



Family and Community Practices and Outcomes Executive Summary

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) is charged with supporting Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS) programs to effectively engage with parents, families, and communities to promote children's healthy development and learning. The Center will:

Mobilize the commitment, energy, and collective experience of programs, staff, parents, and community leaders in implementing Head Start's comprehensive, two-generational model of early childhood education;

Strengthen the capacity of HS/EHS and other early childhood programs to adopt research-based, research-informed, strengths-based, and culturally-informed practices; and

Foster the development of parent, family and community engagement models that are systemically integrated across programs and communities and sustained over time.

This paper conveys our initial ideas about the distinguishing features of innovative, research-based parent, family, and community engagement strategies, how they complement the efforts of HS/EHS staff and systems, and how they improve outcomes for children and families.



Parent, Family, and Community Engagement in High Performing HS/EHS Programs

Our review of research and our collective experience with Head Start and other education and human service initiatives confirm that effective parent, family, and community engagement is:

- **Responsive** to the cultures, goals, and circumstances of individual parents and provides a **comprehensive** range of opportunities for family support, involvement, and leadership;
- Based on **shared responsibility** – programs commit to joining families in respectful and empowering ways, and families commit to actively supporting their children's learning;
- **Outcomes-based and data-driven**; and
- A **systemic program-wide initiative**, embedded in the work of all staff members, management systems, and leadership priorities.

All of these features depend on intentional relationships for their success.

Responsive and Comprehensive. To be responsive, partnerships between staff and families must be grounded in an exploration of families' immediate concerns and interests. For some families, this will mean first focusing on urgent needs related to food and shelter or health and safety. Other families may seek to improve the financial stability of their families while also participating in Head Start parent education or parent support groups. Still other families may choose to be active program volunteers, leaders in policy councils or advocates for their children's transition to Kindergarten. Family engagement is a pathway of many merging routes, and while family circumstances, experiences and commitments will change over time, forward movement along the family engagement pathway is always the desired outcome.

Parent and Family Engagement Framework

The Office of Head Start convened a Parent and Family Engagement Roundtable in 2010 which, in partnership with parents, program staff, T/TA providers and researchers, helped to better define six areas of parent and family engagement practice. These areas of practice encompass a range of responsive and comprehensive parent, family and community engagement goals along the family engagement pathway. Each of these areas of practice are both interrelated and interdependent.

1. **Family well-being:** Families participate in services that ensure safety, health, and financial stability offered in the context of the family's values, culture, and aspirations.
2. **Positive parent-child relationships:** Parents participate in ongoing support, education and skills development opportunities that promote warm, healthy parent-child relationships.
3. **Parents as first and lifelong educators:** Parents have opportunities to observe, guide, and promote the learning of their children at home, school, and in their community.
4. **Parent connections to peers and community:** Parents have opportunities to form connections with peers or mentors in supportive, educational or faith-based networks that enhance social well-being and community life.
5. **Parent leadership and advocacy:** Parents have opportunities to participate in leadership development, decision-making, program policy development, and in community and state organizing activities to improve children's development and learning experiences.
6. **Intentional transitions:** Parents have the necessary tools to improve their children's learning outcomes as they transition to new learning environments, including Early Head Start to Head Start, and Head Start to public schools.

Shared responsibility. All staff collaborate with parents towards shared goals. With mutual respect and trust, parents, families, and staff are more likely to work closely together and share responsibility for children's learning.

Sharing responsibility is particularly important for families facing adversity – e.g. violence, homelessness, or depression – when HS/EHS support systems are needed most. Staff members are less readily overwhelmed by families' needs in such circumstances, because they also know their strengths and understand the strengths of their cultures. Families are active partners, not passive recipients of services.

Together, staff and families build relationships that allow them to share challenges and collaborate to find the best solutions. They dare to share and use the resources they already have in innovative ways. They share responsibility and hold themselves and each other accountable for children's learning.

In communities, HS/EHS programs are institutions where sharing responsibility with other agencies builds social capital. In other words, when HS/EHS programs come together with other community members to share goals and strengths, they can make their communities stronger. When limited community resources are pooled and deployed collaboratively, community agencies can more effectively sustain children's healthy development and families' well-being.

When parents, HS/EHS programs and community agencies act together from a common stance of shared responsibility and goals, crises of daily life are shared and lead to new and more effective responses.

Data-driven decision making. As they share responsibility for working toward common goals, parents, program staff, and community agencies need information to track and improve each other's performance – and their own.

Sharing data on classroom quality and child outcomes with parents prepares them to advocate more effectively for improvements. Data on individual child development – for example, portfolios of children's classroom work – prompt parent-teacher conversations that lead them to action steps to support children's progress. Parents can share data about their children's learning with staff of other programs and new schools during transitions.

Data can be collected and reviewed to inform program decision-making and improve program effectiveness.

A shared commitment to examining data and information together enables parents, teachers, program directors, family service providers, and community partners to find new solutions to new challenges. This too, depends on intentional relationships. New solutions emerge from high quality communication and collaboration.



Systemic, program-wide approach. All staff must be engaged in developing empowering, culturally respectful relationships with parents and families.

- Program Directors: create a culture that welcomes parents and family members and supports teachers and other staff in building strong, respectful relationships with families.

For example, a program director concerned about low parent participation at parent-teacher conferences asks parents what they would like to accomplish in the meetings.

- Teachers, home visitors, and family childcare providers: highlight family members' roles as children's lifelong teachers. They gather insights from parents' stories and share observations about children's development. Together parents and staff can map progress, set goals, and develop strategies for learning at home, in the program, and the community.

For example, an Early Head Start teacher shares a toddler's work portfolio with his parents and together they discover how the child learns and what the child needs at school and at home; or a parent volunteering in the classroom sees how his child learns at school through conversation and imaginative play and tries these at home.

- Family services workers: partner with families to set goals and develop action plans, helping them access the community resources they need. They work hand-in-hand with teachers and home visitors to support families' roles in their children's learning.

For example, a family resource worker does his morning check in with teachers and then purposefully greets a mother dropping off her child, asking if she has seen the good work her daughter did when they talked about emotions during circle time.

- Bus drivers, administrative assistants, cooks, and janitors: welcome children and parents and take further initiative in helping them both with separation during transitions, sharing understandings of the families with other staff, and in making sure parents know they are valued just as much as their children.

For example, a bus driver reassures a worried new parent that her child will be alright, comforting the child with a warm smile as she climbs aboard.



Parent, and Family Engagement: Practice Change

Changes in practice are implemented and become sustainable when they are supported and reinforced by corresponding changes in policies, procedures, and protocols:

Leadership. Program directors, senior staff and policy councils engage with staff to elevate parent, family, and community engagement as a core strategy for achieving family and child outcomes. They demonstrate their commitment internally by serving as role models in working with parents and in providing staff time and resources to develop skills that support engagement. Externally, they build relationships in the community and with elementary school principals that facilitate services and effective transitions.



Professional learning and staff support systems. Ongoing professional development, mentorship and reflective supervision help staff strengthen relationships with families, colleagues and community members. Learning opportunities focus on developing new skills and the care and well-being of staff. Staff is encouraged to serve on community boards to both give to the community and access resources for the program.



Purposeful community partnerships. Programs form community partnerships to amplify their resources. Examining data together helps partners understand the needs and strengths of families, establishes clear expectations for partners' contributions, and builds consensus on how accountability and continuous improvement will be tracked.



Parent and Family Engagement Makes a Difference for Children and Families

When effective parent, family, and community engagement practices are systemically integrated in programs, children graduate ready for kindergarten, families are prepared to engage in their children's education through high school, programs achieve higher levels of quality, and communities are unified by a shared responsibility to nurture and educate the next generation.

- **Family outcomes improve.** Parents become socially connected, empowered, more emotionally available to their children and ready to offer encouragement and motivation for learning. Parents are more likely to advocate for the services and support their family's needs and to draw on the strengths of their cultures to overcome their challenges.
- **Child outcomes improve.** When parents and families are actively engaged in their children's learning, children show more progress toward school readiness.
- **Program quality improves.** Families become agents of change, bringing the strengths of their cultures and new perspectives to children's learning and ideas and strategies for improving program quality. They offer insights into ways to improve communication, program-parent relationships, and access to community resources.
- **Transitions are seamless.** Parents benefit from the support of programs during transitions – from pregnancy to parenthood, home to EHS, EHS to HS, and HS to school. Children benefit when their strengths, needs, and potential are communicated from one setting to the next. They are more prepared for kindergarten and less likely to be referred to special education when transition activities between schools and early childhood programs facilitate parent and family engagement. Continuing engagement in the school years improves children's attendance, behavior, grades, and high school graduation rates.
- **Community engagement increases.** Parents speak out for policies and practices that support children and families from pregnancy through young adulthood. Parents take leadership roles, catalyzing the growth of safe and healthy communities.

National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement and Head Start

Solutions to tough problems and new challenges require the full participation of those who are on the front lines in HS/EHS programs. Nobody understands the challenges and opportunities of working with families and community partners better than the program staff themselves. Leaders in the ranks of HS/EHS Directors, Family and Community Partnership Managers, Family Services workers, parents, and other staff know what they are doing right and what isn't working. The NCPFCE is committed to working with the Head Start community to identify exemplary strategies, and to co-create new approaches that activate the full potential of families, HS/EHS programs, and community partners and support each others' continuous learning and growth.

Our success will depend on open, free-flowing communication across the full spectrum of urban, rural, migrant, American Indian & Alaskan Native programs. We need to know what you need help with and what has helped you to build strong and effective partnerships with parents, family, and community. We need to understand the constraints that limit innovation and improvement, so that we can work together to remove these barriers and help every Head Start and Early Head Start program strive to be a high performing one. Most of all, we need to know about innovations you are already implementing, how they are paying off in improved outcomes, and how we can assist other agencies in testing them out, adapting them, and integrating them into their ongoing interactions and strategies with parents, families, and community partners.