

Profiles of Family Engagement Strategies

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF ALL high-quality early childhood education programs. There are countless ways to engage families, but it is important for teachers and administrators to use the most effective methods for the families in their settings. For this reason, early childhood programs tailor their effective engagement strategies to match the characteristics and experiences of each group of families.

The following are four brief profiles and practices that highlight different ways to engage families (pp. 50–59). These short articles showcase specific strategies used by programs that serve various populations, from families affected by HIV/AIDS to multicultural families of toddlers to families of primary grade students who use technology to learn about their children’s school experiences. The authors hope these profiles inspire you to further support, involve, and partner with families. For further information, readers can contact the authors at the email addresses provided.

Profile **The Children’s Place Association: Supporting Families Impacted by HIV/AIDS**

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THE CHILDREN’S PLACE ASSOCIATION serves families affected by HIV/AIDS. This may include a child, parent, or other immediate family member. These families need support and often live in vulnerable communities. They may face challenges due to the stigma and isolation associated with HIV/AIDS, and need varied support services. Parental HIV infection has been associated with negative outcomes for children (Murphy et al. 2010). Children may suffer from loss of family and identity, psychosocial stress, lack of essential care, homelessness, inadequate nutrition, and fewer opportunities to attend early childhood programs (SAMHSA 2000). Factors like these put the families at higher risk

for poor nutrition, poor mental health, children’s delayed social development, and susceptibility to other diseases, among other challenges. Linking HIV/AIDS-specific support services and providing opportunities to engage families in early childhood programs can promote these families’ strengths.

The Children’s Place Association

In 1991 the Children’s Place (CP) Association opened its doors as the Midwest’s first residential facility dedicated to the care of children affected by HIV/AIDS or other life-changing health conditions, including cerebral palsy, developmental delays and complications of prematurity, shaken baby syndrome, and physi-

cal or mental abuse or substance abuse. The program is located on the north-west side of Chicago in the Humboldt Park community, and serves families with low incomes who are vulnerable to chronic disease, hunger, violence, isolation and stigma, and homelessness. In 2007 the organization launched CP International to bring vital services to children and families affected by HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean and Southern Africa.

Program services

The CP Association Early Learning Center offers specialized child care to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers affected by HIV/AIDS. Currently, the center has one infant room, one toddler room, two classrooms for 2-year-olds, and three for 3- to 5-year-olds. Thirteen teachers and three part-time substitute teachers are available as needed. Age groupings and number of staff are adjusted to meet the needs of the children. For many of the children this is their only opportunity for an early childhood education.

When families are stable and basic needs are met, children are more likely to attend school and have improved developmental outcomes.

Curricula are supplemented by speech, occupational, and physical therapies and by door-to-door transportation so children can attend the early childhood program regardless of their parents' health or community of residence. A registered nurse is available to assist with the medical needs of children. If needed, the nurse, director, and family support staff coordinate to find necessary medical care and treatment options for families. Staff members are trained to handle emotional, behavioral, and social issues that surface. Teachers and administrators meet monthly to review new approaches to support children and families, based on their interactions with and observations of families. A new program-wide goal is set each month to enhance family support efforts. Children's Place staff members have noted



that when families are stable and basic needs are met, children are more likely to attend school and have improved developmental outcomes.

The CP provides on-site transitional housing and housing at several other locations. The plan is to break ground on a 12-unit building that will allow the program to serve more families. A family support specialist assists parents with a multitude of issues and concerns, including housing, employment, school, and counseling services, as well as writing a will and planning for child custody. Staff support families in setting goals that they review together. Families meet with the director, family support specialist, nurse, teacher, and education coordinator twice each school year. Parents also meet with family support staff monthly (and as needed) to discuss progress toward meeting goals. A parent described her experience: "It's hard doing it out here on my own. It's nice to have some people who want to help." Another parent added, "The CP wants to see you do better."

The CP is a safe haven, a home away from home for families. The program maintains an open-door policy and encourages parents to participate in activities with their children and use the available program supports to better their lives and help their own families. A parent noted, "I can come here and use the computer, use the phone, or just sit and talk and have someone ask me how I'm doing. It's like

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a second home.” Teachers receive training on how to listen to and support families who are dealing with a variety of issues and stress. Program staff might conduct two or three home visits a year to build relationships with children and families in their own environments. Teachers and staff work hard to build trust with families, offering support as needed, without judgment and assuring confidentiality. The main goal at the CP is to help children and families be successful.

Families participate in regular goal planning for their children (every six months), and teachers send home activities for families and children to work on together that are aligned with what children are learning in school. Parents participate in classroom activities with the children and share stories and aspects of their culture and home lives. Teachers and parents meet three to four times a year to discuss children’s progress, celebrate successes, and identify ideas that will help support the children’s development.

Strategies for family engagement

To engage families the CP Association’s program staff use a variety of strategies to build families’ protective factors, such as their social support systems. Staff also assist families to overcome the physical, emotional, social, and financial effects of HIV/AIDS and other life-changing health conditions. Often staff accompany family members to doctor’s appointments and other important meetings and events because they feel isolated from spouses or other family members who do not know their health status. Staff may continue to attend Individualized Education Program meetings and other meetings at the new schools of children who had been enrolled in the program. CP staff continue to follow and support families after they leave the Early Learning Center. Parents of graduates frequently return for special events, to receive assistance or support, and to update their progress and connect with staff. Many families have multiple children enrolled in the program and continue their involvement.

In addition, staff use the following specific strategies to engage families:

Create a welcoming environment. To address the stigma and isolation that may prevent family engagement in the program and in their children’s education, staff always greet families and make them welcome to pour themselves a cup of coffee or water in a comfortable waiting area. A computer lab, telephone, fax machine, printer, and more are available for families to use at any time. Some families remain at the program the entire day, assisting in the classroom, connecting with other parents, using the available technology, and participating in workshops, parent groups, and other activities. CP’s goal is to help the families they serve feel like family. Many families say it is the first time they have felt comfortable in their children’s early education environment.

Offer assistance in areas that will help families be more independent and help their children develop and succeed.

For example, the CP Association provides workshops based on families’ interests and needs. Family education topics chosen by the families include how to participate in their child’s education; help their children transition to kindergarten; access community resources; manage finances, health, safety, and nutrition; cope with stress; and disclose their health status to their children and other family members.

Encourage parents to become leaders. Becoming involved in external leadership activities is difficult for those who have not disclosed their health status to family members or friends. However, at the association, parents can become members of the parent advisory council, which promotes their leadership skills. In addition, family volunteers participate in interviewing potential program staff. Parents who feel comfortable with public speaking are asked to speak at trainings or development efforts for the center. Inclusion in these and other parent leadership activities is especially important because many of the parents are living in situations in which they feel they have no voice.

Offer monthly events. These can include family fun nights at museums, concerts, and sporting events; male involvement events and roundtable discussions; open houses; pastries with parent breakfast meetings; and holiday parties.

Encourage parent participation in support groups. Parents participate in groups, such as a moms’ group, single-parent group, and father engagement group. Group topics are guided by parent interests and needs, and facilitated by a staff member. Staff rotate attending groups so parents have an opportunity to talk with all staff members and staff have the opportunity to get to know different families.

Offer assistance to help children and families attend. CP offers parents bus cards or taxi vouchers so they can attend parent-teacher conferences, visit their children’s classrooms, and go to doctor appointments. In addition, staff support families to overcome obstacles that may prevent them from bringing their children to school, including lack of clothing, food, emergency assistance, and child care. The Early Learning Center provides before- and after-hours care for up to two hours for families who are working or in school. In emergency or crisis situations, children are brought to CP’s nearby residential care facility, which has 24-hour staffing. Parents are always welcome to ride the school bus with their children. However, seating on the bus is limited. To accommodate parents the bus driver may do an additional route. Families are also invited to school to share meals with their children, read a story, participate in activities that are special to them (cultural practices, games, special holidays and celebrations, or other activities unique to their family), chaperone field trips, and play with the children.

Partnering with and providing for the needs of families affected by HIV/AIDS has an impact on children's development. This support is important to families. A mother shared the following observation: "I love the CP. I'm watching my son grow every day. He's going to be ready for the world."

Conclusion

Staff need a sensitive and caring disposition to engage families affected by HIV/AIDS. A child care program may be one of the few opportunities for families to interact with others in a supportive environment. One parent said, "The CP saved my life. It's given my son and me opportunities we would never have had." Through family-centered approaches that engage families, early care and education program staff can support and strengthen families. It is important for teachers and administrators to ensure programs

maintain environments in which all children and their families feel secure and welcome.

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Profile Family Bookmaking: Creating Links Between Home and Early Childhood Programs

Lisa Boyce

FAMILY BOOKMAKING ENGAGES DIVERSE FAMILIES in meaningful, authentic literacy experiences that produce books for the families and the classroom, in English and in children's home languages. The Dolores Doré Eccles Center for Early Care and Education recently held a bookmaking event for 2-year-olds and their families. The teachers had identified several goals for the event, including creating and providing meaningful literacy materials, incorporating home languages into the classroom, facilitating language development, promoting literacy skills in developmentally appropriate ways, and helping families feel comfortable and engaged with center staff and other families. Toddlers and their families were actively engaged throughout the evening. The exploration and bookmaking activity lasted about one hour for most families, and more than two-thirds of the families of 2-year-olds participated.

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Interactions between the 2-year-olds and their family members—mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, and others—during an experience they have fun doing together are critical to family bookmaking. One father reported, "The most enjoyable part of the bookmaking experience was the process itself." Staff take on a supportive role during this process—providing assistance as needed and promoting the family-directed nature of the activity.

The books are based on conversations between toddlers and families and interactions during a particular shared activity. Book text is based on the young children's talk as they look at photos of the shared activity. The toddlers talk more about the experience later as they look at the completed books with their families. (See "Creating Books: A Three-Part Process," p. 54.)

I have used shared bookmaking successfully with families from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The activity has been especially rewarding among families with a cultural tradition of oral storytelling—for example, Latino families—who may read storybooks less frequently to their children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2013).

Making family books is an open-ended activity. The activities and themes vary according to the ages and interests

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