THE NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment

The partnership between parents and Head Start staff is fundamental to children's current and future success and their readiness for school. This relationship ensures success when staff understand the value of information and how to share such information effectively, and when they have the attitudes and skills that support genuine partnerships. This set of documents outlines how information that programs collect about children's learning and development can be used with families. These documents identify specific strategies that support the development of staff-parent relationships, and provide specific guidance to staff on sharing information with families.

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Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment:

Responsibilities, Perspectives, and Strategies

This paper addresses the perspectives of parents and program staff in the sharing of child assessment information through the formation of partnerships and suggests strategies for bringing those perspectives together. It outlines a framework for building partnerships between program staff and parents that establish ongoing communication, enhance teacher-child and parent child relationships, and help prepare children and families for transitions to later schooling.

This will assure that 1) families have access to information about their children, 2) the information is understandable and meaningful, 3) that parents have input about the needs of their child, and 4) both staff and families can take action on the information that is shared. Sharing information and strong family-program partnerships help everybody learn – program staff, parents and children.

RESPONSIBILITIES - SHARING INFORMATION IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Every staff member interacts with children. All have information they can share with parents to strengthen the program-parent partnership. Yet program staff roles vary in their responsibilities for family engagement:

- teachers may focus on classroom performance and behavior;
- family service workers may have information about the child that could be used in accessing other services;
- bus drivers have information from home and school, direct observations of children, and opportunities to communicate with parents;
- program directors, home visitors, special needs and heath and nutrition coordinators all bring their own experiences, perspectives, curiosity and interest in their work with families.

All use information (also referred to as "data") about the child when communicating with parents. They can use it to strengthen parents' engagement with their children and the program. Understanding their roles helps staff members determine what information to share with parents and *how* to share it.

PERSPECTIVES - WHAT FAMILY MEMBERS AND PROGRAM STAFF BRING TO INFORMATION-SHARING INTERACTIONS

Parents and other family members bring a broad array of information, feelings, beliefs and expectations relevant to the child's experience in the program:

- the child's temperament, health history, and behavior at home;
- family expectations, fears and hopes about the child's success or failure;
- culturally-rooted beliefs about child-rearing;
- parents' experiences of school and beliefs about their role in relation to professionals;
- parents' sense of control and authority, and other personal and familial influences.

Program staff bring their own knowledge, beliefs and attitudes to their work with families:

- developmental and educational information about the child based on observation and assessment;
- information about the child's performance in the program;
- information about the curriculum and learning goals for the child;
- knowledge about the child's next educational environment;
- staffs' own unique personality and temperament, family history and culture;
- their job description, agency policies, and the supervision they receive;
- their own training, experience, and professional philosophy.

Respectfully sharing these different perspectives is an essential step toward healthy learning environments for children. Regular and purposeful supervision can help program staff recognize when their own perspectives are based upon personal reactions, biases and cultures, and guide them to effective communication strategies.

STRATEGIES FOR INFORMATION SHARING

Start with parents' perspectives: Before sharing data about a child, consider why this information is important to you. Ask yourself whether this information will be important to the child's family in the same ways. If you're not sure, this is a good place to begin: *"I wanted to tell you about your child's progress in learning to get along with the other kids, but first wanted to know if this is something you've been wondering about."*

Ask family members what they would like to share, what they would be interested in knowing, what it would mean to them. You can adjust the information you share accordingly. As you proceed, ask them how they understand it, what they think it means, and what conclusions they may be drawing about the child, the program, themselves.

Be positive and specific: Positive comments about specific behaviors or characteristics - ones the parents are bound to see too - make these conversations real. *"He's so sweet,"* may sound like something the teacher says about all the children. Instead, choose positive information to share about the child's unique qualities: *"She's always the first one to go comfort a child who's crying."* Parents are usually more open to program staff's concerns about a child's behavior or academic performance when they know that the child's strengths are recognized and appreciated. Children's strengths are important to understand in detail since a child's challenges can often be overcome by building on them.

Be descriptive and share interpretations: Simple, clear descriptions of a child's behavior – without interpretations or judgments – help identify common ground and differences. Parents and program staff can simply watch the child together in the classroom or at home. Or they can look together at a child's artwork or portfolio. After listening to each others' descriptions, assessment data, and observations, program staff can ask parents for their interpretations. Parents know their children best, and their observations and interpretations often provide critical information. Program staff can respond first by appreciating parents' perspectives. Then, they can adjust their own so that they can join parents where they are. This does not mean that upsetting assessment results aren't shared. Instead, results are communicated within a respectful and honest relationship that makes them a little easier to hear and to respond to.

If staff observations or interpretations are very different from parents', these different perspectives can be openly acknowledged: "*You know, I think you and I are looking at this painting very differently. I know you are eager to have your little boy learn how to make pictures that look like something real, and so am I. And I totally agree that we have to figure out how to keep him from getting paint all over his clothes! But in all of these colors and brushstrokes he is using, I think he is also showing the enthusiasm and hard work that assures me that he will learn to paint real things and keep the paint on the paper. He is really sticking with it, and he loves it! Maybe you and I see his painting differently, but I think we both want to help him work toward the same goal."*

Focus on the parent-child relationship: Observations of parent-child interactions are data too. Research shows that strong parent-child relationships link with positive cognitive and social emotional outcomes for children. Staff efforts to strengthen these relationships can help achieve such outcomes. Yet in practice, staff often focus on the parent and the child separately, without attending to their relationship.

Parents need to know that their relationship with their child is valued and supported by program staff. Sometimes they worry that their child may feel closer to program staff than to them or they may feel that their relationship with the child is judged by program staff. Sharing observations of parent-child interactions can provide reassurance about such concerns, strengthening the parent-child relationship, and parent-staff relationships too. For example, when a teacher says, *"I think these tantrums your child has when you pick him up are his way of saying how much he has missed you all day,"* a parent feels closer to both child and teacher. Welcoming parents to visit the classroom and encouraging one-on-one interaction with their child are also effective strategies for reinforcing parent-child and parent-staff relationships.

Observations or data shared at parent conferences can serve to support the parent-child relationship, or it can add to stresses that threaten it. Acknowledging the parent-child relationship while sharing information gives parents the sense that the program is reinforcing their relationship with their child: *"I know that you have been working on this together at home,"* or *"Tell me how this behavior is affecting bedtime."* Strategies like these also enhance the staff-parent partnership because they demonstrate that staff's attention goes beyond the child's performance at school to include the whole child.

Support parental competence: Parental competence can be supported in a variety of ways. For example, a child's success can often be credited to parents' efforts, so point out these successes to parents as you see them. Or information that parents offer about their child can be used in planning the child's program. Acknowledging and treating parents as experts on their child, recognizing parents as knowledgeable partners in decision making, and attributing a child's progress to parents' efforts as you observe them, all reinforce parents' sense of competence.

Open up to parents' emotions: Whether parents celebrate a child's successes, worry about developmental challenges, show interest in test results, or express anger at the child's behavior, emotions are always involved in parents' understandings of their children. No matter how professional they are, emotions are also part of program staff's understandings of children, too. It can be challenging for parents and program staff to make room for each others' emotions in their interactions

with each other. Sometimes, these may seem to get in the way of sharing information, and interfere with arriving at a shared understanding of the child. For example, the protective parent may seem to see only a child's successes, and the angry parent may seem to never see them.

Rather than getting in the way of the work, these emotions, both positive and negative, also be understood as parents' and staff's passionate concern for the child. Even when parents and staff have very different ideas about what a child needs, they almost always all "want to do well by the child". When parents' emotions are difficult for program staff to face and to understand, it may help to remember this. Staff members can build strong partnerships with parents by listening for these emotions and working with parents to understand them. *"It is so important to you to be sure your child succeeds. All of these small successes just may not seem to be enough. I want your child to succeed too, and we can work together to make sure it happens!"*

IT'S AN ONGOING PROCESS

At intake, parents will be relieved to discover that program staff listen to them first, and that they truly listen. Parents want to be sure that their child is understood, and that program staff can see the child as they do: *"Perhaps we could start with the things you really want to be sure I know about your child."* There will be important information in the child's approach to a new situation and to strangers, and in the parents' perspective on it. Program staff might ask: *"How does he usually handle new situations? How do you think he's doing right now? What do we need to know in order to help him adjust?"* Conversations like these are more meaningful when data are shared – watching the child together, listening to parents' interpretations, and adding program staff perspectives.

Initial observations help form the parent-program staff partnership. Sharing of information from ongoing assessments sustain it. Data sharing and developing a common view of the child unfold over time, and require different strategies along the way. As the parent-program staff relationship deepens, the quality of the information about the child will become richer, as will the quality of parent and program staff responses to it.

All information about a child has unique meaning for parents. Never only data, it almost always touches on parents' hopes and fears. Once parents have learned that program staff really care about their child and share the same aspirations, they may be more open to sharing their concerns about the child and listening to those of the program staff. Once parents and program staff know they're all committed to understanding each others' perspectives, they will be ready to face their differences. They will be better able to respond together to new information about what the child needs to grow and learn. Ongoing information-sharing leads to ongoing opportunities to improve children's learning environments at home and at school.

SHARING INFORMATION AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

The goal of sharing information with parents about their child is not to make parents do what program staff think needs to be done, nor to see the child as staff do. Instead this process helps program staff to see the child as the parents do. This expands their understanding of the child and the family, so that they can adjust teaching and family support accordingly. When program staff can see the child as parents do, parents know that they can trust them. As a result, they are more likely to be open to program staff perspectives about their child. Information about the child will more effectively flow, from parents to staff, and staff to parents. Then, parents too will have richer information about their child to add to their support of their child's learning and development at home.

Through training and supervision, program staff can master strategies for sharing information that will strengthen partnerships with families and improve children's outcomes. But systemic family engagement also requires an overall program philosophy that upholds partnerships with families at all levels of agency functioning: at the administrative level; in hiring, training, supervising and evaluating staff; in the design and use of the program's physical space; and in program policy. Parent engagement cannot be delegated to a subset of employees. It is everyone's responsibility, and reinforced within all aspects of the program.

Tips for Programs on Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment

QUESTIONS PROGRAMS MIGHT ASK TO ASSESS THEIR PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- Are parents genuinely a part of the program from the very first contact? Are they invited to share what they know about how their child learns and what their child needs? Is that information used and do parents know how it will be used?
- Are parents regularly welcomed into the classroom? Is the classroom parent and family friendly, father friendly?
- Do teachers include/consult parents in setting learning goals for children? Is this an equal partnership in which both parents and teachers feel valued and understood?
- Do parents regularly receive information about what their child is learning? Are there activities that go home with children related to each week's curriculum? Do parents have the opportunity to communicate with staff about using this information at home?
- Are parents offered workshops, tip sheets, videos, joint activities & information about classroom curriculum? Do teachers/staff and parents share any of these experiences and learn together?
- Are parents invited to participate in special activities for learning? Do parents have support and opportunities for exchange with staff about using everyday activities for learning with their children?
- Are parents asked for input for 45 day screenings?
- Do teachers & parents meet to develop portfolios, and other materials that capture a picture of the child's learning over time?
- Do parents & teachers jointly participate in getting ready for school? Do they jointly plan and work with school teachers/staff and parents of school age children to make the transition positive and supportive of the child's continued learning and development?
- Have you found other ways to share information with parents about how children learn and grow?

IDEAS PROGRAMS MIGHT CONSIDER

Children's learning is enhanced when staff and parents both form strong partnerships and share information effectively. Here are some specific points at which staff partnerships with parents are key:

- Ask for parent input first–get their perspective before sharing that of the program.
- Include parents in assessment data gathering from the beginning and as partners in the process.
- Consider the parent's point of view in interpreting that information.
- Translate assessment findings into everyday activities that parents can do with their children and use parents as consultants in planning classroom activities.
- Suggest resources in the community that families can access to support learning.
- Support transitions by helping families use data to describe their children's accomplishments & challenges.

In order to make the most of the exchange, staff can:

- Communicate regularly with families about developmental processes & learning strategies.
- Explore with parents how *they* are observing growth in their children.
- Partner with families to assess the child's process of development.
- Offer tools (for example, portfolios) to support parental understanding of their role in creating developmental change related to their children's outcomes.

Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment:

Program Opportunities to Engage Families in Children's Learning and Development

WHAT WE MEAN BY "DATA"

Early childhood education programs use many types of data, such as child attendance and assessment data, classroom quality ratings, and information about family well-being. The data can be used for different purposes, such as supporting family engagement, helping directors and policy councils make decisions, identifying appropriate curricula supports, choosing topics for parenting workshops, and measuring child progress toward shared goals.

HOW DATA HELPS CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND STAFF WORK TOGETHER

Assessment data helps programs understand children's learning and development. Teachers and other early childhood staff use this information to support children's individual and group learning experiences and socialization activities. All families want to know how their child is doing and how they can help, and data is a powerful tool for partnering with families. Teachers and other early childhood staff can use assessment information to help families understand their child's progress and explore new ideas for supporting their child's learning and development at home and in the community.

When early childhood staff share information with families, families are better prepared to partner with programs to improve child outcomes. Child learning and development become shared responsibilities of families and staff. These conversations also help parents learn about the kinds of information they will need in order to help their children transition into school.

DATA SHARING LEADS TO ACTION STEPS

Below is an example of how data can be used to promote child development.

> As an education manager, I had a discussion with Laura's teacher in the fall about her assessment of Laura's vocabulary. Laura was an active 3-year-old, but the teacher expressed concern about Laura's limited vocabulary use. She knew from screening that Laura did not need to be referred for a follow-up evaluation, yet she noticed that Laura's interactions with other children were somewhat limited.
>
> We reviewed the plans Laura's teacher had implemented and agreed on incorporating some new strategies, such as using more photos and pictures with Laura. We also realized that we needed more shared strategies with Laura's family and agreed that she would have more frequent communication with at least one family member about Laura's progress. We decided to start a small journal that would be sent back and forth between home and school so we could better track the words that Laura uses and with what frequency she uses them.
>
> After some time had passed, we had a discussion about Laura's progress and realized that the journal was a great help. The teacher noticed that Laura was using different words at home than at school, and she was able to work those words into her teaching with Laura. Laura's parents told the teacher that the journal reminded them to try to introduce new words to Laura each day. The journal became a good data source for Laura's teacher and her family, and working together in this way, they saw Laura's vocabulary really expanding.

This is an example of how sharing assessment information leads to new action steps in teaching and at home that improve children's learning and development. Program effectiveness and children's school readiness will be enhanced when data is shared and acted upon. Sharing data helps to focus conversations on what is and isn't working, and on action steps that support children's learning, parent engagement, improved teaching, and improved program quality.

ELEMENTS FOR SHARING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION WITH FAMILIES

There are three elements that are necessary for staff and families to effectively engage in a process of sharing information about children's learning and development:

(1) Families have **access** to their child's individual learning and development information.

(2) Information that is shared is **understandable and meaningful** to families and staff.

(3) Staff and parents put the information into **action**.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Both families and staff have important information to share about a child's development. Parent observations are key to informing teaching at various points in the assessment cycle, while staff-conducted assessments provide parents comprehensive picture of their child's progress. Programs can encourage reciprocal sharing of expert knowledge by:

- Inviting family members to share their observations about how their child learns and their thoughts and insights about their child's behavior.
- Using multiple approaches to reach families, ie. home visits, parent–teacher meetings and other forms of communication, including telephone calls, text messaging, and secure online platforms.
- Inviting teachers to parenting education sessions so they can hear parents' questions, interests, and concerns about their child's learning and development.
- Keeping families informed by regularly sharing key findings from assessments and work samples that together form a child's portfolio.
- Providing the data/information in a user-friendly format.

MAKING INFORMATION UNDERSTANDABLE AND MEANINGFUL

Child assessment information must be made clear and meaningful to staff and families. Staff need to help families understand what the assessment information means about their child's learning and development. Families need to help staff understand assessment information in light of their observations of their child at home and in other settings. Some ways that programs can ensure that child development information is meaningful to families include:

- Helping families understand what assessment is, and that the goal of assessment is to support a child's progress by informing the teacher and family about different approaches to enhancing their child's learning and development.
- Helping parents understand what the next stage of learning will be (e.g., baby is almost ready to walk, preschooler is about to write her name), so they can anticipate and look to support that next stage.
- Listening to families' hopes, concerns, and questions about how and whether their child's development will move forward.

USING INFORMATION TO TAKE ACTION

Children greatly benefit when staff and parents share information in order to co-design activities that parents can do at home and in the community to support learning. Some ways that staff and families can jointly do this could include:

- Translating assessment information from different areas of learning into every day activities. For example, every day literacy can be advanced with parent–child conversations about what they see out of the window of a car or bus. Every day math skills can be reinforced when parents and children sort through socks, counting them and organizing them into colors, before selecting a pair to wear.
- Sharing information with families about resources within the community that can support their child's learning, such as programs at the library or community center.
- Supporting transitions within early childhood programs and from preschool to school by helping families feel comfortable in communicating and describing their child's accomplishments, strengths, and challenges.

USING DATA AS A PATHWAY FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL ENTRY

The following is an example of how a **portfolio** can support a child's learning throughout early childhood.

Getting going: Measuring and documenting Sam's progress over time was just as exciting for me, his home visitor, as it was for his family. I introduced the concept of a portfolio during my first visit with Sam and his family. As new parents and new enrollees in Early Head Start, they were eager to learn about their baby and all that our program could offer. I explained how we could use the portfolio as a central place to keep key information about Sam. There we could keep completed Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ), suggested activities that his parents could do with him based on the assessment findings, and goal plans that we would create together for both Sam and his family.

Moving along: Together, we began building the portfolio, inserting the ASQ findings, photos, and dated artwork representative of key developmental milestones. We also used the portfolio to store notes from his pediatrician, his immunization record, and contact information for other services in the community that the family might choose to use. With its special spot on the shelf next to the television, I was pleased to find that the portfolio was frequently used by his parents to remind them of activities they could do to support Sam's learning, and as a quick reference when they needed to call the pediatrician or another provider. Sam's father was especially proud of the portfolio and shared it with visiting family members, taking pride to point out the difference between Sam's early artwork and what he was now creating.

Moving on: Fortunately, with blended funding, our program was able to serve children from birth through kindergarten enrollment, so Sam's portfolio continued to grow and became a comprehensive record of his early years. When it was time to start school, Sam's parents shared the portfolio with his kindergarten teacher and the principal, so they could be fully aware of his learning profile. The portfolio that we created together ensured that (1) the family had access to and could also share key information about Sam; (2) the information was meaningful; and (3) it helped the family understand things that they could do in their every day activities that would sustain the gains in Sam's learning and development, and they could share their understanding with Sam's new teachers. The portfolio was an essential tool for the family and me, keeping us grounded in who Sam is and how we could work together best to support his learning and development.

Ideas for Programs on Sharing Child Information

TYPES OF INFORMATION THAT PROGRAMS COLLECT:

- Child attendance
- Child developmental assessments
- Classroom observation
- Child screenings
- Observation of child-specific behavior
- Classroom practices (e.g., CLASS)
- Indicators of program quality (e.g., QRIS)

INFORMATION SHARING POINTS OF CONTACT:
Each offers unique opportunities to form the partnership

- Intake and orientation
- Drop off and pick up (whether at the program or at the bus)
- Ongoing communication about classroom activities
- 45 day screenings
- Written communication (notes home, newsletters)
- Parent-teacher home visits
- Regular parent conferences
- Parent participation in classroom
- Special events
- Beginning and end of program year
- Transition between classrooms or programs (e.g. home-visiting to center-based)
- Transition to school

SHARING HELPFUL INFORMATION WITH PARENTS AND PROGRAMS:

Child Assessments and Observations:

- Understand & support the child's developmental process
- Track child learning & development over time
- Inform & support child's activities at home and in the community that influence learning & development
- Facilitate referrals for assessments & additional services to community agencies, such as part special needs services
- Facilitate transitions between programs & to school

Classroom Assessments:

- Understand what good classroom practice looks like
- Share observations of classroom practice
- Advocate for improvement of classroom quality
- Use methods from good classroom practice to develop home activities

Program Assessments;

- Understand what quality programs look like
- Share information on program functioning & quality (e.g. surveys, meetings)
- Take leadership to improve program quality (committee work, policy council)
- Advocate for improvement of program quality in HS & community
- Specifically examine the effectiveness of parent engagement activities

Please share your ideas, efforts, and experience in making child assessment data available to families by e-mailing the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE@childrens.harvard.edu) with subject line: Sharing Data with Families.

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