



Listen, Engage, and Reflect: How to Authentically and Respectfully Engage Individuals With Lived Expertise in Storytelling

This tip sheet was developed by Huyanna Clearwater, Jeremiah Donier, Alex Gaither, Michaela Guthrie, Marcella Middleton, Keri Richmond, and Dakota Roundtree-Swain. It reflects tips and strategies shared in the Power in Partnerships: Child Welfare Virtual Expo 2022 session “Listen, Engage, and Reflect: How to Authentically and Respectfully Engage Individuals With Lived Expertise in Storytelling.”

Tips for Authentic and Respectful Engagement

Storytelling is a powerful practice with deep cultural meaning. People with lived experience in child welfare are often asked to share their stories and, when these people engaged authentically and respectfully as partners for change, the storytelling process can be impactful and mutually beneficial.

Setting the Stage

The following concepts are crucial for professionals in child welfare and intersecting systems to understand prior to engaging people with lived experience in child welfare to share their stories.

- ▶ No one should be expected to share their story, and no one’s story should be shared without their explicit permission.
- ▶ All people with lived experience in child welfare have expertise that is crucial to meaningful systems change. It should be a choice—not an expectation—to participate in change efforts.
- ▶ Media portrayals of people with lived experience can often reinforce stereotypes and often do not reflect the reality of people’s experiences.
- ▶ People with lived experience should be viewed as intersectional and whole people. Their experiences are not limited to child welfare, nor does that experience define them.

Strategies for Authentic Engagement

Treating Stories—and the People Who Tell Them—With Respect

People with lived experience are often asked to share their personal trauma with others. Any opportunity to partner with someone to share their story requires thoughtful and respectful approaches that acknowledge the value of stories and the people who tell them.

- ▶ People have unique stories that represent a multitude of experiences and perspectives. There is no single story of lived experience.
- ▶ Stories should never be reshared without explicit permission each and every time.
- ▶ People with lived experience should never feel pressured to share their stories. A “no” should feel easy to give and should always be honored.
- ▶ People with lived experience should have the opportunity to tell their story authentically without feeling like certain elements are “cherry-picked” to build support for a project, policy, or agenda.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ How prepared are you to authentically engage people with a variety of perspectives, even if those perspectives challenge your own belief system?
- ▶ How prepared are you to ask for explicit permission each time before sharing someone’s story—and to honor their “no”?
- ▶ What do you need to approach people as a partner, ally, and co-conspirator instead of a savior?

Integrating Stories Into Change Efforts

People with lived experience are often brought into projects at a particular point in time as opposed to being fully integrated throughout a process. They may be asked to share their stories and their wisdom but may not be included in decision-making or even fully informed about the objectives or results of a change effort.

- ▶ Lived expertise is a vital component of planning for change.
- ▶ People with lived experience should be fully engaged as partners from the very beginning.
- ▶ Authentic engagement is relational as opposed to transactional.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ What needs to be in place for people with lived experience to be authentically engaged from the very beginning of your projects?
- ▶ How could lived expertise help in your efforts to advance racial equity?
- ▶ What skills and competencies are needed to ensure authentic, relational engagement of lived experts?

Growing Opportunities for Fair Compensation and Employment

People with lived experience are often asked to volunteer their time to share their stories and expertise, at great personal cost. Equitable compensation (on a par with what professional consultants are paid) and employment offer the opportunity for authentic integration of lived expertise.

- ▶ People with lived experience should be equitably and thoughtfully paid for their time.
- ▶ The power of stories and lived expertise should not be undervalued and should lead to level setting and power sharing.
- ▶ People with lived experience are valuable employees and leaders in this work.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ How can you secure adequate funding to support the integration of lived expertise throughout the lifespan of your project?
- ▶ What kinds of pathways to sustainable, paid positions for people with lived expertise exist within your agency? What steps could your agency take to fully integrate lived expertise into professional roles, including positions of leadership?

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