

Parent & Family Engagement

A Community Action Brief



Why does this matter?

Communities are as strong as the children and families that live in them. At the core of each community are the youngest children—the babies and toddlers—who rely on their parents and families to make decisions about their health, education, and well-being. Parents are children’s first and most important teachers and guides. They are uniquely able to nurture their children to be healthy and to develop the capacities they will need to be ready for school and successful in life.¹ In fact, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services affirm that “strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central—not supplemental” to promoting children’s healthy development and preparing them for school.²

Communities have a role to play in empowering families to make informed decisions about their children. Community leaders such as advocates, community organizers, council members, and mayors can work together to identify what families need to achieve their goals. They can build—or strengthen an existing forum—that allows staff from early childhood, health, and family support to work together with families, other professionals, and community partners to hear parents’ wants. There is no one correct model for family engagement but families should be engaged and convened in ways that promote equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.³



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¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start (2018). Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/pfce-interactive-framework>

² U.S. Departments of Education & Health and Human Services (2016). Policy Statement on Family Engagement from the Early Years to the Early Grades. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/policy-statement-on-family-engagement.pdf>

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start (2018). Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/pfce-interactive-framework>

Parent and family engagement strategies differ from one community to the next. Engagement can include a broad assortment of activities such as parent advocacy, advisory roles for parents in agencies, and parent leadership in the community. However a community chooses to operationalize family engagement will vary, but the evidence clearly shows that when families are empowered to shape systems as decision-makers, advocates, partners and providers, outcomes improve for both families and systems.⁴

Early childhood professionals also benefit from parent and family engagement. They tend to experience greater job satisfaction, stronger alliances with families, and more confidence and openness in their interactions with them. Established partnerships with families also make it easier for early care professionals to have conversations involving uncomfortable or challenging topics or issues, such as concerns about a child's development or behavior.⁵



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⁴ Center for the Study of Social Policy (2017). Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems. Retrieved from: <https://cssp.org/resource/firstfive-engagementtoolkit-5/>

⁵ Engelman, Kim (2017). Family Engagement: What Is It and What Does It Look Like? Retrieved from: <http://usa.childcareaware.org/2017/10/family-engagement-look-like/>

What can or should communities be doing?

A major and overarching strategy of parent and family engagement is the creation of positive and goal-oriented relationships. These relationships should be based on mutual respect and trust, should affirm and celebrate families' cultures and languages, and should provide ample opportunities for two-way communication between staff and families. These relationships should also be built around awareness of personal bias and a commitment to addressing it in an effort to build necessary respect and trust.⁶

Core principles that underlie parent and family engagement across disciplines:

- **Collaboration:** Parents have a lead role in making decisions regarding how to best address their family needs; service providers act as good partners and supports to them.
- **Communication:** Conversations with families are not one-time or sporadic, rather conversations are ongoing to build trust and demonstrate that service providers are working to meet the needs of the child and family; communication between families and service providers are two-way, flowing from both family and service provider.
- **Sustained Engagement:** Family engagement activities are consistent, regular parts of programming.
- **System-Level Involvement:** Families are included in evaluating current policies and programs and provide input into the development of new ones.



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⁶ Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. Positive and Goal Oriented Relationships. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/positive-goal-oriented-relationships>

The **Early Learning Community Action Guide**⁷, a collaborative project of the National League of Cities and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, identifies three tangible ways early learning communities make parent and family engagement a high priority:

Level 1

All child and family service providers receive training and support to help them approach parents as partners.

Examples include:

- Give service providers from multiple systems access to training on empathy, effective family engagement methods, and parent leadership, including content on implicit bias and other potential barriers to family engagement.
- Employ the providers in your community who specialize in working with parents—such as parent educators—to train and coach child-oriented providers.
- When providing training on parent and family engagement, invite parents as co-trainers to model effective partnership, share their personal stories and demonstrate why approaching parents as partners makes a difference.



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⁷ This resource is currently being revised and will be published in the coming months. Please visit www.CSSP.org for more information.

Level 2

Parent leadership should be integrated into every sector of the early childhood system.

Examples include:

- Partner with existing parent leadership groups in your community, either to provide consultation on your processes or to recruit participants for a new advisory group. Check whether there are active parent groups connected to mutual support programs such as Circle of Parents or Parents Anonymous, affiliated with Head Start, schools or places of worship or formed around particular issues such as children with special health care needs.
- Work with community-based organizations to host Parent Café or Community Café series to engage parents in meaningful conversations about their strengths and needs, and the needs and assets of their community.
- Convene child- and family-serving professionals and leaders across sectors to discuss parent engagement strategies and learn from each other.
- Provide coaching for leadership skill development and opportunities for parents to take action in their own lives and in partnership with other community members.

Level 3

Parent leadership and resident engagement are the established norm throughout the community, including government and government-funded activities.

Examples include:

- Create seats for parents and residents on city or county committees on issues related to early childhood education, health and development.
- Require parent representation on decision-making bodies funded through city or county offices, such as the boards of family-serving non-profits.
- Bring parents together with leaders of neighborhood associations, non-profit organizations serving the community, and the school system to identify challenges and then take on local projects to help improve the community.



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Community Examples

Kent County, Michigan's Great Start Collaborative

The Great Start Collaborative of Kent County serves as the local infrastructure for governance, planning, investment, advocacy, and innovation for Michigan's Great Start system with the goal of ensuring that every young child enters kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life. The Great Start Parent Coalition is a group of parents and caregivers dedicated to informing, shaping, and supporting the early childhood work in their community. The Parent Coalition provides feedback to steer the work of the Great Start Collaborative. It also provides training in leadership and advocacy skills to build public support for early childhood investment and a stronger voice for the children in the community. The Great Start Collaborative recently began a pilot program to train interested members of the Parent Coalition on the state budget process so that parents can directly influence public funding of early childhood programs and supports.⁸

Maryland's Judy Centers

Judith P. Hoyer Center Early Learning Hubs (Judy Centers) are located primarily at Title I schools in every jurisdiction in Maryland and are financed through state, local, and philanthropic funding. These hubs support the diverse early childhood programs in the school catchment area and employ a 2-generation approach to support young children and their families. Each hub offers family engagement activities and strategies based on the needs of the surrounding community. Activities include social networking events to connect parents and caregivers to their peers and community, parent cafes, and programs to support fathers and father figures in children's lives. Parents and caregivers also have the opportunity to volunteer, plan Judy Center events, and serve on the Judy Center Partnership Steering Committee.⁹

⁸ This information comes from the forthcoming CSSP publication, *Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems: Phase Two—Navigating the Ripples*. Expected publication date: February 2019. Please see www.CSSP.org for more information.

⁹ Maryland State Department of Education (2016). *The Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework Toolkit: Maryland's Vision for Engaging Families with Young Children*. Retrieved from: <https://marylandfamiliesengage.org/>

Additional Resources

Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families: This guide was developed by the Office of Head Start and is intended for early childhood professionals to use as part of professional development training.¹⁰

Ripples of Transformation: This report is a toolkit designed to inspire, challenge, and support leaders in early childhood to embrace a vision of families as agents of change in their children's lives, communities, and early childhood systems.¹¹

Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems: This Manifesto is a guide for early childhood agencies and systems to help them address inequities and racism by giving parents a voice and opportunity to be engaged and lead at all levels of change.¹²

¹⁰ <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/developing-relationships-families/building-partnerships-guide-developing>

¹¹ <https://cssp.org/resource/firstfive-engagementtoolkit-5/>

¹² <https://cssp.org/resource/manifesto-for-race-equity-parent-leadership-in-early-childhood-systems/>