

How can organizations assess their readiness to co-design?

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As the child welfare system and its providers, partners, and other key stakeholders become more aware of and intentional about addressing racial inequities, collective focus is necessarily shifting to strategies that promote equity, prevention, and family well-being. While recent efforts have increasingly encouraged racial equity, kinship care support, and collaboration with adjacent agencies, there is still much work to be done to repair the disproportionate harm the system has caused to Black and American Indian/Alaska Native, and multi-racial children and families.²

Prior to the 1960s, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children largely were excluded from the child welfare system.^{3,4} Since their inclusion, children and families of color have been overly surveilled and separated, creating and perpetuating disparate outcomes. [According to the Children's Bureau](#), “racial disparities exist at every major decision-making point along the child welfare spectrum.” Nationally, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multi-racial children continue to be overrepresented in the child welfare system. These children [collectively make](#) up 19% of the total child population but 32% of children in foster care. Additionally, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children are more likely than others to be removed



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Source for diagram: Co-design mindsets, adapted from *Beyond Sticky Notes, co-design for real: Mindsets, methods, and movements* by Kelly Ann McKercher. ChiByDesign has added Servant Leadership as the core tenant of co-design.

Are you ready for co-design?

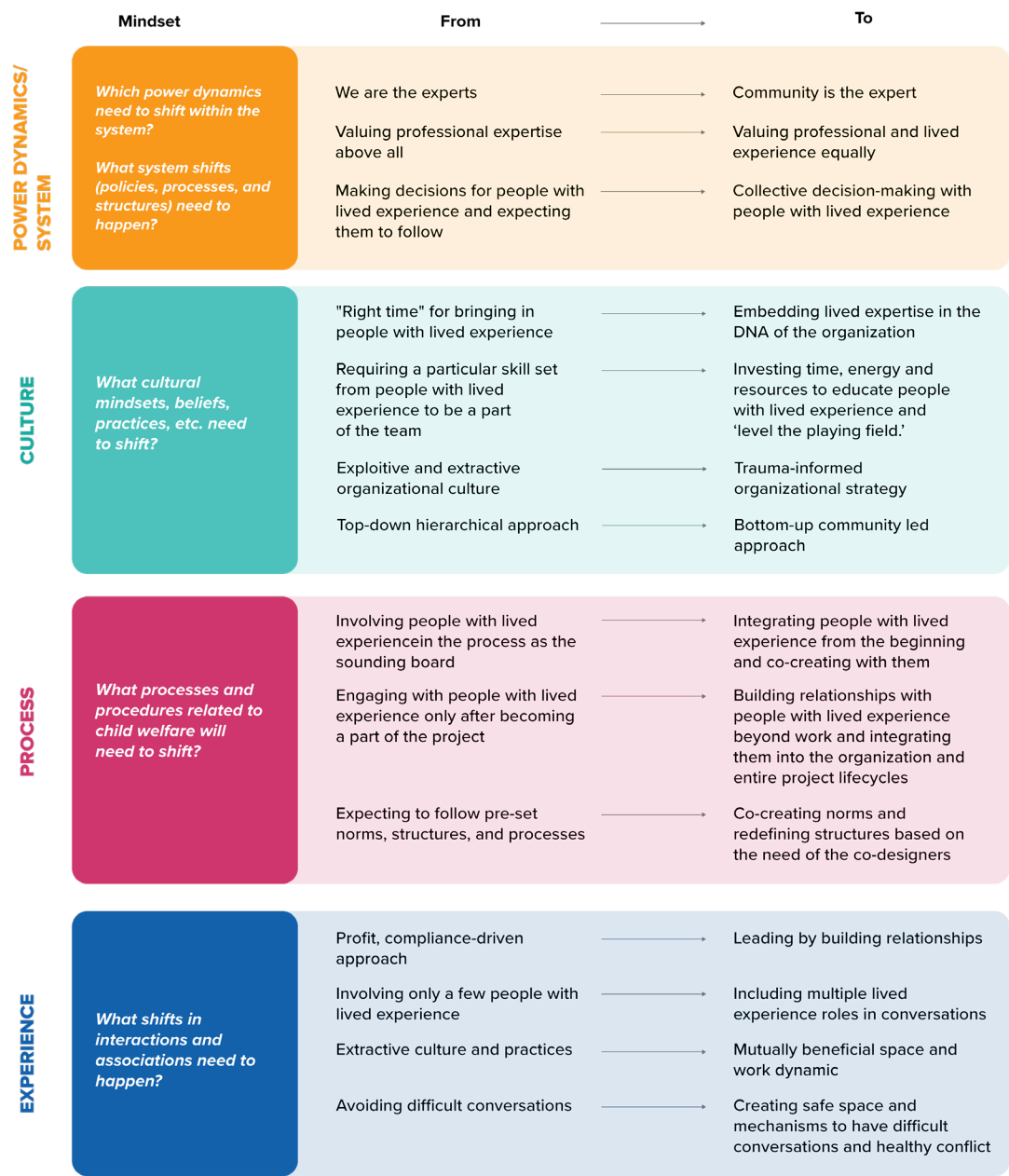
Before engaging people with lived experience in co-design, it is crucial to identify if the system and its actors are willing to engage in the practice of co-design. **Regardless of intention, attempts at authentic engagement miss the mark and may fail if those involved are not ready to shift power dynamics, decision-making structures, and engagement strategies.** Organizations and leaders must collectively assess their readiness to co-design with people with lived experience, and address a number of key considerations before an engagement can begin in order to gain clarity and identify and resolve any foreseeable operational barriers to engagement.

1. Compensation for lived expertise. Organizations must provide equitable financial compensation to individuals and communities with lived experience, valuing their time and expertise. Expecting people with lived experience to volunteer their time, or otherwise failing to adequately and equitably compensate peers, is exploitative, particularly in the context of marginalization and systemic vulnerability (i.e. reduced or compromised ability to realize or maintain a sustainable livelihood).^{7,8} Moreover, because social stigma accompanies financial barriers, it is recommended that organizations adopt a trauma-informed approach to providing compensation to people with lived experience.^{9,10} Thus, leadership and other staff must create a safe space for people to bring forward their lived experiences without judgment or fear of not being compensated if their opinions and experiences differ from those of the organization.

Questions for consideration:

- Have funding and additional resources been secured to equitably compensate people with lived experience for their time and expertise?
- Is compensation for lived experience accurately measured according to the level of participation?
- In addition to financial compensation, how can the organization compensate individuals and communities with lived experience?
- Does the organization or team clearly communicate compensation and other benefits to people with lived experience?

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Ultimately, co-design is an approach that centers and amplifies lived experience while empowering those with relevant experiences to improve their well-being through collaboration with other professionals. As we look to co-design equitable futures and shift from a child protection system that emphasizes the separation of children and families into one wholly focused on improving child and family well-being, people and communities with lived experience should be engaged to lead these efforts from the outset. Their first-hand experience with the system — knowing how it interacts with children and families, the impacts it has, and the outcomes it produces — equip them to identify the inequities and challenges children and families face, and co-create a new path forward.

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- 2 For more information on partnership with people with lived experience in child welfare, please see: If I knew then what I know now: 10 strategies for addressing race equity in child welfare; a collection of Casey Family Programs briefs and resources on [kinship care](#); and several Casey Family Programs briefs about collaboration with child welfare ([What do we know about the impact of homelessness and housing instability on child welfare-involved families?](#), [How can supportive housing help improve outcomes for families in the child welfare system?](#), [How does high-quality early care and education improve safety, permanency, and well-being?](#) and [How can child protection agencies partner with early care and education to improve outcomes for children?](#))
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- 4 Hogan, P. T., & Siu, S. (1988). Minority children and the child welfare system: An historical perspective. Social Work, 33, 493–498.
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- 7 Cheff (2018). [Compensating research participants: a survey of current practices in Toronto](#).
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- 10 Greer, A.M., Newman, C., Burmeister, C., Burgess, H., Coll, M., Choisl, P., LeBlanc, B., Lacroix, K., Lampkin, H., Amlani, A., Pauly, B., & Buxton, J.A. (2017). [Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices: A Guide for BC Health Authorities and other Providers](#) (version 2). Vancouver, BC: BC Centre for Disease Control.



[ChiByDesign](#), a Chicago-based social and civic impact design firm, proposes using a fully integrated, constituent-led co-design approach to co-create equitable outcomes with those most affected. Following engagement with child protection agencies and key stakeholders over the last few years, ChiByDesign has begun to identify how the practice and mindsets of co-design can be used to co-create a system of child and family well-being. ChiByDesign has served as the facilitator of critical conversations and leveraged its power as designers to amplify the voices and experiences of the people closest to the needs addressed. They do so by adding people with lived experience to their teams as co-designers, nurturing their unique perspectives and providing them with tools and resources to co-create their futures.

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