



## Family Engagement: Getting Started

### Introduction:

The Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) Strong Families Workgroup believes that meaningful family engagement promotes better outcomes for programs, children and families. Research supports that positive child outcomes are tied to strong family involvement. The work group seeks to strengthen and support parent's voice in shaping policies and programs that impact on children and families. To this end, we strive to help build family partnerships and coordinate family engagement efforts across state agencies. The focus of our work continues to encourage positive parent-child relationships and offer strategies that lead to meaningful family engagement.

Many organizations are working to support and strengthen families. One way to approach this work is through partnerships between families and service providers. This partnership is often referred to as family engagement.

Many programs within New York State agencies incorporate family engagement strategies. This document is intended to give New York State agency staff, policy-makers and professionals working with families a starting point to coordinate family engagement efforts.

This document includes a common definition of family engagement; a list of some things agencies can do, or are doing, to further support family engagement. In New York State, many state agencies support family engagement through various initiatives and policies. Because of the ever-evolving nature of state initiatives, it is difficult to create an all-encompassing and up-to-date list.

### Definition of Family Engagement:

Program and services that support family engagement are based on a set of values that are a shift from the previous understanding that inviting families to participate with their children is adequate. At the core of these values is the belief that all families have strengths. Furthermore, we know that to achieve desired outcomes, families are integral to the process of setting goals, designing services, and making decisions. Finally, families are empowered to take an active role in their development and to recognize their strengths, needs and resources.

Terms other than family engagement are often used to describe the same concept. Other terms include family-centered, family-driven, family participation, family support and participant-driven. For the purpose of this paper, the concepts will be called family engagement. Also, keep in mind that family engagement is only one tool to strengthen relationships between service providers and clients.

What do we mean by *family engagement*?

- Family engagement means building positive relationships with families that support family well-being, strong parent-child relationships and ongoing learning and development of parents and children alike.
- It refers to the beliefs, positive attitudes, positive behaviors and activities of families that support their children's positive development from early childhood through young adulthood. Family engagement happens in the home, early childhood program, school and community, and is a shared responsibility with all those who support children's healthy development.

### **Benefits of family engagement:**

There is an increased national interest across diverse early childhood settings in enhancing family engagement within various program types. Successful programs recognize the inherent benefits of including families as partners when providing educational and/or treatment/support services for children. These benefits include:

- a. **Enhancing the helping relationship:** A family's belief that all its members are respected and that their feelings and concerns are heard strengthens their relationship with program staff. This positive relationship, in turn, can increase the chances for successful intervention or educational experience.
- b. **Promoting family "buy-in":** When families are part of the decision-making process and have a say in developing plans that affect them and their children, they are more likely to be invested in the plans and more likely to commit to achieving objectives and complying with treatment that meets their individual needs.
- c. **Expanding options:** Inclusion of family members—including fathers and extended family early in a relationship provides a greater opportunity to explore the use of relatives as support resources when needed.
- d. **Improving the quality and focus of visits:** The partnership developed between the family and program staff through family engagement strategies strengthens the assessment process and leads to more appropriate service provision.
- e. **Strengthening the parent child relationship:** "We know that young children develop in the context of their relationships. Children's development depends on the quality and reliability of their relationships."<sup>1</sup> Engaging parents promotes their involvement in their child's development and helps to ensure that parents have the "necessary opportunities, relationships, networks and supports to raise their children successfully."<sup>2</sup>

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Source: Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Head Start Resource Center

<sup>1</sup> Shonkoff, J. *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development* Accessed on 12/27/12 [www.developingchild.harvard.edu/library/](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu/library/)

<sup>2</sup> The Annie E. Casey Website Accessed on 12/27/12 <http://nationalassembly.org/FSPC/About/WhatIs.aspx>



### **Additional Benefits of Family Engagement**

Research has demonstrated sizeable improvements in the social-emotional well-being and literacy outcomes among poor pre-school students.<sup>3</sup>

The Annie E. Casey Foundation supports family engagement: “This need to think about families when we think about kids – and the importance of helping vulnerable families do better by and for their kids – is at the heart of what we mean by ‘family strengthening’ and why we promote it as one of the most critical principles of our work. We’ve put a premium of “permanent family connections” in all of our direct services work and in child welfare reform initiatives. This ‘family centric’ approach is fundamental to how we approach change-making efforts in all of our project areas serving children, youth, families and communities.”<sup>4</sup>

The US Department of Health and Human Services has identified these key elements of family engagement<sup>5</sup>:

- Listening to each family member
- Demonstrating respect and empathy for family members
- Developing an understanding of the family's past experiences, current situation, concerns, and strengths
- Responding to concrete needs quickly
- Establishing the purpose of involvement with the family
- Being aware of one's own biases and prejudices
- Validating the participatory role of the family
- Being consistent, reliable, and honest
- Engaging & involving fathers and paternal family members
- Engaging kinship families

### **Measuring Family Engagement:**

The process to define and measure “success” can take many different forms. Factors to take into consideration include type of service, strengths of families involved, setting of services and the form of family engagement to be measured. Measurement strategies exist on a continuum from and might be done in combination.

Some examples of measurement strategies:

- ratings on satisfaction surveys
- number of services that began as a need identified by families
- number of positive comments posted by families on social media (like Facebook)

<sup>3</sup> Reference: a randomized controlled study of a Nebraska family-school based intervention, Getting Ready, in *More Than a Gut Feeling: The Real Value of Family and Community Engagement* December 5, 2011 *Eric Dearing, PhD, Associate Professor of Applied Developmental Psychology in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, where his research focuses on the ways that the connections between families, schools, and community agencies improve the life chances of children growing up poor. Accessed on 12/18/12: <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/more-than-a-gut-feeling-the-real-value-of-family-and-community-engagement>*

<sup>4</sup> Engage us: A Guide Written by Families for Residential Providers, April, 2012 Accessed on 12/20/12: <http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org/sites/default/files/BBi%20-%20Engage%20Us%20-%20Family%20Engagement%20Guide.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services website: Child Welfare Information Gateway Accessed on 3/20/13: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/engagement.cfm>

- number of families referred by families already participating
- number of programs funded by your agency that utilize family engagement strategies
- length of time or number of times that families voluntarily participate
- number of families serving on leadership teams
- number of family goals set by family

### **Strategies for supporting family engagement:**

State agencies can support family engagement work in many ways. Here are three suggestions:

1. Incorporate family engagement strategies in Request for Proposals or Request for Applications.
2. Share drafts of brochures and other materials with families for their feedback.
3. Where possible, be flexible about allowable expenses for funded programs. Recognize that family engagement strategies may require funding for food, transportation, child care, financial incentives and other costs that are not directly tied to the provision of services.
4. Incorporate family engagement strategies into the operating protocols of your department and/or agency.

Any program can support family engagement work in many ways. Here are seven suggestions:

1. Promote a strengths-based approach to acknowledge families' existing resources and resiliencies.
2. Understand what family engagement looks like in your field. It can take many different forms. Some examples include peer support, family team meetings, setting policies for the program, collaborating to set family goals, community cafés and evaluating the program.
3. Include family representatives on advisory committees or leadership teams for your agency.
4. Promote cultural competency/sensitivity of your staff, and the staff of programs you fund.
5. Share resources with your staff and the programs that you fund.
6. Promote training opportunities about family engagement for your staff and programs you fund.
7. Learn how disproportionate minority representation affects your field. Incorporate family engagement strategies to address disproportionality where it exists.

### **Additional Resources:**

Center for the Study of Social Policy, Strengthening Families: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>

Harvard Family Research Project: <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement>

Head Start National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family>

*"More Than a Gut Feeling: The Real Value of Family and Community Engagement"*

<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/more-than-a-gut-feeling-the-real-value-of-family-and-community-engagement>

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education: <http://www.ncpie.org/>

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/>

New York City Department of Education, Office for Family Engagement (Parent Services):

<http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/District75/Parent+Services/default.htm>

US Department of Education Blog: <http://www.ed.gov/blog/topic/parent-and-family-engagement/>

US Department of Education, My Child's Academic Success:

<http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/partnership.html>

US Department for Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Child Welfare Information

Gateway: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/engagement.cfm>

New York State Parenting Information and Resource Center: <http://www.nyspirc.org/info/>

*Developed by the Strong Families Work Group, part of the New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council*

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