Infants & Toddlers

Family Engagement

Promoting Family Engagement

Strong family engagement is an integral part of high-quality early-childhood practice. Research indicates that family engagement is essential to infant and toddler development and can lead to positive results in their readiness for school. This lesson defines and shares perspectives for understanding family engagement and highlights the benefits for infants, toddlers, families and caregivers.

Objectives

- Define family engagement.
- Recognize and understand the importance and benefits of family engagement.
- Describe the significance of building relationships with families and identify practices that help families feel welcome and heard.

Learn

Know

Family Engagement: What Is It?

What are your feelings about working with families as a whole? What do you enjoy about it? What seems difficult or challenging? While you may feel motivated to develop relationships with families and to support family engagement, it is common to feel more success and effectiveness in focusing on your teaching practices and your direct care of infants and toddlers. It may not seem simple or intuitive to combine these practices.

Family engagement has different meanings for different people. In many cases, it relates to an ongoing partnership and collaboration between you and the families you serve. Early care and learning programs are committed to engaging and involving families in meaningful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their child's learning and development. The literature around family engagement highlights the following characteristics:

- Strong, trusting relationships between caregivers, families, and their community

- Recognition, respect, and support for families' needs, as well as differences
- Strength-based partnership where decisions and responsibilities are shared
- Activities, interactions, and support increase family involvement in their child's development
- Families and caregivers take a shared responsibility for their child's learning
- Acknowledgment that family engagement is meaningful and beneficial to both families and the early care and learning program

It is important to realize that family engagement can look different and take on many forms. What family engagement means and looks like depends on the unique characteristics and the individual comfort levels and understanding of each family.

To help make sure that families are committed to their child's learning and are engaged in their infant or toddler's early care and learning program, families should be invited to participate at whatever level they feel most comfortable. Participation can vary based on the family's comfort and ability. It may mean they participate in monthly meetings or take part in a parent advisory committee. They may donate cookies for a bake sale. Or they may even spend time reading a book to all of the toddlers in the care setting. It is important for families to feel supported and recognized for the ways in which they are able and choose to participate and engage—from bringing their infant or toddler to the care setting each day to sharing their concerns or serving on committees. See handout, *Ways to Support Family Engagement*, for additional ideas and considerations.

The Importance of Family Engagement

Family engagement in early learning can benefit infants, toddlers, parents, families, caregivers, and program quality in various ways. Can you remember what caring adults in your family, community or early care program did to help you grow, learn, and develop?

When you encourage families to care for and nurture their infants and toddlers, the likelihood increases that children will grow up to be healthy individuals who experience success. Infants and toddlers need support and responsive care from their most important adult caregivers to learn the skills to become caring and supportive later in life.

Family members are their children's first teachers and they have a powerful effect on their young children's development. Family engagement during the first years of life can support an infant's or toddler's readiness for school and ongoing academic and lifelong success. Research shows that when children have involved parents, the results are very positive, especially over the long term (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

When families are involved in their infant's or toddler's early care and learning program, they may also feel more vested in what happens there and more competent in their role as parents. Through these interactions and relationships, families may learn additional strategies from you to promote development and learning at home. Such strategies include pointing to and naming objects, following their child's lead in play, more independence with eating or dressing routines, or identifying feelings and emotions.

Infants and toddlers feel secure when the adults in their lives are working together on their behalf. The engagement in the early care and learning program and relationships between families and caregivers are a network of support with the well-being of the infant or toddler at the heart of it all.

Relationships With Families

Think about a relationship you have with someone special and how it developed. What is it about this person (their characteristics and their actions) that supported your relationship development? Was this person upbeat, consistent, flexible, respectful, a good listener, reliable, honest? Some of these same characteristics and supportive interactions can lead to positive, trusting relationships with families.

To effectively build relationships with families, you, as a caregiver, must first understand yourself and what "relationships" mean to you. You can spend time thinking about the importance and influence of your family and family relationships. For example, ask yourself, *"What messages did I receive about relationships from my family and culture?" "Do I build relationships and interact with others in the same way important adults interacted and behaved with me when I was a child (e.g. playful, joking, patient, honest, cautious)?"*

By first understanding yourself, you can better recognize the importance of family in the lives of others and create an environment where different values and traditions are respected, honored, and encouraged.

When you build respectful, trusting relationships with families, you help create a network of support for infants and toddlers that encourages healthy development and well-being. These relationships are critical to providing the best care for infants and toddlers and in fostering a sense of safety and attachment.

You can work together with families to build strong relationships that support consistent sharing of strength-based information regarding an infant or toddler's development and learning progress. For example, share something positive about a toddler with their family: *"Trinity used the cleanup basket today when I asked and she helped pick up all of the blocks!"*

You can also make sure that families have access to and are provided developmental information that is understandable, meaningful and specific to their infant or toddler. As families share information about their infant's or toddler's interests and successes at home, together, you can use this information to establish and work toward goals for their child in the early care and learning setting, home, and community. Lesson Three, *Communicating With Families*, will offer additional information and ideas for sharing developmental information with families. You can also:

- Create and provide families with newsletters, calendars, brochures, or postcards with developmental topics.
- Take photos of infants and toddlers engaged in various play activities and write captions for the photos, such as, *"Bobby is making a new friend."*
- Observe families interacting with their infant or toddler and share how certain behaviors are typical of a developmental stage. *"Toddlers are busy bees! I bet she keeps you moving quickly,*

too!"

Family engagement starts by meeting families where they are and engaging them in interactions and experiences they choose and that feel most comfortable to them. When families have trusting, consistent, and responsive relationships with others (such as community members, service providers, caregivers, teachers), they are more likely to have positive relationships with their children. In essence, if you think of yourself in partnership with families, you will be attuned with family-centered practice that you learned about in lesson one. The benefits are rewarding!

Children are born into families

When you focus on family, an infant and toddler's learning and development are optimized.

Families have different strengths and skills

When they share what they know, everyone benefits.

Families have goals for their infant or toddler

Sometimes these goals may differ from your goals for that child.

Helping Families Feel Welcome

Begin by thinking about what it might mean for families and new parents to consider your program for their infant or toddler. Families often experience uncertainties and feel scared when seeking a care setting for their child. As caregiver, you can do the following to support families during this sensitive time:

- Invite families to **visit** before their infant or toddler's start date
- Send families a **personal welcome note** before the infant or toddler's start date
- Ask families how they would like to **participate** in the program
- Ask families about their infant or toddler's **daily routines and care** – update the information as the infant or toddler develops and as the care routines change
- Ask families about their infant or toddler's **routines, strengths, interests, likes and dislikes**
- Ask families to share **key words and phrases** they use at home in their primary language
- Ask families about and encourage them to bring a **comfort item** for their infant or toddler from home, such as a pacifier, favorite stuffed animal or blanket
- Ask families to share their **hopes, dreams and goals** for their infant or toddler

- Maintain a **family bulletin board** with information about current program activities, upcoming meetings and events, and community opportunities that are of interest to families
- Ask families to **record themselves reading a storybook** or singing a favorite song – share these recordings with infants and toddlers throughout the day
- Make sure you ask families about their **preferred method of communication** and ways to stay connected to their infant or toddler's day
- Include **photos, toys and books that reflect and honor the diversity** of the families supported by your program
- Display **photographs** of infants, toddlers and their families – hang them on the wall where they can be seen or in durable photo books that infants and toddlers can hold and explore
- Include **objects that families have brought from home** that are safe for infants and toddlers to explore
- Encourage families to volunteer or participate in activities throughout the year, and provide a calendar of events.

Encouraging Families to Be Involved

Families want to be included and involved in their infant or toddler's life within the care program. There are a number of ways to encourage and support family participation, such as:

- Inviting family members to share special talents (e.g., play an instrument, read a book, sing, engage in an art activity)
- Offering family members jobs (e.g., help repair broken toys, create books or special photo albums)
- Meet regularly with families to review and evaluate the goals they have for their infant or toddler. Talk to them and ask, "What do you see happening? What do you think is working? What is not working? What could we do differently the next time?"
- Asking a family to create a community storybook using photos or drawings of their neighborhood
- Inviting families to observe their infant or toddler with you
- Asking families to help plan activities of their choice based on their strengths and interests
- Creating and sending out a short survey to families asking about their ideas and suggestions for ways they might like to participate
- Scheduling opportunities for families to join their infant or toddler for breakfast or lunch

- Encouraging families to share suggestions or concerns with you

Within your program, there should be a specific plan as to how to engage families throughout the year. Though families' participation is voluntary, it is your job to make them feel welcome by actively encouraging involvement. Program activities should reflect families' interests and motivate them to participate. Additionally, your program may have a family involvement committee. This committee is composed of family members who encourage communication and involvement with the goal of strengthening and supporting the well-being of children and families. This committee is a resource and asset to your program as families may discuss issues or concerns and suggest changes to improve family satisfaction and involvement. Collaborate with a trainer, coach, or administrator to promote family involvement.

Families teach the skills that enable their infant or toddler to relate positively with others and to engage in activities. In addition, research has found that home-learning opportunities and parental responsiveness are significantly related to motor and social development, language competence, and achievement test scores across poverty levels and different ethnic groups for children birth to age 13. By offering a variety of ways that families can choose to be involved in your program and continue learning at home, you are helping to enrich infant and toddler learning through stable, nurturing relationships.

See

Do

Here are some ideas to help you continue to engage families, to increase their involvement in the program, and to build a strong and collaborative relationship:

- **Communicate** with families and take time to observe their body language to help you measure their comfort level in the care setting. Find ways to ask them how they are feeling about the program, such as a **family survey**, and discuss any concerns they might have.
- **Smile** and **greet families by name**.
- Arrange the environment in a way that encourages families to spend time there. Keep the entrance area open and uncluttered with simple but attractive signs welcoming them. If possible, have a space for families' coats or belongings. Consider setting up a large board on a wall near the center of the room for parents to leave daily messages. Include some comfortable spots, such as pillows on the rug or a small sofa, so parents can read a picture book to their child or a small group of children.
- Spend time **observing** families as they interact with their infant or toddler to learn strategies for supporting them while in your care. For example, watch a parent change an infant's diaper and notice the interaction and steps taken to support relationship building during this routine.

- Show families where important **supplies** and other items are stored so they have access to things they might need for their infant or toddler when in the care setting.
- Include special materials or customs from a **family's culture**.
- Establish regular times to **meet with families face-to-face** and help families design a plan or create activities to reach the dreams and goals they have for their infants or toddlers.
- **Share observations** and other strength-based information about their children.
- **Ask families questions** about their infant or toddler.
- **Share something personal about yourself** (e.g., *"My mom tells me I struggled falling asleep for nap, just like Carlos. She said I never wanted to stop playing!"*).
- Offer **multiple ways to communicate daily** with families (e.g., note home, share a photo of an infant or toddler playing, communication sheet with information about routines, phone call, newsletter).
- Create **rituals** around hellos and goodbyes.
- **Invite families to share** what they see and hear their infant or toddler doing at home or in the community.

Watch this video to learn more about the ways you can welcome, engage, and build relationships with families.

Ways to Support Family Engagement

Use these strategies to engage families in your program

Explore

Think about a relationship that you value, the qualities this person brings to the relationships, and the characteristics that make that relationship successful. Which of those characteristics would be important in developing relationships with families? In the Relationship Characteristics activity write down your thoughts and share your responses with a trainer, coach, and administrator.

If you are a CDA candidate, use the *CDA Competency Statement IV* handout to reflect on how you establish positive and productive relationships with families, a required item for the CDA Professional Portfolio.

Relationship Characteristics

Think about attributes of successful relationships in your own life to support your strong relationship with families

CDA

CDA Competency Statement IV

Competency Statement IV is required for the CDA Professional Portfolio and should be completed by CDA candidates only

Apply

This section includes information you can reference and use to learn additional ways to promote engagement and build relationships with families. Review some of the following articles below:

- Deepening Families' Understanding of Children's Learning in Centers - NAEYC https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/apr2017/deepening-families-understanding
- 5 Things Teachers Should Know about Parents - NAEYC https://www.naeyc.org/resources/blog/5-things-teachers-should-know-about-parents
- Making Hope a Reality: Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities – Zero to Three https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/83-making-hope-a-reality-early-intervention-for-infants-and-toddlers-with-disabilities
- Promoting Family Engagement: 5 Ways to Foster Meaningful Connection https://www.gettingsmart.com/2018/04/promoting-family-engagement-5-ways-to-foster-a-more-meaningful-connection/
- Building Partnerships with Families Series https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/building-partnerships-families-series
- Ten Facts About Father Engagement- The Fatherhood Project http://www.thefatherhoodproject.org/10-facts-about-father-engagement/

In the *Getting to Know and Building Relationships with Families* activity, think about your strengths and the ways you develop relationships with families. Then, choose a family you would like to get to know better as you plan concrete steps to strengthen your bond with this family. Share your responses with your trainer, coach, or administrator.

Getting to Know and Building Relationships With Families

Take action to plan how to enrich your relationship with a family of an infant or toddler in your care

Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator

GLOSSARY

Family Engagement:
Ongoing, strength-based partnership between families and their child's early care and learning program; early care and learning programs are committed to engaging and involving families in meaningful ways and families are committed to actively supporting their child's learning and development

Demonstrate

Q1 True or false? Infants and toddlers are too young to benefit from family engagement. *

- ○ True
- ○ False

Q2 Family engagement means different things to different people, including: *

- ○ Making families' meals
- ○ Caregiver rituals
- ○ Strength-based partnership

Q3 Your co-worker asks you for suggestions on how to help families feel welcome. How do you respond? *

- ○ "It's best to limit the amount of time you spend talking with families."
- ○ "Let families know what the daily routines and care will be for their infant or toddler."
- ○ "Ask about and encourage families to bring comfort items from home such as a pacifier, favorite stuffed animal, favorite blanket, etc."

References & Resources

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