

# Family Peer Support for Families, Parents and Caregivers in Mental Health and Substance Use Across the Lifespan



Person-centered, family-driven support is highly effective, and it means being invested in partnering with the families you support.

## WHAT IS FAMILY PEER SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES, PARENTS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS?

Family peer support offers hope, guidance, advocacy, and camaraderie for parents and caregivers of children across the lifespan and other family members receiving services from mental health, substance use, and/or related service systems. Family Peer Specialists are parents, family members, or caregivers who have or had responsibility parenting a child or as a primary caregiver for another family member experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges. They can speak about and use their lived experience to support other families to advocate for their child's or family member's well-being, supporting them in navigating systems, and offering other necessary resources. They bring expertise based on this lived experience, as well as specialized training, to support other family members and caregivers. Working within a peer support framework that recognizes the power of mutuality and experiential understanding, Family Peer Specialists deliver education, information, and peer support (Obrochta et al., 2011).

Family members trying to identify and access appropriate support for their child or loved one may find systems (e.g., mental health, education, juvenile justice, justice, child welfare, housing, substance use) complicated and overwhelming. Family peer support can help family members navigate systems more effectively; learn from the experiences of other families; feel less alone; and gain hope, ideas, and information. This support can assist family members in reaching their and their loved one's goals more efficiently, and with greater confidence and hope. (Anthony, B. J., Serkin, C., Kahn, N., Troxel, M., & Shank, J., 2019).







National Family Support  
Technical Assistance Center

*Providing Family Support  
Across the Lifespan*

*“Connecting with a Family Peer Specialist was such a blessing. You cannot put a price on a best fit program like this—especially when they supported me in getting access to access other programs. It's a much-needed life source for parents and their children.”*  
- Amber

## WHAT DO FAMILY PEERS DO?

### Family Peer Support:

-  • **Connects families**, reducing isolation;
-  • **Normalizes lived experiences**, reducing shame and blame;
-  • **Encourages resiliency in families** to hold hope for recovery and access to support;
-  • **Offers informational and educational support** on systems and strategies;
-  • **Offers support for caregivers** as they develop positive approaches and methods for addressing their family's day-to-day needs, including their own self-care; and
-  • **Offers concrete support**, such as navigating childcare or transportation.

Family Peer Specialists may be known as family support specialists, family navigators, family partners, family support partners, family support providers, as well as other similar titles—some are “Certified” nationally or by their state. Family Peer Specialists offer a wide range of assistance and support, depending on the settings in which they work and the family driven, person centered goals of the families they support.

### Common Services Include:

- Information, referral to, and assistance accessing providers;
- Individualized supports for family members to access services and natural supports;
- Peer support groups;
- System navigation to support a family in finding or accessing resources;
- Training to encourage systems staff and providers to be more family-driven and person-centered;
- Intensive family support during periods of crisis;
- Specialized supports for families experiencing challenges with systems such as child welfare, juvenile courts, or schools; and
- Participation in policy design, evaluation, and revision to realize family-driven systems.

# WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF FAMILY PEER SUPPORT?

## Early research suggests that family peer support offers parents and other caregivers:

### Increased sense of collaboration:

Partnering with Family Peer Specialists supports family members to be able to collaborate effectively with the mental health/substance use workforce (Hoagwood, et al., 2010).

### Increased sense of self-efficacy:

Family support increases family members' confidence in their abilities to care for their child (Obrochta et al., 2011).

**Decreased internalized blame:** By providing family peer support, family members reframe their experiences and debunk damaging myths about behavioral health conditions and emotional distress (Obrochta et al., 2011).

**Recognition of the importance of self-care:** Families increase their awareness for self-care (Obrochta et al., 2011).

### Improved well-being:

There is evidence that family peer support can lead to a reduction in stress, improved mental health and well-being, a greater perception of social support, and increased engagement with services for caregivers and encouraging evidence of reduction in systems use and improvement in ability to reach goals for children whose caregivers get family peer support (NICWA, 2014).

**Decreased family isolation:** Family Peer Specialists partner with family members to identify and access community supports that help them feel less alone (Obrochta et al., 2011).

**Increased self-direction to take action:** Receiving education about service systems, navigation skills, advocacy skills, and rights supports families to become active participants in their child's services (Kutash, Duchnowski, Green, & Ferron, 2011).

*“Family Peer Specialists are able to support you with whatever you’re going through. Their lived experience is invaluable because they understand your situation. They share information and resources and know how to get the help your family needs.” - Malik*

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