

Family Engagement: Best Practices for State Agencies

State agencies benefit from the opinions, perspectives and stories that families provide. Families bring resiliency to the policy table, demonstrating their strength and resourcefulness as they navigate the work of raising children. These abilities and talents offered by families can assist agencies with system design and program monitoring, improvements and evaluation, as well as other agency needs. These are some of the benefits of amplifying and sharing family voice through family engagement.

Family engagement is defined as a collaborative and strengths-based process through which state administrators, early childhood professionals and families build positive and goal-oriented relationships to effectively support the healthy development of children and the greater community. Throughout this document, we will interchangeably use "families" and "parents." Given today's current dynamics, the shift and concept of parents has evolved.

When we speak of families, we mean a child's adult caretaker (biological parents, foster parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.), as all have a shared responsibility within family engagement with systems to ensure optimal growth within their homes, schools and communities. Family voice is the contribution to this process and viewed as the opinions, perspectives, ideas families and parents bring to the policy and outreach table.

The positive outcomes of engaged families are powerful: increased support for children's learning at home, empowered parents, well-informed agencies and policies, and improved family well-being.

This document was created by a team of non-profit organizations, state agencies, and parents to assist state agencies with a focus on early childhood education design. However, information in this document is applicable to all agencies considering family engagement.



We hope that this information will guide organizations with the implementation of this worthwhile concept.

Why should state agencies consider family engagement as part of their general work?

Family voice provides opinions and insights on program usage, design and program services. Parents are the people who are targeted for these services; therefore their input is vital. If programs are to be successful and to learn about what changes might be needed, parents must be included.

What barriers are there to fostering family engagement?

A few examples of barriers that might impede state-level family engagement include:

- insufficient program funds and lack of resources;
- lack of awareness about the benefits of family engagement by state agencies;
- lack of meeting flexibility;
- lack of overall support to attract parents to family engagement activities;
- agency perceptions that families have limited abilities and understanding of agency information and operations; and
- lack of training provided to families about agency services.

What actions should a state agency consider when implementing family engagement strategies?

State agencies may consider:

- appointing an agency representative who oversees, supports and expands opportunities for family engagement;
- requiring state funded programs to create and implement family engagement within their programs;
- recruiting diverse family voices (same sex parents, families of different races, parents who speak a variety of languages, those who are affected by incarceration, parents who live in rural areas and/or are facing economic insecurity, etc.);
- providing honorariums/stipends/gift cards to families for the work they perform and offsetting costs (such as childcare, meals, paper resources, etc.) parents incur when participating;
- encouraging parents to use their stories and experiences in policy consideration;
- using information/computer systems that are user-friendly to parents;
- providing opportunities where parents can collaborate and network with other parents;
- translating documents to primary languages of parents and providing interpreter services;
- working with local community-based nonprofit agencies to bring family voice to the system design table;
- convening focus groups to get family voice perspectives and insights; and
- fostering cross-state agency collaboration to get a better understanding of family needs to attract family voice.

How should state agencies engage families?

Suggested actions include, but not limited to:

- demonstrate respect and empathy for all parents;
- be aware of biases and prejudices of agency staff when working with families and diverse groups;
- be aware of the wide range of experiences, assets, and challenges that families have;
- provide feedback through multiple pathways based on information provided by parents;
- facilitate positive relationships that require all agencies staff to be culturally and linguistically responsive to the parents; and
- provide supports and resources to parents equally and equitably across the state.

What incentives should be considered when engaging parents?

Stipends and/or gift cards are ways to encourage family engagement as they help to enable family participation.

Other ideas are:

- provide parent leadership and other training opportunities to increase parent knowledge;
- create flexible meeting schedules for families to participate in various activities; and
- provide for meals, childcare, transportation, or internet costs.

How should state agencies use family engagement?

Family voice can provide state agencies with the following resources:

- program monitoring/outcomes;
- ambassadorships;
- success stories and experiences with state programs;
- two-way evaluation – agencies evaluate family participation and families evaluate agency engagement; and
- asset and needs assessment on state agency issues or new program concepts.

Apply equity lens perspectives to family engagement work by:

- making sure all families get equitable supports and resources; and
- inviting a variety of families/parents to system designs (same sex families, immigrant, caregivers, foster parents, families of different races and ethnic groups, etc.).

For more information about family engagement here are some resources to consider:

Family Voices

This agency has developed tools to assess family engagement at both the systems-level (the Family Engagement in Systems Assessment Tool) and the individual-level (the Family-Centered Care Assessment).

<https://familyvoices.org/assessingfamilyengagement/>

Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDGB5) Technical Assistance Center

How State Leaders Can Promote Meaningful Family Engagement at the State and Program Level.

https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/state_role_in_family_engagement_acc.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Policy Statement on Family Engagement From the Early Years to the Early Grades.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/policy-statement-on-family-engagement.pdf>

Head Start - Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework is a road map for progress.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement>

For more information on family engagement, please contact:

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The New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) is a group of public and private sector leaders appointed by the Governor to develop a comprehensive and sustainable early childhood system in New York. Established in 2009, the ECAC is working to create a path for every child to succeed.

Council on Children and Families

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The Council on Children and Families coordinates New York's health, education and human services systems as a means to provide more effective systems of care for children and families. The Council works with state and local organizations in both public and private sectors to foster interagency, collaborative approaches to solving the problems and meeting the challenges facing government, service providers and the private sector.

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