

Taking Small Steps to Strengthen Program Impact: Making the Most of Pedagogical Leadership

BY MARIE MASTERSON, PH.D.

With increased stress experienced by families emerging from the pandemic and early childhood programs scrambling to meet staff needs, leaders need key strategies to balance their time and energy. What steps can they take to strengthen early childhood programs? How can they get ahead of daily interruptions and create a plan to pull staff together around quality improvement goals?

An important guide to leading positive change lies in the foundational competencies of [whole leadership](#), McCormick Center's framework for success in early childhood programs. The framework provides an overview of leadership areas and highlights the interdependent relationship that exists between each part. It includes the work of pedagogical leadership, which prioritizes family engagement and focuses on the critical impacts of supporting children's learning and development through high-quality teaching. The framework also addresses administrative leadership, which includes all the ways leaders plan for and manage the program operations, strategic planning, advocacy, and interactions with the community that make family engagement and teaching effective.

Leadership essentials anchor administrative and pedagogical priorities and address the foundational competencies and behaviors necessary for relationship building and motivating people to achieve shared goals. Essentials include culturally responsive leadership, continuous quality improvement, and personal and professional awareness. Reflective and intentional practice are the hallmarks of leadership essentials.

A key priority for all programs is culturally responsive leadership, which values and builds on the strengths and contributions of each person, culture, and the unique assets of each community. In this way, the three areas of whole leadership work together to create a vital and thriving program.

To provide equitable access to high-quality care and learning experiences, leaders also need to incorporate [developmentally appropriate practice](#), which offers a roadmap to foster children's joyful learning with opportunities for each and every child to achieve their full potential. Developmentally appropriate practice builds on children's natural motivation by creating a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-agency. Teachers provide for equity, incorporate family contexts, and make teaching decisions that are in the best interest of individual children, as well as of the whole group. Families and children are valued for their strengths and are honored for their unique ways of being. What are some steps leaders can take to get started?

First, begin with families. Family engagement may be pushed to the side to take care of other teaching priorities, such as staffing classrooms, managing illness, working with teachers to arrange classrooms and materials, and supporting children's behavior and learning. When family engagement is strengthened, it

contributes fresh energy, new perspectives, and positive communication that benefits teachers and children. Below are tips to jumpstart communication and planning with staff:

- **Invite teachers to reflect and plan.** Set aside regular time for staff communication about family goals and priorities. Identify hidden barriers that may prevent families from full participation in the program and in decision-making related to their children. With teachers, set action steps that lead to tangible goals that can strengthen family engagement. To do this, ask teachers, “What positive strategies do you use with families to seek information about their expectations and priorities for children?” “What approaches have been successful in your interactions with families?” “What challenges or barriers have you experienced that we can discuss and evaluate?” “What support do you wish you had related to families?” Seek [research-based resources](#) from the National Association for the Education for Young Children (NAEYC) that can guide discussion and goal setting.
- **Create multiple opportunities for family feedback.** Use a [comprehensive family survey](#) that is revisited periodically to explore family child-rearing practices, unique developmental priorities, and preferences. Ask families to provide feedback about the handbook and other program policies and materials to be sure responsibilities and opportunities are relevant and understood. Invite families to participate in program boards and committees and to review program goals and priorities.
- **Focus on reciprocal communication.** Plan scheduled family conferences to invite two-way, ongoing conversation. The goal is to focus on children’s strengths, with opportunities for families and teachers to work together to support development and learning. Explore [resources](#) that can jumpstart staff conversations and practices.
- **Connect families.** Bring families together around common interests and concerns, such as inviting a local pediatrician to answer questions about sleep, nutrition, or child guidance. Facilitate in-person or Zoom meetings that invite families to contribute to cultural activities, gardening, reading, crafting, music, and art projects. Families can organize clothing drives, facilitate nature walks and outdoor activities, or create an art gallery or mural in a hallway or classroom.
- **Plan learning experiences that reflect children’s lives.** Encourage teachers to try new ways to [build on the daily experiences of children](#). Select picture books, posters, and other materials with objects and activities children recognize. Teachers can ask children, “How does your family do this at home?” “How do you help your family?” “What do you do that is like this child in the story?” Materials for dramatic play, images, and artwork should serve as [mirrors and windows](#) to reflect the children’s language and cultures and introduce them to new places and perspectives. Invite families to share songs, record lullabies, and read stories in home languages.
- **Focus on curriculum.** Encourage teachers to discuss priorities for the classroom. If you participate in a state or local quality improvement system, be sure teachers have a classroom copy of the environment rating scales, assessment tools, and state standards. Ask staff, “What is working well for you?” “In what area do you need support?” “What topics would you like to explore?” Check

out the NAEYC book and article selections that relate directly to the [development of children](#) and [play-based learning](#). Encourage teachers to reflect on recent experiences and celebrate strengths and accomplishments.

Small steps taken over time to strengthen pedagogical leadership will result in positive change across the organization. Begin with one strategy and set specific and achievable goals. Ask teachers what they need most from professional training and leadership support. Ask families how they would like to be included and contribute in meaningful ways. Offer resources to help teachers gain new insights into their influence in the lives of children and families. The result will be a vital learning community that is rewarding and empowering for all.

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