



Family Leadership Survey and Focus Group Feedback

What Rhode Island Families Want Leaders to Know

2025

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Executive Summary

Family Leadership

Parent/Family leaders are individuals who use their lived experiences to drive positive change – in their families, communities, and at the state and national levels. By building on their knowledge and skills, they step into leadership roles across programs, agencies, and communities. As trusted advocates, they elevate the “parent voice,” shaping services and policies that better support families.¹

Background

To better understand the needs, challenges, and opportunities for family engagement, Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) conducted a survey in November 2024 and focus groups in January 2025.

The goals were to:

- **Identify** the types of engagement and leadership opportunities that families find most meaningful.
- **Learn** why families find it difficult to be part of the decision-making process within early childhood systems.²
- **Collect** suggestions for ways to better involve families in early childhood programs, healthcare, schools, and community support programs.

Demographics

In late 2024 and early 2025, we collected **179 online surveys** (English and Spanish) and held **4 virtual focus groups** (Spanish interpreter present) with a diverse group of 23 parents and caregivers.

We heard from families in over 25 cities and towns, including both English and Spanish speakers, mostly with children under age five.

Bottom Line: What Families Want Leaders to Do

Families across Rhode Island want to serve as partners and leaders. They want to contribute lived experiences as valued expertise to guide positive changes and outcomes for their families and communities and need leaders who approach families with a partnership mindset.

Families suggested ways to improve engagement by

- Sharing clear, simple information;
- Reaching out before events or decisions happen;
- Providing compensation, childcare and translated materials;
- Creating spaces where families feel safe to share, question and participate in decision-making;
- Being flexible about when and how families can engage; and
- Encouraging leadership opportunities for families.

“Policy makers need to create an open, safe environment to have people come forward and feeling comfortable in wanting to participate and share their stories.”

- Focus group participant

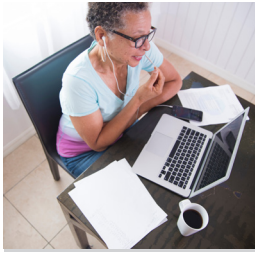
¹Source:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/resource/parent-leaders-are-vital-for-stronger-early-childhood-systems/>

²An early childhood system contains: Interdependent policies, programs, services, and infrastructure. All child- and family-serving systems—such as early learning, health, housing, economic development, and transportation.

Source: <https://buildinitiative.org/approach/early-childhood-system/>

What We Heard from Families



Families Want to Be Involved in Ways that Work for Them

Survey results show that families in Rhode Island are eager to be involved in their children's education and healthcare. The most common way that families said they want to get involved is through surveys. They also value receiving information about parent/family engagement, having opportunities to volunteer, attend training, and taking part in focus groups. Families want choice in how they engage - in person or online.

"I would like leaders themselves to be vulnerable and share what their family experiences have been."
- Focus group participant



Families Want Guidance and Outreach

Focus group participants shared what made their experiences with educators and health professionals positive and meaningful. Families shared that positive experiences come from

- Professionals who listen;
- Personalized guidance;
- Involvement in decision-making;
- Information on local resources and supports; and
- Follow-ups from system leaders and professionals.



Families Need Community and Connection

Families want safe, welcoming spaces to connect with others, including

- Parent groups and community building opportunities
- Workplace supports that acknowledges the dual roles of working parents/caregivers
- Support for healing, mental health, and personal growth



Families Are Ready to Lead

Many parents/caregivers are ready to learn how to lead and speak up for their families and communities. Survey respondents and focus group participants showed interest in joining

leadership training programs that would help them advocate for their children and communities. The most popular choice was a 3-hour storytelling workshop (in person or online).



Families Face Real Barriers

Even when families want to get involved, they face challenges like

- Not knowing where to find information;
- Managing commitments and life costs;
- Language barriers;
- Mental health struggles; and
- Lack of confidence or fear of speaking up.



Families Are Experiencing Success in Advocacy

Through the survey families shared that they have experienced more successes than challenges in advocacy.

"Meet us where we're at and seek understanding. Not all families are alike. Listen to each family and what they identify as their needs."
- Focus group participant

What We Heard About Key Systems

Pre-K Lottery	Families need faster updates about placements.
Head Start	Families praised engagement from staff and opportunities on the Policy Council but stressed the need to address a major teacher shortage causing closures of classrooms.
Child Care	Families want staff connections and daily insights about their child's day.
Child Care Assistance	Families are struggling to afford child care. Income eligibility guidelines for child care assistance needs to consider that families will still need support even with minimum wage increases.
Public Schools	Families want more information before enrollment, especially for kindergarten. There is a need for more centralized, public resources to help navigate school choices, enrollment and before/after school care as well as resources for summer. There is also a desire for schools to serve as safe spaces for community building, learning and healing.
Before/After School Care	Families expressed the need for affordable before and after-school care, especially for special needs students.
Pediatric Services	Families valued responsive and reassuring pediatricians but reported limited access in rural areas.
Family Services, Support	Families found meaningful support and resources from visiting programs like Healthy Families.
Early Intervention	Families valued timely referrals to EI services, which provided critical support for their children.
Behavioral Health	Families valued access to behavioral therapists but noted a lack of in-school resources, leaving families confused about alternative and out-of-district placements for neurodivergent students.
Mental Health	Families are strained from the stress of coordinating services, medication management for their children, addressing financial concerns, dealing with time constraints and advocating for their unique needs.