1A. Workshop for Staff: Partnering with Parents



Partnering with Parents is designed to support learning for a facilitator and group of staff participants. It offers interactive activities and reflective exercises.

This workshop can be adapted as a virtual offering. Refer to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement resource **Leading Online Parent Meetings and Groups** as a guide.

Introduction: Family Connections Workshop Series for Staff and



1A. Workshop for Staff: Partnering with Parents



1B. Workshop for Parents Partnering with Early Childhood Staff



2A. Workshop for Staff What is Depression?



2B. Workshop for Parents
What is Depression?



3A. Workshop for Staff: Talking with Children About Difficult Issues



3B. Workshop for Parents Talking with Children About Difficult Issues



Workshop Focus

Strong relationships between early childhood professionals and parents are key to the healthy development of young children. Partnering with parents is an ongoing process. It can sometimes be challenging for both professionals and parents.

This workshop offers an opportunity to explore these relationships and consider strategies that support positive and strong partnerships.

In this resource, "parent" and "family" refer to all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, including biological, adoptive, and foster parents, pregnant women and expectant families, grandparents, legal and informal guardians, and adult siblings.

Goal

To enhance the strategies used by staff to build stronger relationships with parents.

Learning Objectives

Participants will:

- Deepen their understanding of the importance of partnering with parents
- Explore communication challenges that can occur
- Learn practical strategies to use when partnering with parents
- Become more confident in reaching out to parents

Method and Content

This workshop has three sequential sections:

- Exercise 1: Reflecting on Our Relationships with Parents
- Exercise 2: Discussion of Reflections from Exercise 1
- Exercise 3: Exploring Strategies for Partnering with Parents

Exercise 1 provides participants with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in working with parents.

In Exercise 2 participants are encouraged to discuss the benefits and challenges of making strong connections with parents.

In Exercise 3 the group will discuss positive strategies for partnering with parents.

Throughout the workshop, it is important to emphasize how our own behaviors and attitudes can impact our relationships with parents.

Estimated Time

1.5-2 hours

This does not include facilitator preparation.

Learning Environment

- A space large enough for participants to engage in whole group discussions.
 Consider including two facilitators for large groups (e.g., more than 20 participants).
- Seating for the group.

Materials

- Five large pieces of paper and a way to hang them on the walls of the space.
- Markers for each participant.
- A packet for each participant with the following materials:
 - Handout 1: Strategies for Partnering with Parents
 - Workshop Evaluation Form

Facilitator Preparation

Read through the workshop materials in advance. Reflect on your own responses to the questions in Exercise 1. Consider your reaction to the topics. It is important to acknowledge your comfort level and biases with the subject matter before leading the workshop. Consider what you think are the barriers to building strong relationships between staff and parents.

This workshop will encourage staff to discuss their feelings about work with children and families. Consider how much practice the group has had with this type of discussion. Review the facilitator strategies provided for you to support your role in facilitating a positive environment.

Preparing the Workshop Space

- Set up chairs so that the participants can begin as a large group. Plan in advance how you will move into smaller groups.
- Place a materials packet on each chair in the room.
- Prepare a large piece of paper entitled "Parking Lot for Ideas."



• Prepare four large pieces of paper with titles (see below).

Partnerships Partnerships Some barriers in Making with parents are with parents are communicating connections more difficult easier when... with parents with parents when... are important are... because...

- Display the large pieces of paper so that the whole group will be able to see them and write on them easily.
- Markers can be set out in front of the papers or given to each participant prior to the exercise.

Introduction

Facilitators are encouraged to use their own words to introduce the workshop. Some key points to include are:

- Welcome the group and review logistics general agenda, time frame, when to expect breaks, materials, sign in sheet, etc.
- Introduce the topic. For example, you might say: "The title of this workshop is Partnering with Parents. Working with parents can be both rewarding and challenging. Today's workshop will provide a chance for you to discuss some of the feelings you have when working with parents in various situations. We'll also discuss some strategies to support engagement with all families."
- Describe the objectives of this workshop:
 - Deepen your understanding about the importance of partnering with parents
 - Explore communication challenges that can occur
 - Learn practical strategies to use when partnering with parents
 - Become more confident in reaching out to parents
- Explain the "Parking Lot for Ideas" to the group. If a question, suggestion, or concern is offered that is related to the topic but unrelated to the specific exercise, the facilitator will record it on the "Parking Lot for Ideas". The facilitator will refer back to these ideas at the end of the workshop for further discussion as time permits.
- Create a Group Agreement with the participants. This is a short list of co-constructed statements intended to promote a safe, positive environment for all participants. Ask the participants what they will need to fully participate in the workshop. These can be printed on a large sheet of paper. Creating a Group Agreement is an important step before beginning the exercise.

Sample Group Agreement

Treat each other with respect.

Agree to disagree.

Maintain confidentiality—what is shared in the group stays in the group.

Managing technology (use of phones, etc.).

Humor can be helpful.

(Additional suggestions to create a positive, safe environment.)

Exercise 1: Reflecting on Our Relationships with Parents

Exercise 1 gives participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences with parents. Participants are encouraged to share their thoughts about what has made those interactions both meaningful and challenging.

- Begin by reading aloud the statement on each of the four large pieces of paper:
 - o Partnerships with parents are more difficult when...
 - o Partnerships with parents are easier when...
 - Some barriers in communicating with parents are...
 - Making connections with parents is important because...
- Ask the participants to think about how they would complete each of these phrases. Ask the
 participants to walk around the room and write their answers below each statement.
 - Encourage all participants to provide responses and to be honest.
 - Encourage participants to add their response even if someone else has already written it.
 Or, ask them to place a check mark by the original response to show that more than one person is thinking about it.
- Reconvene the large group after all participants have had the opportunity to contribute to the statements. Read the answers to the group, sheet by sheet. This is an opportunity to ask for clarification. Note the range of responses, ask for any additions, and suggest responses not noted especially if they represent known experiences in the program.
- Table 1 presents examples of participant responses and themes to develop.

Facilitator Strategy

Consider these tips for facilitating thoughtful discussion:

- **Keep in mind that your participants are sharing their views with one another in a group setting.** This type of discussion may be common or rare, depending on the participants' previous experiences. If they have had little experience with groups before this workshop, you may need to reassure them that the environment is one they can trust to be supportive and confidential. Refer to the Group Agreement as needed to maintain a trusting environment.
- Some participants may be unsure about recording their thoughts and feelings in a way that everyone can see. If you find some participants attempting to "sit out" this part of the exercise, encourage them to participate in a way that feels comfortable to them. Be sensitive to issues of literacy and language. Working in pairs or small groups with an assigned transcriber may be helpful.
- Anticipate that some participants will voice strong feelings. The exercise encourages
 people to reflect and speak honestly. Make sure participants share their opinions and
 experiences in a way that is respectful to the environment. Remind participants of the
 Group Agreement if necessary.

Table 1. Sample Responses for Exercise 1

Response Categories	Examples of potential responses	Themes for facilitator to develop in the discussion
Partnerships with parents are more difficult when	 They are in denial They don't want to talk to me There is no trust They are from a very different culture They are under a lot of stress There is no time They are avoidant We do not agree on what is best for their child They are depressed 	This prompt encourages participants to reflect on the challenging aspects of working with parents. Some participants may have strong feelings on this topic, but little experience in discussing it. Others may feel shy or concerned that sharing any difficulties may label them as "negative." Acknowledge this prompt as a jumping off point to further discussion of strategies to help participants feel their responses will lead to a productive outcome.
Partnerships with parents are easier when	 They want to work with me They trust me They know I care about their child They smile They are pleasant They speak the same language They are open to suggestions They take responsibility They say hello They volunteer at the program They are respectful and listen 	This prompt pushes participants to acknowledge what parents do to contribute to and encourage success. A key point can be made by pointing out that Head Start and early childhood staff can contribute to how comfortable parents feel by doing the same things listed as responses.
Some barriers in communicating with parents are	 Hostility They ignore what I say because I am not a parent They rush in and out of the classroom without saying hello or goodbye We do not speak the same language I don't know the parent I am in the classroom and trying to watch the children They yell or curse They are shy or unresponsive They won't believe what I say about their child's behavior They don't trust me I am preoccupied with something else 	This prompt asks participants to reflect on challenging interactions. Focusing on the ways in which parents have contributed to these difficult experiences can inspire strong emotions in some participants. Others will be able to consider what they themselves have done to make communication especially unproductive. A key point is to encourage participants to consider what both parents and staff members contribute to any interaction.

Response Categories	Examples of potential responses	Themes for facilitator to develop in the discussion
Making connections with parents is important because	 The parent is the child's first teacher It is what is best for the child It is the only way to connect school and home It is a goal of Head Start and early childhood programs The parent is the expert We are working together on behalf of the child They need our help They have issues that affect their children It is the best way to build trust 	A key point in this and all the prompts is the important role trust plays in parent engagement. Emphasize that trust can best be inspired through positive interactions, providing a foundation for all other work with the family.



Exercise 2: Discussion of Reflections from Exercise 1

Exercise 2 provides the opportunity for participants to reflect further on the responses shared in Exercise 1. Participants are encouraged to explore the important contributions that they can make in the success of building partnerships with parents.

- Notice the themes that emerge from various responses, especially the responses that carry stronger emotional content for the group. Encourage questions and more specific comments about the professional's role in relationship-building.
- Use the responses as a "jumping off point" to ask questions that encourage reflection and discussion.
- Ask participants to reflect on past experiences with other parents and how those may influence how they perceive their current relationships.

Facilitator Strategies

Consider these examples of themes you can discuss by using common responses to the Exercise 1 questions:

- "When we say that parents are in denial, what does that mean? What do parents do or say that makes us think they are in denial? What might make a parent behave that way?" When a staff member shares a concern with a parent, the parent might deny the concern, seem to have no feelings about it, or even seem resentful or agitated. Responses such as these can be the worst-case scenario for some staff, leaving them feeling frustrated, ineffective, and unsure about what to do next. By asking participants in this workshop to imagine what might be contributing to a parent's response, they are being invited to consider important elements of parent communication. For example, how a parent is given information, who is present when this information is given, and how a parent's response might indicate that the parent needs more time to consider the information.
- "When a parent acts hostile or withdrawn, how does that make us feel? What might be the message behind the communication?" Participants may say "nothing a parent says bothers me," yet this is rarely true. Sometimes it is difficult to separate how a parent feels from how he or she feels about us. Acknowledging that a parent's behavior might discourage, anger, or frighten us can help staff members understand how their response to that parent might be affected by those feelings. This is an opportunity to point out that one might not understand the reasons for a parent's behavior. Invite participants to consider that perspective-taking can be helpful in parent-teacher communication.
- "Sometimes our status as professionals—whether we are or are not parents—is questioned by the parents we work with. Consider how being a parent or not being a parent may affect our work."

 By acknowledging many of the professionals in the workshop may also be parents, the hard line between "staff members" and "parents" may become more flexible. Participants are invited to talk frankly about how these roles compare and contrast. It is important for the group to recognize that a professional's perspective will be influenced by personal experiences, including whether the participant is a parent. Participants who are not parents can share their concerns and questions regarding their experiences. It may be a helpful reminder that when they are talking about parents, they may be talking about some of their colleagues.

Facilitator Strategies, cont.

• "How can we use these ideas about the importance of connecting with parents? Let's consider how these points can inform the strategies we use to build relationships with families." Many participants will know the "right" answers to the prompt asking about the importance of a connection with parents, but may not have had the chance to discuss these answers.

This is an opportunity to use those answers to develop and discuss relationship-building strategies. For example, if we believe that an improved relationship with a parent will create a better experience for the child, then we will make multiple efforts to connect and communicate. If we are finding it challenging to build our relationship, we can reflect on our strategies and adjust what we are doing.

This type of discussion can move the group along to thinking about action and the steps necessary to get to that action. Review the responses to the prompt "Partnerships with parents are easier when..." and ask participants to consider how they can apply these ideas to their own practice. For example, acknowledging how a parent's positive expression and body language can influence communication is an opportunity to draw a parallel to the impact of a professional's behavior on communication. This can lead to more awareness about the nonverbal messages that professionals give parents and how this may impact the relationship.



Exercise 3: Exploring Strategies for Partnering with Parents

Exercise 3 gives participants the chance to review and discuss positive strategies for partnering with parents. This exercise provides an opportunity to integrate ideas that have been discussed earlier in the workshop.

- Draw participants' attention to Handout 1 (see page 14).
- Review and discuss the strategies for partnering with parents.
- Bring the participants into the discussion and ask for their responses. Invite participants to ask questions and offer comments.

Facilitator Strategy

Participants may want to share examples and discuss specific parents related to a specific strategy. While this kind of experiential learning can be instructive, remind participants that the names and details about specific persons are confidential. Refer to the Group Agreement and encourage staff to consider sharing specific information only if it is productive and can be done in a respectful way.

Extending Learning and Supporting New Skills

Consider these activities to extend learning and promote changes in skills and behavior:

- Provide supportive supervision for individuals and teams. Participants will need more time
 to reflect on the challenges they face with families. Consistent planned reflective supervision
 meetings with individuals and teams provide a time and place to share these struggles and
 make plans for how to respond.
- **Implement classroom observation and other support.** Participants will benefit from the observation of their work with families. Supervisors and mentors are encouraged to share observations related to skill development and link their feedback to the real-life context of each participant.
- **Create action plans.** Using the strategies offered on Handout 1 as a starting point, discuss the successes and challenges with parent engagement in a staff meeting. This can provide the opportunity to generate a set of goals and strategies for the program as a whole.

Wrap Up

Bringing ideas together at the end of the workshop is important for everyone. As a workshop gets close to the end, it can be tempting to skip this step. Let people know that you will honor their time and end the workshop as scheduled, but want to take a few more minutes to wrap up the time you've spent together.

1. Review Key Concepts

- Acknowledging our feelings about working with parents can help us move from a personal reaction to a professional action.
- Special attention paid to consistent communication practices can have a positive effect on partnerships with parents.
- 2. End on a positive note. Remind participants that this workshop is an important step in building skills that can support positive outcomes for the children and families in the program. For example, effective partnerships with parents can foster children's social-emotional development and long-term learning and academic success. Encourage participants to use the exercises as a way to rethink their interactions with parents. Suggest that supervisors continue checking in with the teaching teams about the strategies proposed in the workshop.
- 3. Review some or all of the comments written on the "Parking Lot for Ideas" sheet posted on the wall. Consider responding to one comment. Ask participants which of the others they would like to discuss in the time remaining. If you don't have time, acknowledge that the comments are important and think with the group about other ways to address them. These comments may be considered in preparation for the next workshop.
- **4. Express your appreciation.** Let the group know how much you appreciate their time and hard work. Thank them for sharing their ideas and for being willing to think about change together.
- **5. Make yourself available.** Be willing to answer questions and respond to concerns on an ongoing basis after the workshop. If you or another facilitator cannot be available, an on-site staff member may be designated in this role and announced at the end of the workshop.
- **6. Collect attendance and evaluation forms.** Collect signed attendance sheet and pass out evaluation forms for the group to complete. Remind participants that these forms are anonymous and collected for the purpose of improving future workshops. During this time, you might also want to label and date any large group work so you can save it for future reference.



Facilitator Reflection

Take time	to review	the	experience	e, reac	l the	evalua	ation	forms,	and	sumr	narize	the	results.	Some
additional	questions	s to c	consider ar	e:										

additional questions to consider are:
Was I prepared? Did I have all the materials I needed? Was the room adequate? Did I feel confident with the topic?
Did the workshop go as I imagined it would? Did the group respond the way I thought they would? Were there any surprises? Were there any elements of the workshop that went especially well? Were there any parts that were especially challenging?
Were the participants engaged? Did the group size seem appropriate? Who seemed comfortable enough
to share their thoughts with the group? Who did not seem comfortable? Do I know why? Did I get the feeling that the participants understood the exercises and materials? Who was present and who was missing today? Is there anyone I need to follow-up with immediately?
What were some of the themes that people talked about in this workshop? Was there a group of issues
that the responses and discussion had in common? Are any of those issues a surprise? How can I use those issues in future workshops to make the exercises more effective? Are there any Parking Lot items to integrate into other learning opportunities?

What would have made this workshop better? What could I have done differently? Why? How can I use that information to make the next workshop more successful? Did I gain new knowledge from this workshop? Did I learn anything new about the group or individuals in the group? Did I learn something new about myself as a facilitator?

Family Connections: Workshop Series for Staff and Parents Handout 1: Strategies for Partnering with Parents

Use these strategies to build and sustain strong partnerships with teachers and other early childhood staff:

- 1. **Establish a friendly relationship with parents.** This may simply involve smiling and saying hello and goodbye. Welcome them into the classroom each day.
- 2. **Begin with strengths.** When you need to talk to a parent about concerns regarding his or her child, start by mentioning some of the child's and the parent's strengths. Be authentic and specific, sharing behaviors that you have observed. Describe the child's behaviors without judgments. Listen for the parent's perspective.
 - For example, you might say, "I've noticed how well you understand Jose's words. You always seem to know just what he needs. I wonder if you can help me clarify some of the specific things he may be asking me for throughout the day, such as at meal or rest times. I often have to ask him to slow his words down and repeat himself."
- 3. **Find a common goal, such as the well-being of the child.** Remember, parents want to parent their children well. Everyone at Head Start and early childhood programs, parents and teachers, want the best for each child. This is true even if the parent may seem overwhelmed, exhausted, and/or angry.
- 4. **Plan ahead.** Spend some time thinking about what you want to say. If possible, postpone the conversation if you are rushed, angry, or nervous. Think about the best time, place, and environment to approach the staff member. Consider if privacy is important for the conversation. For example, "I'm thinking this isn't the best time or place for us to talk. Could we schedule some time to sit together when we're not so rushed?"
- 5. Consider parents' confidentiality when deciding to talk to parents about concerns. Choose a time and location that is private and comfortable for both of you. Consider reaching out to a family advocate who may be familiar with the parent's schedule to choose a convenient time.
- 6. **Remember: You are not alone.** Reaching out to parents who might be angry and/or depressed is a group effort. Seek out support from your colleagues, including your supervisor, team members, Mental Health Consultants (MHCs), and available program consultants.
- 7. **Respect parents' process.** Working with children and families is emotional work. It can be a challenge to witness or experience parents' reactions or behavior that we see as negative, or feel personally hurtful. Reinforce your willingness to be a support when the parent is ready to be open and discuss what might be helpful.

Get support from colleagues and supervisors if you need help to sort through your feelings and find strategies to manage the relationship. Avoid interpreting parents' difficulties as a personal affront to you. Remaining open to the conversation by practicing self-regulation skills can be helpful.

Family Connections: Workshop Series for Staff and Parents Handout 1: Strategies for Partnering with Parents, cont.

- 8. **Listen to what parents are saying and reflect back on what you hear to enhance communication.** Use active listening strategies such as asking open-ended questions, using body language to acknowledge communication, and withholding judgment. For example, you might say, "It sounds like you are concerned that she is spending too much time playing dress-up and not enough time learning skills that will prepare her for kindergarten. Is that correct?"
- 9. Respect parents' needs and timing. We can offer our support to families and hope that we will be part of positive progress. Remember we all have our own timing. You may feel discouraged or angry if a parent isn't doing what you hoped or suggested. This is a time to reflect on your feelings, get support, and find ways to stay connected to the family and ready to offer your support when they are ready.
- 10. **Reflect on your feelings about working with a parent.** Reflection can help you learn about yourself and be more effective in your work. By acknowledging the emotions that come up during parent interactions, you can focus on how to contribute positively to the engagement process. Recognize what you may be bringing to the interaction. Finding time to reflect independently or reflect with a colleague or supervisor can be helpful for personal and professional growth.

Family Connections: Workshop Series for Staff and Parents Workshop Evaluation

Title of the Workshop: Partnering with Parents

1. Please rate the extent to which you agree that the workshop met each objective:

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree a Little	Agree a Little	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
Objective 1: Participants will deepen their understanding of the importance of partnering with parents.						
Objective 2: Participants will explore communication challenges that can occur.						
Objective 3: Participants will learn practical strategies to use when partnering with parents.						
Objective 4: Participants will become more confident in reaching out to parents.		0	0	0	0	

2. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree a Little	Agree a Little	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
I was satisfied with this workshop.						
The information presented was useful.						
The workshop activities were useful.						
The workshop activities were creative.						
Facilitator was knowledgeable about the subject presented.						
Facilitator's presentation style was engaging.						

3. Is there anything you would have liked to learn more about this topic that was not presented?

Family Connections: Workshop Series for Staff and Parents Workshop Evaluation, cont.

4.	Would you like more workshops that expand on this topic? (please select one)
	☐ Yes ☐ No
5.	I would like more learning opportunities about:
Ad	ditional Comments:

Related Resources

Explore the following resources on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

Family Connections Short Papers

These short papers are designed to share information on topics that are central to understanding depression, resilience, and best practice in engaging parents facing adversities. They are intended to work as stand-alone handouts for parents and staff as well as materials used in workshops and in parent groups. Selected short papers for staff include:

- Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult? Explore strategies for responding effectively to parents and the difficult topics they can bring to Head Start staff.
- The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections Explore strategies for effective parent outreach.
- Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools
 Review the benefits of using self-reflection and shared reflection as tools that can enhance communication and service delivery.

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