. These factors include organizational structure, populations you work with, important partners, relationship with funders, and internal decision-making processes. With this information, parent advisors understand how their feedback will be used. A kick-off meeting with parents can identify these conditions and offer them an opportunity to ask questions candidly. Consider inviting a few funders and/or partners to share their work with the organization, so parents have the information they need to succeed in their role as advisors.

5. Update Parents on the Status of Their Recommendations: Build processes to update parent advisors on how their recommendations are being implemented, and/or why their expertise may not be reflected in the work. How is their guidance being implemented? If not, why? Clarity on how one's perspective and expertise is being used is encouraging and inspiring for all of us.

6. Prepare Parents to be Ambassadors of Your Work: Parent advisors often consider themselves a natural extension of the work they represent. Share one-pagers on your work as well as messaging and branding guides with them. Included below is a branding guide Ascend created for our Parent Advisors as a resource.

Suggestions on How to Coach Parents to Share Their Story

Everyone needs support on how to frame their story in a way that connects the individual experience to a systemic issue, and parents are no exception. Below are some recommendations for organizations to suggest to parents sharing their story. These items are tailored to parents but can be adapted to anyone sharing their story to make change on behalf of families.

- **Avoid the trap of individualism:** individualism happens when one heroic individual or person overcomes tough circumstances because they "worked hard enough" or had enough willpower. Although it is important to share the success of each person and ensure they have agency when crafting their narrative, it is also necessary to tie adversities to the systemic issues that caused them. Don't forget that the main point you want your audience to better grasp involves systems and how they affect people's outcomes in life.
- **Highlight the role of the organizations and networks that helped you, but do not put them in a role of saviors.** It is important for your audience to see how those supports helped you and your family in your journey, but it is also important not to reinforce paternalistic narratives about people with low income.
- **Leave space for your audience to be part of the movement.** Have some sort of action item or give your audience a sense of the role they can play or what they can do to help support the cause. Don't be afraid to share your recommendations.

Additional Resources

- [Commitment Form](#)
- [Parent Advisor Branding Guide](#)

Parent Advisors to Ascend's Postsecondary Success for Parents (PSP) initiative

With support from Imaginable Futures, Lumina, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, and ECMC Foundation, Ascend has been working with a group of Parent Advisors as part of its [Postsecondary Success for Parents](#) (PSP) initiative. The Parent Advisors are a geographically, racially, and gender diverse group that holds knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences complementing the work of the practitioners and researchers who collaborate with Ascend for field-level action and impact.

Ascend brought together the first cohort of 16 Parent Advisors in 2018 when the Initiative was launched to guide and accelerate this work by sharing their expertise, thought leadership, and commitment to ensuring postsecondary students who are parents have the supports they need to succeed in the program of their choosing. The parents were largely selected from the network of parents Ascend has worked with in the past. Parent Advisors to this [first phase](#) worked with Ascend for 14 months and received an honorarium for their role. They attended three convenings and several monthly webinars to support the first phase of this project as well as the development of several publications.

Because of the success of this first cohort, over the last four years Ascend has invited new cohorts of Parent Advisors to support the [second and third phases of the PSP initiative](#), respectively. One of the key projects of both the second and third cohorts was to co-design with Ascend the [Parent-Powered Solutions Fund](#), the first student parent-led fund dedicated to advancing the work of organizations and institutions that support student parents' postsecondary success. These Parent Advisor cohorts each designed a request for proposals (RFP), evaluated applications received, and selected Ascend's [2020](#) and [2023-24](#) Parent-Powered Solutions Fund Partners.



Dimelsa Zelaya from Mary's Center, Canethia Miller from Martha's Table, and Dana Cannon from Mamatoto Village are DC Ascend Parent Advisors speaking on a panel moderated by Ascend Fellow Dr. Wendy Ellis. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Ralph Alswang.



COMPENSATION

Parents are “contextual experts” on how programs and policies play out for their family and in their community, and they deserve to be compensated for their expertise. This is why *Compensate Parents Appropriately* is one of the principles for engaging parent voice. Given the number of compensation models in the field of 2Gen, we are expanding on this principle as part of this guide. This resource includes guidance on how to compensate parents, shares additional considerations when designing a compensation strategy, and highlights practices and strategies from Ascend Network Partners.

Compensation levels will vary depending on organization budgets, length of the engagement, and local market rates. The points below can help determine a fair compensation strategy; however, organizations are encouraged to work with the parent or parents they are engaging to decide what these levels look like. Parents can help organizations determine fair amounts and discover unforeseen issues such as the impact of payments on existing benefits.

1. Determine hourly amount through an analysis of local costs: These costs include the local living wage rate, the market cost for consultants, and the price of child care in the area. Compensation also includes foregone wages as well as child care expenses parents might need to cover to participate in the engagement. If an organization can't provide a stipend that covers child care in addition to compensating expertise, they might consider providing child care on-site for participants. Covering travel, meals, and snacks ensures that parents do not incur additional expenses from their participation. A tool like the Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Calculator (by county) and the University of Washington's Self-Sufficiency Standard (by state) can provide estimates for the cost of child care and transportation in each community.

2. Consider the actual time (hours and/or days) spent providing expertise: What is the realistic number of hours that the parent will dedicate to this work? If the parent is engaged in a single meeting, then they will be compensated for the duration of the meeting. However, if this parent needs to provide feedback and communicate with the team in addition to attending meetings, conferences, and/or check-ins, then these additional hours will be factored into the compensation amount as well.

3. Expedite the process so parents can receive compensation in a timely manner:

Depending on internal policies, issuing compensation might take a long time. Work with internal departments to understand the processing timeline, and make that clear to parents. If your accounting department offers direct deposit, extend this service to the parent as well so they don't have to wait for a check in the mail. Also, consider other forms of compensation that can be provided in a faster way, such as gift cards.

4. Check in with the parents to ensure the means of compensation works for them:

Receiving additional income can affect benefit eligibility, which means discussing the compensation levels with parents in advance will mitigate potential financial challenges after the engagement. Because of the way public benefits are structured, it may seem that smaller compensation is a better approach, but getting creative and being communicative is useful: gift cards, for example, have been a fast and appreciated form of compensation beyond monetary resources. Additionally, if the compensation is given as a check, this might have implications for parents who are unbanked. Before processing the payment, speak to the parents and offer other solutions such as including additional money to cover any check processing fees.

5. Evaluate parent compensation policies each year:

Be sure to look at parent compensation policies year to year to factor in changes in the cost of living and the cost of childcare. Look at how compensation levels remain competitive for the parents and are aligned with market costs from one year to the next.

A Note on Gift Cards:

Many Ascend Network Partners provide gift cards to parents as compensation for their time because they can be given out immediately after the engagement. Additionally, they don't affect benefit levels because they are not documented as income. Some factors to consider when deciding whether to issue gift cards include:

- Internal organizational rules that may limit the amount that can be issued in a gift card.
- Any fees the gift card may charge after usage.
- Parents' preferences – some parents prefer a specific store instead of a Visa or MasterCard prepaid gift card.

On the Horizon: Addressing Internal Accounting and IRS Reporting Challenges

We pay our Parent Advisors for their expertise because we value their time and insights. Still, over the years, Ascend and our Parent Advisors have experienced numerous accounting and reporting challenges when compensating parents for their time. Here are the three most common challenges we have addressed or are continuing to navigate:

1. **Documentation requirements.** Parent Advisors often find daunting, and sometimes insurmountable, the documentation we need to comply with mandated accounting practices and IRS reporting requirements prior to making a payment. In some cases, providing the required IRS Form W-9 is a barrier if the Parent Advisor does not have a Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN). On several occasions, Ascend has used creative workarounds to compensate Parent Advisors who do not have ITIN numbers.
2. **Effects on tax filings or public benefits.** Parent Advisors may not be aware of the tax implications or of the impact that additional income may have on any public benefits received, such as exposing them to the benefits cliff. Ascend advises each Parent Advisor to seek advice from a tax expert because we cannot provide tax advice to them. We also ask Parent Advisors to confirm that they received a Form 1099-Misc from the Aspen Institute by the end of January each year, because many are not aware that the form will be needed to file their taxes for the prior year.
3. **A need for dedicated financial support.** For Ascend staff, adhering to the important internal protocols we have in place to process and track payments to Parent Advisors is time-intensive. Parents also often raise questions that we are not equipped or qualified to answer (such as questions about implications the additional income may have on public benefits or tax filings). We would like to connect Parent Advisors to platforms and experts able to answer their questions as well as support their broader financial goals. Our early research has led us to financial technology platforms such as MoCaFi, which is currently being used by government, philanthropic, and nonprofit organizations to provide individuals and families with cash assistance, mobile banking, and financial programming to support wealth creation. We will continue our research during the coming year and will share where we land.

NETWORK PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

Jeremiah Program

Jeremiah Program is a national organization offering a holistic, 2Gen approach to supporting single mothers and their children on the path to economic mobility. Their service models include quality early childhood education, safe and affordable housing, college and career coaching, a supportive community, and empowerment and leadership training. JP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota but also has sites in Austin, Texas; Baltimore, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; Brooklyn, New York; Fargo,

North Dakota; Las Vegas, Nevada; Moorhead, Minnesota; Rochester, Minnesota; and St. Paul, Minnesota. The program receives feedback from parents through different mechanisms and, in 2020, established an Alumni Fellowship program that trains former participants to become visible leaders among JP moms and in their communities. These Alumni Fellows are paid \$416 per month for a 20-hour commitment, which includes leadership and advocacy training and opportunities to drive alumni programming.



Valeria Martinez, an Ascend Parent Advisor, speaking on a panel at the *Ascending Together: A Vision for Young Families in New Mexico* convening in May 2023. © The Aspen Institute; photo by David Lienemann

NETWORK PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:
The Family Partnership

The Family Partnership is a nonprofit organization serving children and families in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. It provides counseling and education services for children and families, advocates on their behalf, and empowers them to solve their own problems. Participants provide feedback and serve as advisors to the initiative, but there is no a set compensation policy as it is dependent on funding. The stipends provided range from \$50 to \$100 per session, with the idea that this amount compensates for travel as well as time. Parents typically receive a gift card, as close to the event as possible.

NETWORK PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:
The Primary School

The Primary School is a school that expands the boundaries of traditional education by weaving together education, health, and family support services to ensure underserved children have the system of care they need to lead meaningful and emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy lives. With sites in East Palo Alto and East Bay, California, the Primary School partners with parents to co-design and iterate its 2Gen Programming. Families engaged in the process receive compensation that ranges from \$20 to \$100 depending on the time required and the nature of the activity (phone call, focus group, in-person co-design session, etc.). All compensation is given in the form of Visa and MasterCard gift cards so families can freely choose where to use them. In addition to compensation, the Primary School also provides full meals and childcare when co-design or feedback sessions take place in person.

ETHICAL STORYTELLING

Storytelling is often a key component of an organization’s communications strategy. As organizations increasingly engage parents, it is natural for them to collect parent experiences in the form of quotes, stories, recommendations, photos, and more. Organizations publicizing parent experiences in their communications therefore have a responsibility to center parent voice through ethical storytelling⁶ – an intentional and empowering storytelling approach rooted in honoring lived experience.

Ethical storytelling ensures that organizations share others’ stories in a respectful, responsible, and effective manner. It focuses on elevating a subject’s lived experience, perspective, and strengths to ensure that the stories we tell about a person serve them – **not** just the organization sharing their experience. Because of this, ethical storytelling challenges organizations to reflect on the inherent power dynamics that exist between them and the person or community who is telling them about their experience – and it helps organizations honestly answer whether sharing another’s story is the right thing to do in a given situation.

While ethical storytelling approaches can vary in specificity from organization to organization, the points below are best practices to help your organization ensure that it is harnessing parent voice in a respectful and productive manner. Parents can also help organizations shape their ethical storytelling practices by providing feedback on how they feel after their experiences are publicized and examining what steps can be taken to make the storytelling process more accessible and collaborative. By making communications meaningful and learning what parents like, organizations reinforce continuous engagement and positive partnerships with parents.

- 1. Involve parents in the storytelling process from the beginning:** Organizations may want to share parents’ stories in many different ways and for many different reasons. But remember that parent voice is at the center of those stories, and parents should be involved from the beginning in figuring out if and how they want their experiences shared publicly. Rather than assume that parent feedback can be shared, your organization should partner with parents to create an intentional storytelling process that explicitly asks if sharing a story serves your organization goals and the parent’s goals.

⁶ <https://ethicalstorytelling.com/>

2. Always obtain prior consent before sharing parent experiences: The foundation of ethical storytelling is ensuring that stories are only shared with the express permission of their subjects. It is important that organizations secure parents' consent to have their experiences shared before publicizing them in any way, whether the experience is written (quotes, testimonials), visual (photos, videos), or shared in another format. We strongly encourage organizations to develop a media consent form that can be easily reviewed with parents and that lays out different options parents can choose for sharing their experience. Organizations should also emphasize that parents can say "no" to these requests. A sample release form can be found under "Additional Resources" at the end of this section.

3. Consider the broader implications of sharing a parent's story: When a parent consents to sharing their story, they are placing considerable trust in your organization. Honor this trust by operating in transparency and discussing with the parent the potential risks – legal, practical, and emotional – of their story existing in the public sphere. This is particularly important when a parent's personal story involves trauma. Discuss: Is there any aspect of sharing their story that gives them pause or anxiety? Are there any potential negative consequences that you or they could anticipate? Reaffirm that the parent can decide not to share their story if, after this reflection, they feel uncomfortable doing so.

4. Amplify inclusive experiences: As your organization begins to collect stories, remember that power dynamics often determine whose stories are heard and how they are told. Ensuring that your organization is amplifying diverse experiences and perspectives is key to building an inclusive storytelling practice, challenging harmful stereotypes, and gaining profound insights.

5. Appropriately credit parents for their contributions: It's important to credit parents whenever their experiences – written, visual, or otherwise – are shared. This may look like listing a parent's name in the acknowledgments section of a publication; including attribution with their quotes; and including their name in photo credits, captions, alt text, and video lower thirds. Additionally, emphasize parent leadership by contextualizing the credit with their appropriate title. Depending on the communications medium and the preference of the parent, you may add their professional title, relational title to your organization, and/or a descriptor of their parental role (e.g. "mother of three children").

In some cases, parents may prefer to share their experience without any identifying personal information. Understand the nuances of how parents would like their story shared. If they prefer that their name not be used, make sure to change any identifying characteristics in the story.

The Dos and Don'ts of Sharing Parent Experiences

We strive to use an ethical storytelling approach in the development of all Ascend communications that include parent contributions. Even after determining that a story is the right vehicle to share parent voice and obtaining informed consent from the parent, keep in mind some important considerations as you begin writing. Here is a checklist of recommended dos and don'ts to ensure that your organization is telling a story that empowers parents:

Dos

- **Center parents as the protagonists of their own stories:** Convey that parents are whole persons in a story by highlighting their personalities and perspectives, and, whenever possible, tell the story in parents' own words (e.g., incorporate more quotes into written stories or support parents in writing their stories).⁷
- **Collaborate throughout the writing process:** Touch base with the parent from the start to understand what they want their story to highlight, and build in time for them to review what you have written and provide feedback. A story is final when the parent has reviewed and approved it.
- **Seek approval for all the ways in which a story may be shared:** Affirm with parents that they have the ultimate say in how and where their story is shared. Consider the different ways in which you may want to share their story, present those back to the parent, and confirm their approval or any changes they would like.

Don'ts

- **Focus on problems:** Tell stories where parents are more than the challenges they face by using strengths-based language and solutions-oriented framing (See Ascend's People-First Language Guide and Frameworks Institute's Words About People Style Guide under "Additional Resources").
- **Reinforce harmful stereotypes or assumptions:** Highlighting individual experiences and perspectives helps your audience see the complexity of a parent's life rather than reducing them to a generalization.

Additional Resources

- [Aspen Institute's Adult Release Form](#)
- [Ascend People-First Language Guide: A Resource for 2Gen Practitioners](#)
- [FrameWorks Institute Words About People Style Guide](#)
- [Resource Media's Ethical Storytelling Tipsheet](#)

⁷ The Meyer Foundation audited 157 nonprofits' online storytelling efforts and found that nearly 60 percent of stories they reviewed were told in the third person, narrated by someone other than the person the story is about. (Source: <https://csic.georgetown.edu/research/strategic-storytelling/stories-worth-telling/>)

Practicing Ethical Storytelling with Ascend PSP Parent Advisors

What can ethical storytelling look like in practice? Ascend strives to use ethical storytelling in our communications highlighting the experiences, insights, and recommendations of our Parent Advisors to the [Postsecondary Success for Parents \(PSP\)](#) initiative. The following are just a few examples of how Ascend follows best practices to ensure that our communications are collaborative and recognize the expertise of our Parent Advisors:

- **Convenings.** When planning all Ascend convenings, we include a notice-of-filming-and-photography sign in public spaces where the convening will be held, noting that photography and/or video recordings may be taken. Additionally, we brainstorm all opportunities for Parent Advisors to lead or present during panels, sessions, or group discussions.
- **Consent.** Parent Advisors have many opportunities to share quotes, be photographed, or be recorded on video through their participation with Ascend. When we photograph Parent Advisors with their families, for example, we ensure that we describe how the photos may be used in the future, provide them with release forms to review and sign, and answer any questions they share. Even after release forms are signed, we make sure to check with Parent Advisors before including their photos in different Ascend mediums. For example, we first confirm with a Parent Advisor that a family photo taken for our [1 in 5 podcast](#) can also be included in an Ascend publication.
- **Collaboration.** As we supported the [2023 Ascend PSP Parent Advisors](#) in leading the [2023-24 Parent-Powered Solutions Fund](#), we partnered with them to develop a communications campaign in promotion of the fund. In a dedicated meeting, we presented potential communications ideas and brainstormed other options, discussed the communications skills Parent Advisors wanted to grow or strengthen, and identified specific roles for each Parent Advisor. Ascend Parent Advisors then showcased their skills throughout the duration of the campaign, writing quotes, recording videos for social media, leading webinars, and developing an op-ed on their participatory grantmaking experience.

CONNECTING WITH PARENTS VIRTUALLY

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of flexibility when it comes to how organizations carry out programming and activities, especially because so much of our work has been moved to a virtual setting. While the same level of intentionality is needed to engage parents through the strategies shared in this guide in a virtual environment, it is also important for organizations to take additional considerations into account.

- 1 **Ensure parents have access to the needed technology and high-speed internet/WiFi** – It is important to confirm that families have access to stable internet and the technology with which to access the internet. Keep a list of free internet programs in your community to share with any family that may lack or lose access. Advocacy organizations should consider their role in supporting policies that ensure equitable access to WiFi, high-speed internet, and internet-accessible devices given the role technology plays in parents' ability to participate in virtual activities, including the education of their children.
- 2 **Consider accessibility** – Consider using a platform that is easy to navigate for parents, especially something that they are already familiar with and are regularly using for their day-to-day activities. Ensure that the platform is also mobile friendly, as many parents use their phones as their main portal to the virtual world. This will also make it easier for them to participate in activities while their children are using the computer for online learning or while they are on the go.
- 3 **Provide space for communicating accommodation needs** – Not all parents will feel comfortable offering information on accommodations they may need when engaging virtually. For example, having video may pose a problem for those who are neurodiverse. Be sure there are multiple avenues, such as email, talking with the parent, or an intake survey, that can allow parents to express their accommodation needs in the most supportive way possible.



Janine McMahon, an Ascend Parent Advisor, with Anne Mosle at the 2023 Aspen Forum on Children and Families in Washington, DC. © The Aspen Institute: photo by Stephen Jaffe.

CONCLUSION

Parents know what their families need to thrive, which is why their voices are key for any effort that seeks to support and engage them as they build their educational attainment and economic security. This parent engagement guide offers parent-informed guidance and suggestions on how to engage them as partners in this work. It is vital to center processes that share power with parents, particularly in proposal and grant writing, and to invest in capacity-building for working with parents, given the many stressors on community organization and state agency staff.

Having worked with parents as advisors since our inception, Ascend has cultivated a depth of knowledge for the practical elements and nuanced factors that result in successful partnerships with parents. We have also benefited significantly from our Network Partners, Fellows, and philanthropic partners' leadership, lessons, and resources in listening to and working with parents. This guide considers concrete examples from our work, and from many others in the field, and illuminates the lessons learned and best practices for that partnership while removing barriers they may face to participating. Our hope is that this guide will support 2Gen practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and philanthropists across the country as they deepen their work and partnerships with parents. For questions or comments, please contact Ascend at the Aspen Institute at ascend.info@aspeninstitute.org.

- 4 Be clear about logistics** – Let parents know when they have to log on, when they can log off, if they need to participate in a sound check, if their cameras need to be turned on and for how long, etc. Clarifying these details will make it easier for the parent to understand both their role in the activity and your expectations for their participation.
- 5 Don't forget about compensation** – When parents attend virtual convenings and engagements, they still provide the same level of expertise as they would in an in-person convening, so they should be compensated for the expertise and time they provide.



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Ascend at the Aspen Institute is a catalyst and convener for diverse leaders working across systems and sectors to build intergenerational family prosperity and well-being by intentionally focusing on children and the adults in their lives together. We believe in the power of co-creation. We are a community of leaders well-connected, well-prepared, and well-positioned to build the political will that transforms hearts, minds, policies, and practices.

www.ascend.aspeninstitute.org



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