

2009 CCPRC Annual Meeting
Breakout B-3
Thursday, October 29, 2009, 2:15 p.m. – 3:45 p.m.

Strengthening Concepts and Measures of Engagement with Families

Description

This breakout session: 1) identified key elements of a comprehensive concept of family engagement, emerging to replace the limited, older concept of parent involvement; 2) shared components of a related, newly defined dimension of child care quality, family sensitivity; 3) discussed issues involved in measuring family engagement and sensitivity in care and education settings; and 4) discussed the range of family outcomes associated with sensitive, engaged caregiving.

Moderator

Martha Zaslow, Child Trends

Presenters

Juliet Bromer, Erickson Institute

Linda Halgunseth, National Association for the Education of Young Children

Discussant

Jay Fagan, Temple University

Scribe

Manica F. Ramos, Child Trends

1. Documents in Session Folder

- “Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature,” Linda C. Halgunseth.
- “Family-Sensitive Caregiving and Quality in Early Care and Education Arrangements,” Juliet Bromer.

2. Summary of Presentations

- **Summary of Presentation #1: Linda Halgunseth**
 - *Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature*: Goal was to identify 10 programs across the United States that are successful in engaging families.
 - The focus was on Family Engagement rather than parent education or parent involvement.
 - Strength-based: Families have interest and skills they bring to the table; and both programs and families are equal contributors.
 - Emphasize reciprocity (not one-sided).
 - True relationship.
 - Family Engagement has multiple components including shared decision-making, two-way communication between the family and the program, collaboration and

- exchange, sustained learning, encouraging home environments that value learning, and efforts that are ongoing and comprehensive.
- Two organizing frameworks:
 - *Ecological theory*: Development occurs within context and emphasizes the mesosystem (interactions between families and schools) and that everything is embedded within culture (each practice needs to consider and acknowledge culture). Limitations of this theory: It's not easily measured and the theory does not explain the motivation for relationships.
 - *Social exchange*: Addresses motivation for relationships and the fact that both parties (school and home) have something to bring to the table. The exchange between parties strengthens the relationship. There are different readiness levels in parents and teachers. This model is a reinforcing model; motivation is reinforced with more contact.
 - Practice Recommendations:
 - Integrate culture and community in all the program practices.
 - A welcoming environment may increase parents' involvement.
 - Strive for program-family partnerships.
 - Make a commitment to outreach.
 - Provide family resources and referrals.
 - **Summary of Presentation #2: Juliet Bromer**
 - *Family Sensitive Care-Giving and Quality in Early Care and Education Arrangement*: Examination of the roles of families and quality of early care; framing the discussion about families and quality.
 - Home-based settings (including family child care and family, friend, and neighbor care) and center-based settings have different strengths that may contribute to high-quality care and education.
 - Home-based providers may have particular strengths in working with parents.
 - Both child-centered and parent-focused aspects of arrangements should contribute to high-quality care and education.
 - Rationale for considering families in quality measurement.
 - Parents have the greatest influence on child outcomes.
 - Changes in how providers work with parents may lead to better outcomes for families and children.
 - Sensitivity to families may strengthen parents' ability to care for and nurture positive outcomes for their children.
 - Parents' child care choices are often constrained by available resources.
 - Low-income parents may not have access to child-centered arrangements.
 - Arrangements that are both child-centered, and responsive to the daily lives of families, may have greater potential to affect child and parent outcomes.
 - If high-quality programs don't pay attention to the needs of families, then parents can't enjoy the benefits of the program.
 - *Conceptual Framework Underlying a Family-Sensitive Model of Child Care Quality*: Different families have different needs and programs have understandings about families that vary.
 - Family-sensitive components of care:

- Attitudes towards families, especially about parental choices, circumstances, and traditions.
- Knowledge about lives of families (e.g., work schedules, cultural traditions, and economic circumstances).
- Practices with families should be responsive to a range of family needs, strengths, and circumstances (e.g., communication, flexibility around hours, and provision of resources).
- Outcomes in child care arrangements:
 - Continuity (families remain in care over time).
 - Transitions and collaborations (multiple child care arrangements are well managed; transitions should be smooth).
 - Strong mutual provider-parent relationships.
- Parent Outcomes:
 - Satisfaction with care.
 - Trust and respect.
 - Parenting skills.
 - Social and peer support.
 - Stress reduction regarding work-family management.
 - Employment.
- Child Outcomes:
 - Social-emotional: positive provider-parent relationships may foster positive self-concept, emotional regulation, and comfort and trust in caregivers.
 - Cognitive: understanding the language skills of families may inform how providers promote literacy skills for children.
 - Health: comprehensive services or referrals may reduce child abuse.
- Research review findings:
 - Few studies on provider attitudes toward families.
 - Most studies focus on teachers.
 - Many studies show that teachers have negative attitudes about families.
 - Lack of descriptive data on kinds of knowledge gathered by providers and/or programs and how this knowledge is used.
 - Home-based providers are more responsive to working families and economic needs of parents than are center-based programs.
 - Positive support from providers benefits parents and may indirectly benefit children.
 - Formal family support may indirectly benefit children through helping parents.
- Review of Quality Standards Findings:
 - Standards do not focus on attitudes.
 - All mention the importance of provider knowledge about families.
 - Five programs and three parent assessments include family-sensitive constructs.
 - Attitudes covered in parental assessment are more than program tools.
 - Knowledge is one-way (parent's knowledge about program/child development).
 - Practices are well articulated but none examines how attitudes and knowledge translate into informative practices.
 - Methods used: Documentation and providers/parent interviews and surveys.
- Consideration for quality measurements:

- Domain-specific or integrative measures?
 - Measuring levels of family-sensitive care, given individual differences and needs of families and of providers.
 - Program and parent assessment to measure goodness of fit (between parents and program).
 - Alternative methods to consider: Observational assessment and in-depth provider interviews about knowledge; vignette studies.
- **Summary of Presentation #3: Jay Fagan (Discussant)**
 - *Fathers in early childhood settings/programs.*
 - Work with fathers was never meant to be done at the exclusion of families.
 - Not much of a knowledge base about fathers.
 - Head Start has been progressing in its work with fathers.
 - Work on families furthers understanding on where fathers fit into families, but now it's important to bring work back to families and not just fathers.
 - Families aren't sufficiently addressed when considering child outcomes.
 - The field is struggling to become more family-centered.
 - Terms used for family: Family-sensitive and family engagement. It's important to think about the terms used. Mr. Fagan encouraged the presenters to discuss why specific terms were used in their papers.
 - Suggestions for theoretical perspective:
 - Theory of Complementary Roles by Eugene Litwak:
 - This theory provides an added way of thinking about family work.
 - Similar to social exchange theory.
 - Families and schools may fall short in their roles.
 - Family and schoolwork should complement each other.
 - Family systems theory:
 - Multiple direct and indirect influences that a program may have on a family.
 - Useful in thinking about early childhood research because families are complex units engaged in an inter-connected relationship.
 - Family members are individuals and part of a unit, which can have spillover effects on other relationships in the system and school.
 - For example, a study shows that when fathers spent more time picking up and dropping off children, mothers felt that the family obligations were more even as compared to situations in which fathers did not pick up children.

3. Summary of Discussion with Presenters and Participants

- Family systems look very different.
- The main reason that parents need child care is to work; it is important for research to address how programs can be sensitive to parents' jobs and work.
- Early childhood programs cannot be everything to everyone. Other professionals may need to help.
- Family sensitivity should mean having a full range of understanding of family needs and how to deal with them, including steering families to other services.
- Child care can come in multiple forms; connections are needed between child care providers and families and other services.

- Need to be clear about the terminology and definitions we are using to examine family engagement.
- Family engagement should begin before there's a problem at school. There should be daily communication about the common denominator (the child).
- Teacher sensitivity requires that teachers be exposed to what parents think and feel; this means that professional development becomes even more important.
- It takes skills and knowledge to have positive and appropriate relationships with parents and families. Child care workers need to have these skills.
- Family-based care providers tend to think of themselves as part of the family, and therefore may be more sensitive to the family.
- Is quality on a continuum? High versus low quality?
- A program level shift may have an effect on other things; a program may have to connect with other services.

4. Key Themes and Issues

- We should move away from the old parent involvement model and think about reciprocal relationships where all families bring things to programs and programs give to families. At the core should be positive reciprocal relationships for child outcomes.
- We need to think about how early childhood settings support child development, not just actions, but what's in people's heads that makes them sensitive.
- Families are complex and should be addressed accordingly. We need to think about complex inter-relationships.
- Clarifying theoretical issues gets us closer to understanding measurement issues.
- We should use a strengths-based approach when looking at family engagement.
- In addition to child outcomes, we should examine parent outcomes.