




# Strategies for Building Relationships with Families

## For Early Learning and Care Providers

You can engage families by building relationships with them from the first time you meet them. When you engage with a family, you form a relationship on behalf of their child. Building relationships may come easily or may be challenging. You can use the following strategies to support you as you build new relationships with families. You can also use these strategies to help strengthen relationships that you already have.

### Strategies for Building Relationships with Families

You can use the following three strategies when engaging with families:

-  Use a Strengths-based Approach
-  Listen Actively
-  Take Informed Action

Family engagement refers to relationship-based mutual, respectful, and responsive partnerships between families, early learning and care providers, and other related professionals to promote children's development, learning, and wellness. Family engagement includes families as leaders and advocates for their child. Family engagement happens when early childhood professionals and families actively participate in an ongoing process of building and maintaining these meaningful relationships.

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The first strategy, **Use a Strengths-based Approach**, includes thinking about how all perspectives—your own, the family's, and the child's—may influence your interactions with families. The Strengths-based Approach includes using the tools Reflect and Inquire and Strengths-based Attitudes.

The second strategy is **Listen Actively**. Listening involves being present with the family; paraphrasing to confirm what you hear; and asking closed and open-ended questions to learn about the family and their child.

The third strategy is **Take Informed Action**. Take Informed Action is based on your reflections and what you have learned about the family. Informed Action includes using the tool of relationship-based practices to support you in partnering with families.



## Use a Strengths-based Approach

Relationships are the heart of family engagement. Your relationship with a family can strengthen relationships within the family. When you use a Strengths-based Approach with a family, you also positively influence the child's development. Using a Strengths-based Approach is especially helpful if you find yourself struggling to see the family's strengths. This approach helps you focus on the positives and the strengths that you see in a family. You can use three tools to help you as you begin to take a strengths-based approach.

### Reflect and Inquire

Taking time to reflect is an important part of building relationships with families. To reflect means you stop and think about what ideas, assumptions, judgments, and expectations you bring to an interaction with a family. When you reflect on a perspective, it means that you take a point of view. You reflect on your own perspective, or look from your point of view, but you also consider the family and child's point of view. After you take some time to reflect, the next step is to then inquire. Inquiring is simply asking yourself a few more questions or digging deeper. You ask yourself how your reflections might influence your relationships with a family. This step helps you learn about the choices you make when working with a family and how those choices influence your relationship with the family.

#### Reflect

**Reflect on your personal and cultural perspectives.** Your own views and cultures shape conversations with families. It's important to consider your own values and beliefs when working with families. You can think about your own family, your upbringing, and your experiences and how they might influence your view of a family. This practice encourages you to reflect on yourself. You can then use what you discover about yourself to inform what you choose to say and do.

**Reflect on the family's individual and cultural perspectives.** Families may start sharing about their children and themselves when they come to your program. This practice may come easily for some families, but it may take time to build a level of trust with others. You can work toward strong partnerships by being open to what families are willing to share and being patient with those who may need more time. Reflecting on what you already know about families and reflecting on what families share about their values, beliefs, approaches to child rearing, hopes, and challenges can be helpful. You can use these reflections to guide what you choose to do or say when interacting with families.

**Reflect on the child's development and perspective.** Children come to your early childhood setting with their own perspectives and experiences. Who they are and how they see the world are shaped by their past and present experiences with their families and their cultures, what they think about themselves, and what others think about them. You can think about children's perspectives or points of view to help you learn more about them, their family, and yourself.

## Inquire

**What came up for you, both positive and negative?** As you consider each perspective or point of view, identify the feelings, reactions, ideas, expectations, and judgments that came up for you.

**How might these effects influence your relationship with the family?** Consider how your feelings, reactions, ideas, expectations, and judgments may play a role in the way you build a relationship with families. Some of these effects can help support building a relationship with families, but others can be a barrier.

## Apply the Strengths-based Attitudes

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about someone or something. You often see attitudes reflected in a person's behavior. Applying a Strengths-based Attitude helps you show respect and encourages collaboration as you engage with families.

Adopting a positive attitude does not mean avoiding challenges. Instead, it means that you make an effort to focus on a family's strengths. It shows families that you see their strengths and can work together to overcome challenges. On the other hand, you may show distrust or judgment when you approach interactions with families with a negative attitude. You can use the following Strengths-based Attitudes to avoid this outcome.

These attitudes remind us to begin relationships by thinking about a family's strengths. You do this even if you are experiencing challenges with the child or family. All families have strengths. Focusing on these strengths helps you be open to the family, especially if you are feeling uncomfortable or even judgmental.

## Strengths-based Attitudes

Use the following Strengths-based Attitudes to determine how you can focus on a family's strengths:

### **All families have strengths.**

Observe how families interact with their child. Listen to what families share about their child, family, and culture. Each family has its own strengths that can be the foundation of your discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths, even when there are challenges.

### **Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.**

Listen to families with an open mind. Consider the families' knowledge about their child and their cultural perspectives. Families understand their child in ways you don't. This understanding comes from the family and child's history together. Children spend a few years in your early learning and care settings, but they spend a lifetime with their family.

### **Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.**

Every family you meet has something to tell you about their child's development. They may share stories about what their child used to do, what they are currently doing, or what they are working on in their development. Pay attention to what they share at each developmental stage. Their stories and experiences will help shape your relationship with them and the child.

### **Families' contributions are important and valuable.**

Be open to families' suggestions and requests. Adopting an open mind will help you learn what parents know. Families can teach you about their child and their culture.

### **Families have expertise about their child and their family.**

Listen carefully to what parents share about their child, family, culture, and what matters most to them. Build on the family's expertise and what they know about their child. Families understand their children best. Families make important decisions every day for their children's well-being. Children, families, and early learning and care providers benefit when you pay attention to what families know.





## Listen Actively

The Listen Actively strategy allows you to discover what matters most to families and build relationships with families. When you Listen Actively, you listen to understand before you reply. Then, you can listen carefully to what families tell you about their lives, culture, and what they know about their children. You can also learn about their hopes and dreams for their child. You can use this strategy with families and providers to help you shift from immediately reacting to what is said. You know that you are actively listening when you listen more than you speak, and you can repeat back to families what they have shared with you.

Listening actively has many benefits. It can help you build relationships with families you work with and other providers by reducing misunderstandings and helping find solutions that work for everyone when conflicts occur. It helps you show families and providers you care about what they think and say.

You can use three tools to help you listen actively to families and other providers: **Being Present**, **Paraphrasing**, and **Engaging Questions**.



### Being Present

By being fully present, you use nonverbal and verbal tools to help you understand what a family or provider is saying. The tool of being present helps you focus on showing your interest, sincerity, and respect for the family. The table below outlines different types of communication you can use to be present.

Communication	Includes
1. Limiting distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cell phones turned off</li><li>• Private spot for communicating</li><li>• Focused attention</li></ul>
2. Using nonverbal methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facial expressions</li><li>• Posture/body language</li><li>• Gestures</li></ul>
3. Using verbal methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tone of voice</li><li>• Pace of talking</li><li>• Amount of talking versus listening</li><li>• Interrupting or not</li><li>• Word choices</li></ul>

## Paraphrasing

The paraphrasing tool can help you confirm and clarify what a family says. It conveys that you are listening and want to understand what a parent or provider has said. Often these techniques use a question that allows you to confirm what the parent or provider is saying. You can use these techniques independently or combine more than one technique to more effectively paraphrase. The table below outlines five communication techniques you can use when paraphrasing.

Techniques	How
Restate	Repeat what you heard the parent or provider say. For example, you can pause after you restate what you heard or ask if what you heard is correct. This technique gives the other person a chance to confirm or clarify.
Reframe	Propose another way of thinking about what the family did or said. For example, you might think of a positive way to think about something a family did or said instead of a negative way.
Summarize	Review and organize or sort out the main points of what you hear into a sequence or categories. Be sure to let the other person know you want to see if you got everything and ask him or her to tell you if anything is missing.
Clarify	Make a comment that confirms what the family has told you and that helps enhance and deepen your understanding.
Validate	Recognize what is important to families, including their emotions.



## Engaging Questions

The engaging questions tool can help you have meaningful conversations with families and providers. Based on the outcome you are seeking, choose an open-ended or closed-ended question when actively listening and communicating with families. Think of a time when you were working with families and used engaging questions. Here are some examples:

Question Type	Example
<b>Open-ended</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Used to engage in meaningful conversations with families</li><li>· Allows for a variety of responses instead of just “yes” or “no”</li></ul>	What types of activities do you enjoy with your child?
<b>Declarative statements</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Another way of learning what the other person thinks about something without directly asking a question</li></ul>	You really worked hard on that activity with your child.
<b>Closed-ended</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Used when you want a short or quick answer</li><li>· Limited and requires specific answers</li></ul>	Do you want to read a book or color with your child?



## Take Informed Action

When you engage with families, you form a relationship on behalf of the child. Sometimes building relationships comes easy. At other times it may be challenging. You can use this strategy to guide what you will say or do when interacting with families. The tools below can help you in your conversations with families. When choosing a Relationship-based Practice, you can use the other tools of reflecting and inquiring, choosing a Strengths-based Approach and Listening Actively to support you.



## Relationship-based Practices

Use the following Relationship-based Practices to build strong relationships with families to help you decide what you will do or say.

### **Focus on the family-child relationship.**

Let families know you value their relationship with their child. Share the positive things that you see when a family interacts with their child. This practice shows families that you know that the relationship they have with their child is the first and most important.

### **Observe and describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family.**

When you share what you notice about a child with the family, you open the door to two-way communication. You provide an opportunity to discuss with the family what you have seen at the setting. You can also ask families what they have seen at home. You and families can build a shared understanding of the child's behavior.

### **Support parental competence (the parent's skills) and self-confidence.**

Families benefit when you recognize their successes, growth, and efforts. Share in families' progress and encourage them to recognize their strengths. You can join families and support them as they share with you things that they hope their child will accomplish.

### **Value a family's passion (working with both their positive and negative feelings).**

Raising children and working with families always involves feelings. You can expect parents to have feelings about what is happening in their families and in the early learning and care setting. You also experience feelings when you interact with families and children. These feelings come from your shared concern for the child. Valuing a family's strong feelings can help you work with families to address challenges and strengthen the relationship.