



Making Connections: The Partnership Newsletter

Issue 4

Introduction

Parents and family members are children’s first teachers and the “forever” people in a child’s life. They shape a child’s growth and development over the years. When early childhood program leaders—including administrators, child care directors, and family child care providers—create a strong vision for family engagement in their programs and businesses, they help relationships among children, parents, and the program to thrive. Family engagement is a shared responsibility of families and professionals that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. A strong commitment to this shared responsibility sets a course for early childhood quality and best practices for children, for families, and for child care businesses.

Here are three ways that Head Start and child care leaders can realize this vision:

1. **Ensure that all staff receive training in strengths-based relationship-building practices.**

These professional development experiences allow directors, family services staff, teachers, caregivers, and providers to reflect on families’ opinions and preferences with a “seek first to understand, then be understood” perspective. When program leaders support staff to honor the circumstances, cultures, and values of families and respect their experiences in sharing the care and education of their children, it contributes to an environment in which children and families feel welcome.

2. **Create collaborative decision-making opportunities.**

Leaders give staff and families opportunities to weigh in on how the program runs and the quality of the services. They can invite families to participate in policy councils or parent committees, to share their ideas and influence the character of the overall Early Head Start Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnership program. Leaders can gather family input on the best ways to engage families, whether services are being delivered in a center or a family child care setting. Leaders can also provide parents with information about how to be effective advocates for their children as they leave early childhood settings and move on to kindergarten.



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3. **Support the whole family, recognizing that families may have various strengths and needs.**

Programs create opportunities for families to think about their goals and aspirations for themselves and their children. For example, they create avenues to connect parents with community resources such as health insurance, parenting groups, food banks and WIC for families that need additional food and nutritional supports, and libraries and museums for family learning and recreation.

When leaders, directors, and providers value the role of families in these ways, families can feel the difference and, we hope, come to expect this critical aspect of quality early childhood education in the future. When parents and families are engaged as consumers of early care and education, they act as:

- **Decision makers** who are equipped with information and seek access to quality early care and education for their children
- **Resourceful users** of early childhood and comprehensive services that support child and family well-being throughout early childhood and beyond
- **Trusted peers** who help their friends and families understand and connect with the highest quality options available
- **Leaders** who advance program quality through leadership efforts in their child's program and their community

Family engagement strategies are as varied as programs and families themselves. When leaders (a) establish a strong family engagement vision, (b) support staff in realizing that vision, and (c) seek family input in improving that vision, continuity for children, families, and providers is better achieved.



Paula Bendl Smith, Child Care Program Specialist
Consumer Education Lead, Office of Early Childhood Development



Kiersten Beigel, Head Start Program Specialist
Family & Community Engagement Lead