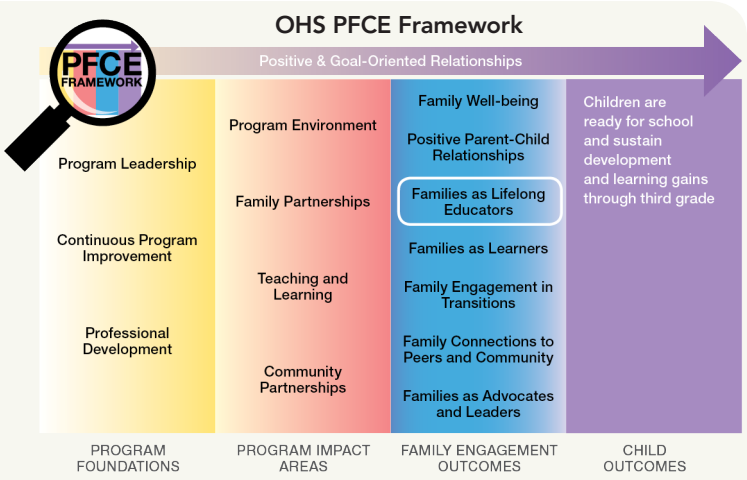
# Families as Lifelong Educators

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Office of Head Start (OHS) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the "Families as Lifelong Educators" Outcome: *"Parents and families observe, guide, promote, and participate in the everyday learning of their children at home, school, and in their communities."*

This resource presents a summary of selected research, proven interventions, and program strategies intended to be useful for Head Start (HS), Early Head Start (EHS), and other early childhood programs.




The OHS PFCE Framework is a research-based approach to program change that shows how Head Start and Early Head Star programs can work together as a whole – across systems and service areas – to promote family engagement and children's learning and development.

## Introduction

Parents and families are their children's most important educators, with many opportunities to build the foundation for a lifetime of learning. Families educate their children every day—both in formal and informal ways. Through positive interactions with their children, parents promote healthy development and prepare them for school, successful relationships, rewarding work, and better health. The skills and attitudes parents encourage will teach their children to care for themselves and for others, so they will grow into adults who can do the same.

Through learning activities with their parents, children help develop social competence, motivation, persistence, and an overall love of learning (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, & Hamby, 2006; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). These are all key components to success in school. Parents can encourage positive attitudes toward school by telling stories, reading, singing songs, and talking together about topics that children will learn about in school (McWayne et al., 2004). Parents give children opportunities for exploration and self-discovery (Rogoff, 1990) and prepare them to learn the language and math skills they will need to find good jobs later on.

While all families want to give their children the best chance at success, they may see their roles as lifelong educators in different ways. They make choices that reflect their cultures, values, and priorities. For example, some families might want their children to speak multiple languages. They may want to preserve a home language and support dual language learning at school. Partnering with families can help you learn what is important to them so you can work together to help children thrive.

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Early Childhood National Centers

NATIONAL CENTER ON Parent, Family and Community Engagement

When Head Start and Early Head Start programs partner with families, the benefits of early education will be sustained throughout children's lives. Long after these programs have ended, families engaged with their children's education will continue to provide a safe, secure, and stimulating environment, motivating children's love of learning throughout their lives.

## Families as Lifelong Educators: What We Know

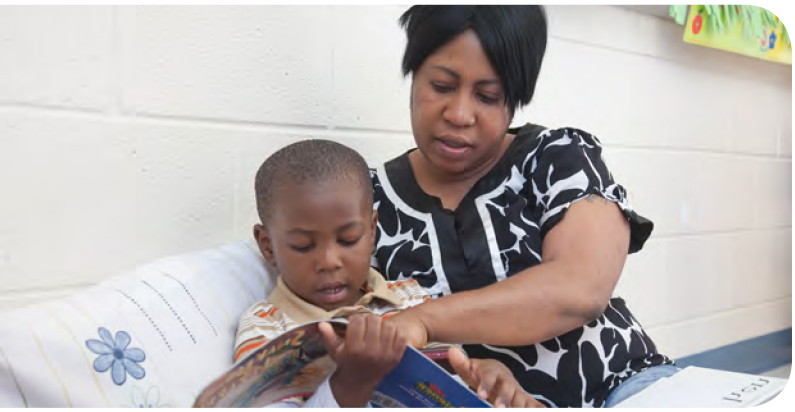
### Early Experiences Provide the Foundation for Lifelong Learning

Parents can begin to promote children's lifelong learning as early as pregnancy. By providing a safe, nourishing, toxin-free environment, expectant parents foster healthy brain development (McEwen, 2003). Then, beginning in infancy, children learn from repeated experiences with others, especially parents and other caregivers who interact with them often.

Through these experiences, infants and children develop expectations of others and themselves, including expectations for success or failure in learning. The quality of these parent-child interactions impacts:

- language and cognitive development,
- academic success (Bowlby, 1969; Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997; Fearon et al., 2010),
- social and emotional competence (the ability to get along with others and to understand and cope with emotions),
- levels of anxiety and aggression,
- feelings of self-worth, and
- how children interpret their broader social world.

In these interactions, the ability to understand and respond to their children's cues—parental sensitivity—(Thompson, 2008) influences children's emotional development (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). From birth on, children use facial expressions, body movements and posture, coos, and cries. Later they use words to let parents know what they need—to be held and comforted, to be played with and stimulated, to sleep or to nurse. They also communicate when they feel fatigue, hunger, pain, frustration, boredom, pleasure, and affection.



Parental sensitivity is key to a parent's role as their child's first educator (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). Such cues as quiet, focused attention or fidgeting and restlessness can tell parents when their children are ready to learn and when they are not. These cues can tell parents their children need a break or just a little encouragement in order to stay excited about learning. Program staff and parents can work together to understand and respond to children's cues effectively.

## How Parents Promote a Love of Learning

Parents can help their children develop the skills and attitudes towards learning that will help them succeed in school and in life. For example, when parents read with their children, they can boost children's school success and language development beyond the impact of literacy activities in early educational settings (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). These powerful parent contributions to children's learning may be especially meaningful to parents whose own reading abilities are limited. Programs can promote parent-child literacy by encouraging parents to take advantage of no-cost early childhood services in libraries that offer shared reading and artistic activities (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

## Bridging Home and School with Family Partnerships

Parents who have positive relationships with their children's teachers and who spend time in their children's childcare, preschool, or school environment advance their children's school success in many ways. Their involvement improves academic outcomes by, for example, increasing children's rates of retention in classrooms, cutting time spent in special education classrooms, and boosting graduation rates (McWayne et al., 2004). The children of involved parents are also less likely to be anxious, depressed, defiant, and aggressive (Yeboah, 2002). Children are more likely to succeed when parents advocate for their needs (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001), such as special education services or support for both the child's home language and English language skills. Parents can advocate effectively for their children's needs when they know their rights and have access to legal and other community resources.

For example, in collaborating with schools to develop individualized educational plans (IEPs), program staff can partner with parents to ensure that the final IEP:

- incorporates parents' observations, concerns, and knowledge about their child,
- specifies the supports and interventions the child needs – in language that parents understand and agree with, and
- addresses objections parents raise during the planning process.

Parents are better able to help their child learn when they understand their child's individual temperament and how their child learns at each developmental stage. Parents and program staff can arrive at common understandings of a child's unique learning style by sharing observations and information with one another. They can learn together about how to respond to the child's temperament and share their views on appropriate expectations for that child.

Parent-teacher and parent-home visitor discussions of child assessment data can also help inspire and guide learning activities at home and at the Head Start or Early Head Start program. This can increase consistency across these settings and reinforce children's learning. Teachers and home visitors can share a child's portfolio with parents, and listen to comments and insights on their child's work. This shows respect for parents' views and allows teachers and home visitors to adjust and balance their comments about the child's strengths and challenges.

Classroom efforts to improve children's outcomes can be enhanced by partnering with families. Teachers can choose classroom activities that parents can easily do at home, such as dialogic reading (specific back and forth exchanges between adult and child while reading) (Institute of Educational Sciences [IES], 2007) or rhythmic moving games that involve counting.

**Programs can encourage parents to bring to the classroom learning activities, such as songs and stories, that come from their own childhoods and cultures. This creates a bridge between home and school and a parent-teacher partnership that promotes children's language and math skills.**

## Bridging Cultures and Languages with Family Partnerships

All parents teach their children, but what and how they teach vary with their family's cultures. Cultural differences in beliefs and values can lead children, parents, and service providers to have different expectations for children's education and development (Mallory & New, 1994) and for parents' roles in their children's education (Garcia & Jensen, 2007; Hughes et al., 2006). Program staff and families with different cultural perspectives can learn to understand each other's perspectives and work together toward shared goals (Trumbull et al., 2001).

For children, families, and program staff there are major benefits of this kind of cross-cultural learning. For example, with open dialogue between parents and program staff about each other's cultures, parents are more likely to engage as decision-makers and advocates for their children and as partners with Head Start and Early Head Start programs (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003). In addition, parents who teach their home language to their children – in partnership with programs that support this while also promoting English language learning – enhance their children's brain development beyond that of single language learners (Conboy & Kuhl, 2011).

**Open communication between home and program across cultures requires strong Program Leadership and a welcoming, inclusive Program Environment. One important step is to ensure that all handouts and communications sent home are provided in the parents' preferred language (Espinosa, 2010).**

## Interventions for Supporting Families as Lifelong Educators

The following approaches are not the only useful, evidence-based interventions in the field, but they represent some good examples of options for programs to consider. Some interventions focus on one aspect of a family's life or a specific time period, such as the prenatal period. Other interventions may address a range of topics within the context of a group or educational setting. Approaches can be comprehensive and/or multi-level. Comprehensive services are a complete set of services to address the full range of a family's challenges. Multi-level approaches address challenges within the family and in the various contexts and environments that affect them.

### Prenatal Interventions

Many effective and promising prenatal interventions provide supportive relationships, connect parents to each other, and empower parents to take charge of their own health during this vulnerable period. These include doula programs (peers trained to accompany women through pregnancy and the postpartum period), prenatal massage (for example see http://www6.miami.edu/touch-research), and groups that focus on the prenatal period and preparations for parenthood. Mothers and fathers can both benefit from interventions in the prenatal period. It is a time to begin seeing themselves as parents, and to build and strengthen a social network that will support them in their new roles.

One example is *Centering Pregnancy*, an intervention that promotes self-care, child development knowledge, and connections to other parents in a group setting for expectant mothers (Rising, Kennedy, & Klima, 2004). Positive results include greater maternal knowledge of child development, more prenatal visits, reduced preterm births, and improved birth weights. All of these are associated with better child outcomes.

### Parent Education Interventions

Simply providing parents with information is unlikely to change behavior. But respectfully engaging parents as equal partners, and welcoming their knowledge, pride, and concerns about their children may lead to greater openness to information – for example, how to boost children's social and emotional development, and language and math skills. Such information can also include the many evidence-informed and culturally relevant resources that teachers and parents can use as they talk, sing, read, play, and count with children (Bardige, 2009). Conversations in parent groups about all of the children's progress can also reveal new ways that parents can be most effective as their children's teachers. Starting with the positive, and listening carefully to parents' observations first, can help put parents at ease and build trust. The success of parent groups depends on positive relationships with practitioners and/or parent educators (Pinquart & Teubert, 2010).

Parent education classes and support groups can:

- guide parents toward developmentally appropriate expectations for their children, and skills and supports to increase positive parenting behaviors (Horwitz, Chamberlain, Landsverk, & Mullican, 2010);
- increase fathers' involvement and decrease parental stress (McIntyre & Abbeduto, 2008); and
- provide opportunities to develop advocacy and leadership skills.

*Parents as Teachers (PAT)* is an example of a parent education intervention that aims to promote parental knowledge of child development, positive parent-child relationships, and parents' sense of competence in parenting (parenting self-efficacy). Children of families in this program scored higher on standardized measures of intelligence and social development than children in comparison groups (Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Yarnell, 1996).

Parent education interventions provide social supports, including positive connections to other parents. This can reduce the negative mental health impacts of living in poverty (Simpson & Rholes, 2008) that can interfere with parents' roles as teachers. Informal social support can come from other parents, a partner, and neighbors, and can help create a sense of belonging to a community. This has a strong positive influence on parents' sense of confidence, perception of child's temperament and development as well as overall parenting satisfaction (Raikes & Thompson, 2005).

### Comprehensive and Multi-Level Interventions

Comprehensive and multi-level services for families are especially important for families living in poverty. The many stressors that are linked to poverty can affect family functioning and children's development. Lack of resources (such as high-quality child care or safe neighborhoods), and greater stress and instability add to the risk of negative child health and behavioral outcomes (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Social, emotional, language, and cognitive development are also at risk (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide a comprehensive range of services to address poverty's many challenges and build on the resilience that often accompanies it. Programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start address the full range of children's and families' needs. Analyses of the long-term economic and social impact of such early, comprehensive interventions show that the costs pay off in the long run (Doyle et al., 2009). Comprehensive approaches prevent the negative effects of poverty from spilling over from one generation to the next.

Comprehensive services can help parents advance their children's language and academic achievement as well as their social and emotional development. These include:

- medical, social, and financial stability services for parents and children, aimed at improving children's educational outcomes;
- direct enhancement of parent-child interactions in which children learn with their parents (Ayoub et al., 2009; Bradley, Chazan-Cohen, & Raikes, 2009); and
- support for parent literacy and educational goals that in turn can improve children's language development (Hoff, 2006; Pan, Rowe, Singer &, Snow, 2005).

Partnering with parents to address their full range of needs and build on strengths can also help boost sensitive and stimulating parenting behaviors (Hess, Teti, & Hussey-Gardner, 2004).

Another example that is both multi-level and comprehensive is the *Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPCs)* program. The *CPC* program promotes parents as partners in their children's education and provides high-quality educational and social support services to children and families from preschool through elementary school. This model improves children's academic achievement through not only high-quality preschool programming but also increased family involvement (Reynolds, Temple, Roberston, & Mann, 2002).

## Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

As children's lifelong educators, families help their children succeed in school and across the life span. Children's learning starts with strong positive parent-child relationships and is rooted in warm and sensitive interactions with their caregivers. Programs can encourage parental sensitivity to children's cues as early as infancy, and support a parent's sense of competence. This can enhance parents' ability to watch for and sustain their children's moment-to-moment readiness for learning. When their children's cues say, "I'm ready to learn," parents can extend the curriculum beyond the classroom by engaging in learning activities that include warm interactions while reading, rich conversations, singing, dancing, counting, and playing.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can create opportunities for families to connect with social supports that strengthen and support their role as lifelong educators. Parents' skills and confidence can be enhanced and reinforced by supportive relationships with peers and connections to community programs and a full range of comprehensive services. When families are empowered in the role as their children's most important teachers, they are more likely to stay engaged with programs, show leadership in schools, and advocate for their children's success – in learning and in life.

## What Can Programs Do?

**Tackle Multiple Stressors with Comprehensive Services.** Programs can connect parents with a full range of coordinated services that build on their strengths and protect their role as their child's most important teacher. For example, services that help parents to advance their education goals, address their health and mental health needs, stabilize their finances and housing, and connect them with peers and informal social supports all give parents a better chance to be their child's lifelong educator.

**Partner with Parents to Learn What is Working and What Isn't.** To use limited resources effectively, engage families in continuous learning and program change. Programs need to know what is working for children and families so that they can expand what works and modify what doesn't. For example, children's learning is affected by parents' interactions with program staff and other parents, so it is important for programs to know how these interactions are working. Programs can ask parents for feedback in surveys or focus groups about their interactions with staff and peers, and use this data to inform professional development and parent activity programming.

**Engage Parents to Build Consistency between Home and School.** Home-school consistency means that parents and programs work together to reinforce children's learning everywhere that children learn. Leadership and program staff can create consistency between Head Start and Early Head Start programs and home by establishing respectful dialogue with parents. They can invite parents to come together to give input into the educational process (Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech, 1999). Home-school consistency depends on the support of Program Leadership, and corresponding changes in Professional Development, Teaching and Learning, and in the Program Environment.

**Provide Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Learning and Open Communication.** Families' role as lifelong educators is especially important as children learn about who they are and where they come from. Programs can celebrate families' unique cultures through classroom activities and curriculum, and community events. Staff and families can work together to support dual language learning, which promotes children's brain development and success in school. Programs can keep lines of communication open by ensuring that the Program Environment is welcoming and inclusive of families from all backgrounds.

# References

Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2012). *Head Start, child care, and public libraries: Partnerships to support young children and their families*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Ayoub, C., O'Connor, E., Rappolt-Schlictmann, G., Vallotton, C., Raikes, H., & Chazan-Cohen, R. (2009). Cognitive skill performance among young children living in poverty: Risk, change, and the promotive effects of Early Head Start. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 24*(3), 289–305.

Bardige, B. S. (2009). *Talk to me baby! How you can support young children's language development*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Barrera, I., Corso, R. M., & Macpherson, D. (2003). *Skilled dialogue: Strategies for responding to cultural diversity in early childhood*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss* (Vol. 1). New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.

Bradley, R. H., Chazan-Cohen, R., & Raikes, H. (2009). The impact of Early Head Start on school readiness: New looks. *Early Education & Development, 20*(6), 883–892.

Conboy, B. T., & Kuhl, P. K. (2011). Impact of second-language experience in infancy: Brain measures of first- and second-language speech perception. *Developmental Science, 14*(2), 242–248.

Denham, S. A., Mitchell-Copeland, J., Strandberg, K., Auerbach, S., & Blair, K. (1997). Parental contributions to preschoolers' emotional competence: Direct and indirect effects. *Motivation and Emotion, 21*(1), 65–86.

Doyle, O., Harmon, C. P., Heckman, J. J., & Tremblay, R. E. (2009). Investing in early human development: Timing and economic efficiency. *Economics & Human Biology, 7*(1), 1–6.

Duncan, G. J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). Family poverty, welfare reform, and child development. *Child Development, 71*(1), 188–196.

Dunst, C. J., Bruder, M. B., Trivette, C. M., & Hamby, D. W. (2006). Everyday activity settings, natural learning environments, and early intervention practices. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 3*(1), 3–10.

Espinosa, L. M. (2010). *Getting it right for young children from diverse backgrounds: Applying research to improve practice*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Fearon, R. P., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Lapsley, A. M., & Roisman, G. I. (2010). The significance of insecure attachment and disorganization in the development of children's externalizing behavior: A meta-analytic study. *Child Development, 81*(2), 435–456.

Garcia, E. E., & Jensen, B. (2007). Advancing school readiness for young ispanic children through universal prekindergarten. *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy, 19*, 25–37.

Hess, C. R., Teti, D. M., & Hussey-Gardner, B. (2004). Self-efficacy and parenting of high-risk infants: The moderating role of parent knowledge of infant development. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 25*(4), 423–437.

Hoff, E. (2006). How social contexts support and shape language development. *Developmental Review, 26*, 55–58.

Horwitz, S., Chamberlain, P., Landsverk, J., & Mullican, C. (2010). Improving the mental health of children in child welfare through the implementation of evidence-based parenting interventions. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 37*(1), 27–39.

Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices: A review of research and directions for future study. *Developmental Psychology, 42*(5), 747–770.

Institute of Educational Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education (2007). *What works clearinghouse intervention report: Dialogic reading*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Lonigan, C. J., & Whitehurst, G. J. (1998). Relative efficacy of parent and teacher involvement in a shared-reading intervention for preschool children from low-income backgrounds. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 13*(2), 263–290.

Mallory, B., & New, R. (1994). *Diversity and developmentally appropriate practices: Challenges for early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

McEwen, B. S. (2003). Early life influences on life-long patterns of behavior and health. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews, 9*(3), 149–154.

McIntyre, L. L., & Abbeduto, L. (2008). Parent training for young children with developmental disabilities: Randomized controlled trial. *American Journal on Mental Retardation, 113*(5), 356–368

McWayne, C., Hampton, V., Fantuzzo, J., Cohen, H. L., & Sekino, Y. (2004). A multivariate examination of parent involvement and the social and academic competencies of urban kindergarten children. *Psychology in the Schools, 41*(3), 363–377.

Pan, B. A., Rowe, M. L., Singer, J. D., & Snow, C. E. (2005). Maternal correlates of growth in toddler vocabulary production in low-income families. *Child Development, 76*(4), 763–782.

Pfannenstiel, J., Lambson, T., & Yarnell, V. (1996). *The Parents as Teachers program: Longitudinal follow-up to the second wave study*. Overland Park, KS: Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education and Parents as Teachers National Center, Inc.

Pinquart, M., & Teubert, D. (2010). Effects of parenting education with expectant and new parents: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24*(3), 316–327.

Quiroz, B., Greenfield, P. M., & Altchech, M. (1999). Bridging cultures with a parent-teacher conference. *Educational Leadership, 56*(7), 67–70.

Raikes, H. A., & Thompson, R. A. (2005). Efficacy and social support as predictors of parenting stress among families in poverty. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 26*(3), 177–190.

Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., Robertson, D. L., & Mann, E. A. (2002). Age 21 cost-benefit analysis of the Title I Chicago child-parent centers. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24*(4), 267–303.

Rising, S. S., Kennedy, H. P., & Klima, C. S. (2004). Redesigning prenatal care through centering pregnancy. *The Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health, 49*(5), 398-404.

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking*. New York: Oxford University Press

Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, D.C.: New Academies Press.

Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2008). Attachment, perceived support, and the transition to parenthood: Social policy and health implications. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 2*(1), 37–63.

Thompson, R. A. (2008). Early attachment and later development: Familiar questions, new answers. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed.; pp. 348–365). New York: Guilford.

Thompson, R. A., & Meyer, S. (2007). The socialization of emotion regulation in the family. In J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 249–268). New York: Guilford.

Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., Greenfield, P. M., & Quiroz, B. (2001). *Bridging cultures between home and school: A guide for teachers*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Yeboah, D. A. (2002). Enhancing transition from early childhood phase to primary education: Evidence from the research literature. *Early Years, 22*(1), 51–68.

## *Acknowledgements:*

This document was originally developed with funds from Grant #90HC0003 and modified with funds from Grant #90HC0014 for the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. We are grateful to our colleagues and the families in the Head Start and Early Head Start community for their contributions to this resource. It may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

*© 2013 Boston Children's Hospital. All rights reserved.*

**NCPFCE@childrens.harvard.edu**

**http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family**