

Building Partnerships with Lived Experience Experts: Authentic Engagement



Who Are Lived Experience Experts?

Lived experience experts are people who have previously or are currently receiving DCF services. They possess invaluable knowledge and insight from this first-hand experience that is needed to create meaningful change and promote positive outcomes. Whether you are a staff member working directly with families or are working at the program- or system-level, you can build genuine partnerships with lived experience experts, most importantly by having a mindset that fosters authentic engagement.

What is Authentic Engagement at DCF?

At its core, authentic engagement is about working in ways that build trust, break down barriers, and promote true collaboration. The following **Core Values** of authentic engagement are the foundation for developing trusting relationships and sharing power between people in staff roles and people who are lived experience experts (acknowledging some people hold both identities). The **Guiding Principles** of authentic engagement below describe how we can actively live these values in our work.



The Core Values & Guiding Principles of Authentic Engagement

Respect: Honoring the humanity, perspective, and wisdom of each person.	Dignity: Demonstrate respect through kindness, intentionality, and unconditional positive regard. Humility: Acknowledge our own limitations and opportunities for growth, show empathy, and value varied perspectives.
Integrity: Being trustworthy and consistent in words and actions by honoring commitments and upholding ethical responsibilities.	Dependability: Be reliable and follow through on agreements and activities. Accountability: Hold oneself and systems accountable for actions and decisions, acknowledging mistakes and working collaboratively to address them.
Transparency: Being clear, straightforward, and respectful in communication, using shared language and providing context to build understanding.	Honesty: Be honest in communication by acknowledging limitations and constraints while working towards mutually agreed upon, beneficial outcomes. Information-Sharing: Ensure information is shared regularly and maintain feedback loops so that everyone has the tools, clarity, and support needed to feel valued, heard, and able to fully participate.
Flexibility: Being adaptable and open to different perspectives and solutions, recognizing that one size does not fit all.	Responsiveness: Modify approaches based on new information or feedback, such as by adapting timelines and expectations based on the unique needs and insights of people with lived experience. Openness: Encourage all contributions, demonstrate openness to new ideas, allow others to lead, and find comfort with uncertainty. Use practices that promote connection, empowerment, and active involvement for all people.
Belonging: Ensuring people feel secure and supported as an important member of a group. Having a sense of acceptance and identity.	Self-Reflection: Engage in regular self-reflection and self-awareness practices to examine and address personal beliefs and assumptions. Humane Practice: Address power imbalances and actively work against bias.

Strategies for Authentic Engagement

Based on the **Four Key Pillars of Authentic Engagement**, this infographic provides practical strategies for authentic engagement and co-design with lived experience experts.



Sharing Power

- Be transparent about processes, limitations, and non-negotiables.
- Acknowledge power imbalances and cede power by using intentional co-facilitation techniques.
- Create proactive opportunities to identify and address the priorities of people who have lived experience.
- Collectively develop working agreements and make as many decisions as possible in collaboration.

Prioritizing People with Lived Experience

- Break down tangible barriers for participation, such as transportation and childcare.
- Be flexible when scheduling meetings and events to increase access.
- Address differences in technology access and skills.
- Provide updates on project progress and share meeting minutes.

Creating Physical and Psychological Safety

- Build rapport before diving into formal work.
- Communicate potential risks ahead.
- Facilitate safe, trauma-informed, healing centered spaces.
 - Ensure meeting spaces are welcoming and free from judgment.



Equipping Everyone to Fully Engage

- Address knowledge gaps to ensure everyone has the same context and information.
- Skip acronyms and ensure language used is relatable and understood by everyone.
- Offer multiple ways for participation, using virtual, in-person, and written communication.
- Hold prep meetings to increase confidence and support before meetings.

Adapted from the [Four Key Pillars of Authentic Engagement](#) by Casey Family Programs and ChiByDesign.