

Definition of Family Engagement and Leadership March 2016

Family engagement refers to the support for family members from an organization, agency, or program, as well as community stakeholders, to ensure that families are given the opportunity to participate in multiple ways. Family engagement reflects a belief in the value of family leadership at all levels from an individual, community and policy level. Furthermore, family engagement is the active intention of infusing the family perspective in all areas of systems design, implementation and evaluation. Family leadership is successful when effective partnerships are built upon mutual respect and shared responsibility, expertise and decision-making.

The following characterizes family leadership at a variety of levels:

- **Family level:** Families are supported in their role of an expert on and advocate for their children. Families participate in the development of goals and service plans, as well as program decisions that affect their child/family (e.g. parents learn how to read infant cues or understand child development and identify areas of needed support).
- **Peer Support level:** Families have opportunities to connect with and support other families in their communities and more broadly (e.g. parent matching, family support groups, planning community activities on behalf of children more broadly than their own).
- **Agency decision-making level:** Families as partners with other families, providers and policy makers in the areas of policy, program development and evaluation, professional education, and the delivery of supports and services increases the likelihood that systems of support and services are helpful, effective, and responsive to families (e.g. they are involved in program advisory committees or participate on work groups about program changes).
- **Systems change level:** Family perspectives contribute to the quality of systems of supports and services and are essential for effective policies and practices at all levels of care and systems planning, including access, integration, accountability and equity (e.g. families offer public comments at health and human services board meetings or participate in community coalitions).

Note: This definition was developed collaboratively with the Department of Health Services Title V CYSHCN Program, the Department of Children and Families Home Visiting Program, Family Voices of Wisconsin, and others.