Dear Reader,

For over 40 years, the Parent Information Center and New Hampshire Family Voices have been helping families understand the systems and programs they are a part of and how to navigate them to make informed decisions based on their individual needs and goals. Whether it’s education, healthcare, or family support services, a big part of our work is helping families find and use their voices to build meaningful partnerships with the providers serving them.

What is family voice?

On an individual level, it’s an opportunity to inform the programs and services that serve us and build strong relationships with the educators and providers in our lives so we can reach the goals we have for ourselves and the people we love. On a collective level, family voices are the spark that ignites the potential in all of us—families, communities, providers of services, and systems builders. Our voices build connection and understanding. They make space for families and those who serve them to learn together and co-create the best solutions possible.

Finding our voice is a journey, and like most experiences that shape us, it can be messy and imperfect. The key is never giving up on each other. When families and professionals commit to listening and learning with each other, making space and time for reflection and growth, and continue coming back to the table to find solutions together, we all thrive.

We are proud to partner with NH Children’s Trust on this effort to launch a state-wide dialogue about the power and potential of family voice. We hope you will find this toolkit and the resources that accompany it informative, and they inspire you to consider the value of your voice and the voices of others in your life.

Sincerely,

Terry Olson-Martin
Executive Director of NH Family Voices
Remember, this is YOUR FAMILY and these are YOUR SYSTEMS. We can’t achieve the positive outcomes we hope for without listening and learning together. Family voice plays a significant role in ensuring our children reach their fullest potential and for us to reach ours as providers and caregivers.

The Parent Information Center and NH Family Voices have been helping Granite State families identify and navigate concrete supports for themselves and the children in their care for over 45 years.

For more information about Family Voice and its critical role in family success, email rdealmeida@picnh.org.

Here are three ways to use your voice so your family has what it needs to succeed:

Don’t hesitate to ask for the information you need to understand a situation or diagnosis and ALL of your options. Whether your child's teacher or physician suggests an evaluation for a developmental or health concern, it can be stressful and hard to recall the details of what was said during an appointment. It’s normal to have a lot more questions after you have time to process things. Providers understand this and expect requests for more information. After the dust settles, write down all the questions you have, then call, and ask them. If they don’t have all the answers you want, ask who else you could talk to and what resources they recommend to help you find answers.

Speak up if a service or activity is not a good fit for your family. Providers and families should collaborate to ensure that recommended services or therapies are realistic and achievable. For example, if your child's occupational therapist recommends an at-home activity for you to do together five times a week, and all you can think about is how stressed and overwhelmed both of you will be trying to do it - share your concerns. Ask what the goal of the activity is and what alternatives are available. This information will help the therapist know your child better and design interventions that meet their individual needs. Working together will mean a higher likelihood of success.

Share your experiences and ideas with service providers, educators, and key decision-makers. Service providers, educators, and key decision-makers need to hear from families so that they don’t have to make assumptions about what families want and need. When families share their experiences and knowledge, it ensures that services and supports remain responsive to the people who need and use them.
Why Family Voices Matter

Key decision-makers and providers want to hear from families so that they don’t have to make assumptions about what families want and need.

When families share what they know, it ensures that family services and supports work for the people who use them.

How Can Family Voices be Heard?

- At appointments with providers, and by following up when you have questions
- Speaking up when something doesn’t feel like a good fit for your family
- Sharing your experiences and ideas
- Joining an advisory council or workgroup
- Participating in focus groups or surveys

Family Voices Impact the Systems That Serve Us at All Levels

 Providers  Programs  Local Community  State  National

What is Family Voice?

An opportunity for families to share their needs, wants, and experiences to build relationships and inspire positive change within the systems that serve them.
with Christine Brennan
Deputy Commissioner for the NH Department of Education

Tell us a little about yourself and how your relationships with families have impacted your work over time.
I worked as an educator in Manchester School System, NH, in many different capacities before taking on the role of Deputy Commissioner (of Education). Over the years, I had the privilege of seeing students in my classroom become the parents of children in my school. As a school principal, I was privy to the intimate details of struggles families faced when trying to make education a priority while balancing other challenges. Often, our education system was not able to be flexible for some of the complex situations brought forth. As a principal, I often felt helpless in solving problems for families. However, in Manchester, there were many partners that I could refer families to for resources. I learned that listening to families, getting the whole picture, and arming them with information and resources was vital to student success. I think connections with families built on trust, honesty, and clear boundaries lead to children thriving.

How do schools and educators benefit when families share the vision they have for their children?
Parents are their child’s first teachers, and decision-makers and children love their teachers. When families and educators agree and are aligned, children thrive. It’s an opportunity to double the impact for children when schools communicate, set clear, reasonable expectations, and share resources and tools to help children’s dreams become realized. When bilateral communication happens, a partnership is made, and everyone has a role and responsibility in student success.

How do families and children benefit from having the educators and caregivers in their lives build trusting, goal-oriented teams?
Building trusting goal-oriented teams empowers families and educators. Families must know they have a trusted partner who will care for, protect, and educate their child the way the family expects while not in their care. Families are entrusting their most precious gift to someone else, and caregivers and educational institutions must understand this enormous responsibility. These relationships must be nurtured, inclusive, and approached with open minds and hearts. Bilateral communication is essential. Being talked at doesn’t serve a purpose. We want to have strong two-way communication. Listening is a skill that we develop by practicing it. Remember, silent and listen have the same letters.

Family members engage with their children’s school in many different ways based on who they are as individuals, what is going on in their lives at the time, and how welcome they feel. So, how can families who do not serve on task forces, boards, or committees still have a voice in their child’s educational experience?
School must be a judgment-free zone and a place that leads with positive intentions. There are many ways families can have an impact on their child’s capacity to learn. Helping children learn to be cooperative in a group or asking about what they are learning in school is just as valuable as serving on a board or committee. Families can have a voice by sharing notes with the teacher or setting up times to meet. Taking the time to read the notices sent home and responding to them by sending a note back always caught my attention as a teacher. I knew that the family was paying attention and invested in their child’s educational experience.

Families can contribute to their child’s success by helping their child understand their responsibilities as a student. Helping students understand the expectations in the classroom empowers them to remain curious and lifelong learners. In addition, families can celebrate the work their child does and the effort they put in. Recognizing a child’s effort and behavior goes a long way in shaping a child’s attitude towards school. For example, saying to a child, “I noticed when you got to school, you smiled at the teacher and said good morning. That makes me proud,” reinforces the behavior we want to see in children.

Any parting thoughts for families regarding teaching our children how to build their own voice in education?
Children are naturally curious and are watching and learning from society even when we don’t think they are paying attention. When we model communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills, children use their mirror neurons and mimic the behavior they see. As a teacher, I would notice the children always wanting to sit in my chair to read stories. I would see them pretending to play teacher. As the student counted the days on the calendar, pointed to a pretend friend, and said, “Good Job, you answered that correctly,” I would see myself in them. I would hear children proudly talk about their parents and repeat their parent’s expectations for them while at school. For example, “Mommy said I need to put the stuff in my backpack this way,” as I was assisting them. Our children are a reflection of us and our society. When teachers and families respect, trust, and support each other, our children feel safe and ready to learn. When parents and educators partner, a safe learning environment is created where children can remain open, curious, and reach their full potential.
Our Lending Library is a FREE resource for NH families, educators, and providers. We have thousands of books on child development, disabilities, health conditions, education, advocacy, parenting, and more!

To search our catalog by subject, scan the QR code on this page or click here.

Add the books you want to borrow to your cart and fill out the delivery form. Books will be delivered to your door with a prepaid postage envelope for returns.

(603) 271-4525  nhfamilyvoices@nhfv.org  www.nhfv.org

Find your voice at www.picNH.org/yourvoice
As a concept prevention is easy to understand—the act or practice of keeping something from happening. And we do it daily. We prevent bodily harm by buckling seat belts. We prevent unwanted visitors by locking our doors. We prevent the spread of harmful illness and disease with vaccinations.

Thankfully, the prevention of child abuse and neglect is also an act we are able to practice daily. When families and their members have access to community supports, are socially well-connected, and can adopt parenting strategies that encourage child development, incidents of abuse and neglect plummet.

That’s called primary prevention.

And it can be as simple as reaching out to a neighborhood family to let them know you’re there. It is offering to watch a child so the parent can finish work or make a medical appointment. It’s lending your voice to legislative advocacy efforts that build family resilience or helping increase investment in family support programming and parental education.

When the family unit is strong and supported, its members can find and use their own voices to connect, self-advocate, and grow.

Supported families are strong families—a concept that’s also easy to understand.

To BE PREVENTION in your community, visit www.nhchildrenstrust.org

Family Voice Checklist

1. Families have the supports to they need to engage
   My child’s providers know what supports I need to be an effective team member. Supports could include further explanation, resources, or background information, scheduling meetings outside my work hours, translation services, etc.

2. Assumptions are challenged
   Rather than just giving me information, my child’s provider and I regularly engage in collaborative discussions (two-way communication) to strategize and problem solve as needed.

3. Shared decision making
   My child’s provider and I make decisions together by discussing different approaches and options, exploring the pros and cons, and sharing our preferences and values.

4. Consistent two-way communication
   Rather than making assumptions about how I want to be engaged or what my needs and priorities are, my child’s provider asks me.

5. My voice is valued and validated
   I feel comfortable sharing openly with professionals on my child’s team. They listen to what I have to say and let me know how it will inform our work going forward.

6. Family-centered culture
   My child’s provider involves families in choosing, implementing, and evaluating programs and services for our children to identify unmet needs ensure that programs and services are responsive, relevant, and accessible for families like mine.

pre-ven-tion \ pri-ˈven(t)-shən

By Nathan Fink, Director of Advancement at NH Children’s Trust

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It seems obvious now that my husband and I were the ones needing a lesson.

We’d collected a pile of corrective notes, “incident reports” of handsy-ness or excessive energy, and there was a growing pit in our stomach when we’d drop him off at the daycare facility.

We’d been listening and listening, trying desperately to fit him in, and the time had come for us to do some talking...

Read the full story at nhchildrenstrust.org/post/boy-i-know
Thank You!