

# Peer support matters: Strategies to incorporate and elevate those with lived experience in your support of adoptive, foster, and kinship families

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# Our mission



Raise public awareness about the need for foster and adoptive families for children in the public child welfare system



Assist US states, territories, and tribes to recruit, engage, develop and support foster and adoptive families

# Goals for this workshop

- 1 Discuss key considerations as you incorporate those with lived experience into your support programs.
- 2 Offer suggestions for how those with lived experience could be incorporated into your support programs.
- 3 Provide examples of how peer-led support is already being provided across the country.
- 4 Provide strategies for how to support and elevate those with lived experience.



# Lived experience: Who are we talking about?

- Those who experienced foster care, kinship care, and/or adoption as a child
- Current or former kinship caregivers
- Current or former foster or adoptive parents
- Birth parents





# The value added by those with lived experience

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- Part of a user-centered support program
- Improves your services, as the support provided by peers is often more valued by participants
- Helps your organizational culture as a whole when you prioritize and center those who experience your services



# Barriers to elevating those with lived experience

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- Educational or professional bias
- Peer-led support often deprioritized
- Lack of sufficient development or support
- Lack of compensation
- Organization not prepared to embrace their expertise

# Setting the stage:

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Ensure your organization is ready to positively receive people with lived experience.

# Assessing organizational readiness

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- What do current staff and volunteers say about the organization's willingness to listen to and prioritize those with lived experience?
- What do the caregivers and youth you are serving say about your services? Are your services meeting their needs?
- How is your organization perceived in the community you serve?



# Assessing organizational readiness

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- What is your organization's culture? What are the spoken and unspoken rules for membership and participation?
- How does the organization talk about those who have experienced foster care and adoption? Are they discussed with sensitivity and respect?
- What is your agency's experience with incorporating those with lived experience? Are they driving decision-making?



## Incorporating those with lived experience: **Advisory**

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- Boards
- Workgroups
- Content review
- Policy review



## Incorporating those with lived experience: Existing services

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- Therapists or other service providers
- Respite providers
- Navigation assistance
- Trainers
- Team member in intensive services



## Incorporating those with lived experience: Specialized peer services

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- Peer support group leaders
- Children's and teens' groups
- One-on-one support
- Mentors or buddies



**How are you incorporating  
those with lived experience  
into your support programs?**

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# Traits of effective peer support providers

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- Knowledgeable on the core issues in foster care and adoption
- Connected to the community
- Understands their experience is not universal
- Skilled in strategic sharing
- Maintains boundaries
- Distanced from their own trauma and understands their triggers







# Supporting and elevating those with lived experience

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# Training and development

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- Core issues—trauma, race, FASD, grief and loss
- Role-dependent skills, such as group facilitation
- Strategic sharing
- Guidance around difficult topics or conversations
- Self-care





# Support

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- Navigating trauma triggers and secondary traumatic stress
- Developing boundaries and assistance in maintaining them
- Balancing this work with their personal life

# Payment

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- Provide compensation for time and expertise.
- Remove barriers so those with fewer resources can participate.
- Don't overburden.







## What different considerations are there to supporting:

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- Relative caregivers?
- Adoptive and foster parents?
- Young adults?
- Teens?

# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT LADDER

## ORGANIZING AND GOVERNING

Youth have a central role in the organization's structure, driving programmatic or strategic decisions. Youth are empowered to be part of shared decision-making processes and have the opportunity for youth to learn from life experiences and expertise of adults.

## YOUTH-INITIATED LEADERSHIP

Youth serve as peer leaders in a paid or volunteer capacity. Youth lead activities with their peers or with adults. Adults are involved only in a supporting role.

## YOUTH-INITIATED PARTNERSHIPS

Youth and adults join together as equals to accomplish programming, plan activities, operate the program, or complete specific tasks.

## ADULT-INITIATED, SHARED DECISION-MAKING

Projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with youth. Attempts are made to use youth-friendly procedures and language.

## INFORMED DIALOGUE

Youth give ongoing advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. Youth are informed as to how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. Youth are involved in evaluation of programming.

## ASSIGNED BUT INFORMED

Youth are assigned a specific role and informed as to how and why they are being involved. This includes inconsistent youth involvement or temporary consultations such as focus groups or surveys.

## TOKENISM

Young people appear to be given a choice, but in fact they have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

## DECORATION

Young people are used to bolster a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by youth.

*Adapted from works by J. Nowicki and R. Hart.*



# Supporting caregivers is different than supporting those who were in care

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- Who chose this path?
- Who does this story belong to?
- What are the long-term implications for being open with their experiences?
- What are the power dynamics?



## Competing priorities: What happens when caregivers and young people have different views?

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- Both viewpoints are valid.
- Help them each shape and refine their perspective from the other person's experience.
- Facilitate a joint conversation.
- Consider who is most marginalized and most likely to be harmed.





# Power dynamics matter

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- Who holds authority?
- How does authority change depending on the context?
- Who holds marginalized identities?
- Can those with less power speak safely?
- What do those with less power risk when they choose authenticity?



# How do we create safer environments for those with lived experience to show up authentically in our organizations?

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- What are you already doing?
- What's one thing you hope to improve after this conference?
- What do you hope will be possible in the near future?



**What other questions do you have about elevating those with lived experience?**

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# AdoptUSKids resources

*Available at [professionals.adoptuskids.org](https://professionals.adoptuskids.org)*

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Resources for parent group leaders:

- **Discussion guides** on topics such as the impact of trauma on behaviors, grief and loss, and navigating lying behaviors
- **Recorded webinars** such as understanding secondary traumatic stress, effective group facilitation, and helping resource parents embrace trauma-responsive parenting
- **Articles and tip sheets** on topics such as strategic communication in support groups, navigating challenging group dynamics, and bringing joy to the support group experience
- **Five-module parent group leadership curriculum** complete with full script, slide decks, and handouts



## Contact information

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We'd love to talk to you about your system's needs! Come visit our exhibit booth or reach out to [consultation@adoptuskids.org](mailto:consultation@adoptuskids.org) to discuss capacity building or other support AdoptUSKids can provide.



# AdoptUSKids

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