

Family Engagement: Moving Toward Genuine Family Partnerships in Early Childhood Education

By Barb Volpe

“There is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools.” —Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot

Administrators and teachers in early childhood programs often acknowledge the importance of building relationships with children and their families; **however, the act of building respectful, mutual partnerships does not happen by accident.**

I’d like to share a personal story with you which captures why I—as an early childhood educator and a grandmother—value genuine family engagement:

After several years of preschool “Mother’s Day” cards, I dreaded having my granddaughter come home from kindergarten and explain, yet again, that she had had to tell the teacher her card was for her grandma and ask for help spelling grandma rather than mommy because her mommy had died.

At the start of each school year, my husband and I had talked to each teacher so they would be aware of our situation; we had been raising our granddaughter since the age of three when her mother had died. Our conversations with teachers never seemed to “stick.” Once, a teacher drew a black line through the word “mother” and wrote “grandma” above it. I was continually saddened and frustrated with the lack of understanding about our family situation and my granddaughter’s feelings.

This year, my granddaughter beamed when she brought me a card and a “Grandmother” book! She told me her teacher had made the book especially for her because Miss Megan knew her grandma was taking care of her like a mommy. The card and book had been made on the computer with each page replacing the word “mommy” with “grandma.” This teacher supported my granddaughter’s emotional development by honoring and respecting her unique situation. Even at age five, my granddaughter understood and appreciated the extra care her teacher took to acknowledge and respect our family structure. As for me, I couldn’t wait to see Miss Megan and let her know how much our family had appreciated her kind and thoughtful act.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS PLAY A HUGE ROLE IN ENSURING THAT FAMILIES ARE VALUED IN THEIR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS.

It is important for staff to be aware of family structure, stressors, and challenges such as worries over money, housing, sleep, and transportation; balancing work and family; and parenting decisions. Families may feel guilt, resentment, or even jealousy over the time teachers get to spend with their child and frustration related to all they have to do to provide for their child. They may feel intimidated by the teacher. At times, parents may even feel protective and concerned about their own child, so they may not see or understand the teacher's responsibility for all of the children in his or her care.

Teachers may not recognize the need to develop a relationship with the families. After all, they entered early childhood to work with children not with adults. They may lack experience or training on working with parents/family members and need support in developing effective communication skills. They also might need guidance around cultural competency.

Children, families, and teachers all benefit from strong family-school partnerships. It is the responsibility of early childhood professionals to take the lead in developing respectful, supportive family partnerships. So, where do you start?

Here are some questions to consider:

- How do staff view the child's family?
- Do staff believe this to be an equal partnership?
- How do staff recognize and respect the family's expertise?
- Are staff genuine and approachable with families?
- Do staff have conversations with families, not just give reports on the child?
- Are there parents and/or families whom staff don't like or understand? How might that affect communication and relationships with the parents/family? What can be done to develop understanding or acceptance of others?

Items 14, 16, and 17 in the [Program Administration Scale](#) (PAS) include many strategies programs can use to strengthen family partnerships. Some of them are listed below along with other ideas to help foster positive relationships between program staff and families.

Here are a few strategies you may consider to foster positive family partnerships:

- Learn every significant family member's name or nickname. If the family is from a different culture or ethnicity, learn how to pronounce names correctly.
- Greet each child and family when they arrive.
- Learn something unique about each family member. Have conversations when possible at drop off or pick up times.

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- Try each day to give each child’s family information about the child’s day that is more meaningful than simply reporting on food and toileting.
- Examine traditions or activities in your classroom that may be exclusionary or include any form of bias.

Strategies for directors to support family partnerships:

- Invite parents to participate in program planning and evaluation.
- Create written materials in family’s home language.
- Try to develop staff that are culturally and linguistically representative of the families in your program.
- Provide written materials on community supports and resources for families.
- Provide staff with training on effective communication skills.
- Provide time at staff meetings to talk about family partnerships and strategies for building relationships.
- Look at your program’s entrance and décor. Is it welcoming for all families?

If you’re interested in exploring more about how to put these strategies into action, consider taking Module 8 of the Aim4Excellence National Director Credential: [Building Partnerships with Families](#). Or, check out these additional resources:

- [Child Care Aware](#)
- [Child, Family, and Community](#) by Janet Gonzalez-Mena
- [Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children and Families](#)
- [Family and Work Institute](#)
- [Family Engagement Framework: A Tool For California School Districts](#)
- [From Parents to Partners](#) by Janis Keyser
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#)
- [National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education](#)
- [Parents as Teachers \(PAT\) National Center](#)
- [Program Administration Scale \(PAS\)](#) by Teri Talan and Paula Jorde Bloom
- [Zero to Three](#)

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