Building Community Partnerships

Early Childhood
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Building Community Partnerships

Community engagement contributes to stronger children, families, programs, and communities. This resource describes how programs can:

- Use the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community (PFCE) Framework to enhance community engagement efforts.
- Focus on three priorities for community engagement.
- Build and strengthen community partnerships and collaborations.

Building Community Partnerships is the first in a three-part Community Engagement Series. It explores how programs can enhance community engagement and partner with families. This series is intended to guide efforts to strengthen child and family outcomes in line with the Head Start PFCE Framework and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).

Engaging Community Partners to Strengthen Family Services

Building Community Partnerships

Strategies and Examples for Community Partnerships

Tools for Planning Community Partnerships
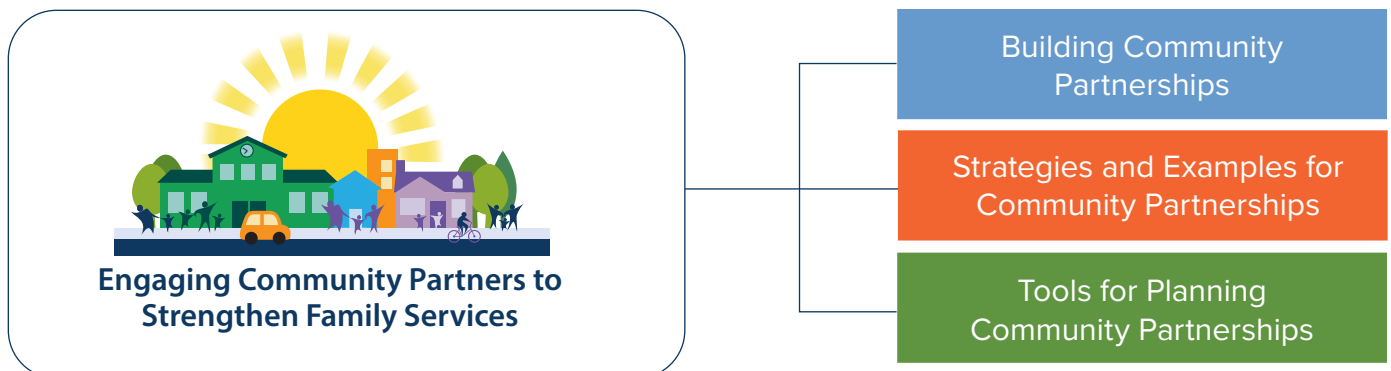
What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement refers to the mutually respectful, strengths-based relationships between Head Start and Early Head Start staff and families, community members, and agencies. These relationships support parents' roles as valued community members and their progress toward their goals for themselves and their children. Community partners can work with families and program staff toward such goals as parents' educational advancement, economic mobility, and other aspects of family well-being.

Head Start and Early Head Start staff actively seek out and respond to community voices, strengths, and needs. Staff know their communities, and many are members of the communities they serve. They collaborate with families, community members, and other local agencies to identify common goals, align resources, and share data for continuous improvement and effective partnerships.

Parent and family

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.

What the Research Says

Community engagement builds on a community's strengths and assets. Community engagement helps families meet basic needs (Small, Jacobs, & Massengill, 2008), and encourages them to engage in wellness activities. It also fosters the use of enrichment resources in the community, including museums, parks, and cultural events.

Effective community engagement results in a welcoming community. Agencies form positive, goal-oriented relationships with families and each other that reflect strengths-based attitudes (Butler Institute for Families, 2015). Service coordination between agencies lessens stress on families (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

Positive relationships with community partners foster trust and openness and help families feel safe. This makes it more likely that families will connect to resources in the community. For example, families may build connections with other families. Or, they may connect to other resources including food assistance, housing supports, employment, and cultural events (Bassok, Finch, Lee, Reardon, & Waldfogel, 2016).

Community partners offer services and resources that respond to a range of family strengths, interests, and needs, and support family strengthening activities (Small, 2008). Community engagement enables agencies to share similar practices. Services are delivered more efficiently and effectively. Families have consistent and positive experiences across agencies and family well-being improves.
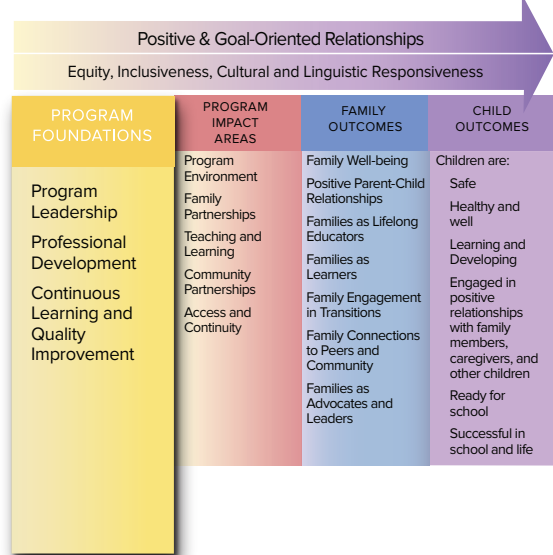
Community partnerships have long-term benefits for children. Higher student achievement is linked to programs that partner with community agencies to engage families in supporting their children's learning at home (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

How can the Head Start PFCE Framework Enhance Community Engagement?

The Head Start PFCE Framework is a guide for collaboration among families and Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families.

The PFCE Framework describes the program elements—Program Foundations and Impact Areas—in early learning programs that can work together to positively influence child and family outcomes. The Framework identifies equity, inclusiveness, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and positive goal-oriented relationships as important drivers for these outcomes.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

Positive & Goal-Oriented Relationships			
Equity, Inclusiveness, Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness			
PROGRAM FOUNDATIONS	PROGRAM IMPACT AREAS	FAMILY OUTCOMES	CHILD OUTCOMES
Program Leadership	Program Environment	Family Well-being	Children are:
Professional Development	Family Partnerships	Positive Parent-Child Relationships	Safe
Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement	Teaching and Learning	Families as Lifelong Educators	Healthy and well
	Community Partnerships	Families as Learners	Learning and Developing
	Access and Continuity	Family Engagement in Transitions	Engaged in positive relationships with family members, caregivers, and other children
		Family Connections to Peers and Community	Ready for school
		Families as Advocates and Leaders	Successful in school and life

Program Foundations

To create lasting change for families and children, Head Start and Early Head Start programs need strong Program Foundations that work together and guide the provision of services in the Program Impact Areas. These include Program Leadership, Professional Development, and Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement.

Program Leadership

Head Start and Early Head Start parent leaders, program directors, managers, and other leaders set expectations and model effective community engagement. Leaders set goals and establish a clear vision. They ensure that program policies, operational procedures, and practices actively promote community engagement. Leaders advocate for the inclusion of diverse family voices to inform the program's community engagement approach.

Professional Development

Professional development is important for all staff to enhance their family and community engagement practices. Professional development plans can be aligned with both continuous learning and quality improvement data, including family and community feedback. These plans describe training and ongoing supports, such as coaching, supervision, and recognition of successes and challenges.

Families, staff members, and community members create a mutually supportive environment for continuous learning and quality improvement when they come together as a community of learners. Together they can co-design and co-lead training to strengthen family and community partnerships.

Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement

Head Start and Early Head Start program leadership, staff, and families are committed to using data to improve family and community engagement practices on an ongoing basis. Together they can work to select indicators of PFCE progress, plan for continuous improvement, and interpret data. Community strengths and needs assessments provide information that can guide ongoing learning and quality improvement.

Programs can include community engagement strategies in their ongoing, annual, and five-year planning (see Related Resources for information about program planning). Leaders and managers build support and capacity for this work among staff, families, and community partners.

Program and parent leaders monitor their program's progress toward PFCE outcomes, and periodically refine plans and actions. Program leaders can partner with parents to seek out opportunities to use their program data to inform local and state planning and policy decisions.

Explore opportunities to apply the PFCE Framework to strengthen and identify priorities for your community engagement in the next section.

What are Engaged Community Partnerships?

Engaged community partnerships are supportive relationships between programs and other community agencies. These relationships can be between individuals or groups. Partners value and nurture relationships. Each partner looks for ways to strengthen the partnership. Partners seek to understand each other's goals, perspectives, strengths, and challenges.

Communication between community partners is regular and responsive. The goals of each partner are best met through their work with each other. Together they share leadership and assess effectiveness to inform continuous learning and improve the quality of their partnership.

Three Priorities for Community Engagement

Engaged community partnerships benefit children, families, programs and staff, other agencies, and the community. Partners are more likely to meet their goals by working together. Head Start and Early Head Start programs can engage with community partners to focus on three priorities and learn how to best support:

1. Individual Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

2. Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

3. Families in the Community

Priority 1: Supporting Individual Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

Staff partner with each family to identify their goals through the family partnership process. Staff help every family connect to the services and resources that match their goals, strengths, interests, and needs.

Example

Family challenge: A child tells her family that she has a toothache. Her family's goal is to access dental care for their daughter.

Community partnership solution: Head Start program staff partner with the dental clinic to identify a contact person and create a referral process. Staff refer the family to the dental clinic, and the child receives dental care. A family services staff member follows up with the family and the clinic to learn about their experience.

Outcome: Stronger family well-being. The Head Start program and the dental clinic have a clear referral process that can be used to address children's dental needs.

Priority 2: Supporting Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start offer comprehensive services and resources to all families in the program. Programs partner with community organizations to respond with additional services to groups or subgroups of families with similar interests and needs.

Example

Program challenge: Nearly 55% of the children in a Head Start program have not received the recommended schedule of oral health care.

Community partnership solution: Head Start program and parent leaders partner with the dental clinic and develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The dental clinic agrees to offer services on site to all children in the program whose parents provide consent. Together, the program and dental clinic create several forms including parental consent and permission, and release of information. These forms are offered in English and the other languages spoken by families in the program. The program and dental clinic inform parents of the types of dental services now available at the program's location.

Outcome: Stronger family well-being. All children in the program are offered convenient and quality dental care. Children's dental health is improved. Parents know what dental care their children receive and don't miss work or school.

Building Community Partnerships

Priority 3: Supporting Families in the Community

Head Start and Early Head Start programs engage in collaborations with community partners at a systems level. Programs participate in the early childhood system of care for families and groups of families in the community. These efforts address barriers that agencies can only change by working together. Programs join with other agencies to create solutions that benefit families in the community.

Example

Community challenge: Over 45% of children entering kindergarten in a community have never been seen by a dentist.

Community collaboration solution: Agency staff and parent leaders discuss the challenge and develop a dental health initiative. These agencies, including a local dental clinic and a pediatrician's office, ask parents about their children's dental health. The agencies create a shared referral process to connect children to dental care. They create a task force to work on influencing increased reimbursements and recruitment of pediatric dentists for the community.

Outcome: Stronger family well-being. A higher percentage of children in the community have a dental home and dental health is improved.

What Can Programs Do to Build and Strengthen Community Partnerships and Collaborations?

Head Start and Early Head Start programs and staff understand child development and family engagement and the importance of high-quality early childhood programming. They can share their knowledge and join with other agencies to strengthen the early childhood system of care.

Parent and program leaders, families, and staff can work with community partners to strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones. Programs and community partners can give valuable support to each other and help to deliver services more effectively.

Programs and staff can help connect community agencies that may not be familiar with each other's work and the importance of each other's roles. This improves the network of family support.

Consider the following strategies to enhance collaboration and expand access, and improve supports and services. While strategies may be initiated at the program or community level, partnerships and collaborations benefit everyone in the system.

Priority 1. Supporting Individual Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

- Learn about each family's strengths and needs, and engage in goal-setting through the family partnership process.
- Consider with each family which services will best help them reach their goals for themselves and their children. Provide services or refer families to existing partners. Build new partnerships to add options for services to support specific family requests and meet needs.
- Make plans with families for accessing referrals. Provide warm handoffs where possible to introduce families to a contact person at the partner organization. Follow up with the family and the contact person about the referral. Refine the referral process as needed.

Priority 2. Supporting Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

- Review aggregate data about families' strengths, interests, goals, and needs. Consider data from community assessments, the family partnership process, discussions with families and staff, and other sources.
- Use data to identify community partners that may provide relevant resources, enrichment activities, and opportunities for groups of families to connect with one another. Learn about community resources, such as libraries, parks, museums, faith-based initiatives, cultural events, and family-led networks to foster family well-being and promote connections to peers and communities.
- Create partnership agreements or MOUs with community partners that offer services to families. Examples include services related to economic mobility, housing and food assistance, child and family safety, domestic violence prevention and response, mental health, and substance use or misuse.
- Establish partnerships, communications, and MOUs with schools, early intervention programs, and other community organizations. Collaboration can encourage children's learning and development and promote effective transitions between learning settings.

- Develop MOUs or data-sharing agreements to exchange program data with respect for program policies, guidelines, and expectations related to confidentiality, privacy, and ethical standards. Share aggregate program-level data about the number of families who have applied for or received services from community partners. Develop data-sharing practices that strengthen interagency relationships and identify service gaps.
- Partner with community agencies to enhance referral processes, facilitate enrollment, and increase service access. Partners can work together to:
    - take steps to ensure a complete understanding of eligibility criteria and application processes for partner systems.
    - address policies and procedures to protect confidentiality with key partners.
    - share application forms or create streamlined referral and application forms. Make these applications available on site, along with brochures, flyers, and other materials that include contact information for referrals. Translate information into the languages spoken by families in the program.
    - review referral processes, access to services, and follow-up practices to inform continuous learning and quality improvement.
    - explore options for co-enrollment with partners. Offer to provide a meeting space on site for families and partners to meet. Establish a regular schedule for these activities.
- Collaborate with community partners to provide services in settings that are familiar and comfortable for families. Examples include Head Start and Early Head Start centers or local community centers.
- Plan and co-sponsor shared training and professional development for Head Start and Early Head staff, community partners, and parent leaders to strengthen service delivery and family and community engagement.

Priority 3. Supporting Families in the Community

- Learn about and participate in Early Childhood Councils or other initiatives that include families, community members, and leaders of programs. These cross-sector groups may not be called Early Childhood Councils in every community but typically engage in similar activities. For example, they may:
    - highlight the strengths and needs of the community and inform the community vision for partnering with families.
    - develop strategic plans for the community.
    - seek funding to improve coordination and the quality and quantity of services and supports available to families.

- Build relationships with community organizations and resources that offer opportunities for family leadership and advocacy. Examples include family-led organizations, local government councils or groups, faith-based initiatives, food banks and farmers' markets, schools, and neighborhood associations and committees.

Closing Thoughts

Families and community are at the core of Head Start and Early Head Start. Programs can engage with community partners to focus on how to best support individual families, families in Head Start and Early Head Start, and families in the community. When community engagement is effective, services to families are enhanced.

What are your priorities for community engagement? How do you work with community partners to address families' goals and interests?

What role do program leadership, professional development, and continuous learning and quality improvement play in supporting your community partnerships?

Explore Resources in this Series

Engaging Community Partners to Strengthen Family Services: Strategies and Examples
Use this guide to explore strategies for building community partnerships. Consider these ideas to develop an approach to address priorities for community engagement. Find examples of steps that programs can take to make a positive difference for children and families.

Tools for Planning Community Partnerships
Find tools and resources to strengthen community engagement. Consider how to use data about family and community strengths to expand current efforts and plan for the future.

Related Resources

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

Family Engagement

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework
Use this resource to understand the collaborative relationships among families and Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families.

Head Start Program Performance Standards
Refer to *1302.53 Community partnerships and coordination with other early childhood and education programs* to understand requirements for establishing collaborative relationships and partnerships with community organizations.

Measuring What Matters: Using Data to Support Family Progress
Use this set of resources, including an overview, four exercises, and a three-part webinar series, to learn more about using data to track family and program progress. Explore program examples that consider how to use community assessment data to strengthen community engagement efforts.

Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement
Refer to this set of resources to review competencies for all early childhood professionals, including supervisors and leaders. Learn the knowledge, skills, and practices that form professional practice. Explore specific practices to connect families with community partners, follow up on referrals, and build and nurture relationships with community partners.

The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and Goal-Setting with Families
Use this guide to learn about the family partnership process. Explore how to use data to inform decisions about program and community level services to address the strengths and challenges of the families in your program.

Program Management and Fiscal Operations

Community Assessment Matrix
Use this resource to understand the context in which Head Start and Early Head Start programs operate. This matrix is useful for ensuring that the correct services are provided to the appropriate population.

Foundations for Excellence: A Guide for Five-Year Planning and Continuous Improvement, 2nd Edition
Use this comprehensive guide to learn what Head Start expects from programs' strategic planning. Discover ways to ensure that programming is responsive to community needs throughout the five-year grant period. Consider program examples that illustrate the role of community partnerships to meet planning objectives, goals, and expected outcomes.

Head Start Management Systems Wheel
Review this resource to understand the twelve program management, planning, and oversight systems that are critical to sound program infrastructure and high-quality service delivery. Specifically, refer to the Program Planning & Service System Design and Community & Self-Assessment sections to inform community engagement efforts.

Explore this family engagement resource on the Child Care Technical Assistance (CCTA) Website:

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems
Use this resource to understand the collaborative relationship between parents and early childhood systems, programs, providers, family caregivers, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring change for children, families, and communities.

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