



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**POLICY STATEMENT ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
FROM THE EARLY YEARS TO THE EARLY GRADES**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 5, 2016

The lives and experiences of young children are intertwined with those of their families. Families are children's first and most important teachers, advocates, and nurturers. Strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central—not supplemental—to promoting children's healthy intellectual, physical, and social-emotional development; preparing children for school; and supporting academic achievement in elementary school and beyond.

Research indicates that families' involvement in children's learning and development impacts lifelong health, developmental, and academic outcomes. Family engagement in early childhood systems and programs supports families as they teach, nurture, and advocate for their children, and in turn, family engagement supports and improves the early childhood systems that care for and teach children. When families and the programs where children learn work together and support each other in their respective roles, children have more positive attitudes toward school, stay in school longer, have better attendance, and experience more school success.

Both the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education (ED) recognize the critical role of family engagement in promoting children's success in early childhood systems and programs. As such, both agencies have developed research-based family engagement frameworks to guide the development of effective family engagement policies and practices: HHS's Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and ED's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. It is the goal of the Departments that all early childhood systems recognize and support families as essential partners in providing services that improve children's learning, development, and wellness. This joint HHS-ED statement aims to advance this goal by:

- Reviewing the research base, legal requirements, and best practices that support effective family engagement in children's learning, development, and wellness;
- Identifying core principles of effective family engagement practices from HHS' and ED's family engagement frameworks to drive successful policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation;
- Providing recommendations to States, State educational agencies (SEAs), lead agencies for early intervention services and child care, local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, and community-based early childhood systems and programs to implement effective family engagement; and
- Highlighting resources to build programmatic and family capacity to be effective partners.

Family Engagement in Early Childhood

Family engagement refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote

children's development, learning, and wellness, including in the planning, development, and evaluation of such activities, programs, and systems. For family engagement to be integrated throughout early childhood systems and programs, providers and schools must engage families as essential partners when providing services that promote children's learning and development, nurture positive relationships between families and staff, and support families. The term "family" as used in this statement is inclusive of all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, to include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents; legal and informal guardians; and adult siblings. Early childhood systems include child care options, Head Start and Early Head Start, early intervention

programs, preschool programs, and elementary school from kindergarten through third grade. Providers include teachers and paraprofessionals in schools, preschools, and Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms; child-care providers, early intervention service providers; related service personnel; comprehensive services staff; and other professionals that work directly with children in early childhood systems.

Highlights from Research and Best Practice

- Families have strong and sustained effects on children’s learning, development, and wellness.
- Family activities such as reading and talking to young children lead to positive outcomes.
- Promoting enriching learning activities in the classroom and in the home contributes to children’s learning and development.
- Family well-being is a strong predictor of children’s school readiness, and promoting families’ strengths and resilience through comprehensive services and promising practices such as two-generation approaches support young children.
- Strong, positive relationships between families and providers reinforce learning at home and in the community and are enabled by two-way communication and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.
- Parents who have more supportive and extensive social networks create more stimulating home environments for their children, communicate better with their children, and feel more confident in their role as parents.

Related Legal Statutes and Policy Highlights

Many Federal programs emphasize family engagement; and the laws that govern the early childhood and elementary education systems reference the importance of family engagement. For example, the Head Start Act consistently emphasizes the role of families in program governance, resulting in family participation in the governance of Head Start programs, in the classroom, in parent-teacher home visits, and in adult education activities. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program promotes parent and family involvement in children’s development in child care settings. The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services, from pregnancy through kindergarten entry. Public Health Services Act, Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children with Serious Emotional Disturbances (SED) provides community-based systems of care for children and adolescents with a serious emotional disturbance and their families. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes families’ involvement in their children’s education in both Part C (Early Intervention) and B (Special Education) of IDEA, through the development of Individualized Family Service Plans and Individualized Education Programs. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) includes many opportunities for family engagement and requires that States and school districts have written family engagement policies with clear expectations and objectives for implementation.

In addition, HHS and ED have released family engagement frameworks as tools for action. The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework uses a research-based, organizational development approach to high performance family engagement with a strong emphasis on engagement that is systemic, embedded and integrated across organizations. ED’s Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships can guide effective family engagement practices that are systemic, embedded and integrated across an organization; that build relationships between families and school staff; that are linked to student learning; and that create collaborative partnerships to support positive student outcomes.

Principles of Effective Family Engagement

The Departments consider the following practice principles—drawn from our respective frameworks—foundational to establishing a culture that values family engagement. The practice principles are embedded in the recommendations that follow. Adopting these practice principles across systems and programs in a strategic and coordinated manner will result in more benefits to children and families.

1. Create continuity and consistency for children and families.
2. Value respectful and trusting relationships between families and professionals.
3. Develop goal-oriented relationships with families that are linked to children’s development and learning.
4. Engage families around children’s health, mental health and social and emotional well-being.
5. Ensure that all family engagement opportunities are culturally and linguistically responsive.
6. Build staff capacity to implement family engagement practice principles.
7. Support families’ connections and capabilities.
8. Systemically embed effective family engagement strategies within early childhood systems and programs.
9. Develop strong relationships with community partners that support families.
10. Continuously learn and improve.

Recommendations

These recommendations are not an exhaustive list; rather, they are a selection of actions that can be taken to promote effective family engagement.

Plan for and prioritize family engagement. Since family engagement is a critical component in promoting children’s learning and development across settings and services, States should develop statewide early childhood and early elementary school policies on family engagement.

Communicate consistent messages that support strong family engagement. Early childhood systems’ public messages should emphasize the strengths and resilience of families and communities.

Invest and allocate resources. Adequate resource allocation and support makes implementation of family engagement practices possible. Examples of specific investments may include establishing or enhancing related statewide technical assistance and hiring a family engagement specialist or designating an existing staff member to be responsible for oversight of family engagement plans.

Establish policies, procedures, and practices that support family engagement. States and districts should conduct a policy review and prioritize policies that will most effectively support family engagement practices and drive local and program procedures and practices. Examples of policies, procedures, and practices may include using Federal funds to support the implementation of family engagement practices in school districts; promoting the use of recommended practices and early childhood quality rating and improvement systems that include tiers of measurable and research-informed family engagement indicators; identifying supports for parents such as parenting interventions and leadership development; and providing examples of how to create opportunities for families to be involved in their child’s development, learning, and wellness, including opportunities for peer learning and peer networking.

In addition, programs and providers should establish procedures and practices that provide access to families and invite them to participate in learning activities. Procedures and practices should create family friendly environments, provide two-way communication between providers and families and support family connections to other families for peer support and learning. Providers should be sure to develop family and professional relationships that are linked to learning, development, and wellness and make data

about children's progress accessible and understandable to parents. Programs and providers should support families as leaders and advocates in programs and schools, and intentionally support families as their children transition to new learning settings. Providers should offer families needed supports through formal or informal relationships with community partners, and conduct voluntary home visits to build relationships with children and families.

Establish workforce capacity building that supports family engagement. States and programs should support all staff to receive training and coaching in implementing family engagement practices. States should incorporate core competencies specific to family engagement into existing competency frameworks for providers and support these competencies through their professional development systems, training and technical assistance, and ongoing coaching and consultation efforts.

Develop and integrate family engagement data for continuous improvement in systems and programs.

States and programs should collect data, to the extent permissible under applicable privacy laws, about the extent to which early childhood systems and programs are engaging families, the strategies that they are using, and the effectiveness of those strategies. States and programs can use this data to better understand current policy and practice, and provide technical assistance as needed to local systems and program staff.

Conclusion

Families are children's first and most important teachers, advocates, and nurturers. As such, strong family engagement is central to the success of early childhood systems and programs that promote children's healthy development, learning, and wellness. Effective family engagement practices are a marker of quality early childhood programming. Together, States, LEAs, schools and early childhood programs have the responsibility to promote and implement effective family engagement to improve children's learning, development, and wellness.