Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment

The partnership between parents and Head Start staff is fundamental to children's current and future success and their readiness for school. This relationship ensures success when staff understand the value of information and how to share such information effectively, and when they have the attitudes and skills that support genuine partnerships. This set of documents outlines how information that programs collect about children's learning and development can be used with families. These documents identify specific strategies that support the development of staff-parent relationships, and provide specific guidance to staff on sharing information with families.

Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment:

Responsibilities, Perspectives, and Strategies

This paper addresses the perspectives of parents and program staff in the sharing of child assessment information through the formation of partnerships and suggests strategies for bringing those perspectives together. It outlines a framework for building partnerships between program staff and parents that establish ongoing communication, enhance teacher-child and parent child relationships, and help prepare children and families for transitions to later schooling.

This will assure that 1) families have access to information about their children, 2) the information is understandable and meaningful, 3) that parents have input about the needs of their child, and 4) both staff and families can take action on the information that is shared. Sharing information and strong family-program partnerships help everybody learn – program staff, parents and children.

RESPONSIBILITIES - SHARING INFORMATION IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Every staff member interacts with children. All have information they can share with parents to strengthen the program-parent partnership. Yet program staff roles vary in their responsibilities for family engagement:

- teachers may focus on classroom performance and behavior;
- family service workers may have information about the child that could be used in accessing other services;
- bus drivers have information from home and school, direct observations of children, and opportunities to communicate with parents;
- program directors, home visitors, special needs and heath and nutrition coordinators all bring their own experiences, perspectives, curiosity and interest in their work with families.

All use information (also referred to as "data") about the child when communicating with parents. They can use it to strengthen parents' engagement with their children and the program. Understanding their roles helps staff members determine what information to share with parents and *how* to share it.

PERSPECTIVES - WHAT FAMILY MEMBERS AND PROGRAM STAFF BRING TO INFORMATION-SHARING INTERACTIONS

Parents and other family members bring a broad array of information, feelings, beliefs and expectations relevant to the child's experience in the program:

- the child's temperament, health history, and behavior at home;
- family expectations, fears and hopes about the child's success or failure;
- culturally-rooted beliefs about child-rearing;
- parents' experiences of school and beliefs about their role in relation to professionals;
- parents' sense of control and authority, and other personal and familial influences.

Program staff bring their own knowledge, beliefs and attitudes to their work with families:

- developmental and educational information about the child based on observation and assessment;
- information about the child's performance in the program;
- information about the curriculum and learning goals for the child;
- knowledge about the child's next educational environment;
- staffs' own unique personality and temperament, family history and culture;
- their job description, agency policies, and the supervision they receive;
- their own training, experience, and professional philosophy.

Respectfully sharing these different perspectives is an essential step toward healthy learning environments for children. Regular and purposeful supervision can help program staff recognize when their own perspectives are based upon personal reactions, biases and cultures, and guide them to effective communication strategies.

STRATEGIES FOR INFORMATION SHARING

Start with parents' perspectives: Before sharing data about a child, consider why this information is important to you. Ask yourself whether this information will be important to the child's family in the same ways. If you're not sure, this is a good place to begin: *"I wanted to tell you about your child's progress in learning to get along with the other kids, but first wanted to know if this is something you've been wondering about."*

Ask family members what they would like to share, what they would be interested in knowing, what it would mean to them. You can adjust the information you share accordingly. As you proceed, ask them how they understand it, what they think it means, and what conclusions they may be drawing about the child, the program, themselves.

Be positive and specific: Positive comments about specific behaviors or characteristics - ones the parents are bound to see too - make these conversations real. *"He's so sweet,"* may sound like something the teacher says about all the children. Instead, choose positive information to share about the child's unique qualities: *"She's always the first one to go comfort a child who's crying."* Parents are usually more open to program staff's concerns about a child's behavior or academic performance when they know that the child's strengths are recognized and appreciated. Children's strengths are important to understand in detail since a child's challenges can often be overcome by building on them.

Be descriptive and share interpretations: Simple, clear descriptions of a child's behavior – without interpretations or judgments – help identify common ground and differences. Parents and program staff can simply watch the child together in the classroom or at home. Or they can look together at a child's artwork or portfolio. After listening to each others' descriptions, assessment data, and observations, program staff can ask parents for their interpretations. Parents know their children best, and their observations and interpretations often provide critical information. Program staff can respond first by appreciating parents' perspectives. Then, they can adjust their own so that they can join parents where they are. This does not mean that upsetting assessment results aren't shared. Instead, results are communicated within a respectful and honest relationship that makes them a little easier to hear and to respond to.

If staff observations or interpretations are very different from parents', these different perspectives can be openly acknowledged: "*You know, I think you and I are looking at this painting very differently. I know you are eager to have your little boy learn how to make pictures that look like something real, and so am I. And I totally agree that we have to figure out how to keep him from getting paint all over his clothes! But in all of these colors and brushstrokes he is using, I think he is also showing the enthusiasm and hard work that assures me that he will learn to paint real things and keep the paint on the paper. He is really sticking with it, and he loves it! Maybe you and I see his painting differently, but I think we both want to help him work toward the same goal.*"

Focus on the parent-child relationship: Observations of parent-child interactions are data too. Research shows that strong parent-child relationships link with positive cognitive and social emotional outcomes for children. Staff efforts to strengthen these relationships can help achieve such outcomes. Yet in practice, staff often focus on the parent and the child separately, without attending to their relationship.

Parents need to know that their relationship with their child is valued and supported by program staff. Sometimes they worry that their child may feel closer to program staff than to them or they may feel that their relationship with the child is judged by program staff. Sharing observations of parent-child interactions can provide reassurance about such concerns, strengthening the parent-child relationship, and parent-staff relationships too. For example, when a teacher says, *"I think these tantrums your child has when you pick him up are his way of saying how much he has missed you all day,"* a parent feels closer to both child and teacher. Welcoming parents to visit the classroom and encouraging one-on-one interaction with their child are also effective strategies for reinforcing parent-child and parent-staff relationships.

Observations or data shared at parent conferences can serve to support the parent-child relationship, or it can add to stresses that threaten it. Acknowledging the parent-child relationship while sharing information gives parents the sense that the program is reinforcing their relationship with their child: *"I know that you have been working on this together at home,"* or *"Tell me how this behavior is affecting bedtime."* Strategies like these also enhance the staff-parent partnership because they demonstrate that staff's attention goes beyond the child's performance at school to include the whole child.

Support parental competence: Parental competence can be supported in a variety of ways. For example, a child's success can often be credited to parents' efforts, so point out these successes to parents as you see them. Or information that parents offer about their child can be used in planning the child's program. Acknowledging and treating parents as experts on their child, recognizing parents as knowledgeable partners in decision making, and attributing a child's progress to parents' efforts as you observe them, all reinforce parents' sense of competence.

Open up to parents' emotions: Whether parents celebrate a child's successes, worry about developmental challenges, show interest in test results, or express anger at the child's behavior, emotions are always involved in parents' understandings of their children. No matter how professional they are, emotions are also part of program staff's understandings of children, too. It can be challenging for parents and program staff to make room for each others' emotions in their interactions

with each other. Sometimes, these may seem to get in the way of sharing information, and interfere with arriving at a shared understanding of the child. For example, the protective parent may seem to see only a child's successes, and the angry parent may seem to never see them.

Rather than getting in the way of the work, these emotions, both positive and negative, also be understood as parents' and staff's passionate concern for the child. Even when parents and staff have very different ideas about what a child needs, they almost always all "want to do well by the child".   When parents' emotions are difficult for program staff to face and to understand, it may help to remember this. Staff members can build strong partnerships with parents by listening for these emotions and working with parents to understand them. *"It is so important to you to be sure your child succeeds. All of these small successes just may not seem to be enough. I want your child to succeed too, and we can work together to make sure it happens!"*

IT'S AN ONGOING PROCESS

At intake, parents will be relieved to discover that program staff listen to them first, and that they truly listen. Parents want to be sure that their child is understood, and that program staff can see the child as they do: *"Perhaps we could start with the things you really want to be sure I know about your child."* There will be important information in the child's approach to a new situation and to strangers, and in the parents' perspective on it. Program staff might ask: *"How does he usually handle new situations? How do you think he's doing right now? What do we need to know in order to help him adjust?"* Conversations like these are more meaningful when data are shared – watching the child together, listening to parents' interpretations, and adding program staff perspectives.

Initial observations help form the parent-program staff partnership. Sharing of information from ongoing assessments sustain it. Data sharing and developing a common view of the child unfold over time, and require different strategies along the way. As the parent-program staff relationship deepens, the quality of the information about the child will become richer, as will the quality of parent and program staff responses to it.

All information about a child has unique meaning for parents. Never only data, it almost always touches on parents' hopes and fears. Once parents have learned that program staff really care about their child and share the same aspirations, they may be more open to sharing their concerns about the child and listening to those of the program staff. Once parents and program staff know they're all committed to understanding each others' perspectives, they will be ready to face their differences. They will be better able to respond together to new information about what the child needs to grow and learn. Ongoing information-sharing leads to ongoing opportunities to improve children's learning environments at home and at school.

SHARING INFORMATION AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

The goal of sharing information with parents about their child is not to make parents do what program staff think needs to be done, nor to see the child as staff do. Instead this process helps program staff to see the child as the parents do. This expands their understanding of the child and the family, so that they can adjust teaching and family support accordingly. When program staff can see the child as parents do, parents know that they can trust them. As a result, they are more likely to be open to program staff perspectives about their child. Information about the child will more effectively flow, from parents to staff, and staff to parents. Then, parents too will have richer information about their child to add to their support of their child's learning and development at home.

Through training and supervision, program staff can master strategies for sharing information that will strengthen partnerships with families and improve children's outcomes. But systemic family engagement also requires an overall program philosophy that upholds partnerships with families at all levels of agency functioning: at the administrative level; in hiring, training, supervising and evaluating staff; in the design and use of the program's physical space; and in program policy. Parent engagement cannot be delegated to a subset of employees. It is everyone's responsibility, and reinforced within all aspects of the program.

Tips for Programs on Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment

QUESTIONS PROGRAMS MIGHT ASK TO ASSESS THEIR PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- Are parents genuinely a part of the program from the very first contact? Are they invited to share what they know about how their child learns and what their child needs? Is that information used and do parents know how it will be used?
- Are parents regularly welcomed into the classroom? Is the classroom parent and family friendly, father friendly?
- Do teachers include/consult parents in setting learning goals for children? Is this an equal partnership in which both parents and teachers feel valued and understood?
- Do parents regularly receive information about what their child is learning? Are there activities that go home with children related to each week's curriculum? Do parents have the opportunity to communicate with staff about using this information at home?
- Are parents offered workshops, tip sheets, videos, joint activities & information about classroom curriculum? Do teachers/staff and parents share any of these experiences and learn together?
- Are parents invited to participate in special activities for learning? Do parents have support and opportunities for exchange with staff about using everyday activities for learning with their children?
- Are parents asked for input for 45 day screenings?
- Do teachers & parents meet to develop portfolios, and other materials that capture a picture of the child's learning over time?
- Do parents & teachers jointly participate in getting ready for school? Do they jointly plan and work with school teachers/staff and parents of school age children to make the transition positive and supportive of the child's continued learning and development?
- Have you found other ways to share information with parents about how children learn and grow?

IDEAS PROGRAMS MIGHT CONSIDER

Children's learning is enhanced when staff and parents both form strong partnerships and share information effectively. Here are some specific points at which staff partnerships with parents are key:

- Ask for parent input first–get their perspective before sharing that of the program.
- Include parents in assessment data gathering from the beginning and as partners in the process.
- Consider the parent's point of view in interpreting that information.
- Translate assessment findings into everyday activities that parents can do with their children and use parents as consultants in planning classroom activities.
- Suggest resources in the community that families can access to support learning.
- Support transitions by helping families use data to describe their children's accomplishments & challenges.

In order to make the most of the exchange, staff can:

- Communicate regularly with families about developmental processes & learning strategies.
- Explore with parents how *they* are observing growth in their children.
- Partner with families to assess the child's process of development.
- Offer tools (for example, portfolios) to support parental understanding of their role in creating developmental change related to their children's outcomes.

Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment:

Program Opportunities to Engage Families in Children's Learning and Development

WHAT WE MEAN BY "DATA"

Early childhood education programs use many types of data, such as child attendance and assessment data, classroom quality ratings, and information about family well-being. The data can be used for different purposes, such as supporting family engagement, helping directors and policy councils make decisions, identifying appropriate curricula supports, choosing topics for parenting workshops, and measuring child progress toward shared goals.

HOW DATA HELPS CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND STAFF WORK TOGETHER

Assessment data helps programs understand children's learning and development. Teachers and other early childhood staff use this information to support children's individual and group learning experiences and socialization activities. All families want to know how their child is doing and how they can help, and data is a powerful tool for partnering with families. Teachers and other early childhood staff can use assessment information to help families understand their child's progress and explore new ideas for supporting their child's learning and development at home and in the community.

When early childhood staff share information with families, families are better prepared to partner with programs to improve child outcomes. Child learning and development become shared responsibilities of families and staff. These conversations also help parents learn about the kinds of information they will need in order to help their children transition into school.

DATA SHARING LEADS TO ACTION STEPS

Below is an example of how data can be used to promote child development.

> As an education manager, I had a discussion with Laura's teacher in the fall about her assessment of Laura's vocabulary. Laura was an active 3-year-old, but the teacher expressed concern about Laura's limited vocabulary use. She knew from screening that Laura did not need to be referred for a follow-up evaluation, yet she noticed that Laura's interactions with other children were somewhat limited.
>
> We reviewed the plans Laura's teacher had implemented and agreed on incorporating some new strategies, such as using more photos and pictures with Laura. We also realized that we needed more shared strategies with Laura's family and agreed that she would have more frequent communication with at least one family member about Laura's progress. We decided to start a small journal that would be sent back and forth between home and school so we could better track the words that Laura uses and with what frequency she uses them.
>
> After some time had passed, we had a discussion about Laura's progress and realized that the journal was a great help. The teacher noticed that Laura was using different words at home than at school, and she was able to work those words into her teaching with Laura. Laura's parents told the teacher that the journal reminded them to try to introduce new words to Laura each day. The journal became a good data source for Laura's teacher and her family, and working together in this way, they saw Laura's vocabulary really expanding.

This is an example of how sharing assessment information leads to new action steps in teaching and at home that improve children's learning and development. Program effectiveness and children's school readiness will be enhanced when data is shared and acted upon. Sharing data helps to focus conversations on what is and isn't working, and on action steps that support children's learning, parent engagement, improved teaching, and improved program quality.

ELEMENTS FOR SHARING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION WITH FAMILIES

There are three elements that are necessary for staff and families to effectively engage in a process of sharing information about children's learning and development:

(1) Families have **access** to their child's individual learning and development information.

(2) Information that is shared is **understandable and meaningful** to families and staff.

(3) Staff and parents put the information into **action**.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Both families and staff have important information to share about a child's development. Parent observations are key to informing teaching at various points in the assessment cycle, while staff-conducted assessments provide parents comprehensive picture of their child's progress. Programs can encourage reciprocal sharing of expert knowledge by:

- Inviting family members to share their observations about how their child learns and their thoughts and insights about their child's behavior.

- Using multiple approaches to reach families, ie. home visits, parent–teacher meetings and other forms of communication, including telephone calls, text messaging, and secure online platforms.

- Inviting teachers to parenting education sessions so they can hear parents' questions, interests, and concerns about their child's learning and development.

- Keeping families informed by regularly sharing key findings from assessments and work samples that together form a child's portfolio.

- Providing the data/information in a user-friendly format.

MAKING INFORMATION UNDERSTANDABLE AND MEANINGFUL

Child assessment information must be made clear and meaningful to staff and families. Staff need to help families understand what the assessment information means about their child's learning and development. Families need to help staff understand assessment information in light of their observations of their child at home and in other settings. Some ways that programs can ensure that child development information is meaningful to families include:

- Helping families understand what assessment is, and that the goal of assessment is to support a child's progress by informing the teacher and family about different approaches to enhancing their child's learning and development.

- Helping parents understand what the next stage of learning will be (e.g., baby is almost ready to walk, preschooler is about to write her name), so they can anticipate and look to support that next stage.

- Listening to families' hopes, concerns, and questions about how and whether their child's development will move forward.

USING INFORMATION TO TAKE ACTION

Children greatly benefit when staff and parents share information in order to co-design activities that parents can do at home and in the community to support learning. Some ways that staff and families can jointly do this could include:

- Translating assessment information from different areas of learning into every day activities. For example, every day literacy can be advanced with parent–child conversations about what they see out of the window of a car or bus. Every day math skills can be reinforced when parents and children sort through socks, counting them and organizing them into colors, before selecting a pair to wear.

- Sharing information with families about resources within the community that can support their child's learning, such as programs at the library or community center.

- Supporting transitions within early childhood programs and from preschool to school by helping families feel comfortable in communicating and describing their child's accomplishments, strengths, and challenges.

USING DATA AS A PATHWAY FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL ENTRY

The following is an example of how a **portfolio** can support a child's learning throughout early childhood.

Getting going: Measuring and documenting Sam's progress over time was just as exciting for me, his home visitor, as it was for his family. I introduced the concept of a portfolio during my first visit with Sam and his family. As new parents and new enrollees in Early Head Start, they were eager to learn about their baby and all that our program could offer. I explained how we could use the portfolio as a central place to keep key information about Sam. There we could keep completed Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ), suggested activities that his parents could do with him based on the assessment findings, and goal plans that we would create together for both Sam and his family.

Moving along: Together, we began building the portfolio, inserting the ASQ findings, photos, and dated artwork representative of key developmental milestones. We also used the portfolio to store notes from his pediatrician, his immunization record, and contact information for other services in the community that the family might choose to use. With its special spot on the shelf next to the television, I was pleased to find that the portfolio was frequently used by his parents to remind them of activities they could do to support Sam's learning, and as a quick reference when they needed to call the pediatrician or another provider. Sam's father was especially proud of the portfolio and shared it with visiting family members, taking pride to point out the difference between Sam's early artwork and what he was now creating.

Moving on: Fortunately, with blended funding, our program was able to serve children from birth through kindergarten enrollment, so Sam's portfolio continued to grow and became a comprehensive record of his early years. When it was time to start school, Sam's parents shared the portfolio with his kindergarten teacher and the principal, so they could be fully aware of his learning profile. The portfolio that we created together ensured that (1) the family had access to and could also share key information about Sam; (2) the information was meaningful; and (3) it helped the family understand things that they could do in their every day activities that would sustain the gains in Sam's learning and development, and they could share their understanding with Sam's new teachers. The portfolio was an essential tool for the family and me, keeping us grounded in who Sam is and how we could work together best to support his learning and development.

Ideas for Programs on Sharing Child Information

TYPES OF INFORMATION THAT PROGRAMS COLLECT:
- Child attendance
- Child developmental assessments
- Classroom observation
- Child screenings
- Observation of child-specific behavior
- Classroom practices (e.g., CLASS)
- Indicators of program quality (e.g., QRIS)

INFORMATION SHARING POINTS OF CONTACT:
Each offers unique opportunities to form the partnership

- Intake and orientation
- Drop off and pick up (whether at the program or at the bus)
- Ongoing communication about classroom activities
- 45 day screenings
- Written communication (notes home, newsletters)
- Parent-teacher home visits
- Regular parent conferences
- Parent participation in classroom
- Special events
- Beginning and end of program year
- Transition between classrooms or programs
  (e.g. home-visiting to center-based)
- Transition to school

SHARING HELPFUL INFORMATION WITH PARENTS AND PROGRAMS:

Child Assessments and Observations:
- Understand & support the child's developmental process
- Track child learning & development over time
- Inform & support child's activities at home and in the community that influence learning & development
- Facilitate referrals for assessments & additional services to community agencies, such as part special needs services
- Facilitate transitions between programs & to school

Classroom Assessments:
- Understand what good classroom practice looks like
- Share observations of classroom practice
- Advocate for improvement of classroom quality
- Use methods from good classroom practice to develop home activities

Program Assessments;
- Understand what quality programs look like
- Share information on program functioning & quality (e.g. surveys, meetings)
- Take leadership to improve program quality (committee work, policy council)
- Advocate for improvement of program quality in HS & community
- Specifically examine the effectiveness of parent engagement activities

Please share your ideas, efforts, and experience in making child assessment data available to families by e-mailing the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE@childrens.harvard.edu) with subject line: Sharing Data with Families.

THE NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Topic #5: Program Planning and Parent, Family, and Community Engagement

The **Head Start planning system** and its related activities are an essential part of program operations.

While thoughtful planning has always been critical to successful programming, it becomes even more so as Head Start programs shift from an indefinite grant period to one based on a five-year project period. The Head Start National Centers created this series of papers to support programs in developing and implementing their planning system and in making optimal use of the five-year period. This paper focuses on special considerations for parent, family, and community engagement in program planning.

Program Goals and Objectives Related to Family Outcomes

Program goals related to family outcomes are broad statements that describe what a program intends to accomplish in its work with (and in support of) families. An objective is an element of a goal. It describes, in a **SMART** way (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic, and **T**imely), what the program is intending to do to reach the goal. See "Topic #1: Understanding Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans" for guidance on setting **BROAD** goals (**B**old—**B**eyond expectations, **R**esponsive, **O**rganization-wide, **A**spirational, and **D**ynamic) and **SMART** objectives.

It is important to be able to distinguish between program-wide goals related to family outcomes and individual family goals that are created with the family through the family assessment and family partnership process. Family goals are based on the personal strengths, needs, and aspirations of each family and on each family's individual circumstances.

The chart that follows describes the differences between program-level and individual-level family goals.

Type	Definition	Purpose	Informed By
Program goals related to family outcomes	Goals that are designed for all or for specific groups of families in the program (e.g., immigrant groups, dual language learners, fathers) and that support progress toward child and family outcomes Goals that affect all program services and systems Goals that are set at the program level and that may affect all families in the program	To answer the question: What should our program do to make a difference for children and families?	Understanding and analysis of trends and patterns that affect children and families through the following: • Community assessment • Annual Self-Assessment • Summary of Family Strengths and Needs Assessments (aggregated data) • Summary of individual family goals from family partnership agreements (aggregated data) • Aggregated child assessment data
Individual family goals based on strengths, needs, and aspirations	Goals set with an individual family to support progress toward child and family outcomes • Staff and parents develop these goals together, based on the family's strengths, interests, and needs. • These family goals may target adult learning or financial stability and/or child outcomes related to early learning, school readiness, and healthy development.	To answer the question: How can we partner with this individual family to make progress toward the goals family members set for themselves and their family?	Family discussions about goals, interests, strengths, and hopes Recruitment and application process Family assessment data Child assessment data

In the Head Start and Early Head Start program-planning context, the term "expected outcome" refers to what programs expect the results to be. The term "outcome" refers to the actual results achieved. Here's an example of how that works:

Sample Program Goal: Moving Forward Head Start Program will ensure that all Head Start and Early Head Start families have the knowledge and skills to effectively parent their children beginning in the pre-natal period through age five.

Objective	Expected Outcome	Outcome
Develop parent cafes in each delegate agency which will run through each program year, with 40 percent participating in the first year, and 10 percent more parents participating in each subsequent year.	Participating parents will have reduced stress, increased parenting knowledge and skills, and increased meaningful connections with other parents.	Thirty percent of enrolled parents participated in the cafes in year one. Of participating parents, 90 percent reported changes in parenting stress levels, increased knowledge about parenting, and more connections with other parents.

The program can tie this to the Outcomes for Family Engagement in the blue column of the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. The PFCE Framework includes seven Family Engagement Outcomes that are broad areas of practice. Our example relates to two Family Engagement Outcomes: Family Well-being and Parent-Child Relationships.

Tips for Setting Program Goals and Objectives Related to Family Outcomes

Ensure families are a part of the process. Engaging families in Head Start and Early Head Start planning strengthens the design and implementation of program plans and engages parents as leaders and decision-makers. To engage families as program planners, be intentional in building a welcoming environment where families feel valued, supported, and ready to contribute. You can do this by using strength-based attitudes and relationship-based practices that help individual staff have positive goal-oriented relationships with families.

For guidance in relationship-based practice with families, please see *Head Start and Early Head Start Relationship-Based Competencies* and and other resources from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) at
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/relationship/practice.html.

Families can be engaged in all phases of planning, whether it is to develop five-year plans, annual program plans, written plans/service plans, or T/TA plans, among others. (See "Topic #2: Plans in Head Start" for more information about different kinds of plans). Parent input on program plans can be sought through Policy Council and Parent Committee meetings, parent focus groups, staff and parent conversations, parent representation on planning committees, and similar kinds of occasions. Be sure to thoughtfully include the families of dual language learners and different subgroups of families in the process as well (e.g., fathers, immigrant groups, LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] families, etc.).

In addition, the Head Start Program Performance Standards require programs to include parents and family members when setting school readiness goals. Many programs include parents on school readiness committees and always gather parent input from all parents during periods of child assessment. Regardless of the type of program planning you use, outcomes for children and families are likely to be strengthened when families are involved.

Review and/or collect data from a variety of sources about the strengths, needs, and personal goals of families. Use data collected from the community assessment and the annual program Self-Assessment. You will find that family surveys, input from community partners, summaries of individual family goals, and aggregated child assessments are also good data sources. By using these sources of data, you can identify trends and patterns to develop and set program goals and objectives related to family outcomes.

Staff can also use aggregated information about individual families—including their goals, strengths, and challenges—to set program goals and objectives. For example, what are you learning about the strengths and needs of all families from the Family Strengths and Needs Assessments, the family partnership process, and from child assessments? Programs can also use conversations/discussions with key staff and stakeholders—the Policy Council and Parent Committee and/or observations of staff (e.g., teachers, family service staff, home visitors, health services, bus drivers) who interact regularly with families—as helpful sources of information. Summaries of input from experiences of individual families are valuable data sources, as well, for setting program goals related to family outcomes.

Based on your data, develop program goals and/or objectives that address your priorities.
Program goal setting helps everyone (leadership, staff, Policy Council, etc.) focus on priorities in support of the program's shared vision. Based on your data, consider the following:

- Which PFCE Framework outcomes are most critical to focus on first
- What the timeframe is for this focus (e.g., during one specific year, or in all five years)
- Whether you need a program goal related to one or more of the outcomes in the PFCE Framework

Keep in mind that you may find it more appropriate to develop objectives related to the family outcomes that support *other* program goals and/or your goals for school readiness. To meet expectations for five-year planning, programs need to use their data to prioritize goals and objectives related to their expected family outcomes. It's important to note that programs may have several objectives related to a program goal or school readiness goal. Here are some different examples of how programs may choose to structure their goals and objectives related to family outcomes in Head Start and Early Head Start:

1. **Programs could create broad program goals related to one of the PFCE outcomes**
   - Program goal related to family mental health (PFCE Outcome: Family Well-being)
2. **Programs could outline objectives related to family outcomes that support program goals**
   - Program goal around transitions with a family-related objective
   - Program goal around facilities (not family related) with a family-related objective in support of creating a "family room"
3. **Programs could prioritize family objectives that support school readiness goals**
   - Family-related objective that supports children's mental health through targeted parenting workshops

Ensure alignment between the goals families set for themselves and the goals set at the program level. Consider whether you have planned for services that are responsive to families' strengths and needs. At times you may need to change a program goal (or objective) in response to a gap in services identified during your planning process from reviewing aggregated family data.

Tips for Making Progress Toward Expected Family Outcomes

Use the PFCE Framework as a guide to program planning for parent, family, and community engagement. The PFCE Framework challenges programs to explore effective ways to design and implement systems and services to achieve expected outcomes for families and children. The PFCE Framework encourages programs to begin with the end in mind. It is helpful to consider from the outset what you want to achieve for families and children and which outcomes are most important to consider for your families and communities at this time and over the projected five-year period.

Keep in mind that the PFCE Outcomes are broad outcome categories that may need to be tailored to a program's data-informed priorities. Just as the domains in the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework are made more specific through the development of school readiness goals, PFCE Outcomes can also be made more specific through the development of specific goals and objectives.

If, based on your families' and community's priorities, you decide to set a program-level goal for PFCE, consider the objectives that will help you meet your goal and expected family and child outcomes. For effective parent, family, and community engagement, also think about objectives that align with the Program Foundations (Program Leadership, Continuous Program Improvement, Professional Development) and the Program Impact Areas (Program Environment, Family Partnerships, Teaching and Learning, and Community Partnerships). Ideally, your objectives will link across systems and services to support overall program goals related to family outcomes.

Define how you will track progress toward your goals, objectives, and expected outcomes.
Include objectives that address both the effort and the effect of your strategies. Your program's level of *effort* addresses the type and amount of family programming you offer. Your program's *effect* addresses whether your program's activities have made a difference for children and families. To learn more, see the glossary of terms and definitions in the "Introduction to Program Planning Topics in Head Start" and *Measuring What Matters* on the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement webpages of the ECLKC (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/assessing).

Many additional data-related tools can help both with developing goals and objectives and with tracking progress toward goals and objectives. Some tools may already be part of your program's ongoing monitoring process, some may be already-developed, published tools, and some may need

to be designed by your program. Here are a few examples of tools that may be useful for tracking progress—depending upon your program's goals, objectives, and expected outcomes, of course:

- Self-Assessment
- Community assessment
- Parent surveys
- Family partnership process
- Family assessments

- Child assessment data
- PFCE Markers of Progress
- Depression screeners
- Parenting intervention tools

Create your plan of action for achieving goals, objectives, and expected outcomes. Action plans vary, but generally they include the "what," "who," and "when." Outline the steps you will take to accomplish your goals and objective and to measure progress toward achieving them. Be sure to include the persons responsible, and identify the projected completion dates.

> For additional support on action planning, see "Topic #1: Understanding Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans" and "Topic #4: Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans—Program Examples," as well as the action plan in the *Using the Head Start PFCE Framework in Your Program: Markers of Progress* (on the ECLKC webpages for the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement: http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family).

Refine goals and plans by examining data for patterns of progress on family and child outcomes. Programs can use data to identify the changes needed to achieve goals for families. For example, while working with individual families to set goals in the family partnership process, program staff may learn about family-specific trends and patterns that may be of value to program-wide goal setting and planning with community partners. Goal setting with families may offer data that programs can use to make timely shifts and monitor the effect of services provided.

PFCE Program Planning: Example

ALL OF US TOGETHER, Inc., has been providing Head Start and Early Head Start services to its community in Michigan for more than 20 years. For the past 6 months, there has been a rumor about the potential closing of two of the largest employers in the community. At community meetings, the Head Start Director has learned that the rumors are true and that the closings may impact more than half of the families in the program.

Program leadership and family services staff were concerned about what these anticipated job losses might mean for families and children. The most recent results from the community assessment, program Self-Assessment, and family assessments, clearly indicated an immediate need to address the well-being of families. There was already an increase in family violence, use of drugs, and stresses related to unemployment. Staff wanted to know: How can we make a difference for our families to help them during this time of change?

To help address this question, staff invited all stakeholders (members of the governing body, staff, family members, and community partners) to join a program planning committee. The group decided that it first needed to gather more information from families in the program. To do this, staff developed a survey about family well-being. At the program's quarterly scheduled "Family Night Out" event, parents completed the survey with their Family Service Workers (FSW). As a follow-up, FSW contacted families who were not in attendance to complete the survey.

Next, program staff reviewed and aggregated the data from this survey and compared it with other previously reviewed sources. This process allowed the group to identify the following common goal:

> **BROAD Program Goal Related to Family Outcomes for a Five-Year Period**
>
> ALL of US TOGETHER will partner with families and work with community partners to support families' progress toward improved well-being and stronger financial stability. We will pay special attention to the families impacted by the job loss and the changes that these families will experience over the next 2–5 years as a result of the job loss. This goal is tied to the Family Well-Being Outcome of the PFCE Framework.

SMART Objectives for Year One

1) Develop MOUs with key community partners that have the capacity to offer job cross-training and apprenticeships.

2) Within one month of the start of the program year and continuing throughout the program year, ensure that 100 percent of parents have information about support services available in the community—including mental health counseling and job training—to better cope with job loss. Also ensure that all staff know of the resources available in the community to help support families experiencing these stressors.

3) Deliver training in mental health consultation, reflective practice, and supervision to all staff to ensure a better understanding of how job loss and job transition influence such mental health issues as depression and anxiety.

Using this goal and these objectives, the committee created a plan of action in which all stakeholders (governing bodies, staff, parents,

See the PFCE Framework: Family Partnerships and Community Partnerships and the two related family outcomes, Family Well-being and Families as Learners.

and community partners) could play a role. This plan of action focused on a collaborative process to monitor the program's progress and evaluate the objectives and strategies planned. Engaging families and key stakeholders in the goal-setting process supported the implementation of the plan of action. As part of ongoing communication with the Regional Office, the program also engaged in regular discussions about the program's progress toward this and other program goals. The program stayed in close contact with its training and technical assistance specialist to discuss its ongoing planning and to identify or access training and resources to implement its plan to support family well-being.

Refer to the information on **BROAD** goals and **SMART** objectives in "Topic #1: Understanding Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans." You can also refer to *Using the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework in Your Program: Markers of Progress* to inform your ideas about goals and objectives. This resource can be found on the ECLKC website at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family.

Conclusion

Programs and families can set goals at the program or individual family level. Program goals related to family outcomes are intended to address the needs of all families in a program. These program-wide goals emerge from several data sources. Program leadership, governing bodies, community partners, staff, and families work together to set and achieve these goals.

In addition, staff work with families to set specific individual goals for each family in response to its strengths, needs, interests, hopes, and progress. During the goal-setting process with individual families, program staff may discover trends and patterns that are emerging for a majority of families. These trends and patterns inform program-wide goal setting and planning. Goal setting with families offers data that programs can use to make timely changes and to monitor the effect of services provided on families' progress at both program and individual levels.

Family Engagement and
School Readiness

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement has created a Research to Practice Series on the Office of Head Start (OHS) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses how family engagement contributes to young children's school readiness.

Aligned with related Head Start Performance Standards, this resource presents a summary of selected research and program strategies intended to be useful for the Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) community.

The OHS PFCE Framework is a research-based approach to program change that shows how HS/EHS programs can work together as a whole – across systems and service areas – to promote family engagement and children's learning and development.

Introduction

Family engagement: The family is the primary force in preparing children for school and life, and children benefit when all of the adults who care for them work together (Bronfenbrenner, 2004). When program staff and families are engaged as partners, they commit to working together on children's behalf. When family members take the lead and make decisions about their children's learning, they are truly engaged. Positive goal-directed relationships between families and program staff are key to engagement and children's school readiness (HHS/ACF/OHS/NCPFCE, 2011).

School readiness is the process of early learning and development, from infancy to school age, when children gain the skills and attitudes they need to succeed in school. With developmentally appropriate programming, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers make advances that prepare them for school.

Early childhood experts describe school readiness in various ways, but typically refer to five areas of readiness: health and physical development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development and communication; and cognition and knowledge. The OHS Child Development and Early Learning Framework (CDELF) (HHS/ACF/OHS, 2012) addresses each of these domains.

Others use the term school readiness to describe a school's ability to provide children with an education (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). It also refers to families' readiness for the transition to school. School readiness is a shared responsibility among schools, programs, and families.
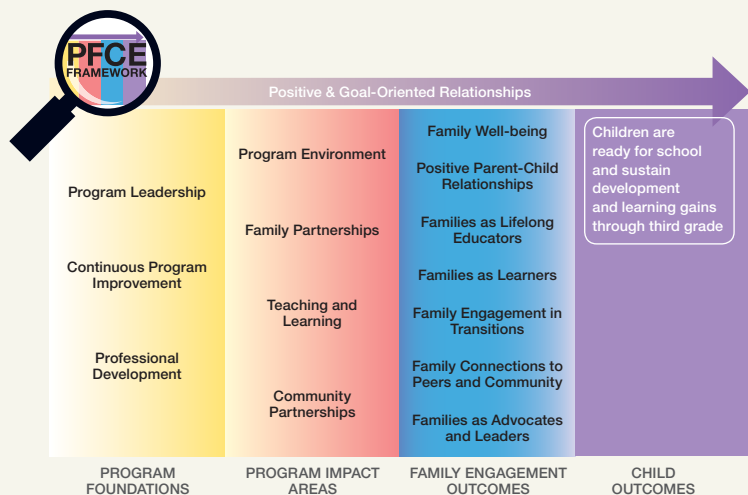
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**Parent, Family, and
Community Engagement**

When parent and family engagement activities are systemic and integrated across PFCE Framework Program Foundations and Impact Areas, Family Engagement Outcomes are achieved, and children are healthy and ready for school (HHS/ACF/OHS/NCPFCE, 2011).

What We Know: Family Engagement and School Readiness

Infants & Toddlers: Learning from the Beginning

"School readiness means supporting and protecting the developing brain in such a way that the brain creates a strong physical foundation for learning" (Petersen, 2012). From the beginning, parents and other caregivers nurture the capacities children will need to be ready for school.

Early interactions with caregivers build babies' brains. The qualities of babies' interactions with mothers and fathers have measurable impacts on future learning (Cook, Roggman, & Boyce, 2012; Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). These qualities include warmth, mutuality, and parent sensitivity to children's play and conversation. Interactions with these qualities lead to social and academic competence (Thompson, 2008). For example, cognitive stimulation by mothers and fathers in playful interactions during toddlerhood is related to literacy and math levels in third and fifth grade (Cook et al., 2012). Warm, responsive, and emotionally secure relationships also provide babies with healthy models for future relationships. Young children who consistently receive responsive and sensitive care are more likely to form positive relationships with adults and peers when they enter school (Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

Two major developmental achievements of infancy and toddlerhood are critical to children's later success in school:

1. self-regulation (the ability to adapt one's level of emotions to shifting situations)
2. joint attention (the ability to pay attention to what an adult or a peer is attending to).

Self-regulation emerges from children's individual strengths and vulnerabilities, beginning at birth. Each baby's unique qualities also shape the care that parents and other caregivers provide. At the same time, this individualized care contributes to each child's self-regulation abilities.

Joint attention occurs when an adult and infant or toddler play cooperatively with the same toy, read a book together, or notice an event at the same time. Abilities such as paying attention and imitating others are partly built through joint attention. Joint attention in parent-infant interactions is related to greater social skills and language learning, both essential to school success (Carpenter, Nagell, Tomasello, Butterworth, & Moore, 1998).

Self-regulation and joint attention build the base for skills that children will need for success in school and later in life. These skills include:

- following instructions,
- focusing on a task,
- controlling emotions and behaviors with peers and adults,
- adjusting to different expectations in different environments, and
- solving problems in school (Center on the Developing Child, 2011).

Infants are born with the capacity to develop these skills through their interactions with caregivers in the earliest months and years.

Of course, language and literacy in the first three years are also important to school readiness. The amount of language that infants and toddlers are exposed to at home is directly related to later vocabulary growth (Hart & Risley, 1995). In families with low incomes, infants and toddlers who were read to more often have better language and cognition at age three than those who were read to less often (Raikes et al., 2006). Partnerships between EHS staff and families that encourage parents to talk with and read to their children at home positively impact future learning. The adults who partner together on behalf of young children help them develop the skills related to later school success – early language, literacy, attention, and self-regulation (Ayoub, Vallotton, & Mastergeorge, 2011).
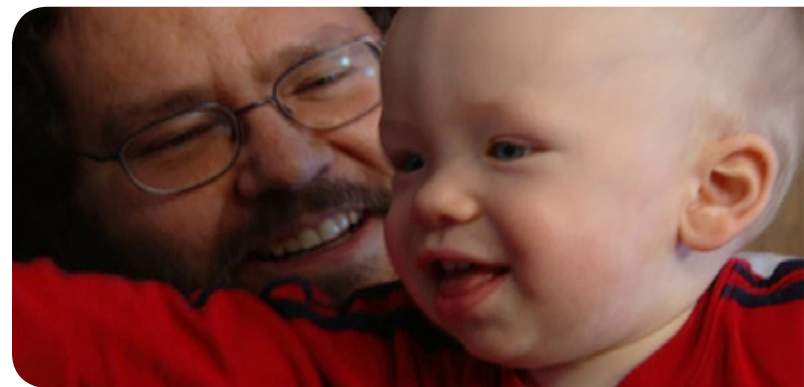
Preschool: Developing the Skills for Success

Family engagement in the preschool years builds on the first three years, and is linked to children's success in kindergarten and beyond (Graue, Clements, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004). One study showed that in the year before kindergarten, children whose parents participated in center-based activities were more prepared for school (McWayne, Hahs-Vaughn, Cheung, & Green, 2012). Another study found that HS classrooms rated high in parent involvement also had high classroom quality ratings. Children from those class-

rooms performed significantly higher on tests of receptive vocabulary and math skills (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012). The effect of engagement is improved when it takes place both through home visits and in centers with high quality programming (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004).

Academic skills and social and emotional competence are closely related in children's development. Children who get along well with peers and teachers are more likely to participate in classroom activities, enjoy learning, and transition successfully from preschool to kindergarten (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Social-emotional competence contributes to academic success in reading and math through sixth grade (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). Parent engagement focused on social-emotional outcomes helps children develop interpersonal school readiness skills, and reduces anxiety and withdrawal (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Relationships within the family remain the most critical for children's social-emotional development. Programs can make a big difference when they partner with family members to support their relationships with their children.

Fathers play an important role in children's emotional and cognitive development. Father engagement has significant effects on children's cognition and language at 24 months and 36 months and social and emotional development at 24 months, 36 months, and pre-kindergarten (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). Children with close relationships with their fathers have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed (Dubowitz et al., 2001).

As with infants and toddlers, self-regulation and executive functions (impulse control, attention, memory, and planning skills) in preschoolers play a critical role in school readiness (Blair & Razza, 2007). Parenting continues to be important to the development of these abilities (Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). Home and center-based family engagement activities can encourage families to help foster these skills in their children.

Parents' contributions to preschoolers' literacy skills are related to school readiness. By engaging children in joint literacy activities and positive discussions about educational topics, parents promote successful transitions to school (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). One home visiting study demonstrated that when mothers were engaged in literacy activities with their children and learning materials were available, pre-kindergarten vocabulary and literacy skills were higher (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011).

Programs can engage parents and other family members in learning activities and expose children to printed materials at home and in school (Buhs, Welch, Burt, & Knoche, 2011). HS/EHS programs can encourage families to read at home and in the classroom. They can also link families to libraries and other organizations that offer books and family-centered reading activities.

Elementary and Secondary Education: Building a Bridge to the Future

Active parent and community involvement are key components of high functioning elementary schools' success (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Mayer, Mullens, & Moore, 2000). A review of 51 studies (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) found that children whose parents were involved with their schooling had better academic outcomes, including higher grades, enrollment in advanced programs, passing to the next grade level, improved attendance, better social skills, and higher graduation rates.

Children whose parents are engaged with their schooling have better academic outcomes.

Across diverse economic and cultural backgrounds, family participation in elementary and secondary school is associated with greater student success. Studies of parent involvement among families with low incomes show links with school success, such as higher levels of literacy (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004). When parents engage in math activities at home, children are more likely to have higher math scores (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). One study of migrant families with young elementary school children found that family engagement led to better language skills. Families used learning materials, such as books, at home and with teachers in kindergarten (St. Clair & Jackson, 2006).

Since the establishment of the right to public education for children with special needs in the 1970s, school interactions with families of children with special needs have changed. School engagement with these families is now more often a "two-way street" in which families and educators work together to support children's learning (Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). Parents are engaged as full partners in developing and implementing individualized plans (Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) & Individual Education Program (IEP)), and in monitoring their children's progress. These partnerships have also helped advance schools' overall family engagement efforts.

Cultural and linguistic variations in family interactions with schools present both opportunities for and barriers against effective engagement (García-Coll et al., 2002). Family engagement can be highly effective when tailored to the unique interests, strengths, and needs of families from diverse cultural groups (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). One particularly useful strategy is to bring families of a specific cultural and linguistic community together so that they have a collective voice in the schools (Durand, 2011).

Promoting School Readiness

A systemic, integrated, and comprehensive focus on family engagement can help families prepare their children to learn and thrive in school. Family well-being, positive goal-oriented parent-staff relationships, and family social and cultural capital all promote children's school readiness.

Family Well-Being

Children's physical and emotional environments affect their readiness for school. Stressful home environments can impact parents' ability to engage with programs in ways that support their children's learning. When a family's food, clothing, shelter, or social supports are inadequate, the children may not be able to focus on learning. Multiple threats to family well-being can interfere with young children's self-regulation, social skills, language and cognitive development. Stress associated with poverty can make it more difficult for parents to provide sensitive, predictable care (Ayoub et al., 2011). For more information about how positive relationships contribute to better child outcomes, see Positive Parent-Child Relationships http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/parent-child-relationships.pdf, another resource in this Research to Practice Series.

The strong two-generational programming of HS/EHS protects and promotes family well-being and children's school readiness. For example, parents in EHS were more emotionally supportive, provided more language and learning stimulation, and read more to their children than parents not in EHS (Love et al., 2005). To reduce the stresses on families that can negatively affect young children, coordination with other services, such as child welfare and housing, is essential (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). Programs that engage

community partners to offer comprehensive family supports have a better chance of promoting family well-being, and as a result, improving children's readiness for kindergarten.

Program and School Relationships with Parents

Positive parental attitudes toward school improve children's performance (Morrison, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2003). Yet parents' and schools' misconceptions about each others' roles can be a barrier to engagement (Ferguson, C., Ramos, M., Rudo, Z., & Wood, L., 2008). Misconceptions lead to mistrust and to less parent engagement. HS/EHS staff can help establish trusting family-program partnerships by creating a welcoming environment. It can also help to provide opportunities for families to express their views about the program and their relationships with staff. The quality of parent-staff relationships is central to family engagement (Porter et al., 2012).

Cultural and Social Capital

When HS/EHS staff form strong partnerships with families, and connect families to each other and the broader community, they build cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers to knowledge about institutions such as schools that helps families advocate for their children. When HS staff transfer their knowledge about schools to families, families gain cultural capital. Social capital refers to the relationships that provide access to resources and power within a community (Lee & Bowen, 2006). When families connect with each other in decision-making activities such as Policy Council, they develop social capital. (See OHS Research to Practice Series: Family Connections to Peers and Communities and Families as Advocates and Leaders (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/rtp-series.html) for additional discussion).

Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

In the first months and years of life, children develop school readiness primarily within their families, and in all their earliest interactions. Self-regulation, joint attention, and other executive functions, as well as vocabulary, language, and other cognitive and social and emotional skills develop both at home and at school. HS/EHS programs can strengthen families' positive impact on their children's school readiness by partnering with families to make progress on the PFCE Family Outcomes. Helping families overcome challenges such as poverty, homelessness, family and community violence, and social isolation is vital to supporting children's learning. Through partnerships with HS/EHS programs as well as other community resources, families can play an active role in their children's learning, advocate for quality education for their children, and create the collective power to improve their children's educational opportunities.

What Can Programs Do?

HS/EHS staff provide families and children with a variety of experiences and tools to support school readiness and positive learning experiences. These include:

- forming positive, goal-directed relationships with families,
- providing programs that support children's learning and development,
- offering information on healthy development, and
- connecting families with resources to address causes of stress.

HS/EHS program staff, in all roles and across all program areas, can help children get ready to succeed in school by working together on effective strategies to engage families. Here are a few examples:

Provide Regular Opportunities for HS/EHS Staff to Learn about Connections between Family Engagement and School Readiness. Ongoing professional development is essential for all staff to understand how to apply family engagement practices to improve children's school readiness. Staff may also benefit from learning about

- what families believe about connections between family engagement and school readiness, and
- how to respond to beliefs that are different from their own.

HS/EHS programs can use a variety of professional development strategies (e.g., training, staff meetings, reflective practice and supervision, mentoring) to help staff promote school readiness in their everyday work. The effectiveness of these professional development strategies depends on adequate supervision and reasonable caseloads.

Visit Boosting School Readiness through Effective Family Engagement (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/pfce_simulation) an interactive professional tool to practice everyday strategies to develop positive, goal-oriented relationships with families.

Create Opportunities for Parents and Communities to Learn about School Readiness. School readiness is a concept that is familiar to HS/EHS staff and many parents, but not necessarily to all the adults in children's lives. For example, some adults do not know that babbling with babies or reading with children promotes literacy skills. Conversations with family and community members about healthy child development can expand their knowledge about how to promote school readiness at home, school, and in the community. HS/EHS programs can also provide easy-to-read written materials on school readiness in families' preferred languages.

For more in-depth information on how positive relationships contribute to school readiness see Positive Parent-Child Relationships (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/parent-child-relationships.pdf).

Engage with Families to Support Children's Transitions. Work on transitions with families as early as the transition to Early Head Start and Head Start, followed by the transition to kindergarten. The more practice children and families have with transitions, the more ready they will be for the next transition. When families are successful with transitions in the early years, they develop skills that will help them when their children enter kindergarten and larger school systems. Program-level strategies include professional development and learning activities for staff and parents that promote knowledge about transitions and skills such as collaboration, leadership, and advocacy. Effective community-level strategies include connecting parents with each other and developing strong program-school and other community partnerships to ensure that children's strengths and needs are addressed as they transition to kindergarten.

For more information on transitions in the early years see: Transitions Strategies: Continuity and Change in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/re-sources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/transition_strategies.pdf) For more information about the transition to kindergarten, see Family Engagement and Transitions: The Transition to Kindergarten (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/transitions-kindergarten.pdf).

Additional Resources

Early Head Start National Resource Center. Technical Assistance Paper #8: The Foundations for School Readiness: Fostering Developmental Competence in the Earliest Years. DHHS/ACF/HSB. 2003.

Office of Head Start National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness. Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five. http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mgmt-admin/diversity/multiculturalism/revisiting.htm

Office of Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. Best Practices in Parent and Family Engagement Video Series http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/video-series.html

Office of Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. Research to Practice Series. http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/rtp-series.html

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Family Well-being

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Office of Head Start (OHS) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the "Family Well-being" Outcome: "Parents and families are safe, healthy, and have increased financial security."

Aligned with related Head Start Performance Standards, this resource presents a summary of selected research, program strategies, and resources intended to be useful for the Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) community.
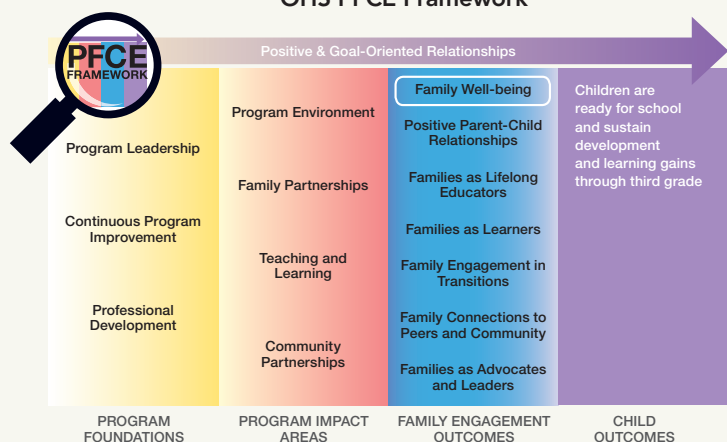
OHS PFCE Framework

The OHS PFCE Framework is a research-based approach to program change that shows how HS/EHS programs can work together as a whole – across systems and service areas – to promote family engagement and children's learning and development.

Introduction

Head Start and Early Head Start have a long history of engaging families to enhance family and child outcomes. Programs have always made family and children's well-being a priority with a focus on comprehensive services that support the whole family. This resource builds on this commitment and offers a common understanding of what family well-being means for HS/EHS families and children. When families are safe, healthy, and financially secure, they are more likely to reach the goals they have for themselves and their children.

Family well-being is one of a number of important outcomes for families. Through strengths-based partnerships with families, programs can support better outcomes for families and their children. Programs can focus on strong parent-child relationships by supporting the positive interactions they already see and sharing new ideas for activities at home. Program leadership can work with staff to create an environment where the strengths, hopes, and passions of families are valued and reinforced. Staff can encourage families to take leadership roles, share program governance, and take an active part in decision-making. When families want to become more actively involved in their own career development, programs can help families pursue opportunities for lifelong learning. When families are strong and secure, and family outcomes are enhanced, children are more likely to be healthy and ready for a lifetime of learning.

Families of all types can raise thriving children. This includes families with various caregiving structures, cultural beliefs, socioeconomic levels, faiths, home languages, and countries

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of origin. While all families have many strengths and the ability to reach their goals, they can also face significant adversity. Many families of all backgrounds in the U.S. face challenges to well-being, including unemployment, poverty, high housing costs, food insecurity, community violence, limited education, and poor health. Each of these alone can cause family stress. When combined, negative effects on family well-being and child outcomes can be even greater (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2012; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Maritato, 1999).

HS/EHS programs can partner with families to:

- identify individualized safety, health, and financial goals,
- obtain needed information and education, and
- access supportive community resources.

Throughout this resource, family well-being refers to the *safety*, *health*, and *financial security* of the whole family. The *safety* sections focus on housing and neighborhood security. Personal and cultural safety issues are also discussed. The *health* section addresses food security, as well as parental physical and mental health. *Financial security* includes meeting basic needs, improving earning capacity, and saving and investing resources.* This resource presents relevant research findings and highlights ways that HS/EHS programs can take a stregnths-based approach to support family well-being.

*This resource is intended as an overview and should be considered as an introduction to the three topic areas. Links to additional information are provided at the end of this resource.

Family Well-being: What We Know

Young children learn and grow within the context of their family, early learning environments, community, and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Within HS/EHS, families represent a wide range of cultures, languages, household structures, and living situations (HHS/ACF/OHS, 2013a). When families have secure housing, nutritious food, and access to health care, children tend to fare better in terms of their early development (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Fantuzzo, Leboeuf, Brumley, & Perlman, 2013; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark, & Howes, 2010; Ryu & Bartfeld, 2012). Neighborhood and community factors also interact to influence families and shape young children's development. For instance, the opportunity for social interactions and the availability of institutional resources such as libraries, community centers, and stores have a positive impact on family functioning and child development (Goldfeld et al., 2010).

Safety and Stability

Family well-being is characterized, in part, by the overall safety and stability of family members. This can include housing stability, neighborhood security, and personal welfare, such as adult and child safety in the home and neighborhood.

Housing: Affordable, stable housing in a safe, supportive neighborhood is an important part of family well-being (Swick & Williams, 2006). Families experiencing homelessness report a loss of parental control, and are more likely to experience domestic or community violence and an increase in fear and anxiety (Swick & Williams, 2010, 2006). Housing instability is associated with less family engagement in children's early school-related activities and poor early school attendance. Children who experience homelessness during their infancy, toddler, or preschool years tend to have poorer early academic outcomes overall (Fantuzzo et al., 2013).

Neighborhoods: Neighborhood security contributes to family safety. Neighborhoods that are physically safe have resources that support family activities, promote health, and support community connections, such as parks, sidewalks or walking paths, libraries, and community centers (Kenney, 2012; Kingston, Huang, Calzada, Dawson-McClure, & Brotman, 2013). Neighborhood safety can foster important social opportunities for young children to:

- learn social customs,
- develop a sense of confidence in their communities, and
- build interpersonal relationships (Boethel, 2004).

On the other hand, unsafe neighborhoods tend to have inadequate physical infrastructure, more limited community resources, and offer fewer opportunities for family outings and play with peers (Kenney, 2012).

Personal Safety

Child abuse and domestic violence: Child abuse and domestic violence have been the focus of far more research than can be covered in this resource. Here are just a few of the many important findings:

- Exposure to violence and abuse can be considered a form of "toxic stress." This can interfere with early brain development, and can also lead to other negative short- and long-term consequences for children (Shonkoff et al., 2012).
- Violence between adult partners in the family is associated with a loss of parent-child closeness and increased child neglect (Nicklas & Mackenzie, 2013). This decrease in family members' ability to nurture their children can negatively impact children's behavior and health (English, Marshall, & Stewart, 2003).

Unintentional injuries: For young children, unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death among children ages one to five. Falls are the leading cause of non-fatal injuries in children birth to five (Hagan, Shaw, & Duncan, 2008). Younger children and children who live in poverty have higher rates of injury (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

In the long term, adverse childhood safety experiences can add up, and have been linked to poor adult health outcomes and shortened life expectancy (Felitti et al., 1998).

Cultural safety: Cultural safety refers to environments and societal practices that recognize, respect, and honor the cultural identities of others (Williams, 1999). The harmful effects of racism experienced by people from non-dominant cultures can affect stress levels, health status, and even life expectancy (Chae et al., 2014). Cultural safety also refers to an approach to service delivery that respectfully engages families to select the most individually appropriate path to well-being (Ball, 2009).

Health

A key aspect of family well-being is the health of all family members. Health promotion and illness prevention depend on the availability of affordable, nutritious food, and access to a regular medical home. It also depends on oral health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment resources.

Food Security: Hunger is a reality for fifty million people in the U.S. and it is more common in households with children (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013). Low-income neighborhoods are less likely to have grocery stores. The food that is accessible is often not very healthy. Food insecurity, or poor access to nutritious, affordable food, can interfere with the whole family's health. The health and mental development

of young children is impacted by their families' access to sufficient, nutritious food (Zaslow et al., 2009). Persistent food insecurity can be especially damaging to children's long-term health outcomes (Ryu & Bartfeld, 2012).

Parental Health: Parental health status includes physical, oral, and mental health. All can impact children in the family. When any one family member experiences poor health and limited medical access, the effects on young children can include:

- an increased use of emergency care,
- missed well-child visits at the pediatrician's office, and
- greater incidences of health conditions, such as asthma (Hardie & Landale, 2013).

Parents with high levels of stress and depression can have more limited capacity to participate in positive parenting practices, such as affectionate, responsive parent-child interactions. This can have long-term effects on children's health and response to stressors (Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007).

Caregiving interactions also affect children's social and emotional competence. When parent-child relationships are primarily positive, children are more likely to have the skills they need to be successful in school (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010).

Health Care: A medical home is a "one-stop shopping" health care resource that can:

- facilitate families' access to services,
- increase connections between community organizations and pediatric health services, and
- promote regular well-child care (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013; Coker, Thomas, & Chung, 2013).

Well-child care can help identify early intervention opportunities such as developmental delays and exposure to environmental toxins. It also offers families information about injury prevention and developmental expectations. Similarly, prenatal care for expectant mothers can provide children with a healthy start in life and reduce the risks of birth defects, low birth weight, prematurity, and miscarriage (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013).

Families without access to regular medical care face barriers to managing family health problems and are more likely to use emergency care (Hardie & Landale, 2013). Access can be especially limited for immigrant families. Almost 45% of recent immigrant children from families with low incomes lacked health insurance in 2009 (Wight, Thampi, & Chau, 2011).

Mental Health: Parents' mental health can affect children's outcomes, including their mental health (Bennett, Brewer, & Rankin, 2012). Mother's depression in pregnancy is associated with poor maternal nutrition and weight gain, as well as premature births, low birth weight, and attachment issues (Wisner et al., 2009). Depression can also directly impact parenting practices and families' abilities to nurture the kind of positive relationships with children that are needed to promote early learning and development (Waylen & Stewart-Brown, 2010). Maternal depression can lead to anxiety and depression in children, which can impact peer relationships and school readiness (Meadows et al., 2007). Because depression is closely linked to the stresses of poverty, housing instability, and unemployment, it tends to be more common in families with persistent financial challenges (Adler & Newman, 2002).

When programs provide families with strengths-based support, information, and referrals for treatment, it can make a huge difference for parents suffering from depression, and for their children too. For more information see Family Well-being: A Focus on Parental Depression (http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/rtp-series.html), another resource in this series.

In addition to depression, other mental health issues, such as anxiety, mood disorders, trauma, and substance abuse can impact family well-being and child outcomes. Over 2.2 million children between birth and five years are living with a parent with a substance use disorder. These children are at much higher risk for abuse and neglect, as well as a variety of behavioral and academic challenges (ICF International, 2009; Mensah & Kiernan, 2010).

Financial Security

Financial security includes families' ability to:

- earn an income to take care of basic living expenses,
- manage their money,
- pay debts,
- save money, and
- build assets.

Income and Education: Poverty can affect child outcomes. During early childhood, poverty is more damaging than later on, and is related to lower long-term academic achievement, adult employment, and earning power (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011).

Parents' educational levels are closely related to income and opportunity (Aud et al., 2013). The lack of a high school diploma affects family income and is a significant predictor of family and child outcomes. EHS studies have found mothers' lack of a high school diploma to be a critical risk factor related to poor child outcomes, along with single parenting, unemployment, level of

poverty, and receiving public assistance (Ayoub et al., 2009; Vogel, Xue, Moiduddin, Kisker, & Carlson, 2010).

Increasing family income through employment and tax credits, particularly during early childhood, can improve children's academic achievement and adult learning (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011).

Increasing and stabilizing family income is related to improved child behaviors and mental health (Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003). Building family financial assets can positively affect children's long-term outcomes. For example, nearly three-quarters (71%) of children born to parents who have low incomes but are high-saving move up from the bottom income quartile over a generation. This is compared to only 50% of children of parents who are low-saving and have low incomes (Cramer, Brien, Cooper, & Luengo-Prado, 2009).

Supporting Family Well-being

Challenges to family well-being can be especially difficult when they occur together and build up over time. When parents are overwhelmed, their hope and motivation may waver. Programs can use their unique two-generational model to re-energize families through their passion for their children. Programs can then help families develop strategies to protect or restore family well-being. Programs can also combine respectful, goal-oriented family partnerships with strong connections to community resource providers to support overall family well-being. This next section outlines practices that HS/EHS programs can build upon to engage families around specific areas of family well-being.

Safety

Housing, Neighborhood, and Community Safety:
Head Start serves more than 50,000 families experiencing homelessness and provides housing assistance referrals to approximately 105,000 households (HHS/ACF/OHS, 2013b). Fostering strong linkages between HS/EHS programs and community building initiatives can improve families' housing stability and address neighborhood safety issues. HS/EHS programs can support families' efforts to improve their communities by linking them with neighborhood watch programs and community leadership opportunities. These community linkages build relationships among families so that they know their neighbors, are less isolated, and give and receive help from each other (Goldfeld et al., 2010).

PFCE FRAMEWORK — Community partnerships can help create and coordinate resource centers for housing assistance, job training, education, English-language learning, WIC, food banks, health care, and other services (Berlin, Brooks-Gunn, & Aber, 2001).

Personal Safety: HS/EHS partnerships with providers in local child abuse and domestic violence agencies can be essential to support families and children who are in physical or emotional danger.

HS/EHS staff can also help families recognize safety hazards in their home based on their children's age or developmental level. Together, programs and families can complete home safety checks and obtain equipment such as window guards, stair gates, electrical outlet covers, cabinet locks, smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, car seats, and other injury prevention items.

Health

Food Security: HS/EHS serves as a protective factor by providing nutritious breakfasts, lunches, and snacks. Programs can also help families access community resources such as food pantries, food stamps, and WIC. Staff can partner with families to provide information and training on planning low-cost meals and maximizing nutrition on a budget.

Health Care: As part of their comprehensive services to children and families, HS/EHS programs can support families to find a medical home where they can access prenatal services and establish ongoing physical and mental health care for the whole family. In 2013, most HS/EHS families had a regular medical home (93%) and health insurance (94%) for their children at enrollment (HHS/ACF/OHS, 2013b). Additionally, 7% of HS parents in a recent survey indicated that Head Start had helped them connect with regular health care (Aikens et al., 2010). Programs can offer training for families that teach practical health skills and empower them to set and achieve their own health goals (Herman, Nelson, Teutsch, & Chung, 2012, 2013).

PFCE FRAMEWORK — By building relationships with health care providers in the community, HS/EHS programs can make connections to health care providers who understand a family's cultural values and speak their language.

Mental Health: HS/EHS provides family members with opportunities for social interactions and peer support. EHS research also indicates that families do better in the long term when they see their children doing well (Vogel, Xue, Moiduddin, Kisker, & Carlson, 2010). Programs that recognize possible mental health disorders and substance abuse in HS/EHS family members can help them access community supports and services. In many cultures, mental health issues carry a strong social stigma, so families may be reluctant to seek treatment. Programs can identify and link families with mental health supports that are culturally relevant. HS/EHS mental health consultants can provide training on mental health topics and offer referral support to help interested families obtain appropriate services.

Financial Stability

Asset-Building Strategies: Family asset-building focuses on educating families about financial opportunities that may help them increase and sustain economic security (Corporation for Enterprise Development, 2010; Tivol & Brooks, 2012). Asset-building can help families to:

- receive public benefits,
- access safe, affordable financial products and services,
- utilize tax credits and free tax preparation,
- understand personal finance and budgeting,
- relieve debt and build or repair credit,
- save for an emergency or future goal, and
- invest in education, home ownership, or a business.

HS/EHS programs can develop a network of community partners that provide asset-building services and collectively aim to support families' financial security. Programs can also develop partnerships with banks, community action agencies, or local cooperative extension offices that may specialize in certain asset-building strategies.

Adult Education and Training: HS/EHS programs support family self-sufficiency by caring for children while parents participate in job skills training or attend school. In addition, programs can offer information to families about training and education opportunities in the community. By partnering with community organizations, educational institutions, and local workforce centers, HS/EHS programs can help families identify opportunities that support their long-term earning potential.

Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

Families experience well-being when all family members are healthy, safe, and financially secure. When families face challenges in one or more of these areas, their ability to support child outcomes and school readiness can be affected. Engaging families as active participants in problem solving can help family members identify and use their own strengths to address the challenges they face. Because HS/EHS staff partner with families every day to raise resilient young children, they are in a unique position to link families to community supports, training, and information resources that can increase overall well-being.

What Can Programs Do?

Well-being is a vast and complex family outcome. As a result, programs need to carefully plan and implement their approach to address the many different strengths and needs of the families they serve.

Gather information: The first step is to learn about the overall strengths and challenges of families in your program. Programs can begin by reviewing self-assessments, program information report (PIR) data, and community assessments. Family partnership agreements are another rich source of information about the kinds of issues families face, the goals they are ready to address, and the resources they already possess to do so. Asking families questions about successes and challenges on a regular basis is essential to decision-making about program priorities. Policy Council and parent committees will also have important information

to share. Staff who work with families, including teachers, family service workers, and home visitors, have valuable insights into what services are being provided, where gaps exist for families, and the strengths that families possess to overcome the challenges they face.

Programs can also work with community partners to collect data on the range of resources and challenges for family well-being in their communities. This data can then be used to engage community partners in planning supports for family well-being.

Once a program has assessed family, community, and program assets and needs, some of the following types of program work can be implemented in partnership with families.

Offer Individualized Support: Develop a program-wide approach to individualizing family support so you can partner with each family on their unique strengths and concerns. Some programs ask all families about their interests, hopes, needs, and achievements at the beginning of the school year and at the end of the spring. Others use parent-teacher conferences or more informal interactions as opportunities to build relationships and identify individual family strengths and needs. Combined with the overall priorities identified in information gathering, knowing individual family priorities and strengths can help programs develop a plan of action for supporting each family's well-being.

Targeted Information, Resources, and Trainings: Once you understand both the overall and individual strengths and needs of families within your program, you can collect the most appropriate resources and develop targeted training to join families where they are. Community and national organizations that have expertise in areas of health, safety, and financial security offer many useful tools and resources. Programs can use these resources to focus on planning and partnering, rather than creating new tools. Additionally, many of the resources and trainings that can support families may also be useful for staff's well-being.

Develop Community Partnerships: Many communities have a variety of organizations that are dedicated to housing, neighborhood safety, health, oral health, mental health, workforce development, education, and personal financial development. HS/EHS grantees and programs can leverage their own role in the community to partner with local organizations to provide topical trainings and develop referral networks for families. In addition, free national resources exist that programs can access and provide to families.

Key Resources

HS/EHS programs can access a wealth of information online to address the complex, interrelated aspects of family well-being. National organizations offer a range of guidance, informational materials, curricula, and program ideas that focus on safety, health, and financial security. In addition, the Office of Head Start has developed resources specifically for HS/EHS programs. To access these resources go to the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc

The following examples are not the only useful resources available but represent some good examples for programs to consider.

Programs can explore these resources to:

- find information materials to share with families,
- identify training opportunities to bring to their sites, and
- create specific partnerships with community organizations.

Housing, Neighborhood, and Personal Safety

Interactive Homelessness Lessons
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/family/Homelessness/homelessness.html

National Center on Family Homelessness
www.familyhomelessness.org

Neighborhood Safety Network
www.cpsc.gov/en/Safety-Education/Neighborhood-Safety-Network

National Crime Prevention Council
www.ncpc.org

Child Welfare Information Gateway
www.childwelfare.gov

Family Health

Breastfeeding (Office on Women's Health)
www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding

National Center for Injury Prevention (CDC)
www.cdc.gov/injury

National Center for Medical Home Implementation
www.medicalhomeinfo.org

National Health Insurance Marketplace
www.healthcare.gov

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
www.fns.usda.gov/wic/women-infants-and-children-wic

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov

Financial Security, Education, and Workforce Training

American Council on Education
www.acenet.edu

Assets & Opportunity Network
www.assetsandopportunity.org/network

Career One Stop
www.careeronestop.org

Center for Working Families
www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/CenterforFamilyEconomic-Success/CentersforWorkingFamilies.aspx

Corporation for Enterprise Development
www.cfed.org

Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (Money Smart Curriculum)
www.fdic.gov/consumers/consumer/moneysmart/

Financial Opportunity Centers
www.lisc.org/section/ourwork/national/family/foc

GED Testing Service
www.gedtestingservice.com/ged-testing-service

National Community Tax Coalition
https://tax-coalition.org

National Endowment for Financial Education (Financial Workshop Kits)
www.financialworkshopkits.org

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

Families as Advocates & Leaders

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Office of Head Start (OHS) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the "Families as Advocates and Leaders" Outcome: "Parents and families participate in leadership development, decision-making, program policy development, or in community and state organizing activities to improve children's development and learning experiences."

Aligned with related Head Start Performance Standards, this resource presents a summary of selected research, promising practices, and program strategies intended to be useful for the Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) community.

Introduction

Families can be advocates and leaders at home, in their children's schools, in their neighborhood and community, or in the larger society (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Their advocacy and leadership may be far-reaching, shaping the development of children, programs, schools, and other families for years to come.

Head Start is a strong national model of family advocacy and leadership. Since its beginning, HS/EHS programs have engaged families as advocates and leaders in all of their activities, particularly through Parent Committees, Policy Committees, and Policy Councils.

Definitions

Family advocates speak for and act on behalf of others as they empower them (Trainor, 2010). Parents may speak up for their own children, or join with others to represent the needs of many children (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocón, 2012).

Family leaders use and develop resources and services to strengthen their family. They speak and act from those experiences (Reynolds & St. John, 2012).

What Parent Advocacy and Leadership Look Like

All parents are advocates and leaders in the lives of their children. They advocate for their children's well-being, and grow as leaders as their children grow, and as they develop as parents. Parental responsibilities that are similar to those of other advocates and leaders include juggling multiple tasks, solving problems, making decisions, setting ground rules at home, balancing family members' competing needs, and helping with household work as a group (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997).

OHS PFCE Framework
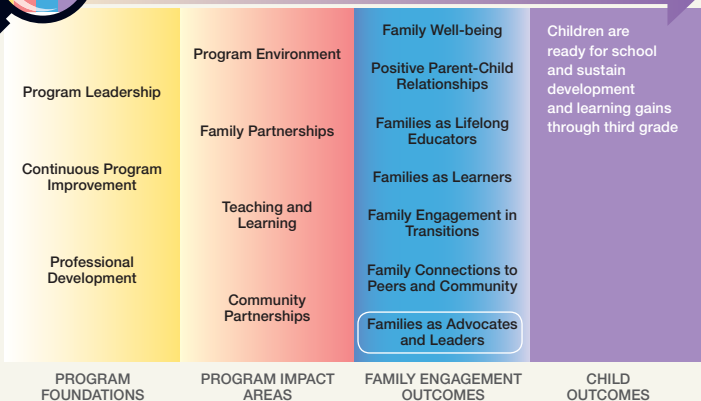
The OHS PFCE Framework is a research-based approach to program change that shows how HS/EHS programs can work together as a whole – across systems and service areas – to promote family engagement and children's learning and development.

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Family advocacy and leadership in early childhood settings, particularly in HS/EHS, can include a range of different activities. Parent advocates and leaders can:

- act as mentors in the classroom,
- share skills with other parents,
- coordinate events for children and families,
- bring out strengths in other families,
- serve as cultural liaisons,
- participate in parent meetings, advisory committees, Parent Committees, Policy Councils, and other governing bodies, as well as community or state coalitions, and
- represent children and families in the development of policy and legislation.

Strong parent advocates and leaders:

- organize others,
- mobilize community members,
- share their commitment, and
- work effectively with other families and professionals toward a common goal in their community and beyond (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Trainor, 2010).

Many parents enter HS/EHS programs with strong advocacy and leadership skills. Many others have great potential to develop them. Families' positive experiences with advocacy and leadership may further motivate them to advocate for broader systemic improvements (Trainor, 2010).

Families can become advocates when they mobilize around a shared concern or crisis, such as potential funding cuts. They can also become advocates after realizing that they have the ability to change situations that once made them feel helpless (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Some family members enter programs with the motivation to strengthen their children's experience. Families can also contribute advocacy skills from additional settings or their country of origin.

Families as Advocates and Leaders: What We Know

Benefits to Children

Families act as advocates and leaders when they are choosing an early childhood program or health care provider. Parents can use the advocacy skills they develop in HS/EHS to positively influence their children's learning experiences throughout their education (Trainor, 2010).

Families who are involved in advocacy and leadership activities serve as important role models for their children (Cunningham et al., 2012).

Benefits to Families

Family members involved in advocacy and leadership activities can experience personal growth (Cunningham et al., 2012). For example, they may develop or reinforce their ability to express their concerns constructively, create and implement plans, and further refine other skills. Many

become more confident and are then able to give back to programs that supported them (Cunningham et al., 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). When family advocacy and leadership extend beyond an individual child or program to the community or region, families develop additional networking skills and a deeper understanding of the issues that are important to them (Trainor, 2010). As one mother observed:

> *"One thing that I found that Head Start did for me was not only to enrich, empower, and educate my family, it enriched, empowered, and educated everyone around me. And that happened through the support of the teachers, the family service workers, the health coordinators, the parent involvement people…. About four years ago, I spoke as the keynote speaker for the parent award banquet, and went on to go to the state association board and the regional association board, where I'm currently a member."* (27th Annual Head Start Parent Conference, Virginia Beach, VA)

Family advocacy and leadership skill development opportunities can also advance career development. For instance, many HS/EHS parent leaders continue their education, become staff at HS/EHS or other community programs, and improve the financial stability of their families over time. Often they serve as positive role models for other families.

Benefits to Programs, Schools, and Communities

Schools that provide opportunities for shared leadership with families are better able to meet the needs of the school and community (Auerbach, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Family advocates and leaders may help organizations become aware of a range of issues, and provide valuable insights about their service experiences.

HS and EHS formally and informally promote family advocacy and leadership in other community organizations. As one HS Director explains:

> *"We make sure that families have the information they need, and we help them to advocate in meetings. Our expectation is that the other agencies know that our families will be speaking up, will be asking questions, and that we encourage them to do so."* (http://eclkc. ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/Disabilities/ Staff%20Support%20and%20Supervision/Orientation/ specialquest-training-library/training-library.html)

One prime example of family advocacy and leadership having national, long-lasting impact is the evolution of special education services for children with disabilities. Families have been the driving force for creating civil rights and educational legislation at the national level.

Program policies, practices, and professional development promote staff knowledge, skills, and actions to welcome all families, honor their participation, and create culturally responsive environments.

Boosting Family Advocacy and Leadership

Relationships are the Key

The foundation for family advocacy and leadership is strong positive relationships between families and program staff. When staff members build relationships with families through home visits and communicate in the family's preferred language, they can identify family strengths, needs, and interests regarding advocacy and leadership. Once positive relationships are built, families feel respected, cared for, and are better able to share their ideas and concerns (Auerbach, 2010).

Families and staff bring their own experiences, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and views of child-rearing and education to these relationships. Positive interactions may encourage families to participate in advocacy and leadership activities, while negative interactions may hinder them. Programs can include professional development opportunities that help staff learn how to encourage parent advocacy and leadership. Reflective practice and supervision give programs and staff the chance to reflect on their interactions with families and strengthen the relationships that affect family engagement.

Families bring a wealth of gifts and strengths to programs. They may be passionate and persuasive speakers, and committed to supporting their children and their community. Many families can give voice to the unique needs of a particular community and share important details about how cultural backgrounds can affect parents' experiences. Families often advocate on behalf of other parents who are wary about getting involved.

Staff members also bring gifts both to their programs and to relationships with families. Many staff are former HS/EHS parents who can relate to the experiences, cultures, and languages of the families they serve. Staff can listen carefully to families and provide the support that encourages families to ask for what they want and need.
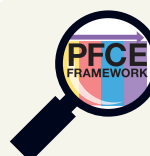
Communication, Negotiation, and Conflict Resolution

Communication is essential to staff-family relationships, as are negotiation and conflict resolution skills. When conflicts arise, families and programs can engage in discussion and negotiation. Family members must be respected as capable of making choices to resolve conflicts and differences of opinion (Auerbach, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Relationships are strengthened when conflict is addressed openly and respectfully.

Some families may not feel confident, see their language skills as too limited, or may lack the related knowledge to be an advocate or leader in certain settings. For some, negative experiences with other programs or schools, or their own difficult school experiences, may make them avoid getting involved in their children's education.

Cultural beliefs about teachers' authority may prevent some parents from expressing opinions that might seem to challenge teachers. Traumatic refugee experiences may lead some families to feel powerless, or fear retaliation if they assert their concerns. Some families, including migrant families or recent immigrants without legal documentation, may avoid leadership roles because they are protective about their family's privacy. For information on serving refugee and immigrant families, see Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development available at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/docs/raising-young-children-in-a-new-country-bryc5.pdf.

Differences or misunderstandings related to staff and parent expectations or cultural differences may challenge relationships. When families express desires for their children that go beyond a program's current practice, staff may feel overwhelmed or defensive (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Teachers or home visitors may feel unappreciated or discouraged if families do not engage in programs in ways they expect and desire.

When programs are open to diverse perspectives and see families as partners, they may discover innovative solutions to program challenges. Programs can address differences in expectations with ongoing communication focused on

how all staff and families contribute to a common goal—the well-being of children and their families. Negotiation and conflict resolution skills are also important for families in advocacy and leadership roles (Cunningham et al., 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991), such as when they participate in policy or advisory boards.

Creating a Collaborative Program Environment

The nature of family participation in a program's governance structure affects family advocacy and leadership. For example, when families have a real role in decision-making, they know they can make a difference, and their leadership grows (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Policy and advisory groups can provide opportunities for leadership by creating a climate of belonging, building trusting relationships, and developing common goals with a focus on the well-being of children and families (Auerbach, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Doucet, 2008). Given the cultural and linguistic diversity of HS/EHS families, special attention must be paid to how information, communication, and leadership opportunities are presented so that all families have a voice and all children benefit (Gordon & Nocon, 2008).

Access to Knowledge and Information

Even when policies and governance structures promote family leadership, additional knowledge, skills, and confidence can help family members to become leaders (Cunningham et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010). Families need to know the rules of the game in order to play. For example, to make informed decisions that support children's learning and development, families need information about program expectations, legal rights and responsibilities. Families also need to know how various systems operate so that they can access services and supports for their children. This is particularly important when working with families from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from those of service providers. It is also crucial when working with families of children with disabilities.

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY DEVELOPS FROM:

- *cultural capital* (knowledge about issues and rights), and
- *social capital* (relationships with key players such as teachers and other parents) (Trainor, 2010).

Through strong relationships with families, early childhood programs can help families gain the cultural and social capital necessary to be strong advocates.

Supporting Staff and Administrators

Like families, program staff need specific knowledge, skills, and actions to promote family advocacy and leadership. Teacher education programs tend to emphasize instructional skills with little focus on partnering with families (Doucet, 2008). Yet with support, staff can go beyond solving families' problems to work with families as equal partners in problem solving (Auerbach, 2010; Doucet, 2008).

When educational programs define parents' roles based solely on their needs, without also engaging their strengths, families may feel undervalued. When parents are asked how they want to contribute to their children's schooling and their own goals, they share critical insights into how family-staff relationships can benefit children, families, and programs (Doucet, 2008).

Training and reflective supervision can help all staff understand that empowering parents is as important as empowering children (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Professional development can provide all staff with the understanding they need about parent advocacy and leadership and the important role that parents play in their children's learning. Parents develop confidence, not only as they watch their children thrive, but also as they learn new skills, manage their own lives, and make a difference in the lives of others.

Program environment and administrators' leadership styles have a powerful impact on the development of family leaders (see the PFCE Framework). Administrators with a relationship-based focus serve as role models for staff and families and create a parallel process—when program leaders nurture staff member leadership, staff are more likely to encourage family leadership (Douglass, 2011).

Promising Practices: Strategies for Growing Family Advocates and Leaders

Staff begin to help family caregivers—including fathers, siblings, and other family members—become advocates and leaders by understanding how families perceive their caregiving roles and by appreciating the different ways they contribute to their children's learning (Doucet, 2008; Emarita, 2006). An early step is to listen and respond to families' concerns and ideas about becoming advocates and leaders. Programs can then offer opportunities to learn and lead that match family skills, interests, and readiness.

Families as Co-Trainers

A broad range of leadership opportunities that are culturally and linguistically relevant can expand the number of family leaders in a program. For example, family members are often part of training teams that present at local, state, or national conferences. Some HS/EHS programs invite families that have graduated to join them as part of professional development activities. Families' experiences with training, conferences, or advisory meetings help build important relationships, expand understanding of systems and services, and increase self-confidence.

The Institute for Human Development at the University of Missouri has identified core leadership skills needed by both families and professionals to help develop family leadership. For a copy of the document see: http://www.moddrc.org/user_storage/File/f2f/CORE%20COMPETEN-CIES%20for%20family%20leaders.pdf.

Parent-to-Parent Leadership Development

Parent-to-parent learning, sharing, and support are often effective strategies for family leadership development. For example, when families of children with special needs develop relationships with each other, they gain useful information and learn strategies for effective communication with staff and administrators (Trainor, 2010). Father engagement efforts can give fathers an opportunity to become leaders who recruit other fathers into program activities. Research with Latino parents in Chicago public schools showed that when Latino parent-representatives on school councils engaged with families to improve community relations, other parents in the community became more involved in their children's schooling (Marschall, 2008).

Promising Practices: Selected Resources for Growing Family Advocates and Leaders

The following (listed alphabetically) are not the only useful promising or evidence-based resources in the field, but represent some good examples of options for programs to consider:

- *Community Cafés* are focused on supporting protective factors in families and help to engage parents and other community members as partners. Led by parent facilitators, the cafés can be used to identify key issues for parents, as well as identify and develop parent leaders. For more information, see: http://www.ctfalliance.org/initiative_parents-2.htm.

- *Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)*, a Latino legal civil rights organization, offers a Parent School Partnership that trains parents and community leaders to become effective advocates for improving educational achievements, schools, and communities. For more information, see: http://www.maldef.org/leadership/programs/psp/index.html.

- *Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI)* has operated for over 20 years in Connecticut and has been evaluated and replicated by other states (for example, the Colorado Family Leadership Training Institute (FLTI)). Participants spend more than 120 hours developing skills to become effective leaders in their communities. For more information, see: http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/plti_about.htm and http://flti.wordpress.com/.

- *SpecialQuest* is a collaborative approach that brings professionals and families together to support the inclusion of young children with disabilities. A key outcome is the development of families as partners and leaders. The SpecialQuest Multimedia Training Library includes training materials and videos on family leadership. More information on SpecialQuest and related training materials are available on the ECLKC web site: http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov and www.specialquest.org.

- *Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute*, at the Parent Services Project, has developed a family leadership curriculum called Leaders for Change, based on the Strengthening Families Five Protective Factors. The curriculum focuses on helping families build relationships, assume leadership in their communities, and engage in systems serving children and families. For more information, see: http://parentservices.org/effective-family-staff-and-community-partnerships/.

Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

Helping families become advocates and leaders is an important step toward supporting better family and child outcomes. As programs work toward a more systemic approach to promoting family advocacy and leadership, they can draw on PFCE Framework Elements such as collaborative Program Leadership, targeted Professional Development, and an empowering Program Environment.

When family members act as advocates and leaders to influence the programs, policies, and practices that shape their children's lives, the effects can be long-lasting. Experiences as leaders and advocates in HS/EHS prepare families for those same roles when their children are in K-12 settings. Their advocacy and leadership can touch the lives of other families in the larger community and beyond.

What Can Programs Do?

The following recommendations are most effective when done with the guidance and counsel of families.

Help Staff and Families Work Together

- **Relationships are the foundation.** Personal contact is essential for authentic and meaningful connections. Daily communication makes a big difference—greetings, quick conversations, notes, or text messages where program policies allow. Home visits are important opportunities to support the development of family advocates and leaders.

- **Provide opportunities for collaboration.** Parent/staff-run events and presentations help families become involved in their children's education and build leadership skills. Collaboration can also help shape program policies to meet the academic, social, linguistic, and other needs of children.

- **Offer communication and leadership training for families and professionals together.** The "two-way street" of collaborative leadership requires families and staff to develop skills such as reflective listening, brainstorming, and compromise (Auerbach, 2010; Reynolds & St. John, 2012). Learning together strengthens staff/parent relationships and helps everyone practice these skills.

- **Use professional development and reflective supervision** to help staff address feelings of vulnerability as they share power with parents. Reflective supervision can strengthen staff skills to build collaborative relationships with families.

Plan and Run Meetings to Maximize Family Leadership

- **Provide relevant and clear background information before meetings** to help families contribute effectively and feel competent. Make sure materials reflect appropriate literacy levels and are translated into multiple languages if needed (Lim, 2008). Use visuals whenever possible. A buddy system, or pre-meeting can help families preview and develop the agenda, clarify jargon or terminology, and set expectations for participation. Encourage parents to bring another person to meetings for moral support.

- **Provide logistical supports** needed for family leaders to participate in meetings and events, including stipends, transportation, child care, and reimbursement for time and travel as policies allow.

- **Create ground rules and meeting norms that support engagement**. The many procedures that often dominate policy-making boards can squelch family leadership (Douglass, 2011). As an antidote, use strategies that encourage participation. Start meetings with a family story to focus on families' strengths, needs, concerns, and successes. Ask families to start the discussion from their perspective. Offer everyone a chance to speak. Collaborative leadership may take more time but can lead to stronger overall leadership and a more successful program.

Support Family Skill Building

- **Work with family members who want to serve as advocates and leaders.** Invite parents to join a discussion about the many ways they can be advocates and leaders in the program and community. Family members may underestimate their skills and potential. Encourage them to reconsider these self-judgments.

- **Connect family members with skill building opportunities.** Advocacy and leadership opportunities within HS/EHS are plentiful, such as Parent Committees, Policy Committees, and Policy Council. Community agencies and informal groups offer opportunities to become involved and build skills.

- **Make the link between advocacy and leadership and career development.** Advocacy and leadership skills are highly valued in many jobs. Encourage family members to reflect on advocacy and leadership skills that might carry over to work opportunities, to add them to their resumes, and to 'talk them up' in job interviews.

Review and Adjust Program Structures and Processes

- **Prioritize family advocacy and leadership in program values, strategic plans, and policies.** Examine policies and practices that support family advocacy and leadership as part of your program's continuous improvement activities.

- **Ensure that decision-making groups and committees reflect the cultural and linguistic make-up of your program and community.** Groups can require a specific number of family representatives so that there is not a "lone" family voice. Have a balance in ages of children represented, racial and ethnic groups, mothers and fathers, primary languages, etc. (Lim, 2008).

Encourage New Parent Voices and Collaboration Between Parents

- **Involve additional parent input through a range of activities** such as reviewing drafted materials and policies, attending/evaluating training sessions, co-presenting with other leaders, attending workgroup meetings, and sharing family stories.

- **Promote leadership from many different families** to ensure that families' needs and strengths are not represented by a small subset of leaders (Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Leaders can bring information back to other families and ask for input so that they represent the group's input, not just their own personal issues or interests (Lim, 2008).

Use Data and Other Information to Support Family Leadership

- **Use data to improve practices.** Evaluate how the program engages family leaders. Track the program's progress in supporting family leadership efforts.

- **Collect, analyze, and share information with families.** Identify leadership opportunities for families that match their interests and needs. Share program results with families. Communicate child progress data in meaningful, understandable, and actionable ways.

Encourage Family Leadership and Advocacy Beyond and After HS/EHS Programs

- **Help early childhood family leaders transition to elementary school leadership roles.** Introduce Policy Council members and other leaders to elementary school volunteer coordinators. Accompany them to an elementary school advisory council meeting.

- **Build alliances with parent leadership and support organizations in your community or state.** Organizations that work with parents, train staff, and facilitate effective family-staff partnerships can strengthen your family advocacy and leadership efforts. You can help link families to organizations in the community.

Related Head Start Performance Standards

1304.40 Family and Community Partnerships
1304.50 (a) (1-3) (b) (1-6) (7) (c-h) Program Governance
1304.51 (a-f) Management Systems and Procedures
1304.52 (a) (1) (b) (3-4) (d-f) (l) (1-4) (5) (iv) Human Resource Management
1308.21 (a) Parent Participation and Transition of Children into Head Start and from Head Start to Public School

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