# Ways to Engage Families by Using Tell Me A Story in Your Center

In many preschools, teachers and staff make daily efforts to include families in their child's education. Often, teachers are left feeling like their efforts are in vain, as days pass without parent participation. Other times, teachers and staff are energized by parents' involvement, and seek to further develop opportunities to have parents in the center. This training provides teachers and staff a platform to work together to discuss benefits and challenges, and also to make a center-wide action plan that commits staff to common goals for families to be a part of the Tell Me A Story program.

## Goal

To identify opportunities for staff in preschool settings to engage families by using the Tell Me A Story program center wide.

## Objectives

Participants will:

- Discuss the benefits of establishing an expressive environment for children
- Develop an Action Plan

## Method and Content

This workshop has two distinct sections, each designed to build on the other.

- Exercise One: The Benefits and Challenges of Connecting With Families and Talking About Difficult Topics
- Exercise Two: Developing an Action Plan

In Exercise One, we laid the groundwork for establishing relationships with families in your center through identification of challenges and benefits. The next exercise, "Developing an Action Plan," is designed to assist participants in setting goals for the future.

## Getting Started

**What You Need:**

- Time – this training should take 2 hours, not including Workshop Leader preparation. For more information on **Time Management**, see the *Introduction to the Tell Me A Story Workshops*.
- A training space large enough to accommodate the members of the training to participate in large group discussion. For workshop groups larger than 20 participants, you may want to consider including two Workshop Leaders to help manage and respond to participant needs. For more information on considerations with **Group Size**, see the *Introduction to the Tell Me A Story Workshops*.
- Seating for the training group (e.g. semi-circle for more interactive exercises)

- Prepare a training packet for each participant with the following materials:
  - Handout 1: Needs/Resources/Action
  - Handout 2: Other Considerations When Engaging Families
  - A Workshop Evaluation
- A pen or pencil for each participant
- Eight large pieces of paper (for Exercise 1)
- Five colored markers: Four for the participants to use in Exercise One, one for the Workshop Leader

### Workshop Leader Preparation

Read through all the workshop materials first. Take time to reflect on your own responses to the exercise questions, focusing especially on your own preconceived notions about reading books and engaging families at your center.

Consider the fact that workshop participants may have different feelings about the workshop's themes, including expectations for how to participate at your center, why there may be challenges reading, and the appropriateness of discussing certain topics with a group of children. Think ahead of time about the elements of the workshop that are most important to emphasize and how you can remain flexible in order to understand where your participants are beginning with this subject matter. For instance, if you have a participant who reports that certain strategies offered will never work in her classroom, ask "Why?" before coming to your own conclusions. That participant may be concerned with having parents in the center, or may simply be uncomfortable with trying new things. **Everyone should approach this subject matter at their own comfort level for making your Center a welcoming place for families.** For example, if having parents attend a center wide workshop seems too difficult, perhaps a first step would be to invite families into your classroom to read during Circle Time.

**Preparing the Workshop Space:**

- Prepare the training space by positioning chairs so that the participants can begin as a large group, and then move easily into smaller groups.
- Place a training packet on each chair in the room.
- Prepare one large piece of paper, entitled "Parking Lot for Ideas."

➤Prepare four large pieces of paper with titles listed below. These will be used for Exercise One (The Benefits and Challenges of Connecting With Families and Talking About Feelings).

Sharing books with parents on social-emotional themes is hard because...

It's easier to talk about feelings or social-emotional topics with parents when they...

Our center helps to welcome families by...

Making a connection with parents is important because...

## Introduction to the Training

Workshop Leaders are encouraged to use their own words to introduce the training. Some key points to consider are:

➤Welcome the group and review logistics – general agenda, time frame, when to expect breaks, materials, sign-in sheet, etc.

➤The topic of the training is "Ways to Engage Families by Using TMAS in Your Center."
*For example, you might say...*
"The exercises will specifically focus on how to engage families in your center in order to promote discussion and conversation with children through books. By reading books, asking questions, and giving children a chance to share their ideas, we can encourage expression and have a unique opportunity to create a community of children who feel supported to explore social-emotional topics."

➤Describe the objectives of this training:
Let participants know that the training will give them an opportunity to:

- Reflect on the benefits of establishing an expressive environment for children and families
- Develop an Action Plan

➤Explain the "Parking Lot for Ideas" sheet as follows: during the training, if a question, suggestion, or concern unrelated to the training exercise, but related to the topic is offered, the Workshop Leader will record it on the "Parking Lot for Ideas" sheet. Refer back to these ideas at the end of the training for further discussion as time permits.

➤Review the Training Ground Rules, which are a short list of statements intended to promote a safe, positive environment for all participants. These can be printed on a piece of paper for all to see, but reviewing the rules and asking for group agreement is the most important step before beginning the exercise.

### Training Ground Rules

**There are no right or wrong answers** in any of the activities we will be doing today. Everyone's opinions and feelings are respected here.

**One at a time.** We want to hear what everyone has to say, so it is important to remember that group discussion requires strong listening skills.

**Learning takes time.** We will not rush one another when trying to understand and participate.

**Maintain Confidentiality.** While sharing our experiences we do not need to use names of children, parents or staff.

For example, you might say…
"In the previous training, we talked about our experiences of being in classrooms. Many of you mentioned that you have many parents who volunteer in the classroom. Others said it's very hard to get parents to participate. Let's remember our own experiences when we think about creating positive opportunities for parents to be welcomed in our classrooms. In the next exercise, we'll think about welcoming families into the center as well as your classroom."

## Exercise One

The goal of this exercise is to give participants the chance to share ideas about engaging families in the Tell Me A Story project in center wide activities. Be aware that there are some challenges that you cannot address in this particular training. Still, getting everyone to contribute will allow the group to discover and clarify what makes reading socially-emotional based books such unique and powerful tools to support children's healthy development.

Themes will be discovered within the responses in order to shift discussion from engaging parents in classroom activities to the benefits of creating an expressive environment throughout your center.

➤Direct the group's attention to the four statement prompts on the large pieces of paper, reading them aloud.

1. Sharing books with parents on social-emotional themes is hard because...
2. It's easier to talk about feelings or social-emotional topics with parents when they...
3. Our center helps to welcome families by...
4. Making a connection with parents is important because...

➤ Ask participants to move around the room and write responses to each prompt directly onto the large pieces of paper.

➤ Tell the group that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to the prompts. This is a chance to discuss the real experience of working with families – so their honesty is essential.

## Table 1. Sample Responses for Exercise One

| Initial statement prompt | Examples of potential responses | Themes for Workshop Leader to develop in the discussion |
|---|---|---|
| **Sharing books with parents on social-emotional themes is hard because...** | • Parents might not like reading<br>• Supervisors tell us not to be close to the parents<br>• Scared of what certain people might say in response<br>• It will frighten some and agitate others<br>• Because it will start a conversation that is inappropriate for the classroom<br>• I don't like to talk about feelings<br>• Parents are in a hurry to leave | It can be a challenge to both develop a relationship with families and establish professional boundaries. Regular and supportive supervision can assist in navigating how to maintain this balance.<br>You might also feel like talking about books with parents is difficult because there are many topics to cover (how the child is doing with friends, expectations about school performance, etc.) in often very little time. |
| **It's easier to talk about feelings or social-emotional topics with parents when they...** | • Trust me<br>• Have experience talking about their feelings<br>• Are open<br>• Talk about their children's feelings with me<br>• Speak the same language | There are some things that can help us feel more able to have difficult conversations with families, such as an appropriate space, frequent times to meet and get to know each other, and common interests. Remember, you always have the child's best interests in common. |
| **Our center helps to welcome families by...** | • Honoring confidentiality<br>• Having coffee available<br>• Posting flyers about community events | It is important to remember and re-visit the valuable goal of creating a welcoming environment for all families in your center. |
| **Making a connection with parents is important because...** | • We will understand their children better<br>• Helps us understand different kinds of families (e.g. same-sex, single, adoptive, bi-cultural, etc.) | Connecting with families will help us be more informed professionals who are better able to serve the needs of children. |

- Once participants have had a chance to record their responses, reassemble the group in their seats for a discussion of the responses.

- Read responses aloud, identifying themes and developing themes for discussion (examples of discussion themes are provided in Table 1).

- Listen for themes that might lead you into the next exercise where the focus is developing an action plan for engaging families in TMAS activities.

## Exercise Two:

Now that the group has discussed benefits and challenges, shift the focus to making plans for next steps. Encourage the group to begin thinking about how today's discussion applies to the work in their classrooms and in the center.

For instance, you might say:

> "It's time to start plugging these ideas into the work in the classrooms and center wide. The next exercise is going to be about making an Action Plan in order to plan for our future goals."

In this exercise, participants will combine their own reflections with the strategies discussed in order to devise Action Plans for their center and classrooms.

- You will need to first divide the participants into small groups for this exercise. Allowing them to work with the other members of their teaching teams is strongly encouraged, if possible.

- Have small groups discuss program and classroom needs, resources, and action. Groups should select someone to record responses on the worksheet.

- Distribute Handout 1.

# Handout 1

## Needs/Resources/Action

### PROGRAM LEVEL

| NEEDS | RESOURCES | ACTION |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

### CLASSROOM LEVEL

| NEEDS | RESOURCES | ACTION |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

- Once participants have had a chance to record their responses, reassemble the group in their seats for a discussion of the responses.
- Read responses aloud from each small group, identifying themes and developing themes for discussion (examples of discussion themes are provided in Table 2).
- Listen for themes that might lead you into the next exercise where the focus is engaging families in a center wide workshop.
- Distribute Handout Two: Other Considerations when Engaging Families

## Table 2. Sample Responses for Handout 1

PROGRAM LEVEL

| NEEDS | RESOURCES | ACTION |
|---|---|---|
| Child care and meals for parent events and workshops | Teachers, volunteer parents, donations, cook, and social work food budget | Have cook prepare a meal, have events during classroom hours – for child care |
| Co –facilitator for workshops for parents | Parent advocates, one social worker, teacher with interest, a social work intern | Review the skills, availability and interest of staff listed and recruit a facilitator |
| Books for TMAS readings | Local libraries… | Contact local libraries about book availability and number of copies |
| Time to plan, strategize and communicate as a team | Social Service Meetings, nap times, email and face-to-face time | Schedule monthly meeting for whole team & weekly meetings for smaller work groups |

CLASSROOM LEVEL

| NEEDS | RESOURCES | ACTION |
|---|---|---|
| Enough books to be able to share/ lend books to families | Local libraries… | Look into grants that will support building school libraries/collections |
| Classroom volunteers | Family advocates/social worker at site, church, one friend, a teacher from country of origin | Make colorful flyers to post in center to call attention to the need for volunteers |

# Handout 2

## Other Considerations When Engaging Families

### A. Supervision

The work of engaging families can be exhilarating, exhausting, inspiring, and demanding. There are times when it may seem like all of the parents at your center are disconnected and hard to reach, and there are other times when they may seem highly involved and ready to participate. And sometimes still, you may perceive a combination of both extremes. Whatever the sentiment may be, providing regular supervision to staff members who are responsible for the "front line" work of engaging parents is crucial to your success. Regular and thorough supervision provides the chance for staff to reflect on their practices, develop strategies for improvement, and get the support necessary to continue doing the work. Supervision, at its best, should include the following:

- Confidential meeting space
- Regularly scheduled meetings (once a week to twice a month)
- An agenda
- Open communication between supervisor and supervisee that is based on trust

Sample Supervision Tool: (see page 11)

### B. Confidentiality

An inherent aspect of providing parent support is hearing information that is sensitive and confidential for families. In working with staff that engages families, it is crucial to address how your center will respond to confidential information that parents divulge as a result of established trust and alliances with center staff. For example, in a support group, some parents may disclose childrearing practices that are abusive, and the group facilitator will be responsible for deciding how to act on that information. In training group leaders, be sure to discuss when information must be shared, with whom, and how it is shared. Another component of confidentiality is the dynamic that may present itself in support groups: members will know each other from other contexts (perhaps they are neighbors), and information may be passed on beyond the parameters of the programs' walls. Stress the importance of building trust over time and encourage staff and parents to respect the privacy of families.

## C. Challenges

Acknowledging the challenges of providing support can be a helpful way to begin planning parent engagement. The following chart may serve as a model for developing strategies to address challenges.

| CHALLENGE | STRATEGY |
|---|---|
| Sometimes the parents we are most worried about are the hardest to reach. | Offer ongoing and varied opportunities for engagement such as groups, drop-ins, teacher meetings, and celebrations. |
| Sometimes the information we need to share (for example, information on abuse and neglect) is not positive and people do not want to participate. | Re-phrase workshop topics. For example, rather than "Workshop on Abuse and Neglect", try "What Does Taking Care of Our Children Look Like?" or "Positive Strategies for Caring for Your Children." |
| The multiple duties of staff that are assigned to parent engagement can interfere with their ability to stay with the project. | Provide regular supervision to discuss staff's workload. If/when staff are overburdened, create a plan for sharing responsibilities with other staff members. |
| Providing childcare for evening events. | Budget for temporary help or regular staff to stay late with children. |

Sample Supervision Tool
Parent Engagement Team
Staff Reflections

Name _____ Date _____

**Listed below are some questions to consider. The goal in this exercise is to be able to reflect on our work, gifts and growth. Your answers are confidential, only you and I will read them.**

What part of your parent engagement work feels the most satisfying? Why?

What part of your parent engagement work seems the most challenging? Why?

In what ways would you like to progress in the coming year (i.e. skills, qualities, abilities, knowledge base, etc.)?

What do you need in order to make this progress (i.e. resources, training, supervision, opportunity, etc.) and how can the parent engagement team support it?

# Engaging Families Worksheet

## 1.) Family needs

| Ongoing needs for families with preschoolers | Current issues specific to your center |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |

## 2.) Different formats to engage families

| Formats presently in use | Ideas to try, retry or develop |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |

## 3.) Problem-solving

| Obstacles | Strategies |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |

## 4.) Setting goals

| To engage with positive information on a daily basis | To build skills to engage during times of conflict/crisis |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |

## 5.) Supporting the staff who engage with families

| Forums to share ideas about parents' needs | Forums for support |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |

## Wrapping Up

Pulling things together at the end of the training is an important step for everyone. As a workshop gets close to the end and people are feeling tired, it can be tempting to skip this part. Let people know that you will get them out of the workshop on time, but want to take a few more minutes to wrap up the time you've spent together.

**1. Review Key Concepts**

- The benefits of establishing an expressive environment for children and families
- Developing an Action Plan

**2. End on a positive note.** Encourage participants to continue this examination of engaging families at your center by using books with their children. Suggest that they refer regularly to the Action Plans they created today to remind them of their goals and strategies. Remind them children and adults respond best to change when it is taken one step at a time.

3. If time permits, **review some or all of the comments written on the "Parking Lot for Ideas" sheet posted on the wall.** Consider responding to one comment, then asking participants which of the others they would like discussed in the time remaining. These comments should also be considered in preparation for the next training.

**4. Express your appreciation.** Let the group know how much you appreciate their time and hard work. Thank them for sharing their ideas and for being willing to think about change together.

**5. Make yourself available.** After the training, be willing to answer questions and respond to concerns on an ongoing basis. If the Workshop Leader cannot be available, an on-site staff member should be designated in this role and announced at the end of the training.

**6. Collect Attendance and Evaluation Forms.** Ask participants to sign an attendance sheet and complete an evaluation form. Remind participants that these forms are anonymous and collected for the purpose of improving future trainings. During this time, you might also want to title and date any large group work so you can save it for future reference.

## Extending Learning and Supporting New Skills

In order to extend the workshop's content to changes in professional skill and behavior, the Workshop Leader and administrators should consider these follow-up activities:

**Provide Supportive Supervision for Individuals and Teams.** Teachers need additional opportunities to discuss integrating books and engaging families with a supervisor or a mentor. Teachers may also need more discussion in order to ask questions about how to employ the strategies shared in Handout One: Needs/Resources/Action.

**Implement Classroom Observation & Social Service Support.** Consider making regular classroom observations when parents are present. Take notes in order to keep track of change over time and the outcome of new strategies. Make time to follow up with discussion of these observations with the teacher teams.

## Workshop Leader Reflection

The Workshop Leader should take some time to review the training experience once it is over, read through and tally the evaluation forms, and review the results. Some additional questions to consider are:

**Was I prepared?** Did I have all the materials I needed? Was the room adequate? Did I feel confident with the topic?

**Did the training go as I imagined it would?** Did the group respond the way I thought they would? Were there any surprises? Were there any elements of the training that went especially well?

**Were the participants engaged?** Did the group size seem appropriate? Who seemed comfortable enough to share their thoughts with the group? Who did not seem comfortable? Do I know why? Did I get the feeling that the participants understood the exercises and materials? Who was present and who was missing today? Is there anyone I need to follow up with immediately?

**What were some of the themes that people talked about in this training?** Was there a group of issues that the responses and discussion had in common? Are any of those issues a surprise? How can I use those issues in future trainings to make the exercises more effective?

**What would have made this training better?** In hindsight, what could I have done differently? Why? How can I use that information to make the next training even more successful?

**Did I gain new knowledge from this training?** What did I learn? In addition to new information on the training topic, did I gain any new knowledge about the training group or individuals in the training group? Did I learn something new about myself as a Workshop Leader?

# Workshop Evaluation

## Title of the Workshop: Ways to Engage Families by Using TMAS in Your Center

Location _____ Date _____

Please rate how well the training met the objectives below:

| | Excellent | Very Good | Good | Not Good |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Objective 1: To better understand the benefits and challenges of connecting with families and talking about difficult topics | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Objective 2: Develop an Action Plan | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |

| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overall rating of this workshop: | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Usefulness of information presented: | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Usefulness of workshop activities: | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Creativity of workshop activities: | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Trainer's knowledge of subject: | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Trainer's presentation style: | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |

Is there anything you would like to learn that was not presented in this workshop?

Would you like more trainings that expand on this topic? Yes No (Please circle one)
I would like more training on:

Additional Comments:

## Additional Resources

**Short Papers for Families:**

*Parenting, Depression, and Hope: Reaching Out to Families Facing Adversity*
*Fostering Resilience in Families Coping With Depression: Practical Ways Head Start Staff Can Help Families Build on the Power to Cope*