



Boosting School Readiness through Effective Family Engagement

Course Summary

The goals of the Head Start training are to develop skills and practices for developing strong relationships with families in order to help families identify and set goals.

Opening initial conversations with a family with direct reference to goal-setting is *not* always the most effective strategy. Focus instead on first building trust and letting the family lead the conversation: once a positive relationship has been established, it becomes much easier to talk about goals. We realize that goal setting is not a quick or necessarily easy process, and it involves a lot more than just filling out an agreement.

Here are **six relationship-based skills** that we review in this course to help you identify and set goals with families:

1. Use descriptions of the child's behavior to open up communication.

These descriptions are opportunities for discussion. Observations should be simple, clear, and free of interpretations or judgments. Descriptions of positive behaviors you have seen can also help facilitate a discussion of goals that parents have for their children and family.

For example:

"I noticed Jayda enjoys books. She spends lots of time in the book center looking at books by herself and with her friends."

"Jayda is really quick to speak up when we do activities, and the other kids really like to be with her. She smiles and laughs a lot. She's been fun to have in the program."

These specific, positive observations of Jayda's behavior show that you are genuinely interested in Jayda, and help to both build rapport and encourage a discussion of some of the goals Jayda's parents have for her.

2. Focus on the family-child relationship.

It is important that parents feel valued and supported in the program. When working on goal setting with parents, it is good to acknowledge how a parent's goals for themselves positively affect their child's wellbeing.

Instead of:

"It sounds like it's really important goal for you to work towards you GED"

Try:

"I think Jayda knows that this is important to you. She sees you going back to school, and it makes school that much more exciting for her because she wants to be like her mom."

Even when discussing goals that parents may have for themselves, keeping the discussion within the context of the family-child relationship helps to show that you recognize the positive role they play in their child's life.

3. Value a family's passion.

Parents will inevitably have strong emotions about what is happening with their child and family. Try to keep in mind that those emotions are linked to the passions and interests they have for their family. You can acknowledge this passion as an opportunity to get to know the family better and to help reveal underlying goals.



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Instead of:

"I'd like to talk a little today about the sort of goals you have for your family...it could be anything; like helping you get a job, or the family wanting a better apartment."

Try:

"If education is a priority for your family, then this is a great thing to be thinking about for Jayda. This could be a goal for your family, to make sure Jayda is a strong reader."

The second examples shows that you recognize that Jayda's parents feel strongly about Jayda's reading skills. This is a great way to show support for their feelings and to begin to uncover concrete goals to work towards.

4. Support competence.

It's important to recognize and celebrate the family's progress and efforts in accomplishing their goals. You can also utilize the skills and strengths they already possess to aspire towards new, achievable goals.

Instead of:

"Are you worried that because you had trouble in school that means Jayda will too?"

Try:

"You're really her strongest role model, and she's already learned so much from you. It's obvious from talking to her. I think if she saw you studying she would probably want to do the same!"

By focusing on what families *can* do, and what families *already* do well, you are less likely to come across as trying to fix/correct a situation or impose/imply fault when you discuss future goals.

5. Reflect on the family's perspective.

Ultimately, it's the family that decides what is important to them and what goals they want to set. Listening to them and reflecting on their perspective helps establish mutual respect, helps to deepen your relationship, and gives you a fuller picture of their goals and motivations. It's important to hear the family's views on a goal before taking any action on their behalf.

For example:

"It sounds like having Jayda out of the house has really changed the rhythm of your day. Rosemarie told me that you've been with her since she was born. How has the transition been?"

"So it sounds like you're not so sure that you'd remember enough from school, and you don't know how you'd do on the test. I can see why that would be on your mind."

Ultimately, taking the time to reflect on the family's perspective serves to help you develop a more meaningful and accurate understanding/picture of their aspirations and feelings towards the goal-setting process.

6. Reflect on your own perspective.

It's also important to continually monitor your *own* feelings and assumptions of how you think the family should operate, and to try to detect areas of common ground.

For example, you might be working with a parent who says, *"We don't really need any help. I just need Jayda in day-care so I can get back to work."* You might be taken aback that this parent thinks Head Start is just a daycare; but, if you take a moment to reflect you will be able to see this as a statement of their passion to support their family by getting a job. In order to appreciate the parent's perspective, you have to be aware of your own.

Reflecting on your perspective can help you identify any judgments, biases, or unrealistic expectations you may have. The family's goals must come from the family, and reflecting can help you avoid imposing your own ideas for goals, or feeling offended when a family's ideas don't seem to match your own.