



Former carer turned award-winning content creator, trainer and mentor, Beth Britton, offers tips and advice for working with families.

There are few topics I am more passionate about than the importance of health and social care providers working with families. That won't come as any surprise to those of you who know that I am a former carer to my dad who had vascular dementia for 19 years. Dad's last nine years (he died in 2012) were spent in three different care homes, punctuated by spells in hospital, and we had very mixed experiences of being involved in my dad's care.

Back then formal involvement was being invited to Residents and Relatives Meetings (which were, in reality, just Relatives Meetings) and dad's yearly care plan review. Informally we did so much more, but sometimes we were deliberately excluded too, with one manager rewriting dad's care plan without consulting us in the months before he died when the care he was being given massively declined.

Family engagement in 2021

Fast forward to now and things are, thankfully, different in many care settings. Lockdown has meant a lot of involvement has taken place via Zoom in the last 18 months, but aside from the restrictions imposed by the pandemic I've heard fantastic examples of really bespoke support that has enabled families to understand a loved one's complex care needs and support them to the best of their ability (whilst being well supported themselves), even in really difficult circumstances like end-of-life care.

In my view, happy families make for happy care settings. Whether care is being provided in the person's own home, a care home, a supported living service or any other setting, working well with families improves outcomes for people who need care and support, provides a different perspective when thinking about service development, reduces instances of formal complaints and increases provider's satisfaction ratings. The success of the Shared Lives model alone shows how positive family relationships (albeit in Shared Lives they aren't generally with individuals you are related to) enable people to live happier and more fulfilled lives.

A best practice example

In my work, one of the best examples of collaborating with families that I've seen has come from one of my clients, [MacIntyre](#), who created the role of Family Engagement Consultant as a result of a legacy donation from a family. This has meant that the importance of families and the unique contribution they can provide is championed throughout the organisation.

In my view, every care provider should have this family champion, and the individual in that role needs to be:

- An empathetic person who understands the complexities of relationships.
- Brave enough to speak up when it might be easier to keep quiet because colleagues think that working with families is too complex or difficult.
- Determined to ensure that families' voices are heard and understood in all decision making.



As Nicola Payne, MacIntyre's Family Engagement Consultant, said to me:

'It's so important from the very beginning to work alongside families, not invite them in when the provider feels it the right time (I see this often). I would recommend working with a framework, like our [Family Charter](#) to ensure staff and families feel valued and respected. And above all as a Family Consultant, be 100% committed. However tough it gets, don't give up.'

The challenges and solutions for working with families

I think we all appreciate that working successfully with families doesn't come naturally to everyone who works in care, even if staff have strong person and relationship centred skillsets in their work with the people they support. Family relationships can be challenging to navigate, especially when you have strong personalities and long-standing issues and rifts amongst relatives. The person who needs care may not wish for their family to be involved in their life, different family members may hold very different views, and staff may be lacking in the interpersonal skills needed to navigate all of this sensitively.

Solutions to these issues can be:

- Training sessions for staff to equip them with the skills that they need.
- Regular, meaningful engagement opportunities with families, in groups and individually.
- Training sessions for relatives to learn about different health conditions, care techniques or care-related matters like the Mental Capacity Act.
- Direct access for families to that go-to person whose sole role is to work with relatives to understand and support them.

With COVID restrictions easing, engagement and information sharing might take place face-to-face in a care setting or by visiting a family at home, through regular online meetings that families can join from anywhere (including overseas), podcasts like this one that I did with [Nicola Payne \(Episode 9\)](#), or events like those I've run for providers that are about sharing information/training resources and answering questions as an external expert and someone who's been through experiences similar to theirs.

For more information on Beth's services, you can email beth@bethbritton.com, visit Beth's [website](#), follow her on [Twitter](#) and connect on [LinkedIn](#).