Family Engagement: Ideas and insights to inform partnerships with families

Meeting children’s needs includes quality, interactive partnerships with families. Families are children’s first and most important teachers. The term family includes the significant adults in children’s lives who care for, protect, nurture, advocate for, and teach. These adults may be biological parents, adoptive and foster parents, grandparents, or legal guardians.

“Family engagement refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children’s development, learning, and wellness, including in the planning, development, and evaluation of such activities, programs and systems” (U.S. Departments of ED and HHS 2016).

Family Engagement: Ideas and insights to inform partnerships with families

Consider the following insights and ideas in planning and improving family engagement (FE) programming:

Explore current research and best practice

Research helps to inform FE best practice. The 2016 “Policy Statement on Family Engagement from the Early Years to the Early Grades” (U.S. Departments of ED and HHS 2016) recommends that FE professional development focus on communicating children’s progress to parents. One way is to build parent capacity for understanding child data and linking child data to activities families can do at home (talk, read, sing, experiment) to promote children’s development, learning, and wellness. Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8 (Committee on Supporting the Parents of Young Children et al. 2016) states that because programs designed to prepare teachers do not often include education related to working with parents, there is a need for improved professional development for those working with families.

Cultivate relationships

Positive and productive relationships are the foundation to FE. Know the challenges parents may face in FE, such as language barriers and fears (fear of judgment, feelings of insecurity due to education and economic levels). Build relationships with families by tailoring partnerships to meet family needs, focus on the shared commitment to the child, and provide various opportunities to connect. Opportunities include:
Welcome and get to know families – consider implementing a family survey *Family survey information provided in resources

- Incorporate home visits
- Provide FE information in the family’s home language
- Create opportunities where families contribute ideas, weigh in on programming, and are decision makers
- Remove involvement barriers by offering child care, transportation, translational supports, and meals and snacks during meetings and events

Use a strengths-based approach

Families want programs and professionals to recognize their strengths and successes. By building on strengths, adults can identify core skills that contribute to positive child outcomes. Help families identify their strengths that contribute to positive outcomes. Harvard Center on the Developing Child offers, “Building the core capabilities of adults is essential not only to their own success as parents and workers, but also to the development of the same capabilities by the children in their care.” Building adult strengths and skills promotes better outcomes overall—for child, family, program, community, and society. Assist families in exploring new goals and work together to achieve those goals.

“It makes a tremendous difference, particularly for people who have previously experienced trauma, to feel that there is someone capable who believes in you.” – Family Court Judge Judith Waksberg

Link to learning

Parents’ engagement in young children’s learning is associated with improvements in children’s literacy, behavior, and social-emotional well-being (Committee on Supporting the Parents of Young Children et al. 2016). Offer learning experiences for families, such as connecting families to online classes and resources, and family nights where guest speakers and families share their insights on topics of interest and need. The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement reminds professionals, “Learning can also deeply influence families’ feelings about themselves, their abilities, and their future goals and actions.”

Think in “next steps”

FE partnerships begin in the early years and continue into adulthood. Early childhood programs benefit from connecting family engagement goals and practices to future next-steps, such as connecting to the public school system. Along with offering family engagement toolkits, many school systems offer transition to kindergarten information and other FE resources. Early knowledge of these systems and connected, related FE outcomes sets families up for success and continued involvement.

Assess FE work

Review and reflect on quality and effective FE policies and practices. Assessment tools, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s Program Self Assessment Checklist, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders Self Assessment are available to help programs take a more in-depth look at what is working and what they can do to improve the quality of family engagement.
Parents have the greatest stake in their children’s well-being and are invaluable partners for organizations striving to improve the lives of kids and families.” – The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016

Resources


Harvard Center on the Developing Child:

- “Building Adult Capabilities”

Harvard Graduate School of Education:

- “Link It to Learning: Concrete Tips for Making Family Engagement Happen,” by Bari Walsh, October 1, 2014


NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children), Family Engagement Forms and Tools (checklists, surveys and other FE tools)

Pennsylvania Strengthening Families

The digital version of this PDF has clickable links to the resources. If you have this PDF in printed form, you can search the terms online to find the resources.

find this PDF online at:
https://bkc.vmhost.psu.edu/documents/HO_FamilyEngagement.pdf

References

• Allen, LaRue, and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., and Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8; Board on Children, Youth, and Families; Institute of Medicine; and National Research Council. 2015. Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.


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