

# PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING AND CENTERING PARENT VOICE



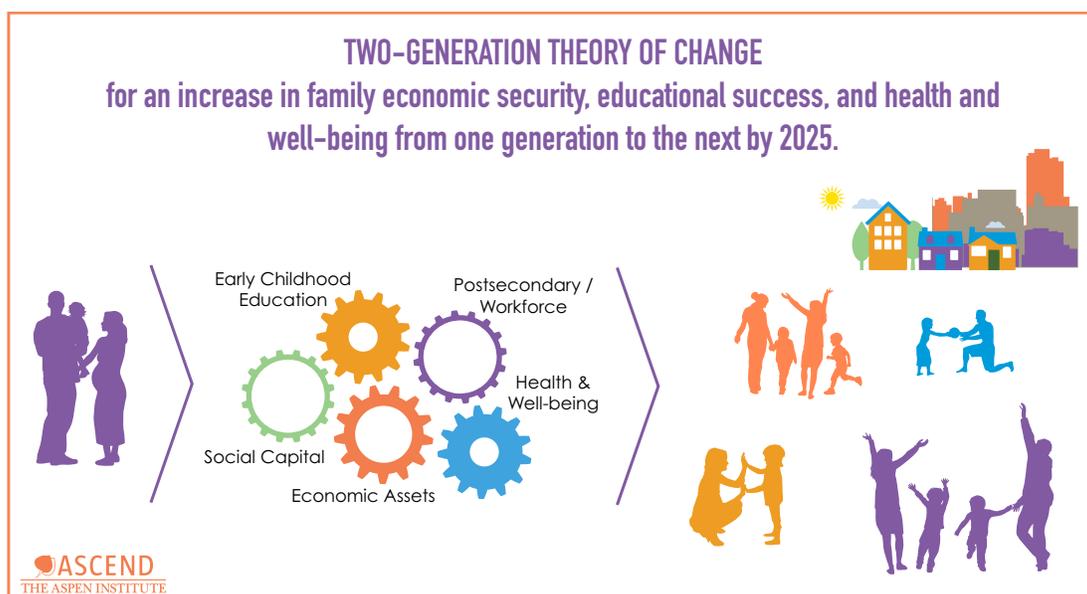
# INTRODUCTION

**The Ascend 2Gen Theory of Change states that strong policy and systems change are best achieved through a combination of family voice and expertise; data, research, and evidence; and best and promising practices.** Centering parent voices is key to informing systems change and ensuring strong outcomes for 2Gen programs and policies.

Over the last decade, Ascend has worked with and learned from more than 50 parents across the country. Our learnings have demonstrated the importance of intentionality when lifting and centering parent perspectives, as well as connecting with parents themselves to gain their expertise and knowledge. From this journey, we developed a set of principles intended to guide interactions with parents and create the best possible conditions to work with parents and center their voices in 2Gen programs, policies, systems, and research.

These principles were informed by parents through both feedback the Ascend team has gathered during our years of partnering with families, as well as parent leadership roles at Ascend convenings and webinars. This feedback focuses on how Ascend can continuously improve partnerships with parents and how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can be more deliberate in their own parent engagement efforts.

Ascend is grateful to our parent reviewers — Amber Angel, Drayton Jackson, and Janine McMahon — who have been longtime partners in our work and essential to the success of many of our initiatives, including this effort to capture principles. This overview is part of a more comprehensive toolkit on centering parent perspectives and expertise that Ascend will be releasing in the coming months.



# 8 PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING AND CENTERING PARENT VOICES

## I. ENGAGE PARENTS AS EXPERTS

Parents have the clearest perspective of what families need. They know better than anyone how and why family-supportive programs and policies fall short, and what changes can be made to improve program and policy outcomes. This expertise derived from their lived experience gives parents a deeper understanding of the challenges presented by some policies and practices and is an essential perspective for any program or policy that affects families. Parents deserve a market-rate stipend for their time and unique expertise, whether as reviewers of a report or participants in a convening. Like any other expert, they also need relevant resources and background, such as guidance on an agenda, so they can understand the matter being discussed and prepare to give thoughtful responses to questions. It is useful to also provide time and space for parents to ask questions and share feedback in a supportive space, free of judgment, if they do not have an opinion or perspective on something outside their area of knowledge.

**“I don’t just want to be a voice. I want to be part of the action.”**

- Ebony Beals, parent, business owner, Springboard to Opportunities participant

## II. ENSURE EQUITY

Structural barriers such as labor market discrimination and lack of access to educational and economic opportunities disproportionately affect communities of color. As a result, while families of a wide range of geographies, education levels, and racial and ethnic backgrounds<sup>1</sup> have faced economic insecurity, communities of color have been most affected. Organizations are encouraged to show the diversity of the families that face hardships and work to address them without reinforcing stereotypes for one community over the other in convenings, as members of advisory groups, as experts in materials, and as the faces of publications. Additionally, it is vital to consider other ways to increase equity by engaging families that represent diversity in family structure, status, ability, and geographic origin.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau - Poverty Rate and Percentage Point Change by Selected Characteristics: People (2018) <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2019/demo/p60-266/Figure8.pdf>

### III. PARTNER WITH PARENTS

Building a partnership with parents is necessary for authentic engagement and centering of parent voices throughout program and policy design, implementation, and assessment. Partnerships develop when parents are not just asked to provide their opinions but also given leadership opportunities and decision-making power. Partnerships can be fostered by ensuring leadership roles for parents and providing support for them before, during, and after the engagement. Authentic partnerships include developing mechanisms to get feedback from parents, as well as building an internal culture equipped to make changes based on that feedback (such as shifts in messages or policies and including transparency around how or why a change may not take place). These partnerships require dedicated investments in activities with parents and staff capacity for this work.

### IV. FOSTER PARENT SAFETY, AUTHENTICITY, AND AUTONOMY

Parents feeling honored, respected, and heard is an outcome of this work that we all seek to achieve. Parents express to Ascend a strong desire for autonomy, which includes respect for their expertise and the provision of spaces to be heard and honored. Support parents as they think about how to tell their story, but do not censor them. Avoid using language that could make them feel negatively about what they have been through or how those experiences have shaped their lives and the lives of their families. For example, practice reflective questioning instead of declarative statements about a parent's experience. Encourage them to voice their opinions but be creative about how to do this. Identify ways for parents who identify as introverts to share their thoughts if they do not feel comfortable sharing out loud – like providing note cards and assigning someone else, approved by the parent, to read them out loud. Additionally, if the room includes people who are not parents, be mindful of how the demographics of an audience and the existing power dynamics can affect parents. It is unwelcoming and disempowering for parents to enter a room as the person bringing the perspective of lived experiences in a room full of people of privilege. Ensure the demographics of those in the room are reflective of the community you serve. Also, consider working with multiple parents to foster a feeling of safety and support. Be sure to check in privately with them on a regular basis to ensure they feel comfortable and respected.

### V. PRIORITIZE SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is considered by Ascend to be the “secret sauce” of the 2Gen approach. It manifests itself as increased peer support and a sense of community; connections to family, friends, and neighbors; participation in community and faith-based organizations; school and workplace outreach; leadership and professional development programs; engagement with case managers or career coaches; and other social networks such as cohort models and learning communities. Such support appears to be a powerful success factor in programs that help families in moving toward economic security. When engaging with Ascend or other organizations, parents have an opportunity to make connections with others in the room, participate in conversations, and ask questions. In addition to forming social capital while engaging with parents, it is useful for organizations to keep in touch with the parents they work with to connect them to future work, resources, networks, and other opportunities.

## VI. COMPENSATE PARENTS APPROPRIATELY

Like an expert on economics or public health, parents are “contextual experts” about how programs and policies play out for their family and in their community. It is important that practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and funders compensate parents for their expertise. Parents take time off from work and rearrange family time to be thought partners; their time and expertise deserves appropriate compensation. When providing a stipend, organizations should first consider the actual time (hours and/or days) parents will spend providing expertise. Additionally, stipend amounts should compensate parents for any out-of-pocket costs and be determined through analysis of local market costs for child care and the local living wage rate. Organizations are encouraged to be transparent with parents about their compensation model and consult their finance department to explore the best provision of the stipend to ensure compliance with tax laws. Through this approach, parents are appropriately compensated financially for their time and recommendations, and organizations ensure that they are modeling how to value parent voices and their expertise.

## VII. CULTIVATE LEARNING AND EVALUATION

To engage and center parents, organizations need solid capacity to conduct outreach, identify parent participants and leaders, adjust organizational culture to support and center parents, and evaluate these initiatives and efforts. Organizations can document their efforts with parents to create a knowledge base that can be transferred from team member to team member working with parents. They can also dedicate resources to training staff on the best way to support parents while prioritizing the parent's development without falling into paternalistic patterns. The organization may also evaluate their efforts by soliciting feedback from families, documenting this feedback, and adjusting programming accordingly. In this learning journey, it is also important to develop strong feedback loops and inform parents about these evaluation efforts and the measures taken as a result of their contributions.

## VIII. THANK AND RECOGNIZE PARENTS

Express gratitude and appreciation to parents for their work and recognize their contributions publicly. Parents contribute a great deal of expertise to the 2Gen field. Consider highlighting processes involving parents in newsletters or on the organization's website through a parent partner section that highlights information about the parents and ways in which they contributed. If they provided feedback to a publication, be sure to acknowledge them in the publication itself, and if they spoke at a convening, include their headshot and bio in the program as you would for any other speaker. This recognition demonstrates the equitable inclusion of parents as experts, and establishes a public track record of their leadership, which they can use for future professional opportunities.

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*The Principles for Engaging and Centering Parent Voice are part of Ascend's Parent Voice Toolkit, which will be released before the end of 2020. In this toolkit, readers will find the principles that guide our work with parents; guidance on how to engage parents as authentic partners; and perspectives from parents themselves. For more information on this toolkit, please contact Eddy Encinales at [eddy.encinales@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eddy.encinales@aspeninstitute.org).*