GUIDANCE ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FOR PROGRAMS SERVING CHILDREN AGES BIRTH - 5

Authored by the Maryland Pyramid Model State Leadership Team's Family Engagement Subcommittee, July 2024

Intention.

This document was written by our Pyramid Model SLT's Family Engagement Subcommittee in an effort to support early care and education programs and services to develop and sustain policies and practices to support family engagement within their programs and services.

The intended audience of this document is the broad service array of program directors and leadership within early care and education, public Pre-K and Kindergarten programs, family child care providers, special educators, and the range of providers delivering early care and education services throughout the state of Maryland.

While the term family-engagement is broadly respected within early educators and providers, and many national programs and supports offer direct service providers with materials to give directly to families {which is important!}, yet guidance on how to engage families in our services, our homes, our classrooms and our work with their children remains evasive. The goal of family engagement remains difficult to implement, with little guidance given to early care and education providers and directors. Acknowledging that, we wrote this document hoping to fill that gap to deliver guidance on the HOW of family engagement for early care providers and directors and others throughout this important field. *We hope it is helpful!*

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MARYLAND Pyramid Model

Maryland STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
THE INSTITUTE FOR INNOVATION & IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction to Family Engagement in the Pyramid Model

What is family engagement?

It is broadly acknowledged that engaging families within early childhood programs and services is a pivotal component of serving the whole child. We honor that young children are, by design, deeply integrated with their caregivers and other close adults. As educators and service providers of young children, we gain so much information and insight on that child when we engage and get to know the adults and others that are in their life. That said, family engagement remains difficult to implement, with little guidance given to early care and education (ECE) providers and directors. Due to the importance of these practices and their alignment with Pyramid Model efforts and principles, we felt called to develop this document in detail and organize some concrete guidance to support ECE programs and providers to accomplish this important goal. There are lots of materials and resources developed for families that ECE's can send home, but we felt it necessary to disseminate this document to support the **how** of truly engaging families, which we know goes far beyond adding a flier or handout to a child's cubby or backpack.

As you are picturing engaging the families that accompany the children in your classroom, on your caseload, or served by your program, we want to first appreciate the importance of acknowledging that families are more than just parents. Children can come to us from homes with same-sex parents, a blended home, can be co-parented between two homes, be raised by grandparents or other kin or be in a foster or adoptive placement. **{Children can come to us from a variety of family dynamics. This list is not exhaustive, make sure you are thinking about all types of families.}** So, as you review this document and begin to make plans both big and small to invite, include, and engage families of the children you work with, please intentionally think about the range of caregivers to consider and what we can do to ensure our engagement efforts are sensitive to needs and differences.

As you embark on family engagement practices both universally within your program, classroom or individually with a given family or caregiver, it is important to not make assumptions about family need or lack thereof – and to be knowledgeable about community-based supports to address the full hierarchy of needs that can contribute to family functioning and child development, presentation, etc. One of the White Supremacy Culture Characteristics is "One Right Way" and we must consider this in our implementation efforts around evidence-based practices and how that impacts family engagement practices and perceptions. To counter this characteristic, we must invest in efforts to embed the important practice of adaptability to honor and respect cultural differences of the children and families served by our programs.
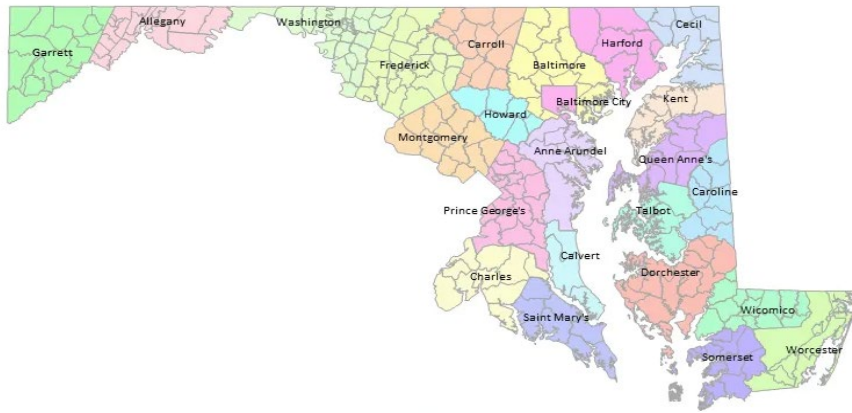
Throughout the state of Maryland there are a number of community based programs and services anchored at supporting the stability and needs of families below are a few, including:

    (1) the regional ***Child Care Resource Centers,*** https://www.marylandfamilynetwork.org/for-providers/find-your-child-care-resource-center

    (2) ***Family Support Centers*** https://earlychildhood.marylandpublicschools.org/families/family-support-centers/find-your-patty-center-formerly-family-support-center

    (3) ***Judy Centers*** https://marylandfamiliesengage.org/judy-center-hubs-map/, which are located within Title 1 and high needs schools, Judy Center Early Learning Hubs prepare children from birth through age five and their families for success in school and life by providing comprehensive educational programming and family support services to families and their children year-round.

Additionally county public libraries are often key resources for specific community programming and events to support families to meet their needs.

One more consideration before you move on to the detailed content of this document:

We acknowledge that our interaction with families has been impacted by COVID-19. Early intervention providers were seeing families via Zoom, on phone or computer screens, and classrooms were initially shut down altogether. Then, once reopened, safety protocols forced ratio restrictions within buildings, making family members drop children off at the door rather than coming in to see the classroom or volunteer for an activity. Now that we have returned to mostly normal status, this is an opportunity to reset some protocols and re-engage and establish new practices to benefit the children you work with, support their families to better understand and address their needs.

Before continuing, we must attend here to the key component of the implications of "One Right Way" in our implementation of evidence-based practices and how that impacts family engagement. Explain the importance of adaptability to honor and respect cultural differences.

Paradigm: You are not just teaching the child & family, they are teaching you!

Come to the work with a strength-based perspective:

- Acknowledge that programs can learn from families. (Families as first teachers).

- Affirm parental competency and strengths.

- Learn about home cultural practices, beliefs, or customs.

- Recognize that diversity enriches and provides depth to the overall program.

- Understand that different does not mean dysfunctional.

- Respect and support the preservation of children and families' home languages, cultural backgrounds, and childrearing beliefs, values, goals, and practices.

- Incorporate aspects of children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the program's curriculum. Highlight strengths and practices that exist across cultures.

- Ensure that families have opportunities to give input to programs regarding their policies and practices. Families should not solely be recipients of information.

- Plan ahead to address language barriers. Provide translational and interpretation resources for program staff.

- An important note here is to make an honest effort to honor the different ways that people receive information (electronic, vs. in-person communication, moving away from just written responses). Including preferred methods of communication.

Hierarchy of Needs – *Meeting Families Where They Are*

It is important to acknowledge here that we, as individuals with experience and employment in the family-serving system, are often overwhelmed with the difficulty of knowing about and accessing needed services for a given family. So now imagine that from the perspective of the families you work with. *How can that perspective support and inform our approach when handing families information about a recommended program or referral? Do we have a sense of how long they need to allot for a phone call or to complete a given document?*

Best practices for embedding Family Engagement within your typical interactions *(as a provider or educator or director)*

School staff and families work together to support the social and emotional development of young children when caregivers are knowledgeable about the Pyramid Model and positive behavior strategies. Below are some best practices for communicating about the Pyramid Model and bridging into the child's natural environment.

Creating a welcoming classroom environment

If families are entering your space (rather than you working with them in their homes) make considerations for how they feel upon walking in. The Pyramid Model Equity Coaching Guide (Ferro et al., 2017) offers several considerations for creating a welcoming and equitable learning environment. Consider the following:

1. Do learning centers and activities include materials, songs, visuals and languages that are aligned with the cultures and interests of children in the classroom?

    a. The teacher collaborates with families to locate culturally relevant musical instruments for children to use during weekly music lessons. Teacher asks families to share songs that reflect family cultural backgrounds and or family history. Songs learned in the weekly music lessons are added to the song bank as part of the daily circle routine.
    b. On a monthly basis the teacher inventories the classroom to ensure materials available align with the cultures represented by all children in the classroom. If needed, the teacher might add materials (e.g., relevant children's literature to the book area, new cultural toy food items to the kitchen area, or new dress up clothes to the imaginative play area).

2. Does the schedule include activities where children work collectively or cooperatively?

3. Does the posted schedule, expectations, and rules use the children's home language?

4. Do teachers use multiple examples, visuals, and cultural experiences to teach behavior expectations in a manner that relates to all children?

5. Does the teacher guide all individual children who need extra support to begin and complete the transition?

6. Do teachers provide positive descriptive feedback for children's skills, behaviors, and activities to every child?

7. Do teachers have conversations, engage in play, and use questioning with all children in the classroom (e.g., including the use of the child's home language, interests, and learning preferences)?

When describing the Pyramid Model, use family-friendly language to communicate that it is a **strategy for supporting the social and emotional development of young children**. It is also important to communicate that the Pyramid Model is a **collaborative model** that encourages communication between providers and families. The success of the strategies also depends on the **continuity** of use across settings. If a teacher is working on strategies in the classroom, families should know about it and be encouraged to work on the same skills at home.

There are many opportunities for schools and child care centers to share Pyramid Model resources with families, including open houses, back-to-school night, conferences, school wide newsletters, teacher newsletters/emails, social media, signage in the building, informal conversations, and individual conferences [Family Engagement Strategies](#).

Every conversation you have with a family about their child's development is an opportunity to introduce and make connections to the Pyramid Model. There are multiple resources on the [NCPMI website](#) that you can refer to as you have conversations with families.

Throughout the school year, consider distributing fact sheets like what is linked below. You can also create your own handouts and posters to get the word out. The beginning of the school year, during conferences, right after school breaks, and just before summer are all good times to send resources home. When distributing written resources, it is important to consider the language diversity of the families you serve. Whenever possible, provide Pyramid Model materials in different languages. You can find some translated family materials in Spanish and Chinese [here](#).

- **Pyramid Model Fact Sheet for Families (1-page)**
- **Description of Pyramid Model tiers (1-page)**
- **Description of the Pyramid Model (2 pages)**

You are likely familiar with the term English language learner (ELL) which is used in K–12 education to describe a child who is learning English as an additional language. Dual language learner (DLL) is used by early childhood practitioners to describe children, age birth to five years, who are learning two or more languages. "Dual language learner" acknowledges that very young children are still actively developing their home language(s) along with an additional language. Young children learn language through the context of relationships with their primary caregivers and peers during daily routines. High quality programming, meaningful interactions in both languages, and intentional instructional adaptations also support DLLs' development and learning. Per the guidelines set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) within Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age Eight (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009), high quality early care and education programs go beyond offering "scheduled events" and "parent education" sessions. High-quality programs create a welcoming environment and reciprocal relationships with families. For DLLs, they also encourage and support the use of home language.

> "The effective teacher recognizes that families are an invaluable source of information about their child as an individual, and she understands that a family wants to know that their knowledge and insights are regarded as important. Besides, by drawing on each family's in-depth knowledge of their child, she also can learn about their home and community environment, including its cultural dimensions. This context is critical in making classroom decisions that are appropriate for each child, as well as in fostering positive relationships with the parents themselves" (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

Read more about this here: https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-EarlyYears.pdf

Engaging Families Within the Classroom:

Families often only get outreach either through a general newsletter, universal reminders about dates or 1:1 if there is an academic or behavioral concern with their child. Building positive relationships with families and creating welcoming environments requires a dedication to positive outreach and ongoing communication with

individual families [Teacher-Family Relationships](#). Honoring and respecting all families, cultures and perspectives is essential.

Relationships are built upon trust and two-way communication. It is important to get a sense of the family's understanding of the process, options, etc. **Families do not always feel comfortable stating their opinion or concerns, especially if they perceive their view as contradictory or different from yours or the school's/program's. When speaking with families, ask them first what questions they have. By allowing families to initiate the discussion, they have a voice.** Additionally, child care, and or school staff will be more in tune with the needs of the families they serve. Recognize and incorporate each family's perspective, the information that they add and their goals for their child and family. Once families have shared their thoughts, offer additional information to support the family and the child in the classroom and or educational setting (e.g. family care home, etc.). This is an excellent time to share Pyramid Model strategies that connect to the families' needs. Be mindful to share information that is clear and in the family's home language.

As the direct link between the family and their child's education and progress, it is important for families to hear from you personally about their child, rather than just program-wide communication. This can be quick, delivered via a range of formats including a range of apps including "parent square" and will send us messages through the app giving "parent shout outs," but should be consistent and intentional **(e.g. simple forms for a teacher to give quick positive feedback to families specific to what their child did well that week)** and, when practiced, goes a long way in building positive relationships with the families of children in your program. When small efforts are made in this way, educators and providers, as a result of families feeling positively connected to them and the program, will often voluntarily and naturally give additional information that can support your work with their child. When the whole family feels positive about the program, children often illustrate this comfort through their behavior.

Design your program or school environment to reflect your program's or school's culture. Nurturing environments support children and families. Be intentional when establishing routines for welcoming families at drop off and pick up each day. Routines and rituals are powerful Pyramid Model tools for creating an extended community outside the classroom with families. These daily interactions are integral to successful

family engagement and go beyond general communication. They support positive behaviors and provide opportunities to model strategies for families.

> *Share Pyramid Model strategies from NCPMI throughout the year that caregivers can implement at home to reinforce the learning happening at school. Here are two specific examples of how center staff and families can work together to teach social and emotional strategies.*
>
> **Tier I: Routines Strategy:** *Hand Washing*:
> 1. At school, children learn how to follow a "First, Then" visual schedule for washing hands after using the potty. "First, we go potty. Then, we wash our hands."
> 2. Teachers share the strategy with families during the drop off or pick up time of day so they can see it in action.
> 3. Teachers send home the same visual schedule(s) for caregivers to post in their bathroom(s) at home.
> 4. Children use the visual routine at school and home to promote good health and hygiene. Schedules, Routines and Transitions
>
> **Tier II: Self-Regulation Strategy:** *Breathing***:**
> 1. At school, children learn the flower and pinwheel breathing strategies.
> 2. At school, children create their own flower and pinwheel to bring home.
> 3. Teachers ask children to demonstrate the strategy for their caregiver at pickup so they can see it in action. Teachers then ask parents to try the breathing strategy with their child before leaving school.
> 4. Teachers send home an informational article about breathing strategies along with the flower and pinwheel that children have created in school (or use the handout pictures).
> 5. Children use these breathing strategies both at school and home to help themselves calm down. Teaching Social Emotional Skills, Self-Regulation Skills: Breathing Strategies

Engaging families in their natural environments

Engage families in their natural environment where they feel most (or at least more) comfortable. Educators and home visitors should follow the family's lead here. These visits can occur in community locations such as public libraries, parks, restaurants and community resource centers. Contact your local community organizations to ask permission to use their space before offering it as an option to your families. Many libraries and community centers have private spaces families may reserve in advance.

"Peace should be the name for home." When we engage with families we want to help establish that peace. (Cheryl Townshend, Behavioral Specialist)

Again here we feel it is important to reiterate the importance of training and supervision to support home visitors to learn about, acknowledge and dismantle the lens of implicit bias that we all have – which if unaddressed serves as an insurmountable barrier to family engagement

efforts. Training and supervision are critical components for home visitors in early childhood education to address implicit bias. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions unconsciously. These biases can influence how home visitors interact with families, make assessments, and provide support.

Respecting cultural differences requires thoughtful consideration and sensitivity. A first step to effectively engage families could be to create a questionnaire to learn more about the family during the home visit. This strategy would allow the family to take the lead in the conversation which could "break the ice" and make the family feel comfortable while the home visitor makes observations. Additionally, targeted questions offer opportunities for the family to share their cultural background, language, family structure, food and dietary preferences, religious and/or spiritual practices, celebrations, and events.

(We realize that this is often helped by practice - here are some sample reflective questions):
- What cultural background(s) do you and your family identify with?
- Are there any cultural traditions or practices that are important to your family?
- What languages are spoken in your household?
- Are there any language preferences or needs we should be aware of?
- Could you describe your family structure? (e.g., nuclear family, extended family living together)
- Are there any dietary restrictions or preferences we should be aware of?
- Are there any cultural foods or cuisines that are important to your family?
- Does your family have any religious or spiritual practices that are important to you?
- Are there any specific holidays or observances that your family celebrates?
- How does your family typically communicate and make decisions together?
- Are there any cultural norms or practices around communication that we should be aware of?
- Are there any cultural celebrations or events that you would like the child care program to recognize or participate in?
- Is there anything else you would like us to know about your family or cultural background that would help us better support you and your child?

Planning is Primary

When students witness the adults in their lives, including parents, teachers, and other school staff, working together to support their needs and their educational experiences, they are supported, reassured, and recognize the value of their education. These benefits are strengthened when family engagement and collaboration between home and school are present from early childhood through high school. As teachers learn more about their students' skills, passions, culture, and experiences, they can better enrich instruction, motivate students, and individualize lessons to meet student needs. In addition, partnerships with families support teachers and reduce their sense of isolation. Families who partner with their children's school develop skills and confidence in supporting learning both at home and at school. More engaged families can advocate for their children and take a proactive approach to influence policies that better meet the needs of families in their community. Parent/family leaders become models and a source of support for other families.

Given this importance, we wanted to outline some key planning and safety considerations for leaving your classroom/home/program setting and entering the community to partner with families.

Preparation is an essential first step.
- Before your visit, always let someone know where you are going and carry your cell phone at all times.
- Be sure your phone is fully charged.
- Review family files/notes for concerns of violence or substance abuse.
- Be mindful of your clothes and if possible, do not wear jewelry.
- Maintain your vehicle, be sure you have a full tank of gas, and park where you can make a quick exit, if necessary.

During a Home Visit:
- Respect the client's home and cultural customs. For example, some families do not wear shoes inside.
- Remain calm and polite and be mindful of your body language and tone. Communication with clients is critically important and is the foundation for relationships.
- Maintain professional boundaries.
- Practice reflective supervision with supervisors and peers to discuss how to best maintain boundaries.
- Be aware of exits and keep yourself between the client and door.
- Know how many people are in the home, even if they are not participating in the visit.

Trust your instincts to know when to leave or request help.
- Things to consider: Pay attention to signs of agitation or that a situation is starting to escalate.
- Self-Awareness and Reflective Supervision are essential ongoing practices.
- Be knowledgeable of conflict management and crisis intervention strategies.
- Practice self-care and know when to ask for help.

Relationships are at the center of home visiting programs. If possible, integrate home visits throughout the calendar year. Ensure that services delivered through home visiting programs are culturally appropriate and consider the strengths they bring as well as the barriers that families face. To ensure a supportive, engaging, and quality home visiting experience, home visiting professionals must foster cultural humility in efforts to be culturally responsive, and prepared to meet the linguistic needs of families. {Again, we acknowledge that concrete examples here are also helpful, as home visits require a unique set of culturally responsive competencies. The questions that start on page 57 of this linked document can be a great starting point for both self-reflection and getting to know a family better: https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-BuildingCulturallyLingusticallyCompetentServices_2004.pdf} When meeting with families, practice perspective taking to better understand what may be happening and what strategies to consider. Think about situations from the perspective of the parent/caregiver, child(ren) and yourself as the provider. Observing, listening and asking questions helps build relationships with families ensuring that we are coming from a stance of curiosity and information gathering rather than one of judgment. Providers and caregivers are a team, working together for the best outcomes for families.

Another important aspect of community-based, family-focused work is ***reflective conversations***. Providers meet with colleagues and supervisors for support as they work through challenging cases. These reflective

conversations should be provided regularly, and this occurs best when integrated into standing meetings or times. When this type of support is delivered over the course of a provider's time with a given family, the outcomes for reducing stress on the provider, and supporting the family are improved. These conversations allow the supervisor and provider to work together to improve family outcomes, specific goals, growth and professional insight.

Here's a potential source for leadership: Reflective Supervision: A Planning Tool for Home Visiting Supervisors https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/Reflective-Supervision-HV_508%20%281%29.pdf

Programs to Explore for More Guidance

- Parents As Teachers Home Visiting Model: https://parentsasteachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Home_Visiting_Model.pdf
- Head Start Home Visitor's Online Handbook: https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/home-visitors-online-handbook/home-based-service-delivery

A note on technology

Technology offers great opportunities to connect with families, which became especially true during COVID-19 when virtual communication became our only means of connecting. Consider these ideas for involving families in Pyramid Model work:

- Use texting services like Remind to send families updates about what their children are working on in the classroom. Consider researching methods of communication that allow families to translate messages on their end. Consider sending pictures throughout the day to engaged families of permission has been granted. This is an opportunity to also highlight parents/caregivers to share with them accomplishments and successes within their child's day.
- We've all seen hallway posters and bulletin boards in school buildings. You can also create a "tech hallway" through blogs, Facebook, Google Drive, and Class Dojo. On these sites, you can share news, tools, materials, and photos with families.

- Share videos to model how to teach children social-emotional skills. These videos can then be uploaded to a file sharing site for families to access. Reading books on video is a great way to get families involved in building children's love for reading, as well as discussing social emotional concepts found in books.
- Using a QR code to facilitate ease of access to sites and resources, and this also allows families to translate documents into other languages to support their access to the information you are working to provide.
- *A note that is important to consider, having documents and resources translated via google translate or other web-based translation services and not via a professional translation service, the risk of inaccurate translation is inevitable. Many organizations have access to translation services that can be meaningful to support collective understanding and engagement. When translators are unavailable - it still remains important to provide opportunities for families to engage through materials and conversations in their home language.*
  - There is an app called [Talking Points](#) that is FREE FOR TEACHERS and provides two-way messaging and translates text into 150 languages.

While technology has many benefits, it is also important to consider the limitations. Families have a range of comfort with and access to technology. Consider that not all families have smartphones or reliable access to the internet. Ensure that you are using additional methods to engage or share information with families served by your program.

Best Practices for Soliciting Family Engagement and Participation on Committees and Leadership Teams

Involving families in your local or program implementation team

- *Guidance on how to invite caregivers to participate on committees*
  - Provide various opportunities for families to engage in decision-making for your program.
  - Be mindful of cultural differences in how families approach decision-making and participation. Take steps to create a welcoming and inclusive environment where all perspectives are valued and respected.
  - Provide information about the committees that are open to families when they enroll.
  - Maintain a consistent schedule for meetings and decision-making opportunities to help families plan ahead and make participation a regular part of their routine.
  - Give details about what they should expect, as well as what the time commitment is.
  - Allow families to give feedback on what would make this task do-able for them.
  - Establish clear channels for families to provide feedback and input outside of formal meetings. This could include suggestion boxes, online surveys, or regular check-ins to ensure that families' voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes.
  - Ask about days, locations and times for meetings, virtual or in-person preferences, topics they would like to address, and what would make them most comfortable in sharing their input. Can we include Provide families with ample notice about upcoming meetings or

decision-making opportunities. This allows them to plan ahead and make arrangements to attend, especially if they need to arrange for childcare or adjust their work schedules.

- ○ Express how important their participation is, and what the program will gain from their participation.
- • *Strategies for making this ask do-able:*
    - ○ Partner with other community agencies or programs
    - ○ Provide child care and/or transportation as needed
    - ○ Schedule with families' needs in mind
    - ○ Ask those who serve on these committees to bring a friend/recruit peers
    - ○ Provide compensation if available
    - ○ Best practice of compensating families for their time
- • *How to solicit feedback from families - reflective prompts for providers and teams:*
    - ○ How do you know about who you are serving? (Recall here the Perhaps, an opportunity to reference the suggested questionnaire in the "Engaging Families in Their Natural Environment" section of this document.)
    - ○ How do you invite regular feedback from caregivers? Do they know who to approach?
    - ○ Are there times that feedback is solicited (or is it only when there is an academic or behavioral concern?)
    - ○ Language and literacy needs
    - ○ How could zoom or video chat support quick updates etc.

Think about the range of families served by your program and the importance of engaging more than just one parent or caregiver, as there are a range of experiences and needs. (Recommending 3 – 5 family members participating.)

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Positive Solutions for Families Training

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Positive Solutions for Families is an evidence-based, family-friendly workshop of six sessions to help families of children ages 2 – 5 years. In these sessions, families learn about child development and behavior, are introduced to strategies to use at home, and are given the opportunity to meet other families with children in similar age groups.

1. Find a local Positive Solutions for Families facilitator: https://kidsthrivemaryland.org/local-support-for-professionals/
2. The Pyramid Model Consortium includes all you need for the six training sessions here.
3. Host sessions within your facility.
4. Survey families for needs regarding language or other adaptations.
5. If possible, offer child care or collaborate with other organizations that can provide childcare (Judy Centers, local YMCA's, etc).

6. Extend the opportunity for engagement and connection by supporting continuation of the group after sessions are complete.
7. Become familiar with the content so that you can connect what families have learned with what is happening in your program.

Teaming with Families of Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities

Best practices for initial conversation with families about concerns related to their child

Child development is a dynamic process as children develop and change quickly. In partnership with families, early childhood professionals watch the progress of children as they change and develop over time. We share information with one another through observations and stories of the day in the child's life. We work together to find out and plan how we can support the child's growth and development.

Conversations around child development, especially when discussing a concern, are most successful when a trusting relationship exists between the early childhood professional and the parent. When a family feels like we know them, understand them, care for them and have listened to them, these conversations can begin to develop into a discussion around a shared vision and plan for the child. *{So, what does this look like from the provider's part? This looks like regularly encouraging the family to share their visions or perspective on the child's goals, reinforcing their authority in the work that you are doing togethe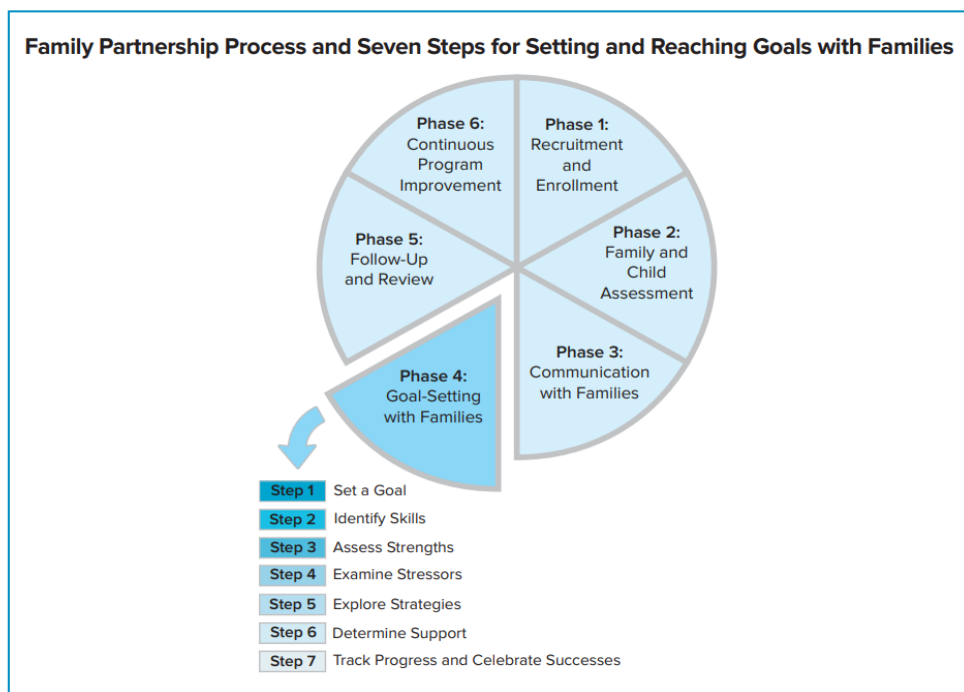r on behalf of their child(ren).}* Starting conversations around a parent or caregiver's concerns for their child can be difficult. We need to be mindful of the feelings that a parent or caregiver may be experiencing and be mindful of the language we use during this conversation, so as not to make anyone feel judged, criticized or that their feelings are minimized. ***Prior to beginning a conversation with the family, consider the following:***

1.   Reflect on the beliefs, values and perspectives of those, including yourself, that will be a part of the conversation prior to the meeting. Ask yourself how this may impact how you share and how a family may receive information. Consider that culture can play a large role in perceptions of child development milestones, disability, and early intervention providers.

2.   Begin the conversation by setting a shared purpose by all those present.

3.   Invite the family to share information about their child's strengths and interests, their own ideas as caregivers and their observations- anything they think may be important to add to the conversation.

4.   Listen before asking. Make sure to allow the parent to complete their thoughts prior to making comments or asking questions.

5.   Let the information that the family shared guide your conversation.

The illustration below provides some guidance from the office of Head Start on a process for supporting families to partner with the early care and education workforce to set goals for their family and their child. This process (available in depth here: https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/engaging-and-goal-setting-with-families.pdf) highlights and facilitates the importance of being family-driven and not having goals/plans defined solely by the provider(s).

Family Partnership Process and Seven Steps for Setting and Reaching Goals with Families

Phase 6: Continuous Program Improvement
Phase 1: Recruitment and Enrollment
Phase 5: Follow-Up and Review
Phase 2: Family and Child Assessment
Phase 4: Goal-Setting with Families
Phase 3: Communication with Families

Step 1   Set a Goal
Step 2   Identify Skills
Step 3   Assess Strengths
Step 4   Examine Stressors
Step 5   Explore Strategies
Step 6   Determine Support
Step 7   Track Progress and Celebrate Successes

Tips for Talking with Parents about Developmental Concerns

- English: CDC_LTSAE_Tips for Talking with Parents
- Spanish: Consejos para hablar con padres y madres (cdc.gov)

How to Get Help for Your Child

- English: [How to Get Help for Your Child Tip Sheet (cdc.gov)](#)
- Spanish: [¿Le preocupa el desarrollo de su hijo? Cómo ayudar a su hijo (cdc.gov)](#)

Watch Me! Celebrating Milestones and Sharing Concerns

- This **free** online training course provides tools and best practices for monitoring the development of children in your care and talking about it with their parents.
- English: [Watch Me! Celebrating Milestones and Sharing Concerns | CDC](#)
- Spanish: [¿Le preocupa el desarrollo de su hijo? Cómo ayudar a su hijo (cdc.gov)](#)
- Accessible PDF of the training: [Watch Me! Celebrating Milestones and Sharing Concerns (cdc.gov)](#)

Discussing Developmental Concerns with Families

- [Discussing Developmental Concerns with Parents | Help Me Grow MN](#)
- [Talking with Families about Their Child's Development |National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#)

Other free (and very helpful!) resources available through the CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early. program - some of which are available in languages other than English and Spanish, may be found at [Get Free "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Materials | CDC](#)

To make a referral to the ***Maryland Infants and Toddlers Program***, visit [this website](#) from the Maryland State Department of Education Division of Early Intervention and Special Education.

As an educator/provider having these types of conversations and meetings with families, your own prep *(and plan for follow up!)* is key. Know the local resources available to families within your region to address a range of needs. When moving into the decision making or next step phase with families, make sure that tasks are limited, clear, and that follow up with you is scheduled to support them.

How to Prepare Families for IFSP/IEP Meetings

The IFSP/IEP process is intended to be family driven, but requires intentional practices to support the child's family members to feel like equal partners in the process and outcomes. This includes everything from the time and place the meeting is scheduled, to how the conversation is initiated and how decisions are made.

For families that have not yet built trust and communication with staff, it can be challenging or intimidating to become more involved. Early intervention providers, schools and districts can partner with family or community members to help bridge the divide, using trusted members of the community to help translate and share key messages and support effective communication. Early intervention providers, schools, and districts can also ask family or community members to serve as interpreters or facilitators during meetings or after-school events. Early intervention systems, schools and districts can also create formal structures, such as a family-led advisory committee, to help school staff learn more about how to best create a shared understanding and system of support between the providers, school and the community.

- Understanding the IFSP Guide
- IEP Parent Guide
- Special Education Process Guide

Additionally, **The Parents' Place of Maryland** provides _free_ individualized support to families of children with disabilities and/or special healthcare needs: Parents' Place of Maryland - Maryland's Special Education and Health Information Center (ppmd.org)

Below is a *self check-list* for special education teams to utilize as a "team-self-check" both before and after meetings.

Team Self-Check Assessment for Supporting Family Involvement During Meetings
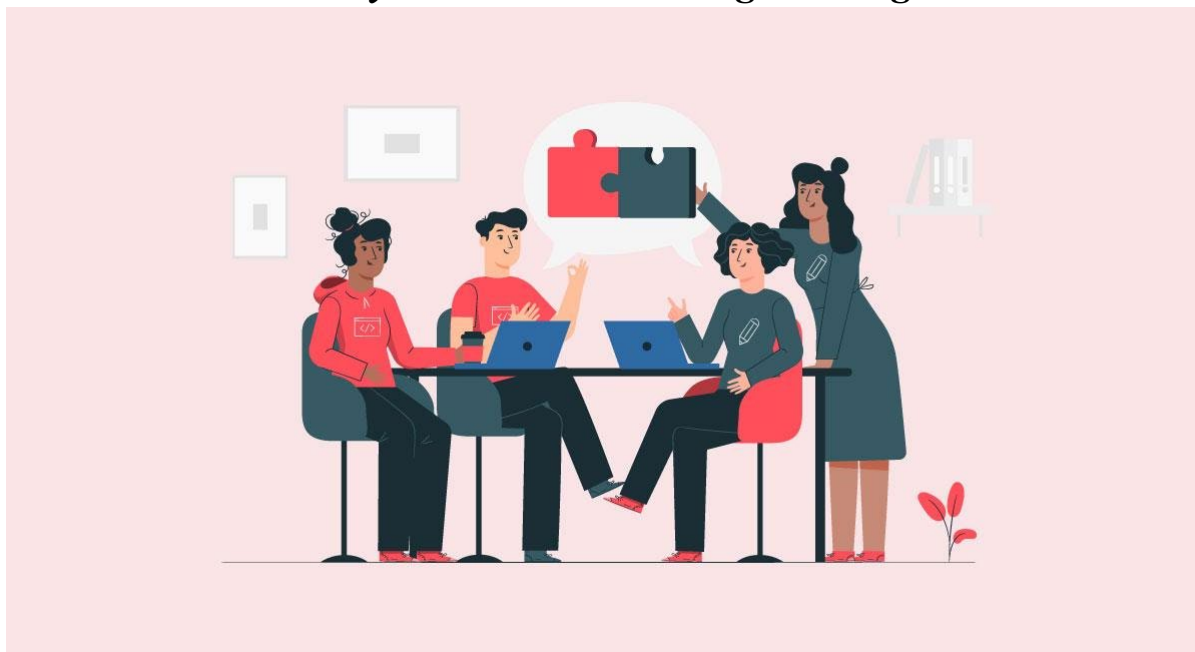
1. Did we share and/or synthesize information clearly and concisely?
2. Did we give family members an opportunity to learn about their rights and responsibilities

as team members in this process?

3. Did we display a warm/positive affect? *(illustrated through tone of voice, facial expressions, responsiveness, eye contact)*
4. Did we use language that the family easily understood? *(no jargon, explain technical terms, interpreter)*
5. Did all team members have the opportunity to participate and contribute relevant information?
6. Did the team members use active listening and ask clarifying questions, when appropriate?
7. Did the team acknowledge and respect input provided by the family?
8. Did the team offer family members the opportunity to give input on decisions made and how progress will be reviewed and tracked and their role in that process?

Consider accessibility of outreach with respect to literacy levels, multi-language learner families, and considerations for culture.

At this time, standard practices require families to inform us if they have needs with respect to adult literacy, language or accessibility. It is incumbent upon us to flip this dynamic. This can be accomplished by implementing universal screenings to understand the profiles and needs of families. Many of these questions can be asked at referral and intake. *(Your program may already gather this information, so best to check!)* Asking these questions of each family helps employ a practice of not coming across as judgmental or threatening when asking about adult needs. How do you address families that may be uncomfortable answering some of these questions?

Great question - glad you asked - just hold space.

Offer the question and if they refuse, you never underestimate the power of offering and what seeds may have been planted for later. It highlights the importance of approaching families with a cultural curiosity throughout our information gathering so that we can collaboratively integrate strategies or guidance into their natural interactions. We would be remiss to not also address considerations around language access and translation of materials and documents to meet a family's needs.

A note on the importance of leadership and reflective conversations to support this work:

Throughout this document, you have seen strategies and read about best practices at the program, classroom and provider levels. We feel it significantly important to note here, before the end of this guidance document, that embodying Pyramid Model practices starts at the top of any program. As you all know first-hand and appreciate, the work of early care and education is intense and heavy. All too often, throughout a range of

family-serving disciplines, the burden of effort to support and engage families falls on front-line workers. It is a core principle within the Pyramid Model framework that leadership and supervisors play an essential role in these practices and our role as leaders is to provide the type of reflective support and space to our staff that we are asking them to hold and provide for families. There are great resources around how Practice Based Coaching can provide regular and consistent opportunities for these interactions between you and your staff: https://challengingbehavior.org/webinar/the-power-of-practice-based-coaching-in-supporting-early-educators-use-of-the-pyramid-model/

- *Professional Development to support your team in this work is key!* We have to highlight here for Program Leadership, Administrators, and Directors the need to commit to ongoing professional development for staff around best practices to engage and support a multigenerational and family anchored approach.
  - And to sharpen this point even further – we need to also emphasize the importance of this professional development to include content about equity {*and specifically implicit biases that show up with respect to race, gender, family dynamics and social interactions*} to support providers to learn about, acknowledge, and dismantle the implicit biases that we all have that show up in their perceptions, interactions and expectations of families in your programs .

Digging Deeper into the Work of Engaging Families Within your Programs and Services
Additional Resources & References

1. DEC's Recommended Practices: Practice Checklists
   a. English: ECTA Center: Performance Checklists
   b. Spanish: ECTA Center: Performance Checklists
2. DEC's Recommended Practices: Practice Guides for Professionals
   a. English: ECTA Center: Practice Guides for Practitioners
   b. Spanish: ECTA Center: Guías de práctica para el practicante
3. DEC's Recommended Practices: Practice Guides for Families
   a. English: ECTA Center: Practice Guides for Families
   b. Spanish: ECTA Center: Guías de práctica para las familias
4. NCPMI Practitioner Brief on Culturally Responsive Practices to Collaborate with Families: Practitioner Brief: Culturally Responsive Practices to Collaborate with Families (challengingbehavior.org)
5. NCPMI Guidance: How to Include Families at Every Step of the PTR-YC Process (challengingbehavior.org)
6. NCPMI Guidance: Family Voice and Choice in the Individualized Behavior Support Process (challengingbehavior.org)
7. NCPMI Guidance – support for families: Developing Neutralizing Routines with Posters (challengingbehavior.org)