ENGAGE PARENTS AS PARTNERS AND LEADERS
A GUIDE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROVIDERS...
The most honest moments I've had with parents have been in the hallway outside the classroom after they've dropped off their child, that's when they open up and tell me what's really going on, not when they are on the other side of the desk in my office.”

Head Start Family Service Provider

Dear Early Childhood Provider,

We appreciate and applaud how much you dedicate every day to your work with children and families. We applaud your efforts and celebrate your accomplishments.

The CT Early Childhood Education Cabinet’s Family Involvement/Home Visiting workgroup in partnership with the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative, interviewed early childhood providers like you to learn your hopes and needs to partner with parents for the best child outcomes.

As Connecticut moves forward with great momentum under the leadership of the new Office of Early Childhood, it is exciting to bring forth and highlight your successes and needs. Many providers shared extensively their goals for children and for the field, and articulated the tools desired for family partnerships. Take a moment and read through the findings and the research on parent engagement. This is surely a positive trend in family engagement that the early childhood providers and parents make real.

This is one step forward to make the parent engagement successful, recognizing your commitment to the family as well as the many responsibilities you have as strong early childhood providers. Enjoy!

Thank you.

Elaine Zimmerman
Chair, Family Involvement/Home Visitation Workgroup
CT Early Childhood Education Cabinet

Elena Trueworthy
Director
Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative
The Early Childhood Education Cabinet was reformed in January 2010 and designated by Governor M. Jodi Rell to be the State Advisory Council specified in the Head Start Act of 2007. The purpose of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet is to develop a high-quality, comprehensive system of early childhood education among the wide array of early childhood programs in the state (including Head Start, child care and School Readiness). The Early Childhood Education Cabinet plays a key role in advancing the integration of services for young children and families.

The Cabinet works within these priority areas through intensive workgroup activity: Quality Data Systems, Early Learning Standards, Family Involvement/Home Visitation, Professional Development/Workforce, Health Promotions, Public/Private Partnerships, and QRIS

Family Involvement and Home Visitation Workgroup

The Cabinet’s Family Involvement and Home Visitation Workgroup seeks to systemically embed family engagement and parent leadership in the early childhood system. Strategies have included working with professionals on how to maximize parents as partners and central assets for improved child outcomes in health, safety and learning. Professionals include early care providers, health care providers, school teachers and community leaders. Additionally, the Workgroup has prepared a continuum of family engagement and leadership opportunities for parents and other caregivers, created a fatherhood audit for agencies to see how they might maximize father engagement, and developed a home visitation system for new families.

The Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative works in partnership with a diverse group of cross-sector providers, agencies, state departments, institutions of higher education, students, parents, home visiting programs, and others to ensure children and families have access to high quality early learning experiences. Created in 1987, the Collaborative seeks to continually assess the early childhood needs, gaps and barriers, and works in partnership to find and implement solutions to give the children and families, and the staff who work with them, the quality of programming and support they all deserve.

The Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative is an initiative of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and a United Way of Central and Northeastern CT partner agency.
SPECIAL THANKS TO THE MANY INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THIS WORK:

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

CONNECTICUT COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

HEAD START

HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING
BRIGHTER FUTURES INITIATIVE

NORWALK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

NORWALK EARLY CHILDHOOD COUNCIL

TORRINGTON EARLY CHILDHOOD COLLABORATIVE

TORRINGTON CHILD CARE CENTER
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In August of 2013, the Governor’s Early Childhood Education Cabinet sponsored five focus groups of Early Childhood providers through the Family Engagement and Home Visitation Workgroup. The Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative was asked to coordinate these efforts with the Workgroup. The purpose of these provider focus groups was to:

1) gauge their attitudes towards and experiences with parent engagement and leadership in their current roles as early childhood providers

2) hear and gather qualitative data from the early childhood community

3) create informational materials to support the provider’s perspective as it relates to parent engagement and leadership

Focus groups do not give us a complete understanding of all the perspectives from the field, but they do enable identification of trends and common themes. The findings from the focus groups give us a fresh understanding of current thinking within the field, and provide critical information to policy makers on the needs and interests of the early childhood community.

Why ask early childhood providers about parent engagement and leadership?

Early childhood providers such as child care directors, teachers and support staff, home visitors, and parent educators are a few of the many providers that come in contact with parents on a regular basis during the early years of a child’s life. These providers play a very important role not only with providing high-quality early learning experiences for children, but also in engaging and strengthening the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the parents. Equally important, the parents of the children help strengthen the quality of the services provided to their children, and they can help support and advocate for the needs of the early childhood field. This reciprocal relationship creates a blanket of support that promotes strong children, families, and communities and better outcomes.

Parent engagement and leadership is a critical component of a high-quality early childhood program. It is a critical piece of the Head Start philosophy and is mandated through the Head Start Performance Standards, has been incorporated into models such as Abecedarian, outlined in Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), and built into the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards for programs serving young children.

Two sets of focus groups occurred over the past year. Seven forums were held with parents. Five focus groups were help with providers and directors in early childhood. The findings below reveal a strong opportunity for connection and partnership between families and the early childhood field for children, family and community strengthening.
WHAT PARENTS WANT

Parents were asked what kind of support they needed to help with their efforts on behalf of early childhood care. Seven Forums were held in the fall of 2012 to collect parent input on Connecticut’s early childhood system. Led by the Cabinet’s Family Engagement and Home Visitation Workgroup, in partnership with many agencies and foundations, parents throughout the state expressed concern about and interest in:

- The cost and availability of quality care.
- The need for respect, activities that embrace and an understanding of the diverse racial and cultural makeup of the families in CT.
- A shortage of information on what makes quality early care and education.
- A need for hubsites and information on what is available for parents in a community and region for children, ranging from leisure, to ways to meet parents to learning what helps a child succeed in school.
- Bilingual programs are in short supply, but necessary.
- Shortage of transportation hinders both choice and access of programs.
- Social Emotional factors are hard to discuss. Parents want to feel safe to discuss behavioral challenges and difficulties at home or at the early care program.
- Parents as Partners. Parents want to learn what they need to know to help their child in every way.

These findings reflect a strong opportunity for early childhood leaders and parents to work together as partners for improved child outcomes.

“Parents came to us because they wanted a cover for their children’s bus stop. We joined their efforts and supported them through the process, and they made it happen!”

— Head Start staff
FOCUS GROUP CONVERSATIONS WITH THE FIELD

Project Methodology

The project consisted of five focus groups, two of which were conducted in Norwalk, two in Hartford, and one in Torrington. Each was facilitated by Elaine Zimmerman, Co-Chair of the Family Involvement and Home Visitation workgroup and consisted of 12 early childhood providers. Each focus group lasted 2 hours.

The basic format was:

- Introductions,
- A chance for everyone to explain what they currently do to engage parents and reflect on how well that was working,
- A visioning exercise that asked providers to think about what would be different at their center and in their community if all parents really understood child development, knew what quality looked like and were articulate, effective advocates to make sure that children got the quality early care and education that they deserve,
- Sharing of what would be different in that vision
- Pairing off to discuss several questions related to working with parents on deepening or expanding partnerships with parents around early care quality and policies to achieve it.
- Sharing highlights of those discussions
- Wrap up.

Make-up of the focus groups

Care was taken to recruit a total of 60 participants, 12 participants per focus group. The groups included a diverse group of staff from the following programs/organizations:

- All Our Kin
- Asylum Hill Family Center – Catholic Charities
- Bloomfield Family Child Care home provider
- Bloomfield Family Resource Center
- Brookside Preschool
- Canaan Child Care Center
- Catholic Charities- Triple P
- Community Renewal Team – Head Start
- Education Connection
- El Centro de Desarrollo y Reafirmacion Familiar – Catholic Charities
- El Pequeñín
- Even Start
- Family/Children’s Agency
- Fox Run Family Resource Center
- Growing Seeds Preschool
- Hartford Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation
- Hartford Neighborhood Center
- Hartford Public Schools
- Kinder Care Learning Center
- Maria Seymour Brooker Memorial, Inc.
- Mid-Fairfield Child Guidance/Child First
- Norwalk Community College
- Norwalk Community Health Center
- Norwalk Public Schools
- Nurturing Families
- Parker Memorial Family Center – Catholic Charities
- SAND Family Resource Center - Village for Children and Families
- Southside Family Center – Catholic Charities
- The Children’s Playhouse Too
- Torrington Child Care Center
- Torrington Public Schools

The overwhelming majority of the participants were women with male representation from Fatherhood programs. Roughly a quarter of the participants spoke English as a second language with Spanish as their primary language. Almost all participants worked with lower income families in subsidized programs.

“Parents drive the center. It is different when parents are truly in the driver’s seat than when policy makers are.”

—Family Center Director
Parent engagement is critically important to early care providers – All providers expressed by citing the research and through personal stories the importance of working with parents and that parents are the “child’s first teacher.”

Culture, Diversity, and Joy – All focus groups stated that when a parent’s culture and diversity is celebrated and highlighted, meetings, events, or workshops are always more successful with parent participation and engagement.

Home visitation offers time and depth – Providers who have the freedom to engage parents in their home or in the community report that this strategy helps to develop relationships with parents and enables them to engage with parents in meaningful ways. Programs such as Head Start and Nurturing Families are just a few of the types of programs that have this ability.

Parents Can Partner in Different Ways - The term “Parent Engagement” means different things to different people, and is used to describe an array of activities along a continuum. This continuum starts with parents engaging with their own children all the way to parents as leaders in changing public policy.

Partnership, Not Services – Many providers view the parents they work with through a traditional human service lens and see them as people only in need of services. Parent leadership was not a focus area for most early childhood providers.

Fathers Matter – Providers noted that dads play a very important role and are increasingly more present in programs. Providers stated that the dads need to be called out in ways that are respectful and specific to males.

Current Practice of Engaging Parents Isn’t That Successful – Providers care deeply about the children and families they work with, and expressed the vital role parents play within their programs. However, many reported having a tough time in not only getting parents to attend events and meetings, but to engage in meaningful ways - especially in leadership roles such as advisory groups.

Build Provider Capacity – Providers agreed that engaging parents is important and they want to do a better job, however, many expressed the need for training and tools to increase their ability to do it more effectively.

Connect with Child Outcomes – The work of partnering with parents is seen as separate or “another thing to do” and not tied to child outcomes on a systematic level for all providers. Providers acknowledged trying to partner with parents, but that it was many times difficult due to time restraints and responsibilities of their work.

Link to Public Policy – Many of the providers felt disengaged with public policy, with the disengagement growing the closer they worked directly with the children. In general, providers reported that at work, they do not discuss the impact of public policy on the families they serve or its impact on the early childhood field. As a result they felt ill equipped to help parents change policy.

Community Together – Providers greatly appreciated working in partnership with other community providers, and felt the value of collaboration. The whole community needs to be involved and come together to create a fully systematic approach.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopt a common framework that defines parent engagement and leadership along a continuum and connects it back to child and family outcomes.

Parent engagement can be framed along a continuum that is tied to positive child outcomes and school readiness goals. Such frameworks already exist, and are being used by some organizations and initiatives in Connecticut. National models include Strengthening Families (www.cssp.org) and the Head Start Parent and Community Engagement Framework (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family).

Ensure parent leadership is an essential part of the framework

Along the parent engagement continuum, parent leadership is an area that needs to be embedded in the inception and design of all program models that see parents as equal partners at the table. This is a void that Connecticut is well positioned to fill. Connecticut has been on the forefront in developing parent leadership training programs like the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), People Empowering People (PEP) and Parents Supporting Educational Excellence (ParentSEE). Augmenting parent engagement frameworks, such as Strengthening Families, with a parent leadership component will increase its effectiveness by helping shift the culture of parent engagement to a strength-based lens at all points throughout the continuum. The early childhood field also benefits from the support and advocacy of the families they work with to be able to run high-quality programs. As the cost of care continues to rise and the reimbursements and fees stay the same, programs continually struggle with limited resources to run high-quality programs.

Provide training and support to Parents and Providers

In the focus groups, providers voiced their frustration with their inability to engage many of their parents and asked for training and support to improve their efforts. In order to expand provider efforts to engage parents, programs will need training, support, and tools to achieve successful results. In addition, all providers who work with children and families should have opportunities to convene together routinely to reflect on lessons learned, successes, policies and procedures, and data sharing.

Include parent engagement as an essential piece to all programming and systems building initiatives

Parent engagement, especially as it relates to parent leadership, is many times not a priority when designing and developing programming and infrastructure for children and families. As a result, parent engagement is not implemented as an important part of an overall system of supports for children and families. This is especially true as it relates to families of diverse backgrounds.
What Providers Can Do

- Offer parent engagement training at least yearly for staff
- Discuss parent engagement as an agenda topic at every staff meeting with examples of how the work ties back to child outcomes
- Partner with parents to support their child’s learning and development
- Seek parent input into programmatic decisions
- Support parents on advisory boards
- Working with parents on selected community-wide issues
- Provide parents with access to parent leadership training by offering it on-site, through hands-on project based learning, and by connecting with community based groups and organizations that offer leadership training

What Policy Makers Can Do

- Continue and maximize the Parent Trust Act, Connecticut’s model policy that creates a funding stream for family civics opportunities and skills development on the community level.
- Ensure the Family Engagement and Support standard of the Quality Rating and Improvement System continues to be a critical component, and is supported by professional development and technical assistance.
- To support the positive effects that parent leaders bring to a community, a systematic approach that includes local government and Mayors, public schools, early childhood providers, philanthropy, and others needs to be created. Leadership can be sustained and grown by connecting parent leaders to opportunities outside their immediate organization and to higher levels such as boards, commissions, and task forces

What the Community Can Do

- Create a community-wide taskforce committed to parent engagement. This can be through the local municipality, Board of Education, or through a community based initiative.
- Ensure parent engagement is a focus in every community-wide plan or funding decision that involves children.
- Publically post leadership positions available in the city or town such as boards, commissions, and political opportunities.
- Match interested parent leaders with local and state leadership opportunities.

What Parents Can Do

- Find out how policies related to young children impact your child, your family and your neighborhood.
- Learn what makes a quality early care program. What does the research say about the components that must be in place?
- Assure ways to help your child’s early care and education setting be excellent. Ask the Director and providers what they do to assure quality and how parents can participate.
- Celebrate evenings or days that honor different cultures and diversity so children are exposed to different food, dress and songs and learn to embrace the differences that make up your community.
WHY ENGAGE PARENTS?

Parents need and want to be involved from the onset in partnerships that serve their children best. Effectively engaging families in partnerships with both organizations and local and state government lays the foundation for positive outcomes.

Benefits to PARENTS:

• builds knowledge and skills
• opens doors for employment opportunities
• creates a sense of belonging
• offers a sense of accomplishment
• provides parents opportunities to effect meaningful change
• increases sense of personal power
• increases confidence in parents’ ability to effect change
• provides parents opportunities to network with other families and providers

* Excerpted from *Making Room at the Table*, Family Resource Coalition of America, 1998.

Benefits to CHILDREN:

• earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
• be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
• attend school regularly
• have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
• graduate and go on to postsecondary education

Benefits to PROGRAMS:

• creates active recipients of care and services
• creates advocates for the program
• creates a positive reputation for the program within the community
• increases market demand for the program
• more support all around for the program by parents
• increases staff morale
• parents provide invaluable insights about family needs and preferences so that programs are truly responsive to consumers. Their insights can help steer the actions aimed at improving quality, increasing public awareness, and enhancing consumer use of high-quality early childhood programs.

Benefits to COMMUNITIES:

• creates a community with leadership role models for other families
• parents continue their engagement with community groups and government, i.e. boards or commission, political positions, task forces, etc.
• parents broaden public support and action through their connections to other families and members of their community
• parents bring unanticipated partners to the table to increase support
• parent voices can also have influence with local officials

“The if this is not a team effort, it is the child that shuts down.”
— Preschool Teacher
Many early childhood programs have effectively engaged parents. The following strategies reflect their experiences and insights.

**EVERY ENCOUNTER COUNTS.**

Early childhood providers have very busy jobs. The demands on staff have grown tremendously in response to the recognition of the critical importance of high-quality learning experiences in the early years. Whether teaching staff have a class full of energy filled children, home visitors have a large caseload, or Directors are in the middle of dealing with a crisis, it is critical that staff approach every encounter with parents positively, especially the first one.

**Tips:**

1. Say hello and welcome every family every time. If you work in a classroom, acknowledge every child and family as they drop off or pick up their child. If you are holding a workshop, make sure a staff member is standing by the door to welcome and direct every family.

2. When meeting parents, remember something about them, their family, or their child that you can then comment on or ask about the next time you see them.

3. Regularly inquire about their lives outside of the program.

4. Recognize and acknowledge parents’ and/or children’s strengths, growth, or efforts at every opportunity.

5. Meet parents where they feel comfortable and are equal. All staff, especially those who work in offices, need to leave their desks often and meet parents in less formal settings like the hallway, near their child’s classroom, during coffee time, etc.

**VALUE AND CELEBRATE CULTURE AND DIVERSITY.**

Early childhood programs and services partner with families of many different structures, socioeconomic, racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Regardless of the family make-up and background, people are proud and value their culture and diversity.

**Tips:**

1. Recognize groups and offer specialized information – parents feel more comfortable and are more willing to engage when they know ahead of time that they will have something in common with other parents. Offer specialized workshops just for fathers and other male figures, parents of children with disabilities, teen parents, etc.

2. Organize smaller, more intimate opportunities for parents to engage. Offer meetings of children within the same classroom, or parents that live in the same neighborhood to get together in a smaller setting where they can get to know each other easier.

3. Establish working partnerships with other organizations or groups that have a specialty working with specific populations (Dad's Groups, Latino organizations, military support groups).

4. Providers reported overwhelmingly that multicultural events turn parents out. Provide a space and invite families to cook a traditional meal from their country or to bring in a traditional object to show. Parents and staff are proud of their heritage, and have an easier time during these opportunities talking and getting to know one another.
“With parent permission, I share the contact information with each family so parents can call each other for child play dates, rides to workshops, or to just to get together outside of the program.”

—Preschool Teacher

LISTEN TO AND LEARN FROM EACH OTHER.

Parents know a lot. They know the most about their children, they know the most about their community, and they know the most about the strengths and needs of the program from a consumer perspective. They have a keen eye to identifying needed changes to programs, policies, or procedures that staff just can’t see. Parents not only experience these challenges, but also many times have ideas and solutions to solve those challenges.

Tips:

1. Don’t ignore a quick comment from a parent – actively listen to what a parent is saying to identify where there might be an issue or an opportunity, and ask probing questions to help gather more information. Then act on the information!

2. Give parents your full attention. It can be difficult to have conversations when children are around or when other parents are near. State that their comments are valuable to you and that you want to be available for them. Ask them to come a few minutes early at pick-up time to have the ability to talk privately one-on-one, or schedule a mutually convenient time.

ENGAGE PARENTS FROM THE BEGINNING.

Make sure that parents are involved from the beginning on opportunities, big or small. Parents are more likely to feel ownership if they are part of the decision making.

Tips:

1. Ask parents about their interests and what is important to them. Use a survey or assessment tool to gather this data from parents, and involve parents in analyzing the results.

2. Engage parents in helping to plan a workshop that is important to them and based on parent feedback, or having them link you with a community resource they know.

3. Learn from parents by asking them about their child’s interests, likes, and what works for them.

“In the Family Center, we have parent ambassadors who take the lead in making sure new families feel comfortable and are connected right away. Parents feel more comfortable with other parents, and it is our role to support and encourage that.”

— Family Center Director
SUPPORT A COMMUNITY OF CHAMPIONS.

Parents are more likely to feel comfortable and empowered if they are not the only parent and are not expected to speak on behalf of all parents. Adding more parents to a group is not enough. Ensure diversity by balancing experienced parent leaders with those who are new to the role. Include fathers and grandparents as well as mothers. Seek a range of parents from different economic and ethnic backgrounds.

Tips:
1. Encourage parents to recruit and mentor other parents, and provide incentives for their efforts.
2. Intentionally connect parents who have been in your program with some of the newer parents.
3. Acknowledge and reward parents who take on leadership roles and become champions.

MAXIMIZE PARENTS’ STRENGTHS.

Get to know the individual strengths of parents. Every parent has strengths no matter their situation. Good organizations and leaders maximize the strengths of all partners, and parents are no exception. Offer a wide range of roles that parents can play to contribute in meaningful ways.

Tips:
1. Identify the strengths of parents, even when they are dealing with crisis situations. To help build resilience, help parents see their strengths even in the toughest of times, and celebrate the successes achieved.
2. Be aware of how a parent would like to engage, and build from there. Meet parents where they are, support their strengths, and intentionally connect them to opportunities.
3. Ensure parent decision making authority at all program levels (with their child, in the classroom, in the organization, and in the community).

“If we want to enable parents to become decision-makers, and participants in children’s programs and policies, we must expand the leadership training programs and develop more methods to increase parent involvement and leadership in children’s health, safety, and learning.”

— Parent
Provide the Necessary Supports for Parents to Be Successful Partners.

Some parents will need guidance to engage and make meaningful contributions. Others will need support in developing the skills necessary to voice their opinions and take action based on their interest and input. Parents of young children lead very busy lives. Family supports such as food, child care, and transportation make it easier for parents to participate. Not only do such supports matter on a practical level, but they also improve group cohesion and morale.

Tips:

1. Create a space where parents feel comfortable and valued. The emotional and physical environment should be warm and welcoming.
2. Establish open communication channels to be able to respond quickly to parent requests for support.
3. Provide hands-on training and guidance for parents taking action.

Connect to the Community.

Be knowledgeable and connect to resources in the community that offer leadership training and action. Share and use this information with parents.

Tips:

1. Know what community action groups are formed and active in your town or neighborhood.
2. Visit the groups to let them know about the services your program offers, and explore ways to collaborate.
3. Bring leadership training and action groups to the parents. If you work at a center, open your doors to these groups.
4. Share information of current community issues and discuss with parents.

“I am now going to have the parents design their own space at the center. It will be better than what I or my staff could ever do.”

— Program Director
The goals of the program are to:

- help parents become the leaders they would like to be for children and families;
- expand the capacity of parents as change agents for children and families;
- develop communities of parents within regions of the state that will support one another in skill development and successful parent action for children;
- facilitate systems change for parental involvement with increased utilization of parents in policy and process decisions; and
- increase parent-child interactions and improve child outcomes through parent involvement.

In an effort to achieve these goals, parents participate in a comprehensive training that includes a retreat to develop group communication, 10 weeks of classes on self and perception of leadership, 10 weeks on practicing democracy and civic skills, and a graduation at the State Capitol. After they have completed the training, parents serve as mentors and advisors for future training classes. The following states have adapted and are using the PLTI model: California, Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.
ESTABLISH OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS TO MEET DIVERSE CIVIC LEADERS.

Bringing parents together with policy leaders can make parents feel more appreciated for participating in the process and feel more connected to their community.

Tips:

1. Link parents and policy leaders together. Policy makers will respond to both formal and informal requests to meet. Organize opportunities for parents to talk with local and state leaders.

2. Support parents in attending local and state policy meetings. Organize a group to attend a city council meeting, go tour the Capitol, or attend a Board of Education meeting.

3. Support parents in their role as advocates.

Cultivate public attention for the contributions that parents make.

Media outlets often look for stories of parents in leadership roles. Public officials are more likely to respond if parents deliver the message. Look for ways to bring recognition to parents. This not only makes parents feel good, it raises awareness about the work and the important issues.

Celebrate! Celebrate! Celebrate!

Awards dinners, certificates, acknowledgements from prominent businesses or political figures, and small and large efforts are all ways to celebrate the contributions of parents (and other partners). Such occasions build good will and momentum to continue the hard work.
TOOLS FOR ENGAGING PARENTS

This section contains tools and resources that staff, parents, organizations, and communities can use to support and encourage parent engagement and leadership.

1. Tips for Engaging Parents

2. A Sample of Questions to Consider as Thought Leaders in Early Childhood
RESOURCES

Strengthening Families™ A Protective Factors Framework
The Center for the Study of Social Policy
http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families
This website includes information on the Strengthening Families framework that helps to build the five protective factors in families:
1)Parental resilience 2)Social connections 3)Concrete support in times of need
4)Knowledge of parenting and child development 5)Social and emotional competence of children
Strengthening Families has developed an online program assessment tool for early childhood providers that can be found at: http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/SF_Program-SelfAssessment_2012.pdf

Head Start Family and Community Engagement Framework and Assessment
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family
Head Start’s National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement created this framework and assessment tool to help programs promote children’s well-being by engaging parents and families.

For more information on state-wide resources for parent engagement and leadership, contact the Commission on Children: 18–20 Trinity Street, Hartford, CT 06106-1591. (860) 240-0290 www.cga.ct.gov/coc

“We need to hold ourselves accountable. If the parents aren’t engaged, it is on our backs and we need to step it up!”
— Early childhood Provider
TIPS FOR ENGAGING PARENTS


1. Consult numerous parents before beginning an action plan. Seek parent input from those who will be affected by a partnership initiative.

2. Listen to parents. Include parent ideas as regular partnership meeting agenda items. Let parents define goals for action.

3. Provide family supports for meetings. Offer dinner, child care, and transportation.

4. Use lay language. Don’t use professional in-house phrases such as “developmentally appropriate practice” when parents care about love, nurturing, and safety.

5. Link participation to real change and active leadership. Parents know what is real and active. They operate within power structures every day at home and at work.

6. Offer civic skills and leadership training. Help parents become leaders by providing them with basic information on budgets, outcomes, media power, how government works, and the policy-making process.

7. Do not shy away from religion. Religion is a mobilizing force in many communities. It is often a base from which parent and community action organizing can take place.

8. Have parents recruit and mentor other parents. Parents are more likely to get involved if they already know someone who is involved.

9. Embrace diversity. Tolerate differences and create agendas and plans that incorporate multiple views within shared values. Bring in the fathers and grandfathers. Include parents who are experienced leaders, as well as those who need experience being leaders.


11. Create reciprocal relationships. Share what parents want from the partnership, as well as what the partnership wants from parents.

12. Select one or two parents to organize parent feedback on partnership activities in environments where parents can fully share their ideas. Treat parents’ input as primary information. Train parent facilitators to create parent memos with all parent feedback recorded for the partnership to read and discuss.

13. Set up parent evaluation teams each year for partnership programs. Use the opportunity to listen to the language, values, goals, and community expectations of the parents. Assess how and if the values and expectations of partnership leaders and staff correspond with parents’ values and expectations.

14. Create opportunities for parents to meet one another. When partnerships just work with parents one on one, the opportunity for parents to meet other parents is diminished. This paints a vertical, individualized interpretation of issues, rather than a horizontal community analysis of gaps in services or needs.

15. Create environments where children see their parents as leaders. Reflect the values of partnership in the environments and initiatives you create. Offer dinners, honorary membership, and awards for family members who contribute to a policy. Invite family and friends to attend the honoring.
### QUESTIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD THOUGHT LEADERS

Use these sample questions as an opportunity to open dialogue with parents, staff, and community members about parent engagement and leadership.

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FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS & PROBES

Focus Group Introduction

Introductions: Name and position

Background introduction: Why we are here

Focus group questions:

Current parent engagement/involvement work

How do you currently engage families with the work you do?

What are some of the most important things you do to engage families?

Do you have examples of ways to engage families that work and that don’t work?

Do you rely on any requirements that you must meet that guides your work with parents? (NAEYC standards, HS standards, etc.)

Current shared civic work for children between agency and parents

Imagine that parents understood the components of quality early care and were spokespeople for optimal early childhood opportunity for children. What would change in the child care system? What would change in the community? Why? How?

Do you partner with parents now on early care quality and policy to achieve it? If yes, how? If no, is there a reason why not?

Would you like to partner with parents in community improvements for young children, such as quality early care, when the opportunities avail themselves? If yes, why? If no, why not?

Are there ways you could see deepening or expanding your partnerships with parents around early care quality and policies to achieve it? On other community improvements for young children?

What supports would you need or changes in the environment to have this deeper partnership with the parents of young children?

Do you think there are opportunities to work on a shared community goal with parents? If yes, what kinds of opportunities? If not, tell us about that.

Do you know how change happens for young children in the public sector in policy and budget arena? Do you as staff talk about how to improve the early care and education environment for best child outcomes? Is this something you are interested in? If yes, why? If no, why not?

Probes

What words come to mind when I say “parent leadership”? When we talk about parent leadership, are there other words you use?

Do they think developing and/or supporting parent leadership should be part of your work?

What type of training do you want or think you need to help support parents more in your role?

Do you have training in leadership development, whether for yourself or for how to build this with families in your program?

Please tell us what parent leadership resources are in your community. Are there parent leadership trainings available, are their community action groups that you work with?
NOTES

1 Research News You Can Use: Family Engagement and Early Childhood Education.  http://www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-family-engagement
