

Children's Learning and Development and Family Engagement Head Start Family Engagement Week 2011 – Day 4

Kiersten Beigel: Welcome to Day 4 of Head Start Family Engagement Week. My name is Kiersten Beigel and I'm the Family and Community Partnerships Specialist in the Office of Head Start. This week, we are launching the Office of Head Start's Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. You can find it here on the ECLKC. It's a road map for progress and for achieving parent and family engagement outcomes. Starting this fall, the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement will offer an engagement readiness guide that will assist programs with their self-assessment and their strategic planning.

This week, we're launching series of online events to spotlight family engagement. In our first video on family engagement, Director Yvette Sanchez Fuentes spoke about the importance of supporting family well-being, engaging families around their children's learning and development, and supporting and strengthening relationships between parents and children. In the second video, she talked with parents about how their programs welcome them and engage them as equal partners in supporting their children's learning and development. In the third video, I talked with two Head Start directors about how they have program-wide systems and processes in place that support family engagement. They described how professional development helps the program achieve family engagement outcomes.

And in our fourth video segment, today, we'll be talking about how service areas work together in programs to achieve family engagement outcomes that are essential for school readiness. As a reminder for our conversation today, here is one way that you can visualize the critical elements that are part of the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. The family engagement outcomes include: family well-being; positive parent-child relationships; families as lifelong educators; families as learners; family engagement in transitions; family connections to peers and community; and families as advocates and as leaders.

Family services staff, home visitors, and teaching staff have an important stake in family engagement. In fact, all staff have a role to play; but today, we are going to focus in on teaching and learning and family partnerships. I'm excited to be joined by program staff. Welcome, and please introduce yourselves.

Chris Beard: Hi, my name is Chris Beard. I'm the Family and Community Partnership Specialist for Northern Virginia Family Service.

Jennifer Huerter: And I'm Jennifer Huerter. I'm the Early Childhood Education Curriculum Director at Rosemount Center in Washington, D.C.

Kiersten: Thanks for being here with us today. So let's start with where families begin, which is their initial impressions of our programs. So, I'm talking about the program environment and the classroom environment. How do each of you, in your respective areas -- family partnerships and teaching and learning -- how do you make it clear that parents are valued and welcome in your programs?

Jennifer: In our program, in all our classrooms, we have family photos. And we modify that for the infant and toddler classrooms, since they spend so much time on the floor, that we have blocks that have the family photos. They're right up close to where they can see them. We're also constantly assessing our classrooms of how we can give more information about parents and models of parents.

One thing we do is we have family books around themes, like of food or games we play, and try to have pictures; and if parents are not comfortable, then maybe they can just write a sentence or two, and we have those on our bookshelf. So, it's a way for all the families to get to know each other. We also know that environment predicts behavior, so we always have to be mindful of that and always are looking at how we can bring families in more often.

Kiersten: So, Chris, I know that you have a lot of experience in engaging fathers. Can you talk with us a little bit about some things to think about in creating a welcoming environment for dads?

Chris: Sure. Dads are a lot different than moms. It really takes a lot more work, I think, to get us involved. And so, the process that we have to go through, I think, in our programs is to be a lot more intentional about the way that we engage dads, a lot more purposeful. Get -- get in front of those dads and talk to them and help to get them to understand, on a one-on-one level, the importance of what it means to be involved in their children's lives.

I think oftentimes, unfortunately, our culture promotes women being the primary caregivers in this process; and unfortunately, dads pick up on that -- children do, too. And it forces dads sometimes to -- to voluntarily take a backseat when they really should be co-partners with the mom, and maybe even in some cases be more involved. And so, there's a lot of things I think our programs can do to help promote that.

First off, I think each program needs to do a little bit of what Jennifer talked about -- is doing an assessment and take a look at your program, not only -- specifically, the environment. Is your environment promoting fatherhood engagement? This is a wonderful picture of a dad that we have here, and I think these types of things in your centers, in your programs, send these very positive messages to the dads that dads are welcome here. We want you to be more involved.

Also -- too, I think -- is we need to take a look at our staff and do an assessment there and see what are the attitudes and behaviors that they're reflecting in terms of whether they want dads involved or not. It does take more work to get dads involved. And I know sometimes, because of that, our staff have a tendency to shy away. It's much easier to get the moms involved in the process. But again, these are the types of things that managers and programs can take a look at. Get more involved, maybe train the staff on different approaches on how to get dads more involved, and then, of course, revisit that process throughout the year to make sure that everyone is -- is on the same page.

Jennifer: Chris really hit the nail on the head about educating staff. Teachers of young children or who teach young children, I think, are often more comfortable with children, not so much with adults; and

then probably with mothers more than fathers. So, we need to really have those conversations with staff of understanding their comfort level, what they're hesitant about, and really help them work through that and give them strategies, like Chris suggests, to really bring in those fathers as well, and make sure that they're welcome as well as engaged.

Kiersten: Well, so you've both given us some wonderful examples of how your programs create welcoming, culturally responsive, and supportive environments and build trusting relationships with families, with some special emphasis on outreach to dads. This really lays the groundwork for program-parent partnerships. What are some of the ways that your programs engage parents as partners who actually have a lot of knowledge about their own child and their children's development?

Jennifer: At the beginning -- actually, before the school year starts, we have all our teachers go out and do a home visit with the families. And we find that, since this is the -- the territory of the family, that the parents often feel very comfortable in sharing information. To go along with that, we often -- we also train teachers of what kind of questions to ask. So, it's not just what the child's interested in but what do they do as far as their values in raising a child, or with discipline or feeding habits or sleeping habits, so teachers really have an understanding of the differences between how they would do something different than what the parents would do. And then we train teachers to think about kind of changing their behavior so the family's values of how they would raise their child are respected at the center as well, and in the classroom.

Chris: Jennifer talked about home visits, and I think that's absolutely an important part of building trust. For our center-based programs, one of the things we do to help initiate conversations about children and families is we sit down and talk to the parents over our family partnership agreement, which is a wonderful tool to allow parents to talk a little bit about what their goals and hopes and dreams are for their children, and ways that our staff can kind of help and work with the parent to help them realize these goals while they're in our Head Start program.

And so, it's a wonderful way for our staff to get to know the parents better. The home visits are a part of it; the family partnership agreement's a part of it. I think both of those go a long way to help building trust with our parents, because every successful relationship is built on trust. And once the parents feel comfortable, they -- they feel that the staff does have their best interests at heart, the trust level increases and then we get more engagement, more involvement, and -- and everyone is the better for it.

Kiersten: So once you have sought input from parents, how do you maintain regular communication with families about how their children are doing? What kinds of systems do you have in place?

Jennifer: In our -- in our Early Head Start program, we have a daily communication sheet that we call "All About My Day," and it really tells the parents about what the child ate -- like the amounts -- the diaper-changing, how much they slept. There's also information about what their mood was that day. And that's done on a daily basis, and so when parents come in they can read it so they have an idea of how

their child's day was. So if they didn't eat very much at lunch and they're a little bit fussy early in the evening, they -- you know, that tells them that their child might be hungry.

What we do in the preschool classrooms -- because those children are a little more verbal and the parents don't need as much information -- is we have a form that's "About Our Week." So, teachers post the lesson plans of what they plan to do, but plans don't always happen the way you think they will. So, the summary sheet is just telling parents what actually happened in the classroom that week.

Chris: And I think, again, for our part, is we make sure that our staff are meeting with parents on a regular basis by scheduling, at the very least, monthly parent meetings. That gives -- again, it's a forum, an opportunity for parents to talk a little bit about maybe some issues that have come up throughout the month about their children and maybe some things we're seeing in the program, some things they'd like to see us do. But it also provides us with an opportunity, our staff, to do some training for our parents, because training is a big -- the parent development is a big part of -- of our programs as well.

We want our parents to -- to feel comfortable and gain -- increase their skill levels in terms of being a parent. So, those monthly parenting meetings provide us the opportunities to do that, as well. Also, I think, is that we need to focus on making sure that, again, our staff have the -- the skill sets to engage the parents so that there is a trust level there, they feel comfortable. The greater, again, the trust level is, the more times the parent will feel comfortable in approaching the staff about what their issues are.

Kiersten: We know there are many different strategies for engaging families as their children's primary educators. Programs can include parents in assessment data gathering, turn assessment data into everyday activities that parents can do with their children at home and in the community. Programs can point families to resources in the community, like libraries, of course, or other things that support family learning, children's learning. And they can engage in partnerships with parents in a way that really acknowledges their growth as parents -- as you kind of talked about -- and their growing understanding of their child's development and learning. Could you share, from each of your programs, some examples of how your programs support families in their role as their children's primary educator?

Jennifer: We've realized, to kind of work towards this goal, we have to be very intentional about what we do. Some teachers are better than others about communicating, some provide more details, but we've learned that just giving parents information about what we -- what we do in the classroom doesn't always give them the information about what they can do at home to support that learning. So thinking through, of giving ideas that connect to the theme or connect to the activities. Not just -- not just summarizing, but giving them things to do.

We also have to be sensitive that parents are very busy. And I think parents often remember their former school experiences. They don't remember their early childhood years, and so they think of homework. They think of sitting at the table and, you know, answering math problems or writing out sentences. So, we kind of need to change their thinking and remind them that a lot of the learning and a lot of the teaching they can do with their children can occur throughout the day. When they're folding

laundry, they can talk about sequencing. When they're at the grocery store, they can make lists of what they were going to buy and read that and -- or, you know, what fruit begins with a B.

So there's things they can do on a daily basis within the routine that promotes teaching and learning, and we really need to remind parents and support parents and give them ideas of how they can do that on a daily basis without -- without doing a lot of extra effort.

Chris: Again, Jennifer makes a great point. Learning can take place anywhere. And parents need to understand it doesn't just have to take place in the classroom, but there's a lot of wonderful things that can be done at home. And we try to reinforce that by also putting out monthly newsletters that we -- where we talk about these types of issues, little things that parents can do at home, in the car, at the grocery store, that they can reinforce some of the things that we're teaching at school with their children as well.

We also provide a wonderful opportunity for parents to sit in as a part of our Policy Council, which gives them an opportunity. And our Policy Council, essentially, is an opportunity for parents to be part of our policy system, our governing system, to help them feel more part of making decisions in terms of staff and -- and the other things that go on in our program. That goes a long way, I think, in terms of what Jennifer said, in providing them information, helping to empower parents so that they feel -- the more knowledge they have, the more confident they feel about wanting to get engaged and speak up a little bit more about maybe some things we could be improving on in our particular programs. And so, empowerment of parents is really an important part of -- of, I think, encouraging that communication.

Kiersten: We all know that transitions can loom large in the minds of parents and their children. Parents wonder if their children are ready and if they, as parents, will fit into the new environment. How do your programs engage parents in transition planning to kindergarten?

Chris: This is a really important point because there's been so much talk about. As children transition from one Early Head Start to Head Start or from Head Start into kindergarten, are they -- are they keeping and maintaining a lot of the skill sets and things we've taught them in our programs? And so, our particular program has really wanted to take a step back and, I think, take a closer look at the way we are doing our transition process.

So we've been going through some revisions, making sure that we do have a written plan that is consistent across our entire program, from our Early Head Start and Head Start programs; working with the community to make sure that, as children transition out, there is that continuum of services that parents have grown accustomed to within Head Start. But I think, too, is also -- we also have worked harder in terms of working with, again, our staff to make sure that they are knowledgeable about Head Start, and they're knowledgeable about exactly what's -- the stress levels that are being placed on children and families as they transition from one program to the next.

Kiersten: That's really helpful to hear about, sort of, your thinking in this area, and -- and that you're

assessing it as you go and that, you know, it may be an area that you want to improve on over time. Jennifer, what -- what would you say is your program doing to help parents and children with transitions?

Jennifer: I... Well before, it was just, like, a three-week period, but now, we've stretched that out into seven weeks, and we -- it progressively gets a little bit longer and more structured. So at the beginning, the teacher -- the children will just spend maybe 20 minutes the first week; but, by the end of the seven weeks, they have spent time in the classroom and have done all the things that would happen in a typical day. So they have a lunchtime; they have a naptime; they have story- and center-time. So they don't get the whole day, but over the seven weeks they experience each part of that day.

And again, as Chris mentioned, we're kind of trying to become more intentional and shape up our transition process to kindergarten as well. One idea that we are working on is to look at the current children and where they're going, see if there's any trends; you know, a group of students typically go to this school or to this school, and then to build relationships with those schools. Start early.

I think often you think of transition in, you know, maybe March. But really, maybe you should start thinking about it in December, and having open houses for those schools that our -- our children -- the children might be going to, just -- and building those relationships with the parents early on. I think, also, with the empowerment, you need to -- you're empowering parents in Head Start, but then I think you need to help them understand how the public school system is different and how can they transfer those skills they've learned in Head Start to negotiate -- or to navigate the public school system.

Kiersten: So what advice would you give other Head Start programs about how to engage families and achieve outcomes? Outcomes, for example, like strong parent-child bonds and ensuring that children are ready for school.

Chris: You know, our program, like many Head Start programs across the country, is very diverse. And I think sometimes, when we take a look at this parent engagement, we sometimes forget about how staff actually fit into that, particularly teachers and family advocates. And I think it's important we understand that they bring to the table certain strengths and certain weaknesses. Many of the teachers and staff come into Head Start because they love children, but their background, their training, may be completely different in some cases. And so, organizations need to go out of their way to make sure that they're doing a good assessment of their staff and then providing some sort of trainings throughout the year that help parents -- help the staff learn to actually grow in those fields where they may be weak.

For example, one of the things we looked at with our organization is that our teachers and family advocates weren't really reaching out to our parents the way we had hoped. There was a part of that whole process where parents didn't always necessarily feel comfortable opening up, particularly about very sensitive things. And so we wanted to --to pull our staff in and talk about ways that we can kind of work to build that trust factor, again, that we talked about.

One of the neat ways and fun ways we did was a role play. We simply brought in our teachers and our -- and our family advocates, and had -- one was a parent and the other one was the family advocate or the teacher, and they just went through just a normal dialogue of maybe some things that they may deal with in terms of average conversations and how do you get that parent to open up and talk a little bit more about it. And that, we found, was just a very useful and kind of fun way to kind of bring to -- to light this issue about developing our communication skills, knowing how to reach out to parents when there is, perhaps, some sensitive issues or some delicate issues, and then, you know, gently bring them along so they -- they can be more part of the process, which is what Head Start is all about.

Jennifer: I really agree with Chris, that having parents be engaged is really -- needs to have a program-wide plan, including staff. We really need to help them, as well as ourselves, be aware of what our judgments are about why parents aren't being engaged. We need to be sensitive to what parents are bringing forward, what -- what might be keeping them from participating. Is it their own negative experiences in school? Do they have different cultural expectations about school? Are they concerned about their own literacy level and their ability to teach their child? We really need to look -- you know, think about those as possibilities. Once parents think we don't care, they'll stop coming.

Kiersten: It seems like what you're saying is it's really important for programs and -- and staff to -- to always be curious about why parents are or aren't coming, and kind of try to look -- look deeper and try to better understand some of those things. And just maintain a constant curiosity about that. So you have to kind of put yourselves in their shoes, is what it seems like you're saying, and come up with some creative problem-solving. And your strategies really need to, you know, convey a respect for who they are. So, I really appreciate those points.

And I really want to thank you both for being here today, Chris and Jennifer. You've really shared some really interesting ideas about what's working well for your -- for you in your programs and some thoughts about maybe where you want to go in the future to improve some of -- some of your work as well.

Our final event will be tomorrow, when staff from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement and staff from the Office of Head Start will address your questions so please do send those in. If you haven't had a chance to see the previous video segments on family engagement, I urge you to view them on the ECLKC. I also urge you to take a look at the PFCE Framework. Think about how you might use it to inform program-wide strategic planning, program design and management, or professional development strategies and activities in your program. You can find out more about the framework and family engagement at the Office of Head Start's 1st National Birth to Five Leadership Institute. This is going to be October 3rd through the 5th in Washington, D.C. You can find out more about that on the ECLKC.

I really want to thank you all for tuning in with us today. Have a good day.