



# Five Rs for Promoting Positive Family Engagement

Bweikia Foster Steen

Developing positive partnerships with the families of the children you teach is one of your most important tasks as a teacher. It can also be among the scariest or the most challenging tasks! I offer five Rs—respect, responsiveness and reassurance, relationship, reciprocity, and reflection—to help you build trust and promote positive family engagement in your preschool classroom.

## Families Want Respect

Showing families respect is more than being polite—it is esteeming or honoring families. Family members want to feel respected as their child’s first and most important teacher; they also want to see that you respect their family values, culture, and home experiences. Respect does not equate to agreeing with every decision made by families. It means being aware of your own biases and making sure that your own ideas, beliefs, and opinions don’t interfere with your work to understand each families’ choices and circumstances.

Respect also calls on educators to embrace a strengths-based approach to their interactions with children and families. In other words, a strengths-based approach demonstrates respect for families by recognizing, appreciating, and

celebrating what they bring to a program or school. Families are viewed as contributors, creators, and participants.

Here are strategies you can utilize to develop respect:

- › **Listen to families.** First and foremost, allow enough time to truly listen to families. This confirms for families that their thoughts, suggestions, and opinions matter and are valued.
- › **Maintain constant communication with families through apps and other means.** Use an app (like Seesaw or Bloomz.com) or design a private, secure webpage that includes the classroom newsletter, weekly plans, photos of the children, a resources and upcoming events section, a forum for asking questions, and an activity for families to complete with their children each week. Activities should be meaningful and doable, such as an “all about me” questionnaire (which you might complete first to help introduce yourself to children and families). You can also share photos and videos. Include the same items on a family bulletin board inside or near your classroom.
- › **Foster classroom community with a Family of the Week backpack.** To foster cross-cultural learning and deeper relationships in an ongoing way, ask family

members to complete an “all about my family” activity that you package in a backpack. Ask families to include items that are important to them in the backpack and to unpack it in class as they share information about each item and answer children’s questions. If family members are not able to join in person, don’t worry. They can join virtually using video conferencing (like Zoom) or share a recorded video of themselves unpacking the backpack and explaining the items they pull out. If families are unable to participate directly, the child can share the backpack while showing pictures of their family. Suggest that families include items that represent their culture, a favorite family memory, and a family interest or hobby.

Use the information and experiences shared to connect with the broader curriculum so that families’ funds of knowledge are integrated into learning in meaningful and sustained ways. For example, find children’s literature that mirrors cultures, languages, and experiences shared. (Check out [weneeddiversebooks.org](http://weneeddiversebooks.org) or [tfcbooks.org/best-recommended/booklist](http://tfcbooks.org/best-recommended/booklist) to find children’s books that celebrate diversity.)

## Families Want Reassurance and Responsiveness

Family members need to be reassured that you care about meeting their child where they are and that you are knowledgeable about their child as an individual and as a part of social and cultural communities. They want to be reassured that their child will not be singled out, labeled, forgotten, or harmed—but will be kept safe and be engaged in activities that are suited to their child’s unique strengths, interests, preferences, and needs. They also want to feel that you are responsive and that they can trust you to address their concerns and questions. For educators to be responsive, they must embrace flexibility. Educators who are flexible in their understanding, their expectations, and their responses to the families they serve will build that trust.

Here are strategies you can utilize to offer reassurance:

- › **Take a lot of photos and videos.** Keep a device nearby to take photos and video recordings (and keep in mind which families have agreed to have their children photographed and what types of sharing they are permitting). Families want to know what their child does during the day, who they play with, the activities they enjoy, and how they are progressing. Most love keeping up with these things through photos and videos. Sharing photos and videos weekly gives every family regular opportunities to peek into their child’s daily school

routine, which also helps to reassure them that their child is happy and is learning at their program. Make sure you gather documentation for every child on a regular basis to share with their families. (To learn more, read “Experiences Can’t Go Home in Cubbies: Using Digital Technology and Documentation to Connect with Families,” by Stephanie Haney, on page 20.)

- › **Provide daily or mid-week talking points.** Unlike more thorough weekly updates, talking points can be just a few sentences to let families know topics, concepts, or vocabulary words that their children are learning and how to expand on those things at home.
- › **Pick up the phone.** Responding to family members is the most important and easiest way to develop a trusting relationship with them and to reassure them that you are on their team. Respond to phone calls, emails, and other messages within 24 hours. Returning these in a timely manner reassures families because it shows that their questions, thoughts, and concerns are important to you.

## Families Want a Relationship

Creating and maintaining partnerships with families is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practice and for good reason: families have expertise about their children, and they play a critical role in their child’s growth and learning. When families do not feel that they are part of the classroom community, they might distance themselves from the school or program. This might impact their willingness to interact with you and to volunteer in classroom activities.

Here are strategies you can utilize to build relationships:

- › **Say “Hello!”** It is amazing how far a simple *Hello!* will go toward building a positive relationship. Just by acknowledging a family member’s presence, you are being welcoming. Short, inviting conversations can lead to positive relationships and family engagement.
- › **Invite family members into your classroom community.** Some families may not know whether they are allowed to be involved in their child’s classroom and may not be clear about how to support their child’s learning at home. This provides a great opportunity to help the family become engaged with your program’s community and to share activities for extended learning. Invite families to serve as a mystery reader or a mystery guest speaker (virtually or in-person). Ask children to guess the mystery reader or speaker by providing clues. For at-home learning, provide a weekly calendar (such as the one provided at [RIF.org](http://RIF.org)) of activities families can do at home with their children.

- › **Make it easy for families to ask questions.** Offer opportunities at the program and online for families to communicate any questions, concerns, comments, or suggestions they may have. You could create forum space on your classroom webpage, in your newsletter, or on your family bulletin board. You could also have a comment box in your classroom for families to share more private communications.

## Families Want Reciprocity

Reciprocity often involves a shift in thinking about engagement and communication because it relies on *interdependence*, or depending on each other to accomplish something. One member of a relationship must coordinate their thinking and actions with others to reach shared understanding and decision making. Such coordination involves being flexible with our approaches and expectations. When we do so, we can foster a supportive and trusting relationship with families and enhance their motivation to communicate and participate.

Here are strategies you can utilize to practice reciprocity:

- › **Involve families by dialoguing and including them in making decisions.** Inquire about a family’s goals and expectations for their child, their child’s teacher, and their child’s school. Telling families about their child is a one-way form of communication. Two-way forms of communication give families opportunities to collaborate with you and to actually talk about their concerns, wants, goals, and dreams. In addition, keep them informed about upcoming plans or changes, with sufficient time to consider their options and preferences, to ask questions, and to communicate with you. As stated in NAEYC’s position statement on advancing equity, educators should “uphold every family’s right to make decisions for and with their children.”
- › **Consider culture, language, and literacy when communicating with families.** This means knowing about the families and ensuring that accommodations are made so that every family can access and respond to the information you share. Translate documents into families’ home languages and use interpreters to help strengthen the two-way engagement and communication between you and families.

## Families Want Teachers to Reflect

True reflection is ongoing and an essential part of assessment and teaching. Reflecting helps teachers engage children and families intentionally instead of falling into routines. You may find it most useful to reflect daily or weekly (such as taking an extra 10 minutes before you write your weekly update for families). As long as you find time to reflect while your memories are still fresh, you’ll have new insights that will positively impact your instruction and your interactions with each child and their family.

Here are strategies you can utilize to promote reflection:

- › **Ask yourself:** How well do I know each of the children and their families, and how can I learn more about them? How often do I interact with each family? What strategies do I use to ensure they know they are an important part of the learning community?
- › **Ask family members:** How would you like to be involved in the classroom? Is there a book you would like to read to the class, a cultural tradition you would like to share, or an activity related to your job or a hobby (like bird watching) you would like to lead? What do you think your child needs to have an even more enjoyable and educational experience in the classroom?
- › **Ask your colleagues:** How do you engage families? Is there something we should do together—like host a family science and art night—to get to know family members better and show ways to extend learning at home?

## Conclusion

At its best, early childhood is a time when teachers, children, and families open themselves to each other, inviting joyful play, collaborative inquiry, thoughtful observation, and deep caring. Together, families and early childhood educators nurture positive social, emotional, and intellectual development.

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**Bweikia Foster Steen**, EdD, is an associate professor of education at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where she also serves as the early childhood internship coordinator. Her research focuses on exploring developmentally appropriate practices that promote social, emotional, and academic success among diverse children during the early years.

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