

10 Tips for Strengthening Family Advocacy in Child Care through Communities of Practice

Simple strategies to help members connect, learn, and support advocacy efforts

A Community of Practice (CoP) brings people together around a shared interest or concern to learn from one another, strengthen their individual work, and contribute to the broader field. A CoP focused on supporting Family Advocacy in Child Care provides opportunities for individuals and organizations to share strategies, elevate family voices, and advance advocacy in communities. The tips below offer practical strategies for planning and sustaining an effective CoP.

1. Establish a Common Purpose
Bring CoP members together around a shared vision for advancing family advocacy in child care. Identify common interests and goals, then align CoP activities and discussions with those priorities. For example, members might prioritize equipping families with science-based information on early brain development to connect children's early experiences to the importance of quality child care. Or they might focus on helping parents build the advocacy skills they need to share compelling messages with decisionmakers.

2. Meet Regularly
A predictable meeting schedule helps members plan to participate, build relationships, and maintain momentum. Set a regular cadence and communicate meeting dates and expectations in advance. Choose the dates, times, and format (virtual, in-person, or hybrid) that work best for the group.

3. Plan Purposeful Agendas
Develop agendas that reflect the group's current interests and priorities. Balance presentations with discussion, peer learning, problem-solving, and networking, and make time for questions. Share agendas in advance, highlighting key discussion topics, any preparation needed, and what members should be prepared to contribute or share during the meeting. Possible topics include effective strategies for recruiting parents as advocates, sharing information on early brain science and learning with parents, and helping parents become effective advocates for quality child care.

4. Create a Welcoming and Safe Space with Flexible Ways to Participate
Invite all members to contribute, ask questions, and share perspectives, and set expectations for confidentiality. Offer a mix of ways to participate, like small breakouts, open discussion, shared activities, and online chat to accommodate different needs and preferences.

5. Honor "Parent Voice"
Keep "parent voice" at the heart of planning and facilitating every CoP meeting, making it a common thread that connects CoP members and guides their work to advance family advocacy for quality child care. Use this shared focus when selecting discussion topics, planning collaborative activities, sharing resources, and brainstorming strategies and effective practices for building families' advocacy skills and supporting their efforts to champion quality child care with decisionmakers.

6. Build on Members' Interests and Experiences
Create opportunities for members to share their current projects, successes, challenges, lessons learned, and useful resources. Use their experiences to generate practical ideas, strengthen the group's knowledge, and identify topics for future CoP meetings.

7. Invite Guest Speakers and Subject Matter Experts
Bring in speakers who can deepen members' understanding of family engagement, advocacy strategies, policy issues, or community involvement. For example, invite parents to share their advocacy journeys – what inspired them to get involved, the successes they are proud of, the challenges they have navigated, and the resources and support that have helped them along the way.

8. Encourage Engagement and Networking
Make engagement and networking an intentional part of every CoP meeting. Start with brief icebreakers or partner discussions to help members connect. Build in time for small-group discussions to share ideas, explore common challenges, celebrate successes, and identify shared priorities. Discussion topics can range from a quick chat about the best parts of working with parents of young children to a more in-depth small-group conversation on plans for supporting families as they take action and engage decisionmakers. These opportunities strengthen relationships, build trust, and encourage collaboration.

9. Extend Connections Beyond Meetings
Encourage members to stay connected, exchange resources, and collaborate between meetings. Directly connect members who are working on similar aspects of their projects to foster intentional collaboration. Share meeting summaries, slide decks, tools, and relevant resources to reinforce learning.

10. Gather Feedback and Adapt
Use surveys, reflection questions, and informal check-ins to understand what members find useful and what support they need. Apply their feedback to shape future topics, meeting formats, and opportunities for engagement.

