

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Strategies for Family
Engagement:
Attitudes and Practices



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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Adapted from Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/building-partnerships-developing-relationships-families.pdf>

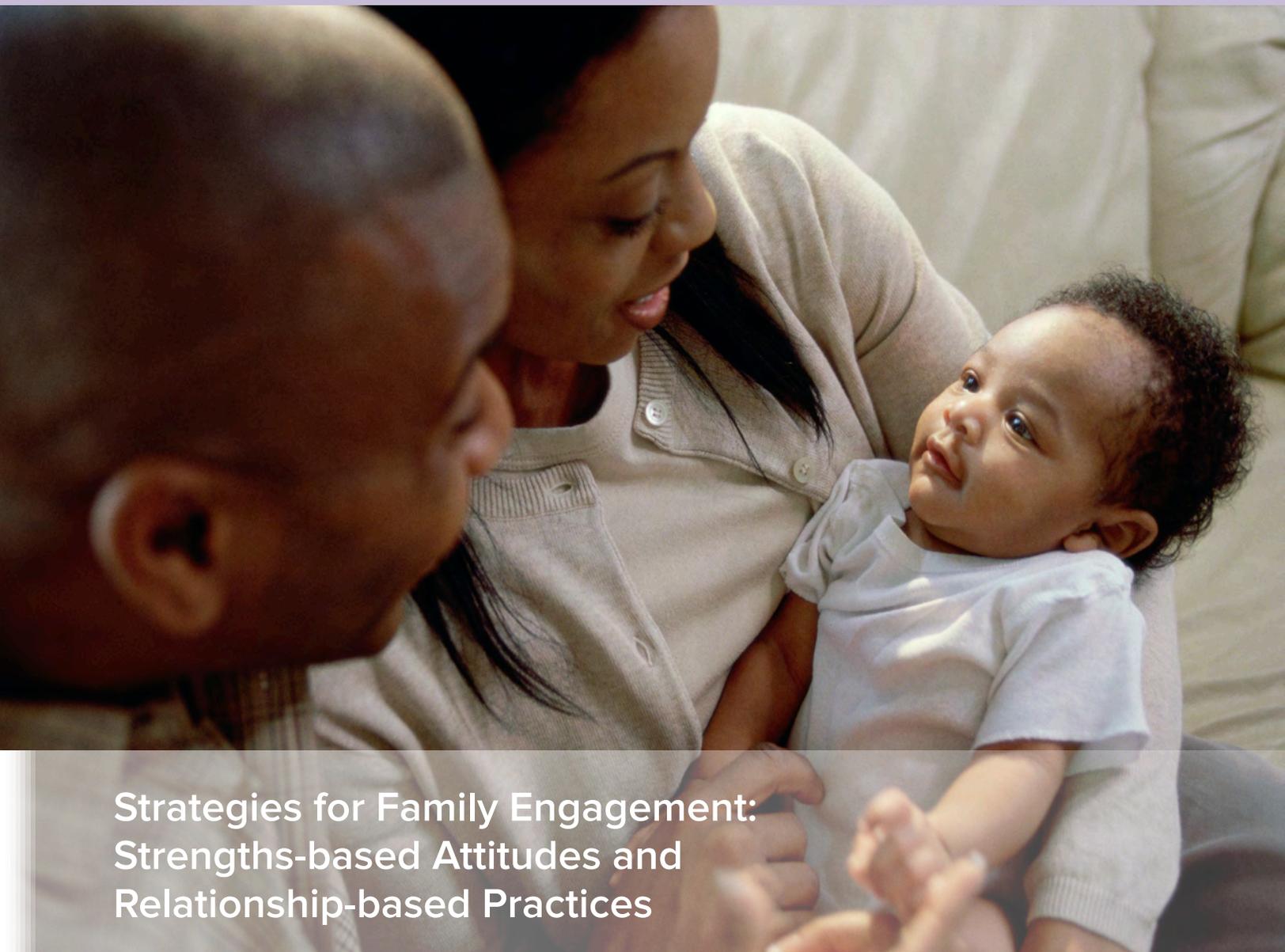
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Strategies for Family Engagement: Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices

Explore the importance of family engagement and practice strategies for building relationships with families. Use this resource to review the following:

- Description of family engagement
- Benefits of relationships with families
- Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices
- Practical examples
- Additional resources and related references

This guide is intended for professionals in the early childhood field. Individuals, groups of staff, and supervisors can use this tool as part of training and reflective practice and supervision.

What Is Family Engagement?

Family engagement is the process we use to build positive goal-oriented relationships with families. It is mutually respectful, responsive to families' cultures and languages, and includes genuine efforts to understand each family's beliefs, values, and priorities. Effective family engagement involves parents and professionals working together toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children. Family engagement also contributes to better outcomes for the whole family.

Why Is Family Engagement Important?

For Children

Parents and providers want what is best for the child, both in and outside of the early childhood setting. Ongoing, intentional, and meaningful engagement with families leads to relationships that support children's healthy development and school readiness.



For Families

Family engagement can help parents and family members feel recognized for their expertise and spark their interest in collaborating with providers and programs. Effective family engagement also promotes the safety, trust, caring, encouragement, and hope that affect the well-being of both the child and the family.

For Providers

Respectful trusting partnerships with families can help providers feel more satisfied with their work, and more confident and open in their interactions with families. These partnerships can also make it easier for providers to have conversations involving uncomfortable or challenging issues, such as concerns about development or behavior.

“Parent” and “Family”

We use the words *parent* and *family* to honor all adult caregivers who make a difference in a child's life.

Parents refers to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents.

Families can be biological or non-biological, chosen or circumstantial. They are connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support.

How Do We Engage with Families?

From the moment a child enters an early childhood setting, we can find opportunities to build relationships and engage with families. Relationship-building happens throughout the “life” of a relationship whether it is an existing relationship or a new and developing one.

Meaningful relationships require commitment over time. Parents and caregivers foster these relationships by focusing on shared goals for children: safe environments, sensitive caregiving, and opportunities for learning. More specific goals may depend on family preferences, cultures, and economic or social circumstances. Caregivers can form trusting relationships with families by reaching out regularly to share observations, ask questions, and learn from the family’s experience and knowledge.



Each family has unique goals and aspirations that we can support through genuine and equal partnerships.

Parent-Provider Relationships: What We Know

Current exemplary practice in quality parent-provider relationships for early care and education suggests that relationships are more successful when providers:

- Show respect for families and their caregiving practices
- Are committed and caring
- Demonstrate openness to change
- Take the time and energy to understand the family’s community and cultural context

Research about quality provider-parent relationships shows that certain strategies are effective with families, including the following:

- Communicating clearly, consistently, and frequently
- Collaborating with families rather than telling them what to do
- Responding to each family’s wishes and needs
- Focusing on the whole family
- Helping the family identify and connect to additional resources

Adapted from Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ) Project 2010-2015 (see references section for additional citations)

Strengths-based Attitudes

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about someone or something. We often see attitudes reflected in a person's behavior. When we approach families with a strengths-based attitude, we show our respect and encourage collaboration.

Adopting a positive attitude does not mean avoiding challenges; instead it shows families that we want to work together to find a solution. In contrast, when we approach our interactions with negative attitudes, we may show distrust or judgment. We can use the following Strengths-based Attitudes to remind ourselves to begin relationships positively, with a family's strengths—even when we are also experiencing challenges.

- **All families have strengths.** Each family has unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths, even when there are challenges.
- **Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.** Children's healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
- **Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.** Families make choices every day that affect a child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
- **Families have expertise about their child and their family.** Families understand their children best and make important decisions everyday for their children's well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
- **Families' contributions are important and valuable.** Being open to a family's suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child. We can encourage effective partnerships when we invite their expertise and listen to their priorities.

What is a Strengths-based Approach?

A strengths-based approach involves the following:

- acknowledging the strengths of families first
- respecting and learning from differences
- showing openness to adapting practice based on family preferences
- sharing decision-making
- approaching families as equal and reciprocal partners in support of their child



Relationship-based Practices

Relationship-based practices promote engagement with all families. When we engage with a family we form a relationship on behalf of their child. These practices, or strategies, are intended to guide what we say and do with families. We can use the following Relationship-based Practices to build strong relationships with families.

- **Focus on the family-child relationship.** Families need to know that their relationship with their child is valued and supported by staff. When we share observations of positive parent-child interactions, we provide reassurance that the relationship between them and their child is more important than any other.
- **Observe and describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family.** The child is the common focus for families and staff. When we ask for parents' observations of a child's behavior and share our own, we create opportunities for discussion.
- **Reflect on the family's individual and cultural perspectives.** Families share their children and themselves as soon as they join our early childhood setting. We can work toward strong partnerships by showing genuine interest in families. This practice is particularly useful when cultural differences emerge.
- **Reflect on your personal and cultural perspectives.** Our perspectives shape conversations with families. It's important to consider our own views when working with families. This practice encourages us to reflect on our interactions so that we can intentionally choose what we say and do.
- **Support parental competence (the parent's skills and self-confidence).** Families benefit when we acknowledge their successes, growth, and efforts. We share in their progress, encourage them to recognize their competence, and join them as they aspire to new goals.
- **Value a family's passion (working with both their positive and negative feelings).** Raising children and working with families always involves emotions. We can expect parents to have feelings about what is happening in their families. No matter how professional we are, emotions are also part of how we react to families. It is important to understand that these emotions come from our shared concern for the child. This can form a common ground to address challenges and move forward.



Relationship-based practices promote engagement with all families. When we engage with a family we form a relationship on behalf of their child.

Using Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices

The following examples demonstrate what providers could do or say to integrate Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices into their interactions with families.

Example: Get to know and learn about a family

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Join with the family to provide consistent care and reinforce that they know their child best.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families have expertise. Families are our partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support parental competence. Focus on the family-child relationship.

Examples of What You Might Say:

- “What ideas do you have for how we can best help Diego when he is here?”
- “What strategies work best at home?”
- “We’d like to work with you to make sure we are giving Madison what she needs.” (Ask specifically in relation to feeding, sleeping, and toileting).

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Identify what is important to the family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families have expertise. Families’ contributions are important and valuable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value a family’s passion.

Examples of What You Might Say:

- “What are you hoping Kalil will learn this year?”
- “Do you have any specific goals for Diana?”
- “What is important for us to know about Chin as she transitions this year?”



Using Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices (cont.)

Example: Build an ongoing and trusting relationship

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Honor the home language(s) of families with children who are dual language learners and respect the value a family places on their home language(s).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are our partners. Families' contributions are important and valuable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on the family-child relationship. Describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family. Reflect on the family's individual and cultural perspectives.

Examples of What You Might Say:

"Farid has been saying both English and Farsi words at school recently. If you would like him to learn both languages, let's work together to support your goal."

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Recognize the parent's role in a child's development and learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are the first and most important teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family. Support parental competence.

Examples of What You Might Say:

"I've noticed that Amanda has begun to tell stories as she flips through books. I've seen you do this with her before you leave for work."



Using Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices (cont.)

Example: Connect with a parent at the end of the day

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Use observations to share something unique about the child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are our partners. All children have strengths. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family.
<p>Examples of What You Might Say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Rachelle gave her friend a hug after he fell down." "Prak told a friend to stop poking him today. He knows the words to use to let someone know he doesn't like something." 		

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Share a specific positive anecdote about the child's day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All children have strengths. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family.
<p>Examples of What You Might Say:</p> <p>"Liana was so helpful cleaning up the paints today."</p>		

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Acknowledge and celebrate the connection between the parent and child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are the first and most important teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on the family-child relationship. Describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family.
<p>Examples of What You Might Say:</p> <p>"I saw Jacob look toward the door and smile as soon as he heard your voice in the hallway."</p>		

Using Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices (cont.)

Example: Speak with a family at a conference

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Use the family's observations and interpretations to inform how you support the child's development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are our partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on the family-child relationship. Support parental competence.

Examples of What You Might Say:

"You told me that Michael likes to sit back and watch before he jumps into anything. I'm trying to be sure I give him some space to just observe."

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Anticipate a developmental change that may be coming.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are our partners. Families' contributions are important and valuable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support parental competence. Reflect on the family's individual and cultural perspectives.

Examples of What You Might Say:

"I've noticed that Kayo is starting to push away the spoon when we feed her. I wonder what she might be telling us?"



Using Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices (cont.)

Example: Respond to a family's concerns

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Invite parents to share their perspectives on their child's behavior and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are our partners. Families have expertise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support parental competence.
<p>Examples of What You Might Say:</p> <p>"You've commented a number of times that you're still very concerned that Jordan can't seem to focus on one thing for more than a few minutes. We've noticed that here, too. It seems like the strategies we came up with together haven't helped her. Would you like to brainstorm about new ideas and next steps?"</p>		

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Address a policy regarding quiet time or nap time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families have expertise. Families' contributions are important and valuable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value a family's passion.
<p>Examples of What You Might Say:</p> <p>"You've told me that you don't want Felix to take a nap during the day because you're concerned that this may be interfering with his sleep at night. We could see if he could play quietly by himself during nap time and if that helps him sleep better at night."</p>		

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Reframe the family's emotions as passion for their child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All families have strengths. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value a family's passion. Focus on the family-child relationship.
<p>Examples of What You Might Say:</p> <p>"I know that you want Josiah to be safe here, and I'm very sorry he got hurt today. I'd like to talk with you more about it when you are ready. He was having so much fun with a friend but then got pushed over in a struggle for a favorite block. I got him some ice and held him in my lap for a little while to comfort him. He really seemed okay to me after that. Is he looking okay to you now? We will keep working on helping them learn to talk things over instead of fighting."</p>		

Using Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices (cont.)

Example: Reflect by yourself, with a team member, or with a supervisor

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Understand more about yourself and your families in an effort to identify your strengths, grow professionally, and build stronger connections with your families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All families have strengths. • Families have expertise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on the family's individual and cultural perspectives. • Reflect on your own personal and cultural perspectives.

Example:

Recognize that what you say is interpreted through the family's cultural perspectives. You may have our own judgments and biases about how children should be raised. But when you confirm and reinforce a family's choices whenever possible, you give children a consistent message about what's important and support the child's relationship with the family.

Opportunity	Strengths-based Attitude(s)	Relationship-based Practice(s)
Build an honest and strengths-based relationship with a family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families' contributions are important and valuable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on your own personal and cultural perspectives.

Example:

Consider what comes up for you as you interact with a family. You might think about your personal experience or past relationships with families. Reflect on how your thoughts might affect how you are seeing this family. There may be times when your reflections help you realize that your feelings may be making it harder for you to work with a family in a respectful way. When this happens, you can seek out a peer or supervisor who can help you handle these feelings and set them aside.





Closing Thoughts

Family engagement strategies can strengthen partnerships that address the strengths and needs of children, improve quality of care, and support family well-being. Early childhood professionals can use Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices to guide their interactions with families and strengthen family engagement efforts. Effective family engagement contributes to a caring community where children, families, and staff can thrive.

Early childhood professionals and their situations are unique. How might these ideas work for you and your program?

What strategies do you already use to engage families?

What new strategies can you plan for and implement in the future to promote partnerships with families?

Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ) Project

Development of a Measure of Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ), 2010-2015 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/development-of-a-measure-of-family-and-provider-teacher-relationship-quality-fptrq>

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