

4.1 Parent Engagement

Level at which parents are engaged as partners and leaders in the early childhood system

Purpose

This measure enables system stakeholders to understand the extent to which agencies operating within the early childhood system engage parents as partners and leaders and the extent to which the early childhood system supports those efforts. The tool that has been developed to help communities assess parent engagement grew out of several CSSP initiatives that expand the concept and practice of family engagement from separate strands of programming to an integrated, continuing stream of opportunities for parents to be leaders in their families and communities, as well as in policies and systems (see Resources). By engaging in this self-assessment, systems are encouraged to extend parent engagement from the preschool classroom, where most resources have been focused, into early childhood systems of care, including family support, children's health, mental health, and community resources. The anticipated results of improved engagement are more responsive, equitable, and accountable services and, ultimately, better outcomes for families and children.

Definition

This measure recommends a process whereby a group of system stakeholders can improve their system-level understanding of parent engagement performance through the internal, agency-level implementation of a self-assessment tool by a broad range of system agencies. The Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool acts as a starting point for dialogue and planning where agencies and systems—in collaboration with parent leaders and other community-based stakeholders—will be able to identify current strengths, target areas for development, and plan targeted actions. You may choose to use one or more of the following tools:

- ▶ **Abridged Assessment Tool.** For those seeking insights on family engagement strategies that have a more limited time and scope, we recommend the Abridged Assessment Tool as a starting point. Engaging staff teams, cross-system collaboratives, and parent leaders in this abridged version can build awareness, spark ideas and point to areas to develop.
- ▶ **Comprehensive Assessment Tool.** For agencies, collaboratives, and systems ready to fundamentally reshape the approach to engaging families, we recommend using the Comprehensive Assessment Tool. Engaging multiple stakeholders—including parent leaders—the comprehensive tool can inform a strategic planning or other significant change process.
- ▶ **Questions for Grantmakers, Policy Advocates & Capacity-builders.** For those agencies and systems partners whose work affects families but does not touch parents directly, these questions can help determine where you can change practices and leverage influence to expand parent leadership and engagement in the field.

Each of these tools guides the user to assess an agency or system's competencies across four "pillars": family-centered, equity-driven, collaborative, and transparent. Within each pillar, four "dimensions" are assessed: the system or agency's commitment, capacity, and practice, and the degree of influence parents have. Competencies

are rated across a four-point scale: (1) Not Evident; (2) Developing; (3) Progressing; and (4) Integrated.

As the steps outline below, a group of early childhood systems agencies agree to field the appropriate tool internal to their organization, seeking the input of a broad range of agency stakeholders, including front-line staff, administrators, and parent leaders. The agency representatives in the group then convene to collectively review their individual agency results and assess the system's overall level of parent engagement based on these individual agency results. The implementation of the abridged tool is likely to prompt individual agencies to take actions to improve engagement in the areas identified as needing work, or agencies may elect to implement the comprehensive tool as a part of a planning or evaluation process. The process hopefully will also lead to system-wide actions, such as including a commitment to equity and engagement in each agency's core values, changes in policies and practices, and/or funding allocation.

Communities may first wish to implement the tool as an internal agency system performance measure, rather than as a part of a broader system assessment of parent engagement. Implementing the measure internally and sharing findings with other system agencies may be a good first step toward engaging other system stakeholders who may be wary of a system-wide assessment.

Implementation

Tool or Survey

The tools are included in a separate [Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit](#), and can be accessed online:

- ▶ [Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool: Abridged](#)
- ▶ [Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool: Comprehensive](#)
- ▶ [Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool: Questions for Grantmakers, Policy Advocates & Capacity-builders](#)

Summary of Steps

The tools are sufficiently lengthy to prevent a presentation in the toolkit, but they can be accessed online:

1. **Set intention:** Consider agency or system-wide goals, recent efforts, and constraints related to parent engagement as a first step. What is your system's goal for implementing this measure? For example, are you just starting out and want to build awareness and buy-in around parent engagement? Completing the Abridged Assessment Tool is likely the right strategy to quickly get baseline information and initial identification of gaps and opportunities. If there is already extensive system buy-in, you may choose to use the Comprehensive Assessment Tool for an in-depth look at the agency or programs. If you are part of an agency that does not directly serve children or families, you may prefer to use the Questions for Grantmakers, Policy Advocates, and Capacity-Builders.

2. **Stakeholder engagement:** Based on your intentions and goals, form a group of interested stakeholders. In some communities, this may be an existing collaborative that has identified parent engagement as a strategic goal and is seeking a way to measure their growth in this area. For others, the group or intent may still need to be developed. All participants should agree to implement the Abridged Assessment Tool (at minimum) within their agency and to participate in a meeting to review and discuss the results.
3. **Implement tool:** Depending on the group's intention and following the implementation instructions included with the Assessment Tool, each agency in the team completes either the abridged or comprehensive tools. Ideally the agencies will have many different agency stakeholders complete the tool, including parents, front-line staff, administrators, and/or grantees.
4. **Convene:** Reconvene the team after the introductory tools have been completed by the participating agencies. Review and compare results. Identify areas of commonality and difference across pillars and different agency stakeholders. Discuss how your system would rate its state of development at this stage. What actions could improve development? What barriers need to be overcome and what successful practices could be replicated?
5. **Plan:** The assessment team will want to plan next steps, which may include:
 - a. *Actions:* Determine if there are actions that can be easily implemented at the system level and by the participating agencies, then identify potentially more challenging actions. Use the action planning template in this toolkit or in the Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool to identify targets, priorities, resources, and responsible parties. The actions are likely to be agency specific, but there may be actions that can be implemented system-wide.
 - b. *Further research:* If the abridged tool was implemented, determine if the assessment team or individual agencies need or want to implement the comprehensive tool. This may be the case if the participants do not feel they can adequately identify actions based on the findings from the abridged tool. Or, agencies may simply wish to go deeper than the abridged tool allows.
 - c. *Monitoring:* Decide when you will meet next and how frequently you will reassess your system's progress toward parent engagement.

Stakeholders

The intent is to create a cross-system group of early childhood agency leaders to participate in the implementation of this measure, which includes individual agency completion of the Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool. Within each agency, the tool should be completed by a range of agency stakeholders, including front-line staff and providers, administrators and managers, parent leaders, grantees, or others with knowledge of the agency's programs and practices. Some communities may already have parent-led organizations that advocate for changes in at least some sectors of the early childhood system; these organizations are a natural starting place for parent engagement.

Data Sources

Data are self-created through the implementation of the Parent Engagement and Leadership Tool.

Tips For Successful Implementation

It may be important to impress upon participants that low ratings are to be expected for most communities since the tool expands the boundaries of common understandings of family engagement. Few agencies will have achieved the highest, or even moderate, levels of engagement, but the process of implementing the tool helps agencies consider new, broader, and more authentic ways to engage with families.

Limitations

The process described for implementing this measure has not yet been directly tested, although the methodology is similar to measures that have been piloted. The Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Tool is in the early stages of pilot testing and may evolve as more communities implement the tool. The Abridged Assessment Tool has not been tested, to date, but it is a subset of measures contained in the Comprehensive Assessment Tool. The Abridged Assessment Tool was created to increase the accessibility of the tool and allow for measuring an agency's level of parent engagement in a less time-intensive process. As a subset of the comprehensive tool, the abridged tool may not lend itself as directly to actions, but it provides an entry point for communities and may lead communities to participate in a deeper analysis with the comprehensive tool.

Resources

- ▶ [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#), Center for the Study of Social Policy
This toolkit provides strategies for providers and program leaders to build family engagement by identifying family engagement as not only central to children's early learning and healthy development, but also as a core strategy to advance equity and community empowerment.
- ▶ [Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Engagement in Early Childhood](#), Center for the Study of Social Policy
Developed by parent leaders and staff members from across EC-LINC communities in 2018, and building on both Strengthening Families and the *Ripples of Transformation* Toolkit, the *Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Engagement* outlines a vision, goals, and Five Commitments for Change for the transformation we want to make so that all parents are supported and empowered to give their children a strong start in life.
- ▶ [Strengthening Families](#), Center for the Study of Social Policy
CSSP's Strengthening Families approach engages families, service providers, systems, and communities in building five protective factors that all families need to thrive. With active cross-systems leadership teams in 35 states, Strengthening Families is being used to transform child- and family-serving systems, with a focus on shifting how service providers interact with parents.
- ▶ [Opening Doors for Young Parents](#), Annie E. Casey Foundation
This resource helps agencies understand barriers young families face, which is a key first step to improving parent engagement.
- ▶ [National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement \(NAFSCE\)](#) This organization provides resources to help agencies document their family engagement work.