

# Families & Educators Together

Building Great Relationships  
that Support Young Children

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## Family Engagement in Action

Family engagement happens every day through your interactions and activities with individual families and groups of families. You involve parents and other family members in their child's development and learning throughout the year, not just at certain times.

Family engagement is

- › Reciprocal—Both teachers and family members exchange information, skills, and teaching strategies.
- › Strengths based—Family members share their talents, interests, and expertise to support their child and benefit the whole program. Teachers see parents and families from a strengths-based perspective where parents are capable, willing, and offer value to the program.
- › Individualized—Families can choose from an array of options—or come up with their own—that best fit their schedules, interests, comfort levels, and skills.
- › Participatory—When parents feel connected with other families and involved in the program, they are less likely to feel isolated when they face challenges and are more likely to seek help in handling parenting and other issues.

As teachers, you can suggest ideas and welcome participation from all families whether it consists of classroom visits, making play materials, planting a garden, planning events, or helping to make decisions.

Family engagement is not just a concept or a policy. Family engagement involves action. What actions will you take to engage with families? What actions will you suggest for families to do? You will find answers in this chapter as we describe strategies, actions, activities, and projects to make family engagement successful, fun, and rewarding.

## Get Started: First Steps to Engage a Family

A first step after a child and family enroll in the program is to get to know the family's needs, hopes, interests, and expectations for their child's time with you. You might collect this information gradually through informal conversations, then use what you learn right away to establish a relationship that leads to discussions about how the family members would like to be involved in the program. You respect families as true partners when you ask for their input and insight on how best to interact and communicate with them. "I would like to share stories about Emily. What is the best time for you—in the morning when you drop off Emily, at the end of the day, or another time?" A respectful interaction such as this might one day lead to the family member saying, "I really can't visit during the day, but I want to be a part of Emily's learning at the program. I noticed that the photos on the cubbies are getting torn and faded. I am an amateur photographer. I could come to pick up Emily early one day and take new photos of the children. Would that be helpful?" Of course the teacher said, "Yes, we'd love for you to do that!" Soon the cubbies had new up-to-date photos of Emily and her classmates.

It may take a while for some families to share insights about their child. As the relationship between you and the family evolves, everyone begins to gain a sense of comfort and starts to contribute as a member of the community. The previous chapter described components of a program-wide family engagement plan. When thinking about the family engagement approach you plan to implement, consider these questions:

- › How do I engage new families *and* returning families?
- › What can I do and say to show I am a partner in supporting their child?
- › What can I say and do to show that I value family input as essential for a child's success?

As a first step, create a clear picture of who the children's families are. A concrete way to do this is to take photos of each family and ask the adults to refer to the photos while introducing their family members. (Later you can post the photos in the classroom.) Using the family stories, you can connect with one aspect—perhaps a love of soccer—and develop a working relationship with them by making connections.

Family stories can be an entry to understanding what makes each family unique. They help teachers connect to what is meaningful to families. When a family shares news of an upcoming multigenerational celebration, you can be ready to welcome a child who is dropped off by extended family members who have come for the event. When you greet Ma Ma and Po Po, the child will know that you welcome her family members. Be sure to ask for a photo from the event and post it near the photos of that child and his family.

### Family and Child Time

On the first Wednesday of the month, we celebrate Wacky Wednesday with an activity for children and their families. In the lobby, the warm smiles of the staff greet families who are ready to do a hands-on activity with their children. For example, on the Wednesday before Children's Day/Book Day (*Día*), the children and families read Pat Mora's book *Abuelos* and make scary but festive masks. As the children finish the activity, they eat the nutritious breakfast that the staff makes available. After breakfast, families take their children to their classrooms.

# Keep the Engagement Going

At Learning to Learn Child Development Center, the teachers have been busily preparing for the first day of the year. The classrooms are clean, well-stocked, and clearly organized so children can easily choose what to do. They include items that come directly from the children's families, homes, and communities, and thus are authentic to the child. They are arranged so children and families can see themselves reflected in the environment, which includes photos and cultural artifacts that are familiar to the children.

Outside each classroom, a shelf labeled "Invitation to Learning" holds a family learning time (FLT) activity. During FLT, a family member can engage in one-on-one play with a child. The adult focuses just on that moment and that child. The staff at Learning to Learn have noticed that some parents seem to find it difficult to start playing with their child, perhaps because they've never played before. FLT is an opportunity to help parents explore, play, and learn, just as their child is doing.

If you set up similar activities in your own program, describe them and explain how and where they will be available; this information can be included in your orientation or enrollment materials, or discussed during a home visit. For families who speak a language other than English, a brief video might help them understand the purpose of and steps involved in the activity. Then, when family members see one on the shelf, they will already know what is. The invitation to the learning shelf can highlight the activity materials and encourage families to interact with their child and the materials. "Use Learning Stories to Individualize Relationships," on pages 42–43, shows an example of an FLT activity and how it might be used.

## Use Learning Stories to Individualize Relationships: A Playdate FLT Leads to a Learning Story

A learning story is a snapshot of a child's day or learning experience that captures the heart and mind of the child in play. Using the following story about Joseph as a guide, what story will you write? What experience do you want to capture to investigate further? Use pictures, story dictations, photos, and children's drawings or writing that represent the experience. These items will capture the child's sense of discovery and wonder. Add your perspective to the story by inserting highlights of the day. Also ask family members to contribute to the story. For more on learning stories, see Chapter 5.

The children in the Butterflies Room are helping their teachers prepare the FLT activity for February. The focus is having a playdate with a favorite person. Teachers set up a table covered with a cloth, a vase of flowers, and a puzzle to work on together near the dramatic play area. The children sign up for a time when each child and his or her family can have a playdate.

The Thomas family joined the program last year when Joseph was 1 year old. They said they were afraid about leaving Joseph in the care of strangers, given his age, but proceeded with

enrollment. At first, Joseph had a difficult time adjusting. As the year progressed and his teacher reached out to Joseph's parents, they began to develop a relationship based on trust. His teacher, Ms. Christy, welcomed them each morning with a special greeting and listened as they spoke about Joseph's experiences at home. Ms. Christy shared news of Joseph's favorite experiences with the parents at pick-up time each day. By the end of the year, Joseph and his family were at ease and fully engaged in program activities.

## Use Continuity of Care

Another strategy for keeping family engagement going is a teaching and caregiving practice known as *continuity of care*. As defined by the Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC), continuity of care—when a child has the same teacher for an extended period of time—results in consistent relationships between teachers and children for the first three years of life or for the length of enrollment in an early childhood program (PITC, n.d.). Continuity of care can be provided in either same-age or mixed-age group care settings. In same-age settings, the most frequently used strategies are (a) to keep a group of children in one environment and change it to fit the children’s needs as they grow or (b) to move the teacher with the small primary group of children to rooms or spaces that are appropriate for the children’s developing abilities (Lally, Stewart, & Greenwald 2009).

Continuity of care serves as a foundation for building relationships with families, children, and early childhood teachers (PITC, n.d.). This approach engages families in the child’s initial transition to out-of-home care and leads to partnerships with teachers to best meet the child’s needs. The families become active participants in the child’s experiences at the program, and they partner with teachers in supporting children’s development. As the child becomes a toddler, then a preschooler, and eventually moves to kindergarten, the family enters the new school ready to advocate for their child and engage with teachers and school administrators. This is a success for all—the child, family, and program. A great beginning in the early years, while the brain is developing, contributes to a child’s success in elementary school (Lally & Mangione 2017). The experiences of children and families contribute to lifelong learning as children grow.

Today Ms. Christy sees Mrs. Thomas sitting by herself watching and enjoying the interaction between 2-year-old Joseph and his dad, who are laughing during their playdate. The parents’ roles appear reversed, because last year Joseph responded only to his mother, and his father rarely picked him up or dropped him off. Ms. Christy takes some photos and tells both parents she will have them ready at pick-up time. As the Thomases prepare to leave, Joseph runs over to his mom, grabs her legs and says, “I love you, Mommy!” Then he darts off to play with his friends in the block

area. Ms. Christy, with camera still in hand, takes a photo of Ms. Thomas’s face as Joseph embraces her.

Each day Ms. Christy creates a learning story for one child. She decides that today it will be about Joseph. She creates a story titled “Highlights of My Day” and includes pictures of the FLT activity with Joseph and his dad doing the puzzle, Joseph resting at nap time, and at the center of the photos, a heart with the photo of Joseph hugging his mom. The learning story has snippets of text describing Joseph’s day and a box labeled “So what’s

next?” where the parents can contribute to the story.

When Ms. Thomas comes to pick up Joseph, it seems that she’s had a rough day and is not feeling up to par. Ms. Christy hands her a printout of the learning story. Mrs. Thomas is immediately drawn to the heart in the middle and hugs Ms. Christy, who says, “You are at the heart of Joseph’s life, and I want you to know how much it matters. He’s able to do the things described here because you love and encourage him.” They hug again, and a smiling Joseph interrupts with “Can we go now?”

## Building on Children's Interests: Family Activities Strengthen Partnerships

Jenny Levinson is a preschool teacher in the state-funded pre-K program at the Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School in Bloomfield, CT. This program serves 3- and 4-year-olds. Its mission is "to develop the character of young children and create a sense of wonder about their environment, culture, and world." Strong family engagement is a school-wide goal.

**CHALLENGE** I want families to know that I listen to, respect, and know their children. To accomplish this goal, each year I plan unique and meaningful family activities that stem from what I learn about children's interests. One goal of these projects is to strengthen my relationships with both children and families.

**STRATEGY** My observations of and interactions with children help shed light on what fascinates them. Each year it is something different—masks, lemons, maps, grandparents. One year the children were enthralled with recycling. We spent weeks bringing in recyclables from home and using them to make eco art that we displayed for families during an art show.

**RESULTS** Almost every child has a family member who attended the art show. Families told me their child was eager for the day of the art show and talked about it for weeks in advance. When I talk with past families, many mention family activities such as this one. It amazes me that after many years, families still remember these activities.

**UPDATE** I continue to challenge myself every year to incorporate children's interests into the family activities. I know this takes intentional planning and lots of thinking outside the box. However, I have discovered these activities are meaningful and personalized experiences for children, families, and teachers alike.

## Be Patient and Persistent

There are times when a teacher's family engagement efforts do not lead to immediate success. The family may resist your suggestions, discount the information you provide, and prefer to make decisions about their child based on only their own experiences. In these instances, you may need to be persistent and try different approaches, while continuing to support the child and engage the family.

Here's an example of how patience and persistence, over time, led to a successful outcome for all.

The Williams family enrolled in the Yes We Can Program when John, their first child, was 3. As John engaged in daily experiences, the teachers saw signs of potential developmental delays. They shared their observations with the family and suggested a developmental screening. The teachers explained, "After we receive the screening results, we can work together to promote John's development and learning at home and at the program." The Williamses were apprehensive. But they had seen similar behaviors at home, so they agreed to a referral for developmental screening. The screening determined the need for further assessment to learn more about John's development and to identify the services he would need to reach his potential. The assessment results led to a diagnosis of autism. The Williamses had never heard of autism and were unsure of how to access appropriate resources for John. They decided to get services through a private therapist. When the teachers asked about how things were going, they replied, "Oh, everything is fine." They said John's behaviors were normal and nothing was wrong with him. The teachers continued to engage with the family and work with the therapist to provide appropriate services at the program. Eventually, John moved to a public preschool program where the adult-child ratios were better suited to greater individualized attention.

Soon afterward, the family enrolled their second boy, Mark, in Yes We Can and again, the teachers noted signs that are typically associated with a diagnosis of autism. They shared their observations, but the family was not concerned. They could see that the teachers met Mark's developmental needs and made classroom accommodations when needed. For example, the teachers made sure that Mark had space to play independently or with the group. Thus, Mark could be successful in his own way. With a teacher-to-child ratio of 3:8 and a lot of one-on-one guidance and assistance, Mark progressed. The teachers regularly expressed to the family that Mark would be more successful if he received special services. When it came time for Mark to transition to the 3-year-old classroom, the teachers recommended that he move to a setting with more adults and fewer children in the classroom. Mark's mom was concerned about him leaving the program, but in the teachers' view, the 3-year-old room had too many children, too few teachers, and elevated noise levels, all of which would make it hard for Mark to succeed. The family continued to believe Mark was doing fine both at the program and at home. They moved Mark to the 3-year-old room.

During the first two weeks in this new setting, Ms. Williams often stood at the classroom window, watching her son struggle. His behavior demonstrated his need for a smaller setting where he could be successful. Mark's mother talks with his former teachers, and together they planned to have him screened for services.

Throughout this process, the teachers respected the family's request to wait for services. They continued to offer them, however, hoping that the family would one day see the need. In the end, the trusting relationship between the family and the teachers led the family to accept the services that would address their child's needs. Today, the family's third son, Paul, attends the same program, and John and Mark go to public school. They both receive services at school and support at home. Ms. Williams is the liaison for the Autism Spectrum Parent Support Group—a community-based program for parents of children ages 2 to 12. She is also a leader on the parent advisory council and an avid supporter of families who struggle with their children's developmental issues.

These brothers now receive appropriate services because their teachers and family members had built a strong, reciprocal relationship over time. The teachers remained sensitive to the family's need for information and resources and patient enough to keep offering the services the children needed.



## Count Men In

The information covered in this chapter is applicable to all family members of any gender. However, many programs find that they need to try different kinds of strategies to get to know and engage men who play an important role in children's lives. Some staff admit that they might not be as responsive to male family members as they are to female family members. Fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and other male family members may feel discounted or uncomfortable developing relationships with a child's teachers. As noted in Chapter 1, millennial families share certain beliefs and approaches to parenting. Two-thirds of the parents in these families do not follow traditional gender roles, one-third share chores equally, and millennial fathers see involvement to be a positive masculine trait (Gross & O'Neil Hart 2017).



## Me and My Family

**Debbie Walsh is a prekindergarten teacher at Green Acres School in Rockville, MD, a school that implements a progressive educational approach for children from preschool through grade 8. The school is a diverse community of families, teachers, and administrators, all encouraging children to learn by using active, hands-on teaching methods.**

**CHALLENGE** Our family engagement was limited to a handful of participants. In prior years, during intake conferences we asked families if they had special talents or interests to share with the class. Only a few felt comfortable sharing a talent, but we sensed that many wanted to visit the classroom. Our goal was to find a way to encourage all family members to join their child in the classroom without making anyone feel compelled to come up with an activity or an interest to share.

**STRATEGY** Teachers and staff thought of ways to involve families that would respect their time, work, and other commitments and could be adapted to their comfort level. We reviewed and evaluated the effectiveness of previous ideas, such as a guest reader program, thus learning that some family members felt unskilled in reading aloud to young children. Some had younger children at home and could not find child care. Others could not make time in their schedule during pre-K morning reading time.

During the August intake conferences, families happily shared activities they enjoyed doing with their child. They introduced or talked about other family members and described cultural and family traditions, including their favorite everyday and holiday foods.

After reflecting on all the information we gathered, teachers and staff planned a yearlong program called Me and My Family. We offered each family a 15- to 30-minute time block—the beginning of the school day, lunchtime, or the end of day—to share with the class. Families could decide what to share. Other family members and even pets were invited to take part.

**RESULTS** In its first year, Me and My Family had an 89 percent participation rate. During the second parent-teacher conference, families' comments were positive and several volunteered to help in other ways. Parents said the availability of numerous time slots made it easy to participate and liked the opportunity to include all family members.

During each Me and My Family visit, we took a photo and posted it in the snack area. As the photo gallery grew, so did the conversations children had during snack time. These conversations sparked further interest in learning about many kinds of food, the culture of the families, the languages children and their families spoke, favorite children's book authors, and many other topics.

**UPDATE** Me and My Family has helped foster a stronger sense of community within the classroom. Children feel more comfortable interacting with other children's families during school-wide events, field trips, or even casual conversations at drop-off and pick-up times.

## Breakfast Club: Enjoying Coffee and Conversations in the Morning

In 1975, Lynn A. Manfredi-Petitt and her husband, Bob Watkins, opened The Creative Comfy Day School @ Lynn's House, a family child care home in Decatur, GA, serving up to six children from ages 2½ to 4½ years old. Although they no longer provide full-day care, the program is still open for drop-in children and parents. This family child care program, like many others, emphasizes family engagement.

**CHALLENGE** Drop-off times can be stressful, even in a warm family child care setting. Parents and other family members have places to go and work schedules to meet. That said, a longer drop-off transition period can ensure that children, families, and educators have a great start to the day and opportunities to build genuine relationships.

**STRATEGY** Every day begins with a healthy breakfast. Often children who are early arrivers are already eating breakfast when their friends arrive. Because family members often sat down and joined us for short periods of time in the morning, we established an optional Breakfast Club so we could enjoy a relaxing time together before the adults had to leave. Some families stay for breakfast every day, while others stay when they are able to arrange their schedule accordingly.

**RESULTS** Good-byes are less stressful, and children often leave the table to choose free play activities. Families can see how their children engage with materials and with each other. Family members and providers are able to observe how each guides children's table behavior and adjust accordingly, which is good for the children.

With Breakfast Club, everyone's day starts in friendly, relaxed ways. When morning circle begins, family members are ready to leave for work. They feel acknowledged and appreciated by fellow adults and have had time to enjoy their children's company. An added bonus of Breakfast Club is that parents get to know each other and form a community of support. They feel comfortable asking fellow parents to babysit when work hours run over closing times, plan playdates for their children, and arrange birthday parties. Lynn and Bob can discuss upcoming activities and gain clear buy-in from those present. Relationships are the heart of quality care. Pass it on!

**UPDATE** Breakfast Club participants were amazed by the easy ways their children said good-bye and moved into their day compared to the tearful, clingy scenes that were a frequent part of previous departures. One father enjoyed Breakfast Club so much, he occasionally drops in for coffee when he can.

Early childhood programs need to plan family engagement strategies that build relationships with male family members. The following suggestions are helpful strategies to consider when interacting with all family members:

1. Learn about the relationship between the child and the family member and what this person does to support the child's development and learning.
2. Use gender-neutral language when asking for volunteers. Both male and female volunteers can repair toys, lead a cooking activity, or plan a carnival.
3. Be sensitive to the relationship between all family members, while recognizing each person's strengths and contributions to their child's development and learning.
4. Share your professional knowledge in a way that adds to, rather than takes away from, the family member's sense of competence. View every family member as capable of enhancing the child's experience the program. Look to individual strengths and discuss ways to build on them.
5. Include all family members in your communications. Make sure the mail, text, and email addresses of both parents and other family members are handy.
6. Learn about individual interests by developing a relationship with fathers and other male family members, and then include them in planning events or activities that build on their interests. Use the same approach for mothers and female family members to do the same.
7. Use the same strategies to engage fathers and male family members as used with mothers and other female family members. Sometimes men are treated like special guests instead of caring relatives who, of course, want to be involved in their child's experiences.
8. Create a welcoming environment. Include pictures and photos of men with young children as well as women with young children. Show men feeding babies and females enjoying rough-and-tumble play with toddlers and preschoolers. When male (and female) family members express an interest in a topic, post information about that topic on the family bulletin board.
9. Strive for gender balance on family committees and councils. If needed, reach out to male family members to invite their participation. (This strategy is adapted from *Conducting Home Visits*, a forthcoming resource from the Office of Head Start.)

For example, the family engagement activities planned by the family services coordinator of the Pittsburgh Public Schools included March DaDness, which was "designed to invite fathers and other important males in children's lives to participate in the children's early learning programs" (Saunders 2017, 29)

To learn more about engaging male family members in their children's early care and education, review the *Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide* on the Head Start website. This resource includes many useful ideas for program administrators and teachers.

## Create a Family Space

One way to communicate that families are a priority in your program is to designate a comfortable gathering place where families can meet and socialize with each other. The family center should be prominent, located near the entrance if possible, nicely decorated with tables and comfy chairs

for sitting and interacting with educators and other parents. It's a place where it's okay to linger and talk. The family center can also be used for events such as Chat, Chai, and Coffee or Family Engagement Networking. And it can house a collection of books and other resources on child development and parenting, and resources on what the community offers families. While every family may not use the space, it is available for both casual gatherings and formal meetings.

In family child care homes and smaller programs, use creative thinking to identify where to locate a welcoming space. Two comfortable chairs in a corner, with an album of photos of the children in the program, may work. The important thing is to make this a priority. When new families appear hesitant or don't speak much English, try inviting them personally and inviting several families who speak the same language or who come from the same neighborhood to stop by on the same morning.

## Offer Variety So There Is Something for Everyone

What do you know about each child's family? Many programs use a simple survey to ask parents how they want to partner with the program. (Of course, surveys should be available in all relevant languages.) You and your colleagues can review the completed surveys to learn about the families' skills and interests, and then develop a plan to work with families to put their assets to work. Family engagement is more than a bake sale or a carnival event. It's family members working alongside teachers in meaningful ways that contribute to the education of their child and provide learning opportunities for the adults as well.

Ask families to tell you verbally or in writing how they would like to be involved in the program. This is a great way to start a partnership, but it's important to engage in conversations and to ask the questions more than once. You can imagine that families might not know how to respond if they are new parents or if they've never been asked to be involved before. When a family member's skills or interests come up in later conversations, you might say, "Oh! I didn't realize you design flyers and handouts. We're having some trouble coming up with a look for our new brochure about the program. We'd love to have your input."

Parents and family members who feel needed are most likely to contribute to the program, if their schedules permit. When families are able to visit and see their child's classroom in action, they often become more confident in supporting their child's learning—now and in the future. The more contact teachers have with families who speak different languages, the easier it is to overcome language barriers. By using the following simple strategies, programs report extraordinary success engaging all families:

- › Celebrate children's cultures. Invite families to share their traditions and aspects of their culture with the class. Find times of the day (group time) or places in the classroom (art area) for families to share materials from their home or to read stories aloud that reflect their culture. Arrange many opportunities, large and small, for all families to share their traditions and talents throughout the year. Schedule these events at different times and days to give every family a chance to participate.
- › Offer a variety of options for family members to visit their child's classroom (not everyone is comfortable reading stories in front of a group). With a range of choices, more parents will participate with confidence. They can cuddle a fussy

baby, speak in their home language while helping toddlers plant or weed a garden, or point out sights and sounds on a neighborhood walk with preschoolers.

- › Host workshops on topics the current families request rather than topics the staff or previous families think are important. Here are some ideas you can use or adapt to meet families' interests:
  - Partner with a local organization to
    - Offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Families could learn by translating traditional stories and rhymes that you use in the classroom.
    - Hold workshops on searching for a job. Cover topics such as completing applications, providing appropriate documents, going on interviews, and so on.
  - Use the computers at the program to introduce families to multilingual literacy resources.
  - Hold a quick and easy cooking night—provide free grocery coupons and ideas for embedding science and math learning in the kitchen.
  - Plan a family game night. Provide materials for making simple games such as lotto or bingo.
  - Promote literacy by sharing information about organizations such as First Book so families can build their children's home libraries at little or no cost.
- › Invite family members to apply their skills and talents to enhance their child's early childhood setting. Family members, often with their child's help, could reorganize your music collection, paint bookshelves, clean and update the play foods in the dramatic play area, make or repair doll's clothes, or repair classroom books. Parents may not always believe they need your assistance, but they will usually contribute if they feel you need them! Feeling needed and valued is the best kind of motivation for family engagement.

### **Multigenerational Participation**

At a New York City early childhood program serving a diverse group of teen moms and their children, a teacher invited parents and grandparents of the toddlers to visit the class. She asked that they each bring along a meaningful family artifact, such as a mom's beloved childhood toy or a baseball glove passed down from a grandfather to a grandchild. Family artifacts convey a sense of the history and traditional oral stories passed from generation to generation. This strategy engaged several generations in the program.

- › Invite experienced parents to serve as welcoming ambassadors for new families, especially when they speak the same language.
- › Ask current bilingual families to explain the family engagement options to new families who speak languages other than English.
- › Link new families with current families to foster greater engagement in the program. Arrange phone chains so experienced parents can call newer families to explain events, policies, and changes to new parents. Match parents up on small teams to plan and contribute to classroom activities. Working together makes everyone feel more included and fosters that deep sense of community that is great for each child and great for the whole school (Nemeth 2018)!
- › Schedule events before or after the program hours so every family has a way to join in. Some participants might bring toys home to clean and repair. Others might help by conducting online research for needed materials or resources, or by creating materials such as class photo books.

## Providence Connections: Identifying What Families Need

**Samantha Ellwood is the Executive Director of Providence Connections in Pittsburgh, PA. The program serves children and families through its child development and family support programs. They include children from 6 weeks to age 5 in child care and Head Start and operate after-school and summer programs for older children.**

**Some families receive support services through family development specialists who visit in their homes twice a month. These families are typically experiencing a crisis whether it be learning to parent, finding food or housing, or coping with life's stresses.**

**CHALLENGE** Many of the family members we serve are under employed. They work two or three jobs to pay the bills and thus have little flexibility in their schedules. They may want to attend workshops and other events but with scheduling difficulties, and lack of child care and transportation, they cannot.

**STRATEGY** A key part of this program's history guided staff in facing this challenge. Providence Connections was founded by the Sisters of Divine Providence about 25 years ago. The sisters had operated a hospital. After selling it, they looked for another way to serve the community. They travelled from door to door in the community to find out what residents needed. They identified single mothers as those most in need and decided to found Providence Connections to offer services that would support these families.

Taking our cues from this approach to identifying needs, Providence Connections established a 12-member Parent Council to advise on family needs and to ensure that planned projects and activities would be well received and well attended. To ensure the desires of multiple audiences are heard, the Parent Council includes mothers and fathers, single parents, dual parent families, and family members who care for nieces, nephews, and grandchildren.

**RESULTS** Attendance at family-focused events has increased and participants are pleased with the content and the logistics. We provide transportation and child care for families who could not attend events otherwise. Thanks to the Council's guidance, we have a better understanding of families' strengths, needs, and life experiences. We work with the Council members to ensure the effectiveness of family engagement strategies.

**UPDATE** The Parent Council's work has been successful. Members continue to guide staff and evaluate planned projects. Council members serve for several years, if not longer, and often act as cheerleaders for family engagement projects they are particularly excited about. Staff appreciate the feedback offered by the Council and from program participants.

## Engage Families as Decision Makers

Being involved in decision-making is another way for families to participate. Inviting families to join staff in discussing issues, solving problems, and making decisions encourages meaningful involvement in the educational community (Edwards 2016). It also provides perspectives and ideas that staff may not generate on their own. This models a reciprocal relationship between parents and teachers where each one contributes to the program in a significant way.

### Include Families in Decision-Making for the Program

How does your program include families in decision-making and collaborating to set program policies and practices? At Oklahoma City Educare, family members can volunteer as a class representative, be a member of the program-wide Policy Council, or join the Education Committee to inform curriculum and school readiness goals. Family members can provide firsthand feedback on these experiences and suggest ways to improve outcomes as a program community.

For instance, along with other committee members, parents on the Education Committee review school readiness goals and child outcomes. The goals are measurable and can be tracked by programs. Parents participate based on their own experiences and look at the outcomes to determine if the goal needs to be addressed in different ways.

All Head Start programs are required to include family members on their Policy Committees and Councils to achieve this type of input. These groups participate in making important decisions about operating their child's Head Start program. Interpreters and translators are generally provided as needed.

Involving families in governance and policy requires a lot of thought and balance. Programs benefit by having strong family participation and buy-in for program changes and updates. At times, some teachers and administrators find it difficult to accept this input, and it can be challenging to manage families' input, questions, and concerns. However, to achieve the goal of full family engagement, these challenges must be navigated. Professional development can help staff understand the purpose of full family engagement and learn specific strategies that make it meaningful for all. At what levels can family members enter as contributing members of the program? How are families' voices evident in the program's practices and procedures?

## Collaborate on Community-Wide Efforts

Every opportunity for people to gather, work, and jointly make decisions is an opportunity to learn about who we are as educators and families, both individually and collectively. When you work with families on a project together, you cultivate relationships as you make joint decisions. In Oklahoma City, parents, teachers, family workers, and community leaders gather in June to start planning the annual Harvest Celebration. This event was established by a parent who had attended the Possibilities program ([www.possibilitiesinc.com/pip](http://www.possibilitiesinc.com/pip)), an Oklahoma-based venture designed to strengthen families. She chose to spearhead a community-wide carnival for neighborhood families, friends, and businesses. Harvest Celebration is now a successful community event that serves 200 families. The educators and family members who participate benefit from a five-month planning period and see the result of their work manifest before their

## Coffee in the Lobby: A Long-Standing Tradition for All Families

**Dee Dee Parker Wright is the executive director of Jubilee JumpStart, a child development program in the diverse Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, DC, which serves young children ages 6 weeks to preschool. Forty-eight children are enrolled in five classes. To acknowledge children's cultural and linguistic strengths, each class is taught by one English- and one Spanish-speaking teacher. This dual language approach is a bridge for the many immigrant families whose children attend the program, and it helps honor and support the child's home language and culture.**

**CHALLENGE** In the first 18 months of operation, Jubilee JumpStart had three directors. When I became the director seven years ago, families were already concerned, confused, and feeling disconnected about the program. Although the program was designed to welcome and nurture families, this goal was not being addressed, much less achieved.

**STRATEGY** I bought a coffee maker and table and implemented a new weekly event: Parent Coffee Hour. Every Friday morning for the first two hours of operation, we kept the coffee pot full and provided donuts or pastries in the lobby. After dropping off their children, family members could stop to chat with staff or each other or sit down for longer conversations, as appropriate.

**RESULTS** Parent Coffee Hour is ingrained as a vital part of our program. It takes place every Friday, unless we are closed, in which case it is rescheduled for Thursday. Family members use the time to build supportive relationships with each other and to offer feedback, both positive and not so positive, to staff. Coaches and teachers attend as their schedules permit, and specific concerns raised by individual family members are shared with the relevant teachers. It has been vital to creating a robust community within our center.

**UPDATE** While the coffee event continues as originally designed, there have been three key additions. First, we created the JumpStarter Council, a group including family members, teachers, and administrators. They meet monthly. The suggestion for establishing this group came from a coffee hour participant. Second, we periodically invite guests, often representatives from community resource organizations. These are called Espresso Shots and allow families to connect with needed services. The third addition is a more formal monthly meeting for interested families. We adjourn to a meeting room to discuss topics of interest to the families. We also use the Parent Coffee Hour to present or review written communications and also to solicit quick feedback, such as which movie to watch on Family Movie Night or voting on parent leadership.



eyes. The families contribute their expertise, ideas, and work, and see staff as contributors to the community they have created. The parents understand that their voice matters: they can approach educators and program leaders, and their views will be heard and considered. The extra benefit of this collaboration is that the parents became advocates for the program. They encourage other families to get involved and contribute volunteers and members of the policy groups.

In many programs, well-loved traditional activities like the Harvest Festival happen year after year. These events strengthen a sense of community for the current group of families. Traditions are important, as is a flexibility to envision and plan new projects and get-togethers—with maximum involvement of families. Just as each new group of children arrives with different interests, assets, and needs, new families want and need to be engaged in projects they initiate and plan, with assistance as needed. This chapter included numerous ideas for engaging *all* families. It's important to remember that only some of the suggested strategies are a good fit for the families in your program. Always begin your planning by asking families their preferences. And be sure to include families in all stages of the planning rather than just asking for volunteers when the project is already scheduled and ready to go. True engagement occurs at every step in the process.

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## Reflection Questions

Now that you have read this chapter, consider the following questions:

1. Think of a time when you individualized family engagement. How did you respond to families' individual interests, assets, needs, and so on?
2. Think of a family with whom you have had a rocky relationship. What did you and the family do to keep moving toward a reciprocal, meaningful relationship for all?
3. Think of a community activity that you have enjoyed. What motivated you to participate? How can you apply this self-understanding to creating family engagement options?