

Parent leadership occurs when parents gain the knowledge and skills they need to function in meaningful leadership roles and represent the “parent voice” to help shape the direction of programs, policies, and laws. Historically, parents of children with special needs have taken on leadership roles in advocating for supports and services for their children. Many parent leaders started out trying to improve the quality of life for a family member but ended up improving the lives of many through their advocacy efforts.

A parent leader speaks and acts from their perspective as a parent and the stories they hear from other parents. They become strong advocates for themselves, their children, and other families in their community, region, or state. Successful parent leaders often engage in shared leadership initiatives where parents and professionals build effective partnerships and share responsibility, expertise, and leadership in decisions being made that affect families, communities, and systems change.

Here are some tips to help you become an effective parent leader in bringing about change in policies, programs, or systems that impact families.

Avoid becoming overcommitted. Know the limits on your time and resources

- Attend MSPTI webinars and trainings, which are designed to accommodate most working parents’ schedules
- Network with other parents at MSPTI events and workshops to maximize support for and the efficacy of your efforts

Seek out other parents who support your cause and strategize on how to reach out to more parents

- Parents at your child’s school
- Social media

Identify organizations and groups that represent a similar viewpoint and could be potential partners in achieving your goal

- Parent organization in your child’s school
- Disability-specific organizations
- Special Education Advisory Council in your school district

Build an in-depth understanding of the issues involved with your cause

- Current laws or policies that will have an impact on achieving your goals for young children
- Budget implications

Identify the key people you need to reach with your message

- School board
- City or county board/commissioners
- MS State legislators

Ask questions and speak out to have a powerful voice in decision-making about your issue or concern

- Gather all the information you can by doing research on your issue and talking with your professional partners and MSPTI Center staff
- Write letters to newspapers and identify key decision makers to connect with
- Stay calm, listen, and seek to understand differing points of view