

The What and Why of Family Engagement



What Is Family Engagement?

Family engagement as defined by First 5 California 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” (*First 5 California, State of California, personal communication, April, 2019*).

Parents refers to “any significant adult—such as a parent, grandparent, guardian, or foster parent—who has primary responsibility for a child and with whom that child has a relationship” (*California Department of Education and First 5 California, 2018, 292*).

Families can be biological or non-biological, chosen or brought together because of life events. They can be connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, and support (Adapted from the *Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems, 2018*).

Building and maintaining these relationships is a shared responsibility of families and professionals that requires respecting the strengths each has to offer. Family engagement means doing with—not doing to or for—families. Building relationships with families benefits everyone involved: the child, the family, and the early learning and care provider. When you enter a relationship with a family, you open the door for parents to share their knowledge and insights about their child with you. The more you know about the child’s temperament, interests, personality, strengths, culture, challenges, and special needs, the more equipped you are to support the child’s learning, development, and relationships with their family.

Research shows that, when you engage families, you learn more about the child from the most important people in their lives and the people who know them the best. This knowledge has benefits for everyone:

- **Children** thrive and develop when parents and providers have common goals.
- **Parents** feel more connected and partner with providers to support the child's development.
- **Providers** feel more confident in their work and are more at ease working with families to learn more about children's strengths, challenges, likes, and dislikes.

Why Does Family Engagement Matter?

Research shows that the parent-provider relationship can have a positive impact on a child's ability to develop and learn (Porter, Bromer, & Forry, 2015). Your relationships with parents matter. Parent-provider relationships are more effective when providers:

- Provide clear, consistent, and regular communication
- Invite ideas from families
- Respond to each family's wishes and needs
- Focus on the whole family
- Help families identify and connect to resources
- Share observations of children's behavior with families
- Show respect for families and their caregiving practices
- Take time to understand the family's communities and culture
- Care about the family
- Show an openness to change

What Can You Do to Engage with Families?

You can build relationships with families when you recognize and use these approaches in your interactions:

Build strengths-based relationships.

Relationships are the heart of family engagement. Your relationship with a family can strengthen relationships within the family, which benefits the child's growth and learning. Your relationship will have the biggest impact on the family if it is strengths-based. This approach means you look for the positives and focus on the strengths in the family, even if you find it challenging to do so.

Respect the family's role in the child's development.

Children's development happens within the context of relationships. Children's first relationships are with their families and have the biggest impact on their development and learning. Children's development is not always smooth and can sometimes be confusing to their families and providers. As development unfolds, these relationships are affected. You can join with families to look at children's development and how it is affecting the family. And you can also partner with families to share goals that you both have for their children.

Show cultural respect. Learn what matters most to families.

Being open to a family's cultural perspectives aids in building trust and respect. In turn, reflecting on your own perspectives and cultures is a part of building relationships with others. It helps you understand your reactions to others, find common ground, and connect with them. It also helps you become aware of the assumptions and biases that you bring to these relationships. Being aware of these issues will help you be open and learn from others.

Take a shared approach to family engagement.

Family engagement is everybody's business, and everybody has a role to play. Included are providers who interact directly with families and those who don't. You can use these same strategies to build relationships with others: leaders, providers, and professionals. When you do, you create a culture of engagement that encourages positive family interactions.

When you use these four approaches together, you can build and strengthen your existing relationships with families. You can use these same approaches to build relationships with other providers, leaders, and professionals. When you do, you create a culture of engagement throughout your setting. This culture of engagement strengthens relationships between you, families, and children; encourages a climate of engagement; and supports children's overall development.



References for this resource can be found in the Module 1 Reference List.

www.qualitycountsca.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FE-M1-ReferenceList.pdf

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (2018). *Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices*. To learn more about Family Engagement, check out the Family Engagement Online Toolkit qualitycountsca.net/FEtoolkit. Copyright © 2019. Facilitated and Funded by First 5 California. qualitycountsca.net

