

INTRODUCTION:

The following definitions of roles are intended to be descriptive rather than confining. An individual may act in one or another role, or in multiple roles, at different times. Similarly, the definitions of strategies are not exclusive. An activity may be part of one or more strategy or part of several strategies at different times. *The writer's hope is that the terms and definitions offered below will be distributed widely and adopted by parents themselves as well as by policy makers, parenting services practitioners, providers and staff.*

ROLES:

Parent / Caregiver:

Any individual who has or had primary responsibility for the care of a child of any age.

Practitioner / Provider / Staff:

An individual, in a paid or volunteer position, affiliated with a program or organization offering parenting education, training and support.

It is important to note that the above two main roles often overlap: Practitioners, providers and program staff are very often parents themselves. Further, an individual parent or caregiver has various sorts of interaction -- and often follows a natural progression in his or her interaction -- with a parenting services program or organization, as follows:

1 - A parent or caregiver starts out as a participant. At this stage his or her primary activity involves receiving the benefits of the program: education, training, support.

2 - A parent may become involved more regularly with a program and take an active role for shorter or longer periods, bringing materials home, offering feedback, for example, and these activities may inspire other participants to follow his or her example.

3 - A parent may then choose to become engaged in a wider variety of activities and make a longer-term commitment. This involves taking on more responsibilities, including communicating about program events and organization with other parents and with practitioners, providers and / or staff and helping plan and organize program activities.

Note: The term "parent engagement" also describes efforts by school departments and other community agencies to include parents in activities and programs, often under the heading "family and community engagement."

4 - Ideally, the interactions described above lead to parents becoming empowered and both more confident and more competent in their family roles as well as in their roles in the community, including in parenting services program.

5 – Finally, an individual may become a parent leader: someone who has taken part in one or more of above activities, first participating, then becoming involved, engaged and finally empowered to take on major responsibilities. These include independent advocacy and/or meaningful advisory roles within or for a parenting program on issues of program planning, policy and evaluation. These can include advocacy and advisory roles, as well, for other community programs that benefit children and parents, for example, recreation, sports and arts programs.

Clearly, individuals should be able to move from one sort of interaction to another as their children grow and develop and they should be able to move back to simple participation if their needs dictate. A common thread in all these interactions is parent peer support, a vital complement to the education, training and support offered by practitioners, providers and staff who work in parenting programs.

Usually, parents fill the roles described above as volunteers, but parents also may move into practitioner, provider or staff roles. It should be noted that financial support (stipends, expense reimbursements and other practical support including meals, child care and transportation) offered to for fulfilling any of the roles from participant through leader may blur the nonprofessional/professional distinction. However, the value of parents' time and the wide, deep and long-lasting social benefit of parents and caregivers becoming good at raising children, should be recognized and can legitimately be remunerated.

STRATEGIES:

Public, private and community-based organizations committed to community-building should incorporate the above sorts of interactions and should support parents in taking on whatever roles they need, want and can take on, depending on their and their families' situation. These strategies include:

Parent participation
Parent involvement
Parent engagement
Parent empowerment
Parent leadership

Further, the collaboration between parents and practitioners that takes place in the course of parenting services being offered and that results in parents' increasing competence and confidence can develop into parent-practitioner partnerships that take a variety of forms. Parents and practitioners may partner with each other along a continuum from individual family support to program planning, policy and evaluation.

Ideally, parents' needs are met, their voices are heard and their confidences are respected in all the strategies. Similarly, good management practices in parenting services respect the needs and foster the career development of practitioners, providers and staff alike.

CONCLUSION: The above schema is offered as a contribution to the national dialogue on parenting resources in a variety of fields: education, human services, medicine, public health, public safety and workforce development. I hope it will serve to raise awareness of the importance of a strengths-based approach to parenting services that recognizes parents as most knowledgeable about their families and communities and will, ultimately, serve to improve the health and wellbeing, educational attainment and life success of all our children.

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NOTES:

In distributing this Parent Participation Ladder, kindly provide credit to Eve Sullivan, Founder, Parents Forum, Cambridge, Massachusetts USA / eve@parentsforum.org (and on twitter: [@evesullivan](https://twitter.com/evesullivan)) / Founder, Parents Forum / <http://www.parentsforum.org> / Author: *Where the Heart Listens: a handbook for parents and their allies in a global society*

The 'ladder' schema was created as a follow-up to the FRIENDS Network for Action Meeting held June 21+22, 2011, Alexandria VA, and is based on the Parent Leadership / Partnership Working Document presented at the June 21, 2011, 11am session at that meeting.

In spring 2013 I completed a project for Teachers21 (www.teacher21.org), co-writing standards for 'family and community engagement' submitted to Massachusetts DESE Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education. In those standards we used Family and Community Engagement as the overarching term, and wrote "family engagement", "parent engagement" and (in Boston) 'family and student engagement' as shorthand.

I understand the term 'engagement' to mean the school's responsibility for outreach to parents and others in parenting roles, that is, family members responsible for children's and youth's care and guidance. Parents as individuals then have a responsibility to participate, become involved and empowered and, as they are able and willing, assume leadership roles in school/home partnerships.

I urge these activities to be considered steps on a ladder: participation, involvement, engagement, empowerment and leadership, with parents responsible for the first two and the last two, and school and agency staff -- who, of course, are often parents themselves -- responsible for engagement. An individual parent or caregiver can step up or down on the ladder, depending on his or her time, interest and expertise.