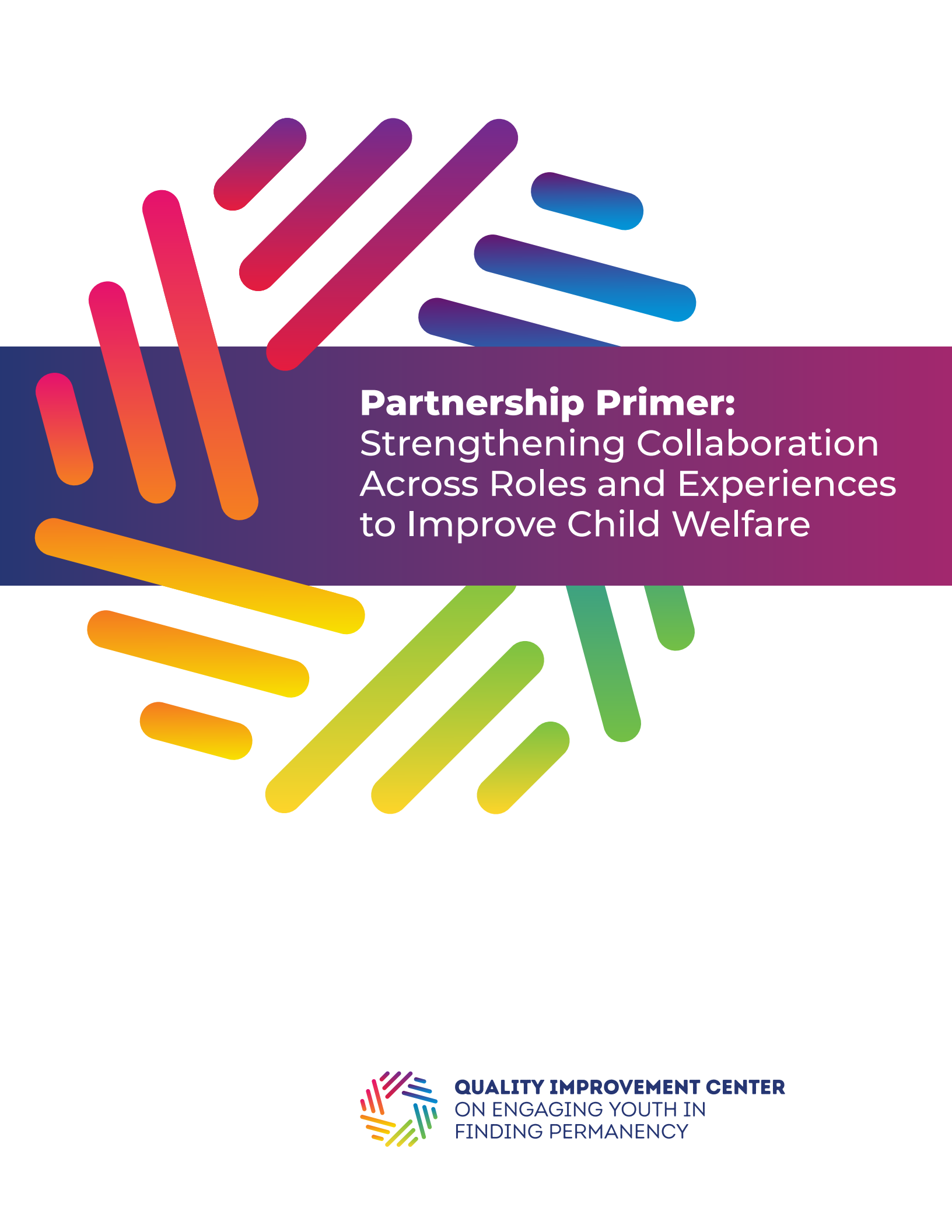




Partnership Primer: Strengthening Collaboration Across Roles and Experiences to Improve Child Welfare



QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

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Dear Child Welfare Partners:

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY), in collaboration with The National Youth Engagement Advisory Council (NYEAC), produced this primer. We offer it as an invitation to professionals and individuals with lived experience to work alongside each other.

Many people enter careers in child welfare because they care deeply about children and families. That care matters, especially as we continue working to improve systems that do not always meet people's needs. The challenges we see are not the result of individual failure. Instead, they indicate that child welfare systems and practices still are adapting to an approach that stresses learning how to listen, to share power and to engage in ways that feel genuine and respectful.

Individuals with lived experience and other partners working in youth engagement, partnership development and systems improvement co-created this primer. We observed that when lived experience and professional expertise are brought together and mutually respected, programs improve, policies become more responsive and trust grows. These are not side effects but rather the whole point of the collaboration.

Meaningful engagement is essential. When done well, it improves decision-making, assures accountability and supports lasting change. Whether you are new to this work or building on existing efforts, this resource offers practical guidance, suggests questions to prompt reflection and presents real-world examples to support forming stronger partnerships.

As you read, we invite you to think about your own relationships, your own “seat at the table” and where you can make room in your practice to listen more deeply and to perform your duties a little differently. That's how positive change begins to take hold.

Thank you for your commitment to children, youth and their families and to building systems that work better for everyone.

With gratitude,

The QIC-EY, NYEAC and Partners

Introduction

Partnership Primer: Strengthening Collaboration Across Roles and Experiences to Improve Child Welfare

The Partnership Primer is a practical, field-tested resource designed to prepare child welfare professionals, system leaders and individuals with lived experience to work together in true partnership. It supports caseworkers, managers, administrators and community partners in their efforts to build the mindsets, skills and structures needed to collaborate effectively across various roles and types of experience.

Moving beyond theory, this primer offers clear, actionable guidance — the kind you actually can use — to produce the conditions in which partnership is not only encouraged but also made operational in everyday practice.

This is not about performative inclusion or checking boxes. It's about meaningful collaboration that reshapes how people within systems listen, make decisions and evolve.

THIS PRIMER IS FOR YOU

- » **People working in partnership across child welfare systems:** partnerships grounded in mutual respect, shared responsibility and lived experience. Although roles may differ, the principles and practices in this primer still apply across varied roles and perspectives.
- » **Champions:** those who lead and support authentic engagement within their organizations and systems. They may have formal authority, lived experience or both. This primer offers guidance on readiness, facilitation, building relationships and sustaining partnerships over time.
- » **System leaders:** those who set policy, allocate resources and shape the conditions that make authentic engagement possible. This primer helps leaders to understand what champions and partners need to succeed and how to build infrastructure that supports shared decision-making.
- » **Individuals with lived experience (ILEx):** those who bring insights that cannot be learned through data review or professional training alone. This primer acknowledges their experience and clarifies what an authentic partnership looks like, enabling partners with lived experience to advocate for their meaningful and sustainable involvement.

- » **Child welfare professionals:** including caseworkers, attorneys, service providers and clinicians, all of whom are essential partners in system improvement. This primer supports professionals in sharing decision-making, building trust and integrating lived experience with professional experience.
- » **Community partners:** including advocates, researchers, service providers and community-based organizations that play critical roles in strengthening collaboration across agencies. This primer offers an approach for them to work together effectively.

This resource focuses on practices that support meaningful engagement within partnerships. Roles are not fixed. The people involved often contribute in different ways; some of them may hold multiple roles at once. Think of this primer as a starting point — something to read together and to adapt to fit what your community actually needs.



Bringing People Together

Bringing the right people together matters. Authentic partnership does not begin the first time people gather together in a room. It starts much earlier, with intentional decisions about whom to invite, why to recruit those particular individuals and how to structure their work.

Bringing people together effectively takes more than good intentions. It requires a shared language, clear values, readiness across roles and thoughtful attention to power dynamics.

This section outlines the conditions needed for effective collaboration. When the elements combined to produce these conditions are addressed clearly and intentionally, engagement more likely will be meaningful, sustainable and transformational, not symbolic or performative.

ESTABLISHING A COMMON LANGUAGE

Strong partnerships begin with a shared understanding. The definitions below provide a common language to support collaboration across roles and types of experience. They're not exhaustive, but they do reflect the concepts that come up repeatedly in our work.

Authentic Engagement

Authentic engagement means partnering in ways that respect the perspectives of others, value each person's input and consider each individual's needs. In this primer, authentic engagement refers to collaboration among child welfare professionals and ILEx as well as across all roles involved in systems change. To engage authentically, partners need to do all of the following:

- » Commit to shared decision-making and mutual accountability.
- » Communicate clearly and respectfully to build trust.
- » Recognize the impacts of trauma, and build on the strengths of each individual.
- » Be aware of power dynamics. Address them intentionally.
- » Prepare and support all partners so that each one's contributions are meaningful.

Individuals With Lived Experience (ILEx)

ILEx are individuals who personally have experienced navigating through child-serving systems, such as child welfare, social services, education, health care and the justice system. Their expertise comes from firsthand experience with how systems work in practice, not just how they are designed to work.

This knowledge goes beyond what can be learned through training alone. ILEx understand how systems work in real life – including what works well and where gaps exist – in ways that complement professional and academic expertise.

Champion

A champion helps to lead and to support authentic engagement within a system or an organization. Champions turn values into practice by creating conditions that enable shared decision-making, a sense of safety and collaboration.

Champions may have formal authority, lived experience or both. They may fill multiple roles at the same time. Effective champions build trust across people's differences, attend to the readiness of team members and remain accountable to people as well as to outcomes.

Partner / Participant

A partner or a participant is anyone who contributes knowledge, skills or lived experience to help shape decisions and outcomes. This includes ILEx, professionals, system leaders, community members and cross-system partners.

Power Dynamics

The term “power dynamics” describes how authority, influence and decision-making are shared within relationships and systems. In child welfare, professionals historically have held most decision-making power while people with lived experience have not always been included. Addressing power dynamics requires transparency, preparation and a commitment to sharing decision-making and leadership.

Co-design / Co-creation

Co-design (or co-creation) is a collaborative process in which people with lived experience and those with professional experience work together from the beginning to develop ideas, programs, processes and solutions. The goal of co-creation is to design with people, not for them. As they work together, partners define the problem, shape their approach to solving it and develop the final product, ensuring that the result reflects real needs and priorities.

Shared Decision-Making / Shared Power

Shared decision-making (or shared power) is the process by which partners make choices throughout their work. Partners have access to the same information, discuss options openly and participate in decisions about direction, priorities and next steps. They share responsibility and authority. Some partners may be persons who have not always been included in past decision-making.



Pause and Reflect: Are the key terms and values that guide our engagement clearly defined, accessible and co-created with our fellow partners?

CONDITIONS FOR PARTNERSHIP: *SHARED VALUES*

Shared values guide how partners work together in practice and how they make decisions. Without them, engagement can become superficial despite good intentions.

When Shared Values Guide the Work

- » Individuals with lived experience develop skills, take on leadership roles and help to shape decisions.
- » Child welfare professionals deepen their understanding of the situations and conditions experienced by those they serve, build stronger relationships and make more informed decisions.
- » Individuals with lived experience and child welfare professionals build mutual trust and share accountability. They work as partners who learn from one another, navigate power dynamics openly and make decisions together rather than in isolation.
- » Systems and organizations become more responsive and more trusted. A range of perspectives rather than a single point of view shapes decisions.

What Shared Values Look Like in Practice

- » **Real Roles in Decision-Making**
Partnerships go beyond token inclusion. Every partner has a real role in shaping decisions, not just a seat at the table.
- » **Shared Responsibility Built Through Relationships**
Change happens through relationships. Formation of strong partnerships requires time, care and shared responsibility. This isn't a "soft" part of the work; it's what makes change in systems and practices possible.

» **Learning and Growing Together**

People do their best work when they learn, grow and contribute collectively. Preparation, mentoring and support build the skills of individuals and strengthen the group. Clear values help partners to navigate through challenges and to stay engaged.

These values set the direction. But values alone don't sustain partnership; they need specific conditions to take hold. Two practices necessary from the beginning and throughout a partnership are building genuine relationships and creating a sense of safety and belonging.

CONDITIONS FOR PARTNERSHIP: *RELATIONSHIPS AND SAFETY*

The values above describe what partnerships work to achieve. The following two essential practices describe what must be in place for that work to happen at every stage and in every role.

Building Relationships

Meaningful progress is rooted in strong relationships. It requires investing in people by meeting them where they are, building trust and mutual respect over time, creating opportunities for growth and recognizing each other's real-world experiences and limitations.

Supporting a Sense of Safety and Belonging

People need to feel safe, connected and able to participate without fear. When a sense of safety and belonging is developed intentionally – not assumed – people become more likely to engage fully and to share openly.

These practices shape whether partnerships succeed or struggle. Without attention to relationships and safety, trust can break down and participation can feel uncertain or risky.



Pause and Reflect: Do current practices reflect a shared approach to partnership? Who helped to define the language, roles and values that guide the partners' work? Should other voices be included? If so, whose voices?



Practice Tip: Pay attention to feelings of tension early. Address concerns directly and with care. Keep lines of communication open. Strong relationships help partners to work through challenges and to keep their work moving forward.



In Practice: Early engagement with the NYEAC revealed a gap between the team's design and how members actually were experiencing their work. Team members expressed feeling unsure of their roles and undervalued. Rather than defending the original plan, project leaders listened to team members' inputs. The leaders revised structures where they could and returned to the group with transparency about what had changed and honest acknowledgment of what hadn't. This accountability helped to build trust and kept the partnership moving forward.

READINESS FOR PARTNERSHIP

Shared language and values are important, but they are not enough. Meaningful engagement also requires readiness of systems, leadership and partners.

Achieving readiness is not a one-time activity at the beginning of a partnership. It needs to become an ongoing practice performed throughout the partners' work. Team members can sense when the team's level of readiness is low because of leadership transitions, stretched resources and expectations that weren't made clear. Partners feel unsupported; professionals feel uncertain. Pressing forward without the foundation of readiness can strain relationships and can undercut the work that the team cares about most.

System Readiness

System readiness refers to whether the organization and its leadership are prepared to support authentic partnerships. Partnering is unlikely to succeed if systems are not ready for shared decision-making, acting on partners' inputs and providing the necessary supports.

System readiness includes

- » leadership commitment to shared decision-making;
- » clear processes for the ways that partners' inputs inform decisions;
- » structures that support ILEx influence beyond storytelling;
- » plans for compensation, logistics and support for partners; and
- » willingness to learn from challenges and feelings of discomfort.

The people in child welfare systems need to do this work first before forming partnerships. This includes preparing leaders and staff – many of whom may not be accustomed to shared decision-making – to listen openly, to reflect on long-standing practices and to respond to feedback without becoming defensive.





Practice Tool: National Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement
Family-Agency Leadership Academy Assessment Tool:
<https://qic-ey.org/ala-assessment-tool>



Readiness for Facilitation and Coordination

Those who support or facilitate the work play important roles in producing the conditions for an effective partnership. Their ability to guide discussions, to manage tension and to support participation depends on leadership's backing and the system's flexibility.

Effective facilitation requires

- » credibility across roles and perspectives;
- » ability to navigate difficult conversations with care;
- » clear understanding of meaningful engagement in practice; and
- » access to support, coaching and tools that sustain well-being.

Partner Readiness

Meaningful engagement is built on trust, mutual respect and shared accountability. Some partners may have been impacted by trauma, exclusion or harm related to their experiences in child welfare systems. Achieving readiness for partners includes providing them with the supports that they need to participate with dignity and freedom of choice.

Consider whether

- » roles, expectations and influence are communicated clearly;
- » preparation and skill-building opportunities are available;
- » communication methods are accessible and responsive to partner needs; and
- » clear boundaries, prior consent and support for sharing personal experiences are established.

Assessing readiness includes recognizing when partner participation may not be appropriate at a given time. It also includes honoring each partner's ability to pause, to decline or to step back from participation without feeling pressure or being subjected to negative consequences.

Culture, Resources and Feedback

Sustained engagement depends on how well the work of partners is supported and how their inputs are used. Elements needed for sustained engagement include the following:

- » **Resources and Support:** systems in place for compensation, logistics and facilitation, responsive to the needs of partners



- » **Culture and Relationships:** a culture of respect, belonging and openness actively demonstrated, not assumed
- » **Using Feedback:** input taken seriously and used to inform decisions; progress communicated back to partners

Without these elements in place, engagement can become one-sided and partners can feel disconnected from real decision-making.

Achieving readiness also involves preparing professionals to work effectively with persons with lived experience. This includes building skills in communication, shared decision-making and responsiveness to feedback in ways that are clear, respectful and aligned with the purpose of the work.



Pause and Reflect: People, especially those with lived experience, may feel under pressure to say, “Yes,” because they care about the work. However, saying, “No,” can be healthy and necessary. Consider the support that partners need as they decide when to participate, to decline or to refer others. They need to make these decisions without pressure or negative consequences.

When Readiness Level Is Low or the Situation Changes

Not every system, leader or champion is prepared fully for authentic engagement. Leadership transitions, limited resources and shifting priorities can make collaboration difficult to achieve. When the team's level of readiness is low, partners may feel burned-out, unsupported, frustrated. Pushing for change without clear backing can lead to burnout plus personal and professional risk.

When challenges arise, consider the following:

- » **Leadership and Decision-Making:** Is current leadership aligned with and willing to act on participant inputs? If not, focus first on building internal alignment before broadening engagement to include partners.
- » **Resources and Support:** Are funds and structures in place for compensation, logistics and facilitation to meet partners' needs? If not, partners may feel that their engagement is one-sided or forcibly imposed.
- » **Culture and Relationships:** Do team members share a culture of mutual respect and belonging? If not, invest in relationship-building before expanding participation. Have team members co-create agreements committing the group to a shared culture.
- » **Using Feedback:** Do leaders take participants' inputs seriously and act upon them? If not, revisit the purpose and decision-making structure of team meetings.

When progress stalls, pause and reset. Consider strengthening staff skills through training and reflection. Begin engagement with partners in low-risk settings, being transparent about limits and timelines. Redesign the approach to engagement, based on lessons learned. Pausing to reset is healthy. Staying stuck is not.



Practice Tip: If decisions already have been made, do not ask participants simply to endorse them. Be clear about when input still can have real influence.



In Practice: Rather than developing a training curriculum in isolation for the general workforce and then seeking validation, the QIC-EY staff engaged with partners at multiple stages of the process. Partners helped to identify the core components needed and reviewed proposed outlines for the training, including the number of modules and key content areas. The partners' greatest influence came in shaping the activities and engagement strategies used to deliver the material. By the time the training was finalized, partners had contributed their insights at key decision points and felt comfortable promoting the products because they had had real influence throughout the process. Because the QIC-EY's internal positioning centered on incorporating the voices of ILEx, many of those refining and finalizing the products were themselves professionals with lived experience. They provided continuity between partner inputs and the final deliverables. As a result, partners could see clearly how their contributions had shaped the final products. This strengthened their trust, ownership and confidence in the process. These outcomes extended beyond development of the training, reinforcing relationships and strengthening partnerships across the broader project.



BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

Who's at the Table

The people at the table shape how they experience the work, how trust develops among them and whether change efforts are made with people or for them.

Child welfare benefits from the inputs of varied voices. Teams need to reflect the communities most affected by the work. All partners, including ILEx, need preparation and support to work collaboratively.

Reflect on these questions whether building a new team or strengthening an existing one: Do people see themselves and their experiences represented at the table? Do they see others who understand their communities and experiences?

Why Who's at the Table Matters

Bringing people to the table is not enough. We need to ask, "Whose table is it? Who decides what happens at the table?"

The people at the table need to include persons with a range of lived experience, cultures and perspectives. Team members in strong teams may not always agree, but they share responsibility for improving the system.

When decisions about who's at the table are made intentionally, they result in better decision-making and more responsive outcomes; they also build trust. Thoughtful selection of those at the table helps to ensure that policies and practices are informed by those most affected, not in name only but also in influence. Without it, child welfare systems risk reinforcing blind spots, missing critical insights and making decisions that do not reflect the realities of the people they serve.

Who Makes Up the Team

Work on systems change often includes the following:

- » staff and system leaders
- » ILEx
- » family advocates and peer specialists
- » community partners and cultural liaisons
- » informal community leaders
- » cross-system partners (courts, schools, health care practitioners, housing providers)

Each team member plays a role in shaping trust, decisions and outcomes.

Effective teams intentionally choose their members and decide how to structure participation within the group. Consider the following:

- » Whose lived experience is represented on the team? Whose is missing?
- » Which cultural, linguistic and community connections exist within the group?
- » Is influence shared rather than determined by role or position?

Addressing gaps in the composition of a team may involve reserving seats, expanding partnerships and redefining who counts as part of the team.

Intentional Recruitment

“Who’s at the table” means not only who is present but also whose knowledge shapes decisions.

Recruitment needs to extend intentionally beyond existing networks. This includes inviting new voices, especially those who have not always had the chance to participate previously. It also involves preparing the veteran team members to work effectively with these newcomers.

Evolving the Team

Building a team is an ongoing endeavor. Whether starting fresh or strengthening an existing team, focus on expanding who belongs, contributes and leads.

This task may include

- » hiring or contracting to bring in missing perspectives,
- » strengthening community partnerships,
- » creating meaningful roles for youths’ family members and peer leaders,
- » redefining who is considered “part of the team” and
- » supporting professionals to help them work effectively in environments of shared decision-making.

The goal is not perfection but steady progress toward building teams that reflect and respond to the communities they serve.



Pause and Reflect: Consider the following questions:

- » Who is seen and heard consistently at each level of this work? Who is missing?
- » Whose experiences and perspectives are shaping decisions? Whose are not?
- » Are community members and individuals with lived experience engaged early in the process or only after decisions already are being implemented?



- » How well does the composition of the team reflect the backgrounds of the families served?
- » Where are the disconnects between the team members and the families and communities they serve? How is the team addressing those gaps?



Practice Tip: Building an effective team involves considering not only who is at the table but also whose voices are being heard and whose inputs are getting a response. Deliberately provide seats at the table for partners who may communicate differently from fellow team members, who need extra time to process ideas and who have been excluded from the team in the past. Listen to more than the loudest voices. Provide multiple ways for team members to contribute. Ensure that all members have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions and the direction of the work.



In Practice: Staff members at each QIC-EY pilot site conducted an environmental scan of their system to understand better who would be impacted by implementation of the program, which communities were most connected with child welfare services and whose perspectives were missing from existing decision-making. They used demographic data to support the development of their team structure and to ensure that team membership at their pilot site reflected the communities they served.

Staff members collected information for their environmental scans via focus groups, surveys and the review of previously recorded data. Collecting this information in varied ways facilitated getting feedback from widespread voices in their communities.

Putting Partnership into Practice

As the work moves from bringing partners together to getting them working together, circling back to revisit team readiness may become necessary. That's not a setback; it's a typical part of the process. Reflection helps to keep the process moving, not slowing down.

The next step is learning to work well together. Readiness brings people to the table; practice happens after they arrive there. It includes sharing space, working through differences and establishing routines that help partnerships to succeed over time.

The following sections focus on the skills, structures and approaches that support strong, lasting partnerships.



Working Together Effectively

Once the right people are at the table and prepared to collaborate, the focus shifts from their readiness to how they will work together day-to-day. Working together effectively depends on creating the conditions in which people feel safe enough to contribute honestly, to share decision-making genuinely and to show up ready to exert real influence, not just the appearance of it.

This section focuses on how partnerships work day-to-day – how teams build trust, navigate differences and work together over time.

CREATING AND SUPPORTING A SENSE OF SAFETY AND BELONGING

A sense of safety and belonging enables people to show up fully, not only with their physical presence but also with a state of mind that lets them contribute.

- » **Psychological safety** means that people feel they can speak honestly, ask questions, raise concerns and take interpersonal risks without fear of punishment, dismissal or other negative consequences.
- » **Environmental safety** includes both physical and emotional well-being in a supportive space for participation. This is especially important in settings that may call to mind a team member's prior trauma or involvement in the foster care system, such as child welfare offices or courtrooms.
- » **A sense of belonging** means that each team member feels included, respected and treated as an equal contributor.

Together, these conditions build the foundation for meaningful partnership. Without them, participation often becomes limited or guarded as partners hold back, disengage or question whether their voices truly matter. When a sense of safety and belonging is present, all partners can engage openly, build trust and contribute their perspectives in ways that strengthen their relationships and improve the quality of the group's decisions.

How to Support a Sense of Safety and Belonging

Before

- » Be clear about purpose, roles and the decision-making process.
- » Choose a welcoming, accessible space to meet.
- » Make logistical plans (e.g., for compensation, transportation, childcare, break periods).
- » Identify a trusted facilitator or other trusted person in the room.

During

- » Facilitate the development of group agreements that clarify the expectations and commitments that guide working relationships.
- » Offer multiple ways to participate (e.g., team discussions, written correspondence, small group breakout sessions).
- » Use clear, easily understood language.
- » Address triggered feelings of past harm or exclusion directly and respectfully.
- » Allow flexibility (e.g., stepping out, passing when one's turn comes to comment, communicating via video options).

After

- » Schedule time to reflect and to debrief.
- » Share how partners' inputs were used and explain decisions.
- » Ask what support partners need as the team moves forward.



Practice Tip: It's okay not to have all the answers. Saying, "I'm not sure, but I want us to figure this out together," builds trust and shows that everyone has a role in the work.



In Practice: Before meetings, the National Youth Engagement Manager and the QIC-EY staff chose a neutral, welcoming location; shared the group's purpose and level of influence; and confirmed and communicated logistical arrangements (compensation, transportation, childcare). During meetings, they provided multiple ways for participants to contribute and explained terms used in child welfare practice, as needed. Afterward, they showed how the group's inputs had influenced decisions and gathered feedback to improve future meetings. These meetings allowed for a variety of voices to be heard. Partners shared the responsibility for setting agendas and worked together to support each other and to participate in every aspect of their meetings.



BUILDING TRUST AND SHARING POWER

A sense of safety and belonging nurtures the conditions for forming successful partnerships. Ongoing interactions, follow-through and shared experiences over time build trust and strengthen shared decision-making. Trust increases when people feel heard, respected and able to influence decisions. Trust isn't declared; it's built through consistent actions such as following through on commitments, communicating clearly and closing the loop to let partners know how their inputs shaped decisions.

All partners bring valuable expertise to this work. Trust increases when all of their perspectives are respected and reflected in decisions.

Shared decision-making goes beyond asking for input. It requires clarity about how decisions will be made, who has influence and how inputs will be applied in decision-making. It also requires child welfare systems and leaders to clarify who holds authority and when it can be shared.

Trust and shared decision-making aren't built by intention alone. They emerge when participation leads to real influence and when systems respond to partners' inputs.



Practice Tip: Partnerships grow stronger when the persons in them feel safe to speak up about what isn't working. Partners who raise concerns often surface important insights that can improve decisions and outcomes. When these perspectives are welcomed, heard and lead to action, the quality of solutions and the trust within the partnership both improve.



In Practice: The NYEAC members consistently shared that one reason they remained committed to the project long-term was because leaders and facilitators intentionally “closed the loop” by explaining how member feedback had informed decisions and had influenced final products. Members regularly saw their inputs reflected in project outcomes and understood how their perspectives had shaped the work.

Even when partner recommendations were not incorporated fully into final decisions or when the direction of the work did not change, members continued to feel valued. This was because leaders acknowledged team members' feedback, communicated openly about decision-making and maintained trusting relationships throughout the process.



How to Share Decision-Making

- » Be clear about which decisions are being made and what input is needed.
- » Offer multiple ways for team members to contribute (e.g., group discussions, written correspondence, small group breakout sessions).
- » Explain how decisions are made and when the ability to influence them is limited.
- » Rotate facilitator and team leader roles when appropriate.
- » Ensure that team members' participation influences decisions, not just confirms them.
- » Acknowledge and credit members' contributions.
- » Show how members' inputs influenced decisions.

Using a Team Charter

A co-created team charter makes shared decision-making visible, intentional and consistent. It helps to clarify

- » the purpose and the scope of the team;
- » roles and expectations of all members;
- » how decisions will be made and who will be involved in making them;
- » support structures for participation and accountability; and
- » how the work will begin, evolve and conclude.



Practice Tip: The process of drafting the charter is as important as the final product. How it is developed — together, transparently, with shared input — builds the foundation for how members will work as a team.



In Practice: Staff in the QIC-EY pilot sites worked from a shared template for the project. They adapted it by adding their own content and agreements to reflect their local contexts and partnerships. Rather than treating their charters as onetime deliverables, staff members at the sites considered them living guides. They revisited and adjusted their charters as their working relationships evolved. At each site, team members shared responsibilities for facilitation to support ownership across the team and gathered inputs in multiple ways to ensure that different voices were included. When members raised concerns, leaders communicated what action would be taken to address these concerns and what would happen next. Staff members at some of the sites are leaving their charters in place as a starting point for future work involving engagement with partners with lived experience. This is a sign that the process they have built is durable. The process did more than produce a product; it also produced a team that knows how to work together.





Practice Tool: QIC-EY Co-Creating a Team Charter

<https://qic-ey.org/team-charter>



DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

Partners build stronger solutions when they collaborate from the start. They involve people early as team members and ensure that decisions reflect the perspectives of those most affected.

When done well, this approach enables ILEx, child welfare professionals and community partners to contribute to planning, design and implementation of the solutions. Building solutions together shifts the work from imposing solutions on communities to developing solutions with them. When people help to shape the work from the outset, they're much more likely to trust the solution, to use it and to help it last.

This work does not always occur in a linear sequence. It requires flexibility, openness and the willingness to adapt as new perspectives emerge. Although this process may take more time up front, it leads to better results and shared ownership.

How to Build Solutions in Practice

- » Be clear about timelines, resources and constraints.
- » Explain how decisions will be made.
- » Involve partners early and throughout the process.
- » Use simple tools to gather inputs from team members (e.g., meeting in small groups, taking a vote, ranking recommendations).
- » Prepare facilitators to guide discussions and to ensure that opportunities to participate are accessible for each team member.
- » Provide opportunities for partners to take on leadership roles.



Practice Tip: The work may seem to progress slowly at first when partners are working with other team members. However, their collaboration leads to better, more lasting results. If a decision is on the verge of being made before inputs have been gathered, pause and ask, "Who else should be part of this conversation?"





In Practice: QIC-EY team members at the pilot sites identified a child-and-youth engagement program to implement. They used a comprehensive assessment process that included hearing from a wide range of partners. Even after choosing the program, the site leaders throughout implementation continued to ask who should be at the table to inform decision-making. Team members at the sites worked in close partnership with state agency staff, local agencies, community organizations and young persons with lived experience, ensuring that those most impacted had real influence over how the program took shape. As the work progressed, teams continued to pause and to ask whom else they needed to include. This reflection led to bringing in additional voices to inform how the program was developed and delivered. The process moved slowly and intentionally. Because it did, the results reflected the communities that the program was meant to serve.



Practice Tool: Lesson Learned #10: Authentic engagement of children and youth is most powerful when policy and practice are brought to life by local leadership grounded in the realities of the communities they serve.

<https://qic-ey.org/lesson-learned-10>



COMPENSATION

Authentic partnership requires investment. Compensation for partners is not a courtesy; it signifies that people's time and expertise are taken seriously.

Some partners participate as part of their professional roles. Others, including ILEx and community partners, contribute outside of paid positions. Compensation and other supports need to reflect the value of their time and expertise.

Failure to plan for compensating partners can result in imbalances that undermine trust and participation. Expectations for compensation need to be discussed openly and built into planning from the start.

Compensation needs to be

- » planned;
- » transparent, consistent and fair;
- » flexible enough to meet diverse needs; and
- » structured to avoid unintended impacts on public benefits.



Common types of compensation include

- » financial payments (stipends, hourly rates, honoraria),
- » reimbursement for participation costs (transportation, childcare, meals, technology) and
- » non-financial recognition (leadership opportunities, acknowledgment of authorship).



Practice Tip: Structure compensation carefully to avoid unintended effects on public benefits, such as housing assistance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Be transparent about potential impacts and offer options, when possible. Consult benefits specialists to avoid unintended consequences.



In Practice: The QIC-EY staff offered multiple options for compensation to support accessibility and freedom of choice for partners. These included direct deposit, mailed checks and direct payment of bills or expenses when needed. Leaders and facilitators tracked compensation totals and maintained ongoing communication with partners about financial considerations, including impacts on taxes and self-employment reporting requirements.

Staff members encouraged partners to make the decisions about compensation that worked in the partners' own best interests. Partners could decline compensation at any time without affecting their participation or value as team members. The program designers also recognized that meaningful acknowledgment is not always financial. Partners could identify other forms of support, recognition and professional opportunities that aligned with their needs and goals.



Practice Tool: QIC-EY Compensation Considerations
<https://qic-ey.org/compensation-considerations>



ONGOING SUPPORTS FOR PARTICIPATION

Bringing people together is only the beginning. Sustaining their genuine engagement — not just listing them as participants — requires consistent, thoughtful support over time. Without it, even the most promising efforts at partner participation can fade or become one-sided.

Providing support is a shared responsibility. Child welfare systems and leaders need to create the conditions that make meaningful participation possible.



Types of Support

With appropriate supports, people can engage consistently, relationships grow stronger and burnout becomes less likely. People want to sustain their participation because it is meaningful to them and makes them feel valued. Because of their active involvement, the work produces better outcomes. Strong partnerships rely on three types of support:

- » **Logistical:** clear communication, preparation and follow-through
- » **Relational:** recognition, encouragement and respect for boundaries
- » **Financial:** fair and timely compensation

Supporting Participation in Practice

Logistical Support

- » Share expectations, timelines and materials in advance.
- » Provide clear points of contact and consistent follow-up.
- » Make meetings and processes accessible.

Relational Support

- » Recognize contributions. Follow through on commitments.
- » Respect boundaries. Allow flexibility.
- » Provide opportunities for team members to connect with each other beyond their tasks.

Financial Support

- » Provide timely, easily accessible compensation.
- » Reduce administrative burdens.
- » Be clear about payment processes,

Onboarding and Transitions

Strong onboarding and thoughtful transitions help people to stay engaged.

The onboarding process needs to help new partners understand the purpose of the work, their roles in it and how they can participate. Early connections with the champion and opportunities to ask questions build their self-confidence.

Transitions, including when a partner leaves the team, need to be handled with care. Recognizing contributions, capturing feedback and maintaining connections help to strengthen future partnerships.



Practice Tip: Thoughtful onboarding and transitions help to maintain continuity and to honor the contributions of team members. They also help to prevent abrupt endings, especially for partners who may have experienced disruption or loss within child welfare systems.



In Practice: Staff members in the pilot sites designed a layered onboarding process in which relational learning wasn't a onetime orientation session. Partners first engaged with fellow team members when they attended an onboarding presentation together. During this, they received a broad overview of the project's purpose, structure and goals. Next, the partners intentionally "zoomed in" to their individual roles. This process helped partners to gain a broad perspective of project goals as well as how their own specific roles were connected with the larger project.



Supporting Ongoing Engagement

Sustained engagement builds on the supports described earlier. Engagement needs to adapt as roles, capacity and interests change over time.

Participation is not static. Lives change, capacity shifts and priorities evolve. Team members step forward, step back or change how they contribute. That's okay. Strong partnerships make room for this rather than treating it as a problem.

Ongoing engagement depends on how well the team adjusts to these changes while retaining what matters most: clarity, connection and a shared sense of purpose.

WHAT HELPS ENGAGEMENT TO CONTINUE

Adapting to Change

Participation will shift over time. Partners need support in setting boundaries, declining opportunities that don't fit their needs or schedules, and recognizing when others may be better positioned to contribute. Partner engagement needs to remain flexible and responsive to changing circumstances.

Clarity in Communication

Clear, consistent communication helps people to stay connected to their work. The team may need to revisit and to update expectations, roles and decision-making processes as the work proceeds.

Growth and Development

Partners may want to deepen their involvement over time. Opportunities to learn, to build skills and to assume new roles help to sustain engagement and to strengthen work outcomes. Support for professionals and ILEx as they seek these opportunities benefits the team. Professionals, in particular, may need ongoing development to work effectively in shared decision-making environments, including learning active listening skills plus how to respond to feedback and how to adjust their approaches as partnerships evolve.

Maintaining Connections Purposefully

People are more likely to stay engaged when they understand how their contributions are being used and what is changing as a result. Regular updates, pauses for reflection and shared learning sessions help to maintain their connections to the work.



Pause and Reflect: Partner participation involves more than sharing personal stories. Persons with lived experience also serve as leaders, connectors and community resources. Recognizing these roles supports partners' personal growth and sustained engagement.



Practice Tip: Sharing a personal experience can be valuable, but it always needs to be shared voluntarily and with the team's support. Before inviting someone to share, especially an intense or traumatic experience, consider the following:

- » Is participation clearly optional?
- » Is the environment respectful and safe?
- » Is sharing connected with a clear purpose?
- » Do participants retain control over how their experiences are used in the project?
- » Is informed consent clearly explained before sharing?
- » Are boundaries and privacy respected?
- » Is support for the sharer available before and after sharing?



In Practice: Before diving into content during a meeting with partners, the QIC-EY team first provided time for partners to connect with fellow team members. The QIC-EY team members invited partners – never required them – to share parts of their personal stories as a way of building relationships and trust. Facilitators communicated the purpose ahead of time, identified a support person who would be available if any partner felt tense or uncomfortable, and made clear that opting out of sharing was always an option. The guiding principle for the team was that no one was entitled to anyone else's personal story; sharing must be free of coercion, no matter a person's title. After partners shared their stories, the facilitators debriefed, expressed gratitude and transitioned to the next topic on the agenda so that no one was left holding a heavy, emotional feeling alone. Sharing was voluntary, supported and purposeful from start to finish.



HONORING TRANSITIONS AND ENDINGS

Ongoing partnership does not mean permanent partnership. People's lives undergo changes; capacity shifts; team members' relationships to the work evolve. Some transitions are planned, such as when a term ends, a project concludes or someone pursues new opportunities. Others occur unexpectedly. Whatever the reason, how you say, "Goodbye," matters.

Abrupt endings can feel dismissive and may re-create experiences of abandonment that many ILEx have faced within child welfare systems. Thoughtful closure honors contributions, preserves dignity and serves as a model of the relational accountability that authentic partnership requires. Practices that support meaningful closure include the following principles:

- » Name the transition explicitly. Do not let people fade away quietly. Acknowledge departing team members with gratitude for their specific contributions.
- » Provide time and space for reflection. Invite departing members to share what they have learned, what they hope will continue and what feedback they have to offer for the partnership.
- » Plan for unplanned departures. Include in the team's charter how the group will handle unexpected transitions. This will ensure that a pathway for honoring someone's contributions always will be available, even when formal closure is not possible.
- » Support those who remain. Departures affect the whole team. Provide time for team members to acknowledge the change and to reaffirm their shared commitment to moving forward.



Practice Tip: A meaningful closure needs to include an expression of appreciation for the progress made. Partners leave feeling ready for future collaboration when they feel genuinely valued. Consider what individuals need and what the child welfare system realistically can provide to show gratitude. A certificate, a group celebration or a personal acknowledgment can go a long way.



In Practice: As the pilot sites' work came to the end of the project, team leaders facilitated conversations about transitions, members' contributions and meaningful endings. We recognized that endings and transitions often can leave the persons involved feeling uncertain or ambivalent. Therefore, we approached transitions intentionally with clarity and care.



UNDERSTANDING THE ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

People engage in systems change in different ways and at different stages of their personal and professional journeys. Engagement is neither a one-size-fits-all process, nor is it static. Over time, many partners shift how they participate. They may move from personal storytelling to broader advocacy and, eventually, to leadership roles that leave space for others to rise.

The goal is not for partners to “move beyond” their lived experience but to honor its evolving role in shaping their insights, actions and leadership. Three broad levels describe how involvement may grow over time:

- » Everyone can show up and spread the word. Advocate and amplify within your networks. Make introductions and open doors. Share tools and resources that align with your current work.
- » Some may go deeper. Participate as a resource on authentic engagement in community learning sessions. Serve on panels, boards or committees focused on workforce education.
- » A few will lead the way. Facilitate or cofacilitate trainings. Manage projects or supervise teams. Serve as a consultant for innovation and systems-change efforts.



Practice Tip: Be aware of the stage of personal and professional growth that each team member has reached, and tailor support for that individual accordingly. Meeting people where they are, not where you expect them to be, makes long-term engagement with them possible.



In Practice: The NYEAC participated in a train-the-trainer training for a child welfare workforce. Facilitators for this training explained that not everyone would serve as a formal trainer but that all partners would have roles to play. Partners can share key messages, connect others to resources and apply learning in their day-to-day work. This approach allowed participants to engage in the training’s content in ways that fit their roles and to leave the session with practical strategies that they could use even after the project’s conclusion.



USING DATA TO STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS

Data helps to indicate whether a partnership is working. When used well, it provides insights into those who are engaged, whose input is shaping decisions and what is changing as a result of the work. It also helps to identify gaps, such as who isn't at the table that should be there, whose voice isn't resonating with other team members, when and where the work needs to shift.

Data becomes most useful when it reflects partners' experiences, is shared openly and is used to improve the work over time.

Careful review of data helps team members to do all of the following:

- » Stay grounded. Answer key questions: Are we making progress? For whom? How do we know?
- » Build trust and accountability. Show how team members' inputs are being applied. Document follow-through on commitments.
- » Support shared decision-making. Be well-informed during discussions, and reduce reliance on assumptions.
- » Improve the work. Track progress, identify challenges and make adjustments, as needed.
- » Show results. Clearly show outcomes. Share them with partners and other stakeholders.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Together, Decide What to Track

Work with partners to identify what matters and how to measure it. This may include tracking partners' participation and assessing whether team members feel heard and able to contribute.

Use Multiple Methods

To capture examples of lived experience as well as data, combine surveys and other tracking tools with focus groups, storytelling and interviews that provide those interviewed with opportunities to reflect. Consider conducting check-ins before and after engagement with partners to assess changes in each partner's degree of trust, sense of belonging and emergence of leadership skills.

Close the Loop

Share results. Make them clear and accessible, such as via community forums, visual summaries and participant feedback sessions. Be clear about how partners' inputs shaped decisions.

Use Data to Make Adjustments

Review information with partners. Then use the data to help identify next steps and to make changes together. Pair partners' stories with data to guide the way to meaningful improvements.

Recognize and Compensate Contributors

Compensate ILEx for their roles in data collection and review. Recognize their contributions across their roles in preparing reports, participating in meetings and delivering presentations.

Be Clear and Respectful Regarding Data Use

Explain in advance how information will be used and obtain consent before collecting narratives of personal experiences. Be thoughtful about how to share stories. Consider questions such as the following:

- » Who is shaping decisions?
- » Who is involved consistently? Who may be missing from the table?
- » Whose feedback is influencing decisions and improvements?

Acknowledge Progress

Regularly identify what has improved and what has been learned. Doing this helps to maintain engagement with team members, to build trust and to reinforce shared progress.



Practice Tip: Start small. A good evaluation needn't be complex or cumbersome. Begin with a single question; then build from there. Short, simple check-ins, such as debriefing after meetings, can provide useful insights and strengthen engagement over time.



In Practice: Staff at the QIC-EY pilot sites conducted brief surveys after meetings, tracked participation and periodically facilitated reflection sessions with individuals with lived experience to assess whether team members felt prepared, heard and able to influence decisions. The members of each site team reviewed findings, adjusted facilitation strategies, clarified decision-making roles and improved meeting materials. Over time, partners reported increased trust, clearer expectations and greater confidence that their inputs were being put to use.



Moving Forward: Next Steps

Attempting systems change can be challenging. Advocates for change may meet resistance, and the pace of progress may feel slow at times. Some colleagues may not yet see the value of this work. Some partners may approach it cautiously or skeptically because of their past experiences. This is part of the process.

As a resource, this primer covers a lot and presents some ideas more than once. This repetition is intentional; it reflects the complexity of the work.

The Partnership Primer is designed for use in practice. It is not just an explanation of theory. It prepares child welfare professionals, system leaders and individuals with lived experience to work in true partnership by building the mindsets, skills and structures needed for effective collaboration across roles and different life experiences.

Remember that placing partners with lived experience at the center seats of the table is not a onetime decision. It is reflected in everyday practice. That includes how relationships are built, how meetings are facilitated, how decisions are made and whose experience is drawn actively into the work.

Collaborating with persons who have lived experience also requires intentional preparation for child welfare professionals and system leaders so that they can work in true partnership with these individuals. Providing this preparation cannot be the responsibility of individuals alone; it also requires the support and reinforcement of the system.

A NOTE ON SUSTAINING YOURSELF

This work of facilitating partnerships is emotionally demanding. You navigate tension, provide time and space for difficult conversations and push against systems that resist change. You do all of this while working across power differences. Individuals with lived experience should not be asked to engage as partners without support. Likewise, you should not be expected to lead transformation in isolation.

Seek coaching, peer networks and supervision. Allot time for reflection and debriefing. Develop means of sharing leadership and infrastructure. Document processes. Arrange for rotating

facilitation roles and providing clear pathways for making transitions so the entire work does not rest on any one person's heroic efforts. Sustainability is not optional. It is central to achieving lasting partnerships and meaningful change.

Begin With What Is Already in Place

Meaningful change does not require doing everything at once. Start with what's already in place. Build from there.

Review and Revise

- » Revisit shared definitions. Does the team use a common language that reflects the work?
- » Observe meetings and participation. Who is contributing? Who is missing?
- » Clarify roles, expectations and decision-making processes.
- » Ensure that child welfare professionals have the training and the support needed to partner effectively, especially with individuals with lived experience.

Listen and Learn

- » Conduct a listening session with those most affected by the work.
- » Ask these questions: What feels respectful? What feels like checking a box? Act on the feedback heard from team members.
- » Reconnect with former partners. Consider how their transitions can support continued learning.

Final Considerations

Authentic engagement requires consistency and follow-through. When partners with lived experience participate meaningfully in the work, decisions are better, trust grows and outcomes improve.

This primer is a starting point. Use what is most relevant. Begin applying its principles in day-to-day practice.

Not everything will work the first time. That's okay. What matters is staying open to change, learning from what didn't resonate at first and keeping the work moving forward.

Strong systems are built with the people they serve. They are built through active listening, shared decision-making and ongoing collaboration. This is how change takes hold and lasts.

Additional Tools and Resources for a Deeper Dive

- » **Healing Guidebook**
<https://qic-ey.org/healing-guidebook>
- » **How Can Organizations Assess Their Readiness to Co-Design?**
<https://qic-ey.org/readiness-to-co-design>
- » **Agency Leadership Academy Assessment Tool**
<https://qic-ey.org/ala-assessment-tool>
- » **Power Mapping and Analysis**
<https://qic-ey.org/power-mapping>
- » **So You Want to Include a Lived Experience Expert**
<https://qic-ey.org/include-lee>
- » **Transformational Relationships for Youth Success**
<https://qic-ey.org/transformational-relationships>
- » **What Does It Mean to Value Youth Partners as Assets?**
<https://qic-ey.org/value-youth-partners>
- » **Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Viewing Young People as Organizational Assets**
<https://qic-ey.org/yeps>
- » **Youth Engagement Options Worksheet**
<https://qic-ey.org/yeow>
- » **QIC-EY Lessons Learned #10: Authentic engagement of children and youth is most powerful when policy and practice are brought to life by local leadership grounded in the realities of the communities they serve.**
<https://qic-ey.org/lesson-learned-10>
- » **QIC-EY Co-Creating a Team Charter**
<https://qic-ey.org/team-charter>
- » **QIC-EY Compensation Consideration**
<https://qic-ey.org/compensation-consideration>

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