

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

Jamie Brooks Hello, I'm Jamie Brooks with the Capacity Building Center For States, cohost of *A Look Inside Sharing Power In Child Welfare*, a podcast series by and about people with lived experience in child welfare and about their partnerships with leaders within child welfare agencies, partnerships that are aimed at improving child welfare systems. You're about to hear the second half of my cohost, Tony Parsons' conversation with a young adult leader and an agency leader from Nevada. So if you didn't hear the first half, listen to episode 2 and then circle back. So here's Tony and his guests.

BREAK

Tony Parsons Hello everybody. My name is Tony Parsons. I am a young adult consultant for the Capacity Building Center for States. I'm gonna be your host for this afternoon. Or for this morning, or whenever you're listening. Welcome, enjoy, and thank you for joining us.

Judy Tudor I'm Judy Tudor. I am an Assistant Director for the Department of Family Services in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Madison Sandoval-Lunn I'm Madison Sandoval-Lunn. My pronouns are she/her. And I'm the Family and Youth Empowerment Program Area Manager at the Capacity Building Center for States.

Tony Parsons I want to shift discussions just a little bit. Talk about the population that we kind of— ignore is not the right word, but we don't think about them first when we talk about sharing power. And that's really the families. The parents. Right? Biological, birth, resource, foster. Whatever term you want to use for them. What considerations should the agencies be taking or people who are doing this work need to be taking when it comes to sharing power with them? I think that we talk a lot about sharing power with

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

young people. There's the Wong's Typology Pyramid, for example, when it comes to sharing power with people, but what does that need to look like when we're dealing with parents? Or families more generally? What does that look like? What does that need to look like for that to be successful?

Judy Tudor

I think in a lot of ways—and I like what you said, Tony, about the idea of trust and how trust is definitely needed and developed through power-sharing. And when you have that trust, I think that is when you can move to innovation. So, to me, that's a powerful piece of what happens when you are power-sharing. And I would say similarly for our work with parents. As I mentioned, it really does have to be a philosophy. If you are working with parents and you don't honor that expertise that they bring to the knowledge about their family, the knowledge about their children, the knowledge about their experience, then you're really not going to get anywhere. You're not gonna ultimately—you may address some surface symptoms, but you are not gonna ultimately get to a space where I can tell you what's really going on that can affect lasting change. And a lot of that is intentionally building trust because trust, I think, is something that can just happen over a period of time of people just being consistently and showing up. But I think there is also a way to be intentional about what are the things that I need to do. What is the behavior I need to exhibit to establish trust?

And I think it's, honestly, a challenge in child welfare because oftentimes, we are stretched so thin, we're not able to do the behaviors that really instill trust. So, if you call me and I don't have the information you're asking for, instead of calling you back and saying I got your call, I'm not sure. I'm working on it. They just don't call back until they have the information. And then a parent walks away from that interaction, feeling

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

like, “I’m not heard. I not listened to. They’re not responsive. They don’t care about what is going on.”

And the same thing can happen in those partnerships with parents where we’re inviting them to the table to share their experiences and to share information with us that can help us grow as a system. Sometimes I think it can be overwhelming because we think, “Well yeah. That would be great. I mean, we’d all like to do that, but how is that gonna happen?” Right? So, rather than responding to it or figuring out how we move things forward, people can shut down instead of really allowing people to feel heard. And try and look like, “OK, we may not be able to achieve the ultimate vision, but what are the steps that we can agree to take to continue to march in that direction?”

But I think a lot of it is similar to how we engage with young people. It’s about intentionally developing the trust that it will take to create those relationships where people feel like, again, it is authentic. And on the power-sharing that is happening, and that they are heard, and that we are following through with the things that we have heard. And that we are giving them an equal space at the table and not just— I think for me, always the concern when we talk about really engaging folks with lived experience, whether that be young people or families, is tokenizing. That we have them at the table to check a box to say that we have them at the table. But are we really doing that intentional work to develop the trust? To have that consistency? And to do the follow-through that’s necessary? And to be ready to hear? And to be ready to allow them to use the power that they are bringing to the situation?

Tony Parsons

Madison, do you have anything you want to add about when you work with families or anything like that? I mean, I think Judy did a fantastic job, but I’m curious from your

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

vantage point, having to provide technical assistance working with probably a lot of people, a lot of state organizations: What have you seen? What have you noticed?

Madison Sandoval-Lunn Well, I think when you're thinking about sharing power with families, whether it's at the systems level or case level, or peer level, I think Miss Judy covered a lot of the case-level engagement and trust-building. But I'm thinking about if I'm sharing power with someone as a paid professional or as a consultant. The many different ways that we might be thinking about sharing power with families. Whether they're serving as advisors or what have you, but I think that different family groups have different needs. And from my experience, working with foster and adoptive parents is around understanding that they're volunteering their time, their home. And oftentimes, they jump through a lot of barriers, real or perceived barriers, when they're working with systems, to be able to even help to open up a home, to receive children. And for good reasons, because we want to make sure that these children are entering safe homes if we're taking them away. We're removing children from what's perceived to be unsafe families. So, there's a unique dynamic there around the voluntary nature of how one is engaging with the system.

Whereas when I'm thinking about working with birth families or birth parents, it's completely involuntary. They did not ask for this. They did not want this. They do not want to lose their children. No one likes to be forced into compliance or policed in how they're— So, there's all of those dynamics that exist. So, even when I'm thinking about engaging a person who is a parent of a child who's in the system, I have to be mindful of that. And that differs from how I engage between a birth parent and a foster and

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

adoptive parent. And really understanding the nature of how they're involved with the system.

And then with kinship families, a whole other situation, which is both voluntary and involuntary, in that a lot of kinship families are caring for children on their own without any type of assistance with the child welfare agency, but often have to engage the child welfare agency because they need resources. And it's because it's hard for them to get resources. And yet, they've experienced all the stigmas that birth parents get, and they get all the barriers that foster and adoptive parents experience in even licensing their homes.

And for me, understanding those dynamics helps me kind of respond maybe more appropriately and kind of tailor how I might be engaging with a person. And how I might be talking to them about these unique experiences. So, when we lump families together, or parents or caregivers, together, we're not acknowledging the unique and distinct challenges that they experience. That is very different from a child or a young person who's grown up in the system, which is another power differential. Like, they have the least amount of power because they're not adults. They don't get to decide who they live with. And on the whole, trauma is constantly, in many ways, being done to them. It's not them who's doing it. So, I think about all of those considerations.

And I think a lot of it at the basic core principle is meeting people where they're at. Even if they perceive you as an adversary. Even if they perceive as the villain, right? Because that's stuff that they— And through relationship-building, every opportunity is an opportunity for potential repair, potential healing, and just the process of learning and unlearning because what might work for one person will not work for another person. So, I think people who are frontline workers and the people who are doing the work

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

have the hardest job. They are the most skillful people. They're doing this well. They're having to tailor every approach to every person. And I think it's just being mindful that it's gonna take time. So, I think it's important for people not to hold any bias or beliefs that they have about these different populations and just meet the person where they're at. And if a person tells you who they are, believe them. Not what you are trying to place a template on top of them because you've worked with hundreds of families, and you're an expert. And I think that that's when it creates these issues because trying to put people into the boxes that you think that they should be in, rather than having them tell you where they fit.

Tony Parsons

Yeah. That's great. I really appreciate you breaking down the different considerations between a biological family and a kinship family. I think without having some of that contextual knowledge, not just for them, but in general, I think that people kind of do this, I don't think wrong, but can do more harm than they might be imagining they're doing. And so, I do appreciate that you drew that out.

And I kind of want to dig a little bit deeper about that. What advice would you guys give to people who think... because I can already see someone in the comments going, "Oh, I tried power-sharing, and nothing's changed." This work is hard. This work does require you to think differently. It does require context. What advice do you have to organizations who said that I've tried power-sharing, I didn't notice the shift in how we did things? What would you say to that?

Madison Sandoval-Lunn

I like sarcastic answers, which is like, try to lose 20 pounds in a night and see how that works for you. You know, change is slow. It's painful. It requires daily, regular,

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

mindful habits. It's exhausting. It's not about losing weight, but that seems like a relatable thing to most people. Is that we try all the time to change, and we're always changing as humans. And that understanding the process of change is scientific a little. There's the contemplation, precontemplation. There's understanding what the cycle of change is will help you understand why change may be slower.

But also, for me, my desire for somebody else to change is not the place to start. I have to change myself. So, I might need to think about what is it that I'm expecting of this person has to do or should do that I need to change? What's the serenity prayer? I'm pretty sure someone on this call knows the serenity prayer. Right?

And it's just really about understanding what's within your locus of control. So, if I'm a frontline staff person, I might not be able to get this parent to work fast enough to reunify because I haven't really considered all the context. But what can I do today to start unpacking beliefs about the person? What do they believe of themselves? What are the challenges that they're feeling that are real or perceived? And then how do we work through those things? And a lot of that requires time. It requires patience. It requires consistency. All of these things are fundamental values of building trust too. Right?

And that change is really slow, and not always the people that are closest are always gonna see the change happen overnight. Sometimes it's like a gap. It's like, they're losing the weight. Sometimes it takes some time to see that push. And it's like, oh, it's very visible. But the person that you see every single day, you're not gonna see that change as visible because you're working really closely with them. So, it's just being very mindful of that. And then, at the systems level, if we're talking about systems change, I mean, just in looking at how system change is incremental. And this is actually Amy

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

Jaffe(ph.), one of the managers taught me this when I was like 18. Because I was so frustrated because everything, I was advocating for made sense. I'm like this should happen overnight. This should happen today. The minute I'm talking about it, it should be happening. Right? And Amy, being a public administration major, explained to me that change is incremental and that I have to start making a way. You know, you can't eat a mountain in a night. So, you got to just start slowly chip away. And, with more people, with more support structures that you put things around, like a family, the more people are helping to chip away at the mountain of barriers. Like, if I'm doing this all by— I cannot be everything to everybody, but as I grow the team who is supporting this person, the more likely we're gonna be effective in creating that change together.

Judy Tudor

Yeah. I would agree. I would invite that person to really examine where they're at in the stage of change because it absolutely is a process. So, it may feel like nothing has changed, but that just may be because you are at the beginning stages of change. And oftentimes, in the change process, when we start to feel uncomfortable with whatever that change is, we revert back to that's how it always was. "That doesn't seem to be working. I'll just go back to the way that it's been happening." And there's comfort in that. Also, I think sometimes, when we are in the change process, we start to understand what we will lose as part of the change. And that brings up some grief and loss that we may not even be realizing is happening that can interfere with us moving forward in the change.

And then lastly, I would think from my perspective maybe it looks like nothing is changing, but have I heard from the people that I've invited to the table? Because from their perspective, it may feel like actually, I feel like we are moving forward, and we are

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

getting somewhere. I may not see it in the bigger system that I'm working in, but they may be experiencing a change that I haven't realized. So, I would invite them to really look at where are you really at in the stage of change. You may feel like you've done all the things, but you may still really just be in preparation for change before you've even actually taken action. And then also, not only stepping back and observing that from your point of view but getting others' points of view as well into that process. And not be misinformed just by those stages of change that you have to go through. Being uncomfortable, dealing with loss. To think that the changes isn't happening, those may just be those beginning stages as you start to actually break through and see the change really come into fruition.

Tony Parsons

Yeah, Judy, I really liked that piece. This idea that this is going to be uncomfortable. You both mentioned that it's uncomfortable, but Judy, I think you said there's some grief and loss that has to come with some of this. We have say goodbye to a system that we thought was working. You have to say goodbye to a system and practice that feels comfortable and good to us. I think as individuals, we don't always like to feel uncomfortable. But I mean, that's how growth happens, right? And as someone, Madison, I like the weight loss analogy you had. This doesn't happen overnight. You're not gonna see the change when you're here every day. As someone myself, who's lost 115 pounds, there are still days when I look in the mirror, and I still think I see the guy who was 350. I think that's a great analogy for how this is gonna look. You're not gonna see it all at once, but six, seven, eight months, a year later, you're like, "Oh, I've made significant strides."

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

And the same is true with the child welfare system. I think of when I started doing this work eight years ago, just to see where the system has gone since 2014 to now, in the grand scheme of things, it's not that great. But I definitely seen it over time. I think that if we start to adopt this over time kind of view and do that intentional CQI to be like, is this still working? What do we need to change? Because if it's not, I hope that we're gonna start to see the system's agencies at the federal, state, and local level start to make some of those incremental changes. Because over time, small steps get us through that marathon.

I just wanna finish this with some final thoughts. I mean, if you guys can wave a magic wand today, what is the one thing you would change about how we operate as a system?

Judy Tudor

That's a hard question. It's a hard question, not because what would change, but there are so many things that I would change. I think one maybe—I'll take it from this perspective—I think maybe small thing I think we could do a better job of in child welfare—and this is gonna sound kind of simple and silly, but it really is to listen. We get so caught up in everything that we're doing and all the things we have to do. Especially post-COVID. Like meeting fatigue. Like all those things that we have to do that are task-oriented that we don't stop to really listen to what people are saying. And not just listening with our ears, but listening with our eyes. The verbal and the nonverbal communication. Like if we paused and were mindful to really listen to what people were saying, and heard what families were saying, heard what youth we're working with were saying, I think we would respond in a different way. If we weren't sitting across the table from someone really thinking about "What's next on my schedule? What information do

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

I need to gather from them to make these decisions to meet these timelines?" But really, just listened about how they are experiencing life in the system. I think it could be really life-changing to the life of the system.

Because I think we have created a system that doesn't give people just that space to really hear from the people that are most impacted by the system. So, whether that is at a case level, whether that's at a systems level, I think we've gotten away from really just intentionally listening to how people are experiencing our system. And then, by listening to that, really carrying that work forward. And/or ensuring that we're using our power to make sure that other people who are in other places of power can hear those experiences to really be able to make the change that is necessary overall for our system.

So, that's what I've got. I could talk for days about other wishes. So, if you find the genie that can give those out, I'd be happy to talk to them as well.

Tony Parsons

If I find that genie, I'll be the first to let you know. I have a couple wishes too. Child welfare and otherwise. I wish I had my afro back because I used to have one. It was beautiful. So, Madison, what is your one wish if you could wave a magic wand, find a genie, get fairy godparents, whatever? What would you do?

Madison Sandoval-Lunn

I think if I had one wish we need to care for one another, love one another. And that seems just as simple as Miss Judy's "listen," but I think at my heart, I think one of the reasons why our system is so broken is I don't think that we care enough about the people in our community. And I think people care. But only to the extent that it affects them. I think it comes from individualistic belief systems and the belief system of a

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

meritocracy. Those who work the hardest and do the best get all the things, and in reality, many people are being oppressed. Many people are being harmed. And that I wish that we did.

As we are being lifted up, and for me, being lifted up and out of growing up in poverty and being in the position that I'm in today. Try to bring other people along with you. And as many as possible, so that our reach is exponential and that impact is more exponential. And so, that's what I mean by the whole caring for one another. Not trying to cause more harm to our community and our people. And not to say that there's an "us versus them." I'm talking about the collective we, the collective our, the collective. I'm kind of visiting and revisiting concepts of transformative justice. Like thinking about that's very community-driven, and it's around how communities have been harmed. And that's people harm each other. Like, hurt people hurt people. And so that we need to figure out ways to heal our people and heal our community so that we don't have to be in those situations, where our kids are being hurt physically or otherwise. Or we're taking care of our people so that people have the basic needs to care for their children. When we have so many resources that are available. So, it's just about all of these pieces, and what's in it for me is that as our nation gets healthier and we're more happy and more well, the better we're all off collectively. And that's a big wish. But I wish that we're caring more for one another.

Tony Parsons

Hey, it's a good wish, though. I mean, I think those are both great wishes. And you heard it here, folks. I mean, we talked about a lot of things this afternoon, today, this morning. Whenever you're listening. We talked about a lot of things. We need to listen, and we need to care authentically. Not just to respond. We need to do it in a way that moves

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

that needle forward. We need to understand this process is hard. And it's gonna be uncomfortable. You're gonna feel crunchy, as I like to say it, but keep going. Slow and steady does win this race eventually. And we will win this race if we're walking it together. Remember, context matters. When we're working with young people, when you're working with families, understanding that they are the experts in their own lives. And if we go in there with the expectation that they also know what they're talking about and that they're going to be equitable partners, we will all get better together. I just want to thank Judy, and I want to thank Madison for hanging out with me today. I'm sure we could talk for many hours because they're both great advocates, administrators, leaders, but I want to thank you all for joining us this afternoon. This morning. Whenever you're listening. And know that there's a place for you to do this work. And we hope you'll join us for our next episode. Thanks.

Judy Tudor

Yeah, this was great. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

BREAK

Jamie Brooks

Hi Tony,

Tony Parsons

Hey Jamie,

Jamie Brooks

Great conversation! I loved hearing about the importance of trust and how building trust intentionally is really important. And may not just happen naturally, that you really have to you know, do things to work toward that and also thinking about change and

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

how slow and painful, sometimes it can be but really staying the course and you know the changes will happen over time. What stays with you from the conversation?

Tony Parsons

Yeah, I mean, so additionally to those points, I mean, one of the bigger things that really stayed with me. It was like we have to listen to people that we're working with right when we're power-sharing. It's great that we'll be like, "Oh, yeah, I heard that but then like really listening is like I'm gonna act on what you're telling me." Right? And so that's so huge to me because I don't think we do a good job of that. I also think that we get so confined to what they call "boxes," right? Like, this has got to be the way it looks like you know, and so being understanding like power sharing is not gonna be what we think it is. Typically it's better, right? And so just being open to that, it can be or what it could be rather than what we think it should be because you know, we might have the credentials on the degrees, but we're not experts in this. We're all still kind of learning as we do this work and so being open and honest with the people that we're working with to do that work are really some things that like I'm gonna take away from that conversation. But a little birdie tells me that you are gonna interview some folks in our next episode. So what can our friends in the audience expect to hear in that one?

Jamie Brooks

Thanks, Tony I'm really excited. I'm gonna be talking to some parent leaders from New Hampshire and some agency folks there that have supported their work over the last decade or so, so really excited to be talking to them.

Tony Parsons

Awesome. I definitely look forward to hearing more about that and yeah, so we were just in Nevada. Now we're going. New Hampshire my friend. We are coastal, and so, if

A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare- Episode 3: Listening and Building Trust

you like to hear what we're doing on no matter where we are in the country, give us a like, give us a follow, and wherever you listen to podcasts and stay tuned because we're just getting started.

Betsy Learner

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