

# Parent Partners: Resources for Individuals, Teams and Systems

By Lexi Ivers

The removal of children from their caregivers is often a painful, traumatic experience. Reunification with parents or primary caregivers is both the most common goal and the most common outcome for youth in out-of-home care. Across the country, birth parents, foster parents and child welfare professionals alike are working towards reunification and improving the transition process. Many courts and child welfare agencies are turning to parents who have previous system involvement to provide mentoring and guidance to parents entering the system. Commonly known as *parent partner*, *parent mentor* and *parent ally programs*, this approach has emerged nationwide as a powerful tool for family empowerment and engagement. For National Reunification Month 2018, the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law spoke with parent partners and program administrators both to better understand its benefits for reunification, and to provide tips for practitioners seeking to design and implement parent partner programs in their communities.

## As Coach and Mentor

Parents who have lost custody of their children often are mistrustful of child welfare professionals. Denise Moore, who currently serves as the Des Moines Parent Partner Program Coordinator, recalled feeling "terrified, confused and alone" when her five children were removed. None of the professionals around her understood her pain, yet they all expected her to complete many tasks to reunify with her children. Today, she speaks locally and nationally about the importance of integrating birth parents into child welfare system practice and policy.



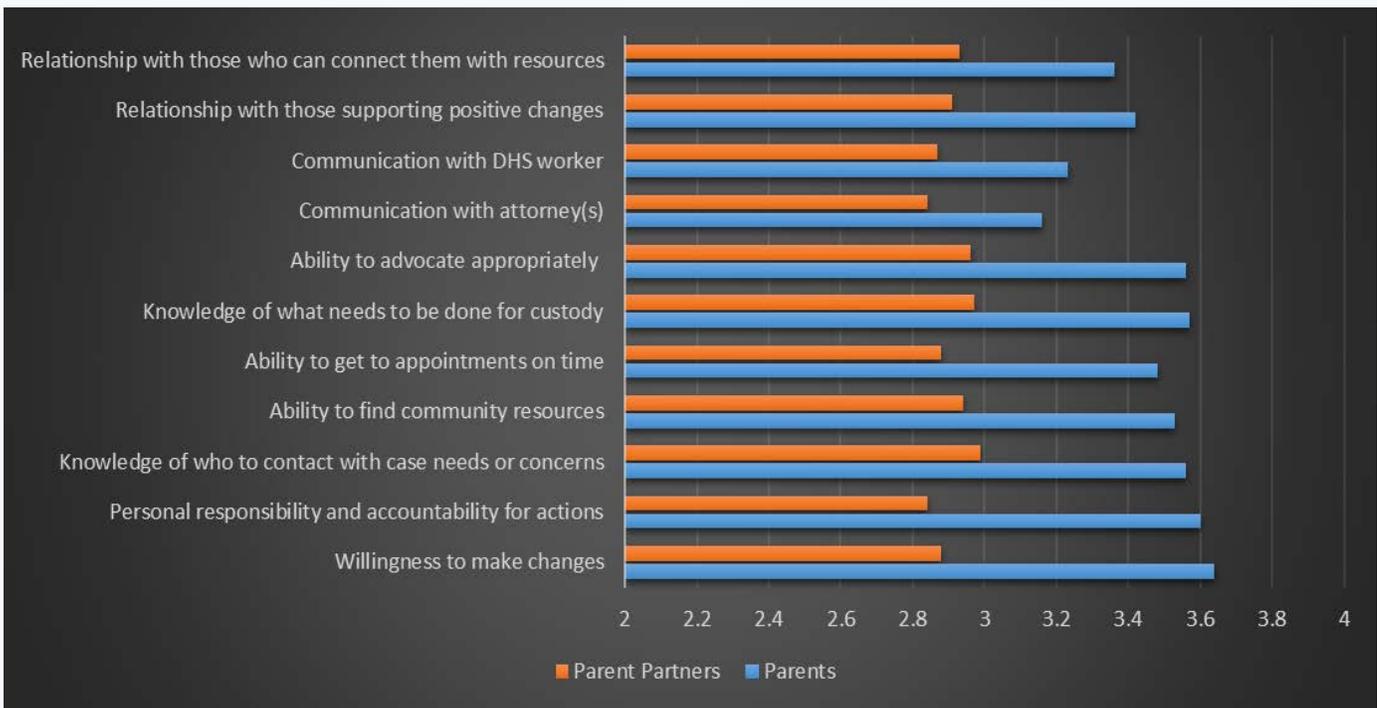
She works so no parent must experience the confusion and isolation she felt while navigating the child welfare system. Her commitment to supporting birth parents is evidenced by her work as a master trainer for the “Building A Better Future” curriculum. She has assisted in the development of various curricula for the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, such as the “Working With Parents” curriculum and she is a trainer for the association’s “Breaking Barriers: Working Effectively with Birth Families” curriculum. Both are designed to help improve interactions with birth parents in support of reunification.

When asked about the value of parent partners in one on one mentoring roles, Moore shared the following four benefits:

1. The ability to translate the traumatic and confusing child welfare system into easily understandable terms.
2. Providing practical tips, tools and strategies for parents to overcome challenging circumstances.
3. Connecting parents with resources in a personal way.
4. Serving as an example of hope when reunification seems impossible.

Moore and the entire Iowa Parent Partner Program, which now exists in all 99 counties in the state, mentored and supported 2,096 parents in the 2016-2017 fiscal year alone. 332 of those parents completed family self-assessments upon exiting the program. An analysis of those assessments revealed that with the assistance of Parent Partners, parents feel more supported in their cases. The chart below (Figure 1) represents average levels of improvement in program areas based on the responses from Parents and Parent Partners. Parents viewed that they had improved more than the Parent Partners viewed parents improving on all items. Based on the parents’ responses alone, it is clear that Moore and the Iowa Parent Partner Program are helping parents develop the interpersonal skills and practical knowledge necessary for successful reunification.





(Figure 1) Family Outcomes: Results Compared Between Parents and Parent Partners from Iowa Parent Partner Program’s 2017 Annual Report

Like Denise Moore and her work with the Iowa Partner Program, Toni Miner supports and advocates for families with addiction and child welfare system involvement in Colorado. She sees avid support and trust as major benefits provided by parent partners. She spoke with us about the difficulty many parents still have discussing their struggles, but she also sees that families have less trouble sharing once bonds of trust have been established between parents and staff.

Whether it is comforting a birth parent during a family engagement meeting, helping birth parents get school supplies or even just talking with a parent who does not want to be alone, Toni provides critical support for parents when it feels like the rest of the world is against them.



“Parents walk into family serving institutions and instantly feel like they don’t belong. Most parents say they feel judged even when they are trying to do positive things like going to therapy or attending school meetings. When parents have someone who can give them advice on how to deal with their guilt and discomfort, they are more likely to complete their case plan and reunification happens much faster.”

Parent empowerment undergirds all parent partner work. Toni Miner discusses the need for the child welfare system to give parents more power in their cases. “Parents should be involved in creating their own cases.” Parent partners can help encourage parents to ask questions when they do not understand something. Many parent partner programs provide informational handbooks for parents, which explain important processes, outline parent rights and answer frequently asked questions. When parents are confident and equipped with system knowledge, they can more easily and more effectively advocate for themselves.

### **Building Partnerships**

While peer support for system involved parents has been proven to improve reunification permanency placements<sup>1</sup>, many professionals fail to substantively incorporate birth parents in decision-making processes. Some of the parent partners we interviewed recalled instances when organizational representatives were not open to having birth parents share their perspective. In his work as a family engagement consultant in Florida, Corey Best fights to ensure the parent voice is never overshadowed.

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<sup>1</sup> Berrick, J D., Cohen, E., & Anthony, E. (2011). Partnering with parents: Promising approaches to improve reunification outcomes for children in foster care. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 11(1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol11/iss1/14>

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Corey Best, Family Engagement Consultant

On the importance of recognizing parents as experts in child welfare, Mr. Best notes the value of acknowledging and addressing power dynamics. He notes, “the power is power over, not shared power, and the more shared power, the more likely parents are to engage. It should always be viewed as an equal partnership for the best interest of the

parents and the child.” Best describes his experience having had his child removed while he was incarcerated and credits his “lived experiences and working in partnership with the system” as a factor that qualifies him to cultivate, train and model parent leaders. Best challenges child welfare professionals to integrate training that address biases and their impact on decision-making. He uses his own experience navigating the criminal and child welfare systems as a Black male to call attention to the stigma associated with substance abuse, the stigma associated with single fathers and anti-Blackness. He works to educate judges, lawyers, social workers and other child welfare professionals on the drivers of disparities in child removal and reunification rates.

The most effective reunification efforts, according to Best, require building strong partnerships between birth parents, parent partners, social workers and attorneys. A critical framework for partnerships is the focus on family strengths and needs. He describes parent partners as “the buffer between the court, systems and parents.” Parent partners often can understand and address the stigma and judgment associated with many parents’ experiences. The best partnerships, according to Best, work when all parties can express their expectations, challenges and concerns at each stage of the process.



Parent partners also bridge the gap between the agency and parents by clarifying agency concerns about child safety and case requirements. Most importantly, Best adds, to be sure to treat parents with respect and professionalism. He notes parents in the child welfare system are not always treated with professional courtesy. If you're unable to make a meeting with a parent, the parents should be contacted. Too often parents are blown off and treated as an afterthought. Parent partners can help parents feel more comfortable in spaces that are often sources of trauma or fear. They help parents feel like they belong and their input is valued.

In addition to support for system involved parents, Best also shares how parent partners provide integral support for case workers. Parent partners support the efforts of caseworkers who are often balancing large caseloads of complex cases and feeling the pressures of limited agency resources. Parent partners support caseworkers by helping them achieve more productive and sensitive interpretations of the patterns, behaviors, and needs of families. By gaining parents' trust, parent partner programs also strengthen other ongoing family engagement initiatives (such as family group decision-making or solution-based casework) which are heavily reliant on parent buy in.

### **Parent Partners at the System Level**

In addition to assisting at the case level, parent partners are integral for systemic reform efforts. Parent partners serve on advisory committees, contribute to policy development, facilitate trainings, and speak in a variety of government and community settings. In rejecting the old child welfare paradigm that regarded families solely as service recipients, parent partners help to establish parents' expertise on family needs, and demonstrate the importance of the parent voice. Each of the parent partners we interviewed serves in many advocacy positions both at the local and national level.

We spoke with 2012 Reunification Hero Alise Hegle, who in addition to serving as a parent partner, works as the Advocacy Lead at the Children’s Home Society of Washington. She regularly meets with state and national legislative staff, she serves on a variety of child welfare committees and task forces and she works to spread Washington’s parent partner model across the country. Additionally, she serves on national, state and local committees to include Children’s Administration’s Children, Youth and Family Services Advisory Committee and the Birth Parent National Network. She has provided leadership in the passage of key legislation for children and families in her home state of Washington. Her background of prior homelessness, criminal and child welfare system involvement, lends a nuanced perspective of systemic barriers that impede families’ success and help to enrich her system advocacy efforts. A part of her work at the Children’s Home Society of Washington includes coordinating the Washington State Parent Ally Committee, an association of Parent Allies, who have successfully navigated the child welfare system and work to improve outcomes for families with current system involvement. In the last seven years, the Committee has helped to ensure the passage of over 20 state laws and budget reforms and hosted many trainings to help support reunification efforts. At the heart of her work, Hegle shares is “relationships, trust and respect. We have to reduce the punitive aspects of the child welfare system.” She continues, commenting on the role of parent partners, “we model that people can change. We demonstrate the importance of asking families what they need and giving them the necessary supports.” Alise Hegle and the Washington State Parent Ally Committee are one of many parent partner organizations doing this work.



We also spoke with Meryl Levine, a Senior Associate for the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds. In her role as Senior Associate, she oversees the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN), a network of over 200 members, including parents and organizations, who support birth parents as leaders and partners in prevention and child welfare systems reform. Levine coordinates leadership and parent engagement programs with National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds. She sees parents as critical members of teams dedicated to strengthening families. “Parent partners can’t do it by themselves and staff can’t do it by themselves, it takes everyone working together in equal partnership.” The strongest parent partner programs, according to Levine, educate parents and help them develop the necessary skillset to process their experiences and to be open to learning how to advocate for their family. Members of the BPNN routinely rely on their advocacy skills as they are often consulted by policymakers, contribute to written publications and research projects and serve in many other advocacy roles. Last year, one member spoke on how opioids are impacting communities at a joint hearing held by the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education and the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development of the Committee on Education and the Workforce. Another group of birth parents gave a presentation at a Missouri Judicial Engagement Team, where they spoke about how parental engagement in the child welfare system can expedite permanency and reduce maltreatment. These parents, and many other parent partners are not only working to help individual families reunify, but they are also working to improve the child welfare system for families at the county, state and national levels.



## Tips and Tools for Starting a Parent Partner Program

What follows is a list of suggestions for starting a parent partner program compiled from each of our interviews.

1. Conduct an initial assessment to determine if there are any existing parent advisory bodies.
2. Host small local gatherings to learn about system concerns among members of the community.
3. Determine eligibility criteria and select a small number of parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system to serve as models.
4. Implement a series of trainings to teach parents how to deal with vicarious trauma; provide parents with an overview of family interaction, domestic violence, substance abuse, and family team meeting policies and practices; and educate parents on cultural competency.
5. Parents should be included through every step of the process, from the development, implementation, evaluation and maintenance of the program.
6. Highlight program success to obtain more funding and attract more parents.
7. Host regular support sessions for parent partners.



## REUNIFICATION HEROES

EACH REUNIFICATION MONTH, WE INTERVIEW PARENTS, PROFESSIONALS, AND YOUTH WHO HAVE BEEN NOMINATED BY MEMBERS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES FOR DEMONSTRATING COMPASSION AND PERSEVERANCE, DESPITE THE CHALLENGES, TO KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER. WE SHARE THEIR STORIES IN CELEBRATION OF THESE IMPORTANT INDIVIDUALS. WE ALSO HOPE THESE STORIES WILL BRING POSITIVE ATTENTION TO THE SUCCESSES OF CHILD WELFARE, PROMOTE QUALITY PRACTICES AND LEAD TO CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SYSTEMIC NEEDS.

[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/child\\_law/project-areas/nrd/heroes.html](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/project-areas/nrd/heroes.html)

June is Reunification Month

For more information [www.ambar.org/nrm](http://www.ambar.org/nrm)