TRAINING TOPIC

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

As early childhood professionals, we are committed to children's learning and to empowering parents with tools and strategies that support the healthy development of their children's emotional expressiveness. Tell Me A Story (TMAS) enhances school literacy interventions, with the valuable addition of addressing social-emotional development issues. TMAS encourages teachers and parents to work together using books to support children's social-emotional development and to strengthen their capacity to manage emotions and relationships. This training focuses on incorporating parents into 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 in their classrooms.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Have a greater understanding of the challenges and benefits of engaging parents around a literacy and social-emotionally-based intervention within the classroom context (Circle Time)
- Address concerns and advantages of parent participation and discussion of feelings
- Review TMAS invitation to parents to participate in Circle Time

Method and Content

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

- Exercise One: Reflecting on the Classroom Experience and Reading
- Exercise Two: Circle Time With Parents
- Exercise Three: The Question and Answer Period

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: TMAS Letter to Parents
  - A Workshop Evaluation

- A pen or pencil for each participant

- Eight large pieces of paper (for Exercise 2)

- Five colored markers: Four for the participants to use in Exercise Two, 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 engaging families at your center and reading books.

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 about having parents in her classroom, or may simply be uncomfortable with trying new things. **Everyone should approach this subject matter at their own comfort level for making your classroom 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 Two (Circle Time with Parents).

A parent can be helpful during Circle Time by...

Parents may not be in my classroom as often as they would like to because...

The books in my classroom...

When parents are in my classroom, my classroom is...

Introduction to the Training

Workshop Leaders are encouraged to use their own words to introduce the training. 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 Classroom."
For example, you might say...
"The exercises will specifically focus on how to engage families in your classroom 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:

- Recognize the unique opportunities that using books offer to spark thoughtful conversation with children
- Learn strategies to engage families in classrooms, using TMAS
- Reflect on a parent's experience of participating in schools

➤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 in Exercise Three.

➤Review the *Training Ground Rules*, which are a short list of statements (listed below) 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.

Exercise One: Reflecting on the Classroom Experience and Reading

As the Workshop Leader, you can set the tone by saying that all responses to this topic are welcome and will not be judged as good or bad. It is important that participants are assured that they should "start where they are" in terms of their feelings about books and having parents in the classroom.

Many connections at preschools are made from simple beginnings: greeting a Mom with a smile and "hello" every morning as she enters the building; telling a Dad about his daughter's progress at pick-up; posting notices that are colorful and get a parent's attention. When starting to engage families, you may want to access online community resources, such as free weekend activities, to post or distribute to families as they enter the center. Your center's staff can greet parents entering or leaving the center and share written information or point out a bulletin board with resources. Sometimes after weeks of these very brief interactions, a parent might feel comfortable to engage in a longer discussion or see your center as not just a daycare, but as a place to share concerns and seek resources. Through these conversations, your staff can learn the most pressing issues for parents and then incorporate them into workshops accordingly.

Offering different opportunities to connect is another way to begin engaging families in your center. For parents that are in a hurry and cannot stop to "check in" with a teacher or staff member, it is nice to have special planned events that he/she may plan for in advance. A few examples of such events could include open houses, student/family art shows, celebrations such as birthdays/Mother's Day/Father's Day, and even drop-in breakfasts.

In addition to greetings and small planned events, the role of printed information is important to consider. Information should be presented in multiple languages if applicable and available, and posted in multiple areas of the program, including classroom boards, flyers on doors, and in newsletters from the program and from classrooms.

➤ In the large group, facilitate a discussion about involving parents in your classroom. You might begin, **"Before we think about how to involve our parents in center activities, let's think about how to connect them to our classrooms."**

➤ Ask participants to give a show of hands for the following questions:

- How many of you are parents yourselves?
- How many of you have been inside your child's classroom?
- How many of you enjoy reading with your own children?
- How many of you enjoy reading during Circle Time?
- How many of you find reading during Circle Time a challenge?
- How many of you have had a parent regularly participate in a learning activity in your classroom?

The Workshop Leader may ask for volunteers to share their responses to some of the questions. It is important that everyone feels valued no matter what their response may be.

After gathering a sense of the group's feelings about Circle Time and parent participation, it is important to remind the participants of tools that they already possess for encouraging an expressive environment—books and Circle Time. As teachers you know that exposing children to books at an early age will encourage literacy and give them a chance to learn from pictures and stories. Books can also open up discussions about almost any subject, including some of the more challenging topics like loss, violence, or exclusion. Circle Time is a standard fixture in early childhood classrooms and usually involves a group of children sitting in a circle, responding to teachers' questions, or participating in daily routines such as calendar or singing. Often, Circle Time also includes the teacher reading a story to the children. Circle Time therefore provides a rich opportunity for parents to be involved in supporting their children's learning and their social-emotional development. By using books with parents in Circle Time, children and adults together have the opportunity to explore and discuss their feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

➤Direct the group's attention to Handout 1. Introduce it as a resource for delivering printed information with families about the TMAS project.

Handout 1

Sharing Information about Tell Me A Story with Families

DATE

Dear Parents of Children at SCHOOL NAME HERE,

As you know, we value the importance of reading to your children here at SCHOOL NAME HERE. Tell Me A Story (TMAS) is a program designed to help children understand and describe their emotions by using books. By reading stories about emotional topics—like making friends, feeling left out, or what to do when we feel angry or grumpy—we can help our children talk about their feelings.

Tell Me A Story was developed to support teachers and families in expressing emotions such as anger, sadness, and loss – but also in understanding how to manage those feelings through discussion and other activities. TMAS focuses on learning to use and define emotion-related words and expressions. For example, one of the books featured in TMAS is "When my Mom is Sad," a book about a young girl who feels sad that her Mom is depressed. The little girl in the book talks about what it is like to see her Mom feeling sad.

We will be reading this book and others in class and talking to the children about their own emotions. We would like you to come participate! Please feel free to join us during our Circle Time in the classroom (generally at HOUR HERE, Mondays through Fridays). You may join us to read a book, to listen to stories, or simply to sit with your child and have time with him/her in the classroom.

Please feel free to let us know if you have any questions. In addition to opportunities to participate in the classroom, the center will also be hosting a workshop on the Tell Me A Story program and we hope you can join us. We will let you know the date.

Thank you!
Family Connections SCHOOL NAME classrooms

Transition to Exercise Two

The group has now had the chance to reflect on their own ideas and feelings about parent participation, reading, and being in the classroom. This is a good time to remind the group that in order for them to support families and make them feel welcome, staff must devote energy to their own self-care. In the next exercise, the group will have the chance to address topics specifically related to Circle Time and parent volunteers.

Exercise Two: Circle Time With Parents

The goal of this section is to give participants the chance to further develop their thoughts and feelings about Circle Time and parent participation. This exercise may help to reveal some preconceived notions about parent participation, and feelings may vary from person to person. You will get positive and negative feedback about having parents involved. Be aware that there are some challenges that you cannot address in this particular training. Still, getting everyone to share ideas will allow the group to discover and clarify what makes Circle Time and parent participation a valuable enhancement to children's learning.

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

1. A parent can be helpful during Circle Time by…
2. Parents may not be in my classroom as often as they would like to because…
3. The books in my classroom…
4. When parents are in my classroom, my classroom is…

➤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 having parents participate in your classroom, particularly around the use of books, so their honesty is essential to the productivity of the exercise.

Table 1. Sample Responses for Exercise One

Initial statement prompt	Examples of potential responses	Themes for Workshop Leader to develop in the discussion
A parent can be helpful during Circle Time by...	• Reading books to children • Sitting in circle to help manage children • Helping to suggest books • Bringing books in other languages • Modeling listening for the children	Having parents in the classroom can be helpful to some, and intimidating to others. Supporting a discussion on the benefits of having parents participate in Circle Time may remind staff of the positive things families have to contribute.
Parents may not be in my classroom as often as they would like to because...	• They are working and don't have time • They didn't like being in school themselves and do not want to come • They are intimidated • They don't speak the same language	It is important to help participants remember that often times, parents *do* want to participate in classrooms, but there may be obstacles in their way. Identifying challenges may help make the center a more welcoming place for families.
The books in my classroom...	• Are always ripped • Are too few • Are my favorites • Don't address tough feelings • Don't seem to interest the children • Make the children laugh! • Are the only books the children get to read (not reading at home)	Books in early childcare settings are not always treated with the care that we hope for. You may want to talk with children and families about how to take care of books. Taking field trips to local libraries is also a way of getting families to join in, and supports expansion of the number of books in your classroom.
When parents are in my classroom, my classroom is...	• Calmer • Harder to manage • More active • Easier to manage • More cheerful	There may be a range of responses to this prompt. Having involved parents, however, increases children's success and helps parents feel part of their child's education.

➤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.

Transition to Exercise Three

The group has now had the chance to reflect on some of the specific challenges and benefits of having parents volunteer in the classroom. Participants have also discussed issues specifically related to Circle Time. In the next exercise, the group will have a chance to discuss questions that may be left over from this discussion.

Exercise Three: The Question and Answer Period

Ask participants how they feel about the time they have had to reflect during these exercises. Did they find it helpful? How is reflection a productive tool for making classrooms more attuned to children's feelings? What resources do teachers need to implement new strategies? (e.g., more training, opportunities for practice, more books, regular discussion/reflection with their team or supervisor). Did these exercises leave them with any questions? Did everyone feel the same way or were there a variety of responses? Acknowledge that a variety of responses is natural. Just like the children we serve, we do not all feel the same way about connecting with families.

For example, you might say…

"We've discussed ways to invite parents into the TMAS program, challenges that may arise, and the importance of creating environments where healthy social-emotional development is valued and supported. Sometimes we feel worn out from our work with families, especially when children are going through difficult times. In addition to caring for ourselves, one of the most important resources we have is our co-workers and supervisors. Even though we are around people all day, sometimes this can be lonely work. Remember to ask for help when you need it, and to offer help when you see another staff member struggling. We all need each other to do our best. Now we're going to think about all of the work we've done and whether there are some lingering issues left to address."

The training ends with a Question and Answer session about the topics discussed in Exercises One and Two, and an opportunity to revisit ideas in the "Parking Lot for Ideas."

➤Ask if there are lingering questions.

➤Revisit the "Parking Lot for Ideas." Review some or all of the comments, and 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 used to prepare for the next training.

Workshop Leader Strategy: How to Manage a Question and Answer Period

Participants may ask questions that can be understood in a number of overlapping categories, including those that:

➤Ask for guidance about a challenge related to a specific child, family or co-worker

➤Ask for clarification of a principle or element of what has been presented

➤Represent either doubt about or resistance to what has been presented

➤Have nothing to do with the issue at hand

Points to consider in responding to such questions:

➤Listen. Model careful and respectful listening even when the question seems outrageous. Ask for clarification if the point isn't clearly made. Restate the question to confirm your understanding and to help clarify it for the entire group.

➤Maintain a balance between being a knowledgeable leader and utilizing the resources in the room to respond to these questions.

➤Model Collaboration and Reflection. The question and answer period is an opportunity to model collaboration and reflective group problem solving. The leader should use the group itself as much as possible in responding to questions. The readiness to have a real discussion is more important than answering individual questions.

➤Avoid Leading as the "Expert." The leader should avoid getting trapped into being the expert who has all the answers, or being perceived as "selling" a particular approach. This can be avoided, again, by seeing the question and answer exercise as an exploration of ideas as opposed to a time for getting the "right answers." When appropriate, Workshop Leaders should answer specific questions about the approach for which they have clear answers, but remember to ask the other participants if they have responses to the questions posed, and remind staff of mental health resources when concerns go beyond the expertise in the room.

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

- Recognize the unique opportunities that using books offer to spark thoughtful conversation with children
- Learn strategies to engage families in classrooms, using TMAS
- Reflect on a parent's experience of participating in schools

2. End on a positive note. Encourage participants to continue this examination of including parents in classrooms by using books with their children. Remind them that children and adults respond best to change when it is taken one step at a time.

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

4. 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.

5. 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.

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.

Create Action Plans. In order to improve efforts to engage families, teaching teams and supervisors must agree on the steps to be taken to be successful. Make sure to develop a variety of short-term and long-term goals in order to acknowledge all levels of growth and success.

Workshop Leader Reflection

The Workshop Leader should take some time to review the training 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 discussions had in common? Are any of these issues a surprise? How can I use these 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 Classroom

Location _____ Date _____

Please rate how well the training met the objectives below:

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Not Good
Objective 1: Have a greater understanding of the challenges and benefits of engaging parents around a literacy and social-emotionally-based intervention within the classroom context (Circle Time)	❑	❑	❑	❑
Objective 2: Address concerns and advantages of parent participation and discussion of feelings	❑	❑	❑	❑
Objective 3: Review TMAS invitation to parents to participate in Circle Time	❑	❑	❑	❑

	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

For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

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