

Vital Partners in Youth Protection: Engaging Parents and Caregivers



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You've seen it in the news or heard about it through the neighborhood gossip chain, but you hope you'll never hear the same news again: an appalling allegation of child abuse is uncovered at a trusted nonprofit. Almost anyone would feel repulsed, devastated, or enraged at such news, but perhaps the news hits home the worst for parents—especially those who entrust their child's care to a nonprofit or other agency. What can parents and other caregivers do to ensure that their beloved children are safe, or at least to reduce the risk of harm to their children while they are in the care of a nonprofit?

Child protection and the safety of youth are essential considerations for all organizations that serve youth on a regular basis. Youth serving organizations aren't the only agencies that need to have a plan for protecting youth. Even nonprofits that primarily serve adults may also serve youth, if only on an infrequent basis. For example, an association of kayaking enthusiasts may find a young fan of the sport in their midst, or a social services agency that delivers meals to the homes of elderly community members may find that a household includes a child living with his grandmother.

In many instances, when a nonprofit commits to implementing a policy or program to protect youth in its care, there is uncertainty about the appropriate scope of the policy/ program, and about the best place to start. Nonprofit leaders often rightly feel that youth protection practices must be tailored or created from scratch to suit their organizations' missions, programs, and unique participants. Chances are, your board, staff and volunteers will quickly buy into a customized youth protection program, especially once they recognize that safeguarding your vulnerable clients is not just necessary, honorable and ethical, but it also inherently supports the fulfillment of your mission. However, what many nonprofit leaders overlook is the possibility of engaging another group of key stakeholders in the youth protection process: parents and caregivers.

Parents and caregivers are often the most enthusiastic partners in child protection programs. Parents and caregivers are usually delighted to hear that an organization strives to ensure the safety of their children. Leverage this free, ever-lasting spring of parental fervor and commitment to support your nonprofit as you develop or implement child safety programs.

Goals of a Child Safety Program

Child safety or *youth protection* programs may involve many different things. For some organizations, the primary concern is protecting children from abuse that may occur within the organization. For others, child safety may be much broader and also seek to protect children from other possible forms of harm, including:

- Bullying during organizational programs or activities, at home, or at school
- Cyberbullying and online predators
- Exposure to hazards such as chemicals, paint, cleaning supplies, sharp objects, and equipment like ladders and tools
- Injury that occurs during activities such as using the nonprofit's play area, riding a bicycle, or running on a slippery surface
- Sexual or physical abuse
- Neglect
- Dangerous decision-making involving drugs, alcohol and other risky activities
- Suicide or other self-harm resulting from depression, stress or other mental health challenges

The extent of an organization's child safety program will depend entirely on the specific programmatic offerings of the nonprofit, as well as the ages and developmental stages of the children it serves. In any case, reaching out to parents to assist with building a strong program can lead to positive results.

Understanding the Role of Parents and Caregivers in Child Safety

For many children, parents or caregivers are the most influential role models in their lives. Although children spend time in school, sporting activities or other community activities, most children spend the majority of their free time with their parents or caregivers. With the right information and support from nonprofits that serve their children, parents and caregivers can help prevent or identify potentially harmful or dangerous behaviors, or identify signs of abuse in their children. Children may also be more likely to report experiencing abuse or harm to their parents or caregivers than to other adults.

In addition to enhancing your organization's child safety program, by engaging parents and caregivers in youth protection, you can offer support to children outside of your programs. With parents who are fully empowered and educated in the realm of youth protection, a child may have a reduced risk of suffering harm related to bullying, emotional distress, eating disorders, safety incidents, and so on.

Ways to Involve Parents and Caregivers

- Ask parents and caregivers for input on how they would like to be involved in your organization's programs and activities
- Encourage parents and caregivers to connect with staff and volunteers at your organization; provide instructions for parents to easily access nonprofit staff and volunteers
- Provide volunteer or partnership opportunities for parents and caregivers who demonstrate an interest in supporting your child safety program
- Offer training and educational materials to parents and caregivers to boost awareness of youth protection issues, and to promote understanding of your child safety goals and objectives

Helping Parents and Caregivers Be Effective Child Safety Partners

Engaging parents in nonprofit programs and child safety initiatives can seem like a daunting task. However, with the right planning and the right support, parents can become successful partners, and help your organization develop a robust child safety program.

- **Communicate**—The most impactful parent engagement in child safety programs requires clear and consistent communication. Organizations trying to build a partnership with parents or caregivers should commit to providing parents with several channels of communication, through which parents can: learn more about the programs and activities offered by the nonprofit; find opportunities to volunteer and assist with programs; check in with staff and other youth-serving personnel who interact with their children; and, provide feedback and recommendations about current and future program offerings. Consider offering multiple communication channels or poll parents on the channels that best suit their

lifestyles:

- Memos or letters sent home with children, or sent through the mail
 - Email or text message blasts providing updates on programs and activities
 - Flyers posted throughout the organization's facilities and on the website
 - Online blogs or chat boards where parents can hold conversations with the organization's staff, volunteers and other parents
 - Newsletters sent to parents on a regular basis (e.g., once per month)
 - Postcard updates mailed or sent home, specific to the individual child
 - Report cards or progress reports, sent via mail or email, or available online
 - An online site where parents can login and see updates about their child's participation in an organization's programs or activities, review report cards and recent mailings, and reach out to the organization's staff members
 - Phone calls
 - Automated phone messages
 - Face-to-face meetings or conferences between the organization's staff and each child's parents or caregivers
 - Group meetings for parents or caregivers of all children participating in a particular program or activity
 - Announcements or advertisements on local radio or television
- **Provide educational materials and online or in-person training**—For most organizations new to child safety programs, the first goal is ensuring that measures are taken to protect children involved in the organization's programs and activities. The second most common goal is getting employees and volunteers involved in the effort by providing support, education and training on why child safety programs are important, and how they can help all parties. Although many organizations may be overwhelmed with trying to fulfill these two goals, providing support and training to parents can often be done in concert with providing support and training to staff and volunteers.
 - For **small organizations** with fewer resources, the primary way to engage parents and provide education on child protection efforts may be to hold a group meeting or session where a brief introduction to child safety is provided. In these meetings, a short training can be incorporated where parents are introduced to the specific initiatives the organization is undertaking to reduce safety risks for children involved in programs and activities. Offer parents supporting information and educational materials about your child safety protocols, such as information from reputable sources like the CDC (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/index.html) or Childhelp (childhelp.org).
 - For **mid-sized organizations**, or those with the primary purpose of serving youth, training may involve a series of trainings or brief meetings introducing best practices in child safety, the steps the organization is taking to protect children, and what the parent should do if he or she has a concern. Additionally, midsized organizations may have a point person who leads child safety initiatives. This person, in addition to being a resource for staff and volunteers, should also be available to communicate with parents who reach out with concerns or recommendations for strengthening the youth protection practices in place.
 - **Large organizations** with less restricted resources may consider creating an online parent portal that hosts information including the organization's specific youth protection policies, online training available to parents (e.g., webinars, courses and podcasts), articles and resources with additional information, and instructions for reporting suspected abuse or child safety concerns. Additionally, the online portal may provide the contact information for staff leading your youth protection efforts.

Regardless of the size of the organization, or the availability of resources, all nonprofits that serve youth should consider providing information and training specifically for parents and caregivers, to promote child safety awareness, and to empower parents to act as vital partners in child safety.

- **Provide volunteer opportunities for parents and caregivers**—For many parents and caregivers, finding time to volunteer may be very difficult on top of an already busy schedule. However, many parents would love to be a part of an activity in which their child is participating, to get an idea of what the child is learning and to support the organization in its mission. To maximize parental involvement in the programs and activities of your nonprofit, consider offering a variety of engagement opportunities:
 - *Encourage parents and caregivers to serve as mentors, chaperones, or coaches for your organization*—depending upon the programs and activities you offer, you may have a variety of needs for parental involvement and volunteer support. Parents are a pool of potential volunteers that should not be overlooked! Invite parents and caregivers to play a rewarding role in your

organization.

- Ask for help from parents and caregivers in writing grants or looking for new sources of fundraising—some individuals may be more comfortable playing a behind-the-scenes role in your organization, rather than directly interacting with children. In these situations, there are still important roles to be played, and your nonprofit could benefit from taking advantage of a parent's existing expertise.
- *Invite parents to help out with meal-time activities, weekend programs, or special events*—find out what the parents and caregivers of your youth participants do for work, or what expertise they have. For example, if one parent is a landscaper, she may be willing to lead a youth activity where children grow their own plants.
- *Invite parents to help coordinate activities and make calls to remind parents and youth of upcoming appointments and events*—even involving parents and caregivers in making routine calls and putting out reminders about activities and events can be extremely beneficial. Your nonprofit can get help, and parents and caregivers will become true stakeholders in the work and mission of your organization!

Common Barriers to Parental Engagement

1. **Parents and caregivers are unable to attend training sessions or volunteer due to schedule conflicts.**
 - Make it a priority to offer a variety of activities and workshops, and base them on the schedules of the parents and caregivers. Doing this will send the message that you care about the families of your youth participants, and you are willing to make the effort to ensure that parents and caregivers can be involved with their children's activities.
 - Provide alternative ways for parents to gain information or volunteer without being present for your organization's meetings and activities. Consider providing online training and educational materials. Create a parent listserv so parents can be in touch with other parents and caregivers, and have the information they need to make sure their child is taking full advantage of your nonprofit's offerings.
 - Make it easy for parents to attend the meetings or workshops you hold. Consider offering free childcare or refreshments to parents and caregivers who attend your meetings or training sessions. Make the meetings fun by having giveaways or raffles for nominal prizes.
2. **Parents aren't comfortable at meetings or activities due to language or cultural barriers, or unfamiliarity with the culture of your organization.**
 - Host programs and meetings that are culturally sensitive to parents who may not be comfortable. Acknowledge that interacting with others isn't the only way that parents can help out with your organization and support their children. Bring multicultural and multilingual staff to your events where parents will be present, and make sure that parents and caregivers know that these staff members will be available to them and their children.
 - Incorporate diversity and inclusion education into your staff and volunteer training, especially if you serve a very diverse group of children or those who come from different backgrounds.
 - Translate your educational materials and postings for parents into as many languages as you can. The goal is providing education and information to as many community members as possible.
3. **Staff members have difficulties working with parents and maintaining relationships.**
 - Provide support to your staff and volunteers to enhance their relationships with the parents and caregivers of the children you serve. Encourage staff and volunteers to share with you any concerns or discomfort they experience while interacting with parents. Provide training and coaching on how to interact in a positive way with parents, how to respond appropriately to questions, and how to handle an unhappy or concerned parent or caregiver.
 - Provide workshops and development opportunities where your staff and volunteers will have the opportunity to learn how to better engage parents and strengthen relationships with the community. Offer trainings on varying topics (e.g., customer service, top concerns of parents and caregivers, etc.), since all staff members will not have the same relationship-building strengths and weaknesses.

At the end of the day, your nonprofit's goal is to continue providing mission-driven services to children and other clients. Child protection programs and policies are one factor that will play a role in the success of your programs, activities, and ultimately, your mission. Ensuring that clients of all ages are able to engage in your

activities safety and confidently is a very noble and worthwhile goal for any nonprofit. Engage parents and develop dedicated support for your nonprofit; this will boost the caliber and sheer number of stakeholders who are empowered to help advance your mission.

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