

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Guidance for Supervisors:
Using a Strengths-based
Approach



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Guidance for Supervisors: Using a Strengths-based Approach

Family services managers and supervisors can use this resource to support staff in using a strengths-based approach in their work with families. This approach is rooted in Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices. Managers and supervisors can support staff to use these strategies to strengthen family partnerships and promote effective family engagement. Meaningful partnerships and sustained family engagement lead to better outcomes for children and families.

Learn strategies and find reflections for supporting staff to explore and use:

- A Strengths-based Approach
- Strengths-based Attitudes
- Relationship-based Practices
- Strategies to integrate the Attitudes and Practices

Strengths-based Approach

Strengths-based interactions between supervisors and staff provide a foundation for effective supervision. Supervisors can start with staff strengths, listen to and value staff emotions, and encourage growth through reflection and practice. When encouraging staff to try new skills, such as adopting the Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices, supervisors can create a learning environment where it is safe to take risks and try something new.

A supportive and trusting relationship between supervisor and staff is essential to professional growth.

Trust in the supervisory relationship may take time to develop. Some characteristics of trusting supervisory relationships are:

- A common sense of mission toward work with children and families
- Tolerance of risk-taking and mistakes in trying out new strategies
- Fairness and equity in dealing with multiple staff
- Awareness of personal-professional boundaries
- Emotional support when the work becomes difficult
- Recognition that perspectives vary based upon life experiences, education, and cultures

Strengths-based Attitudes

Attitudes are the beliefs that staff bring to their work. Attitudes toward families, children, and child-rearing are based in a person's own beliefs. These beliefs and values are products of one's own family, cultures, and personal history.

“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.

Strengths-based Attitudes

- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.
- Families are our partners with a critical role in their family's development.
- Families have expertise about their child and their family.
- Families' contributions are important and valuable.

Attitudes may be refined by training and experience, but they are grounded in a professional's belief system. Work with any family is a negotiation of cultural beliefs—those of the worker and those of the family. The Strengths-based Attitudes allow us to bring this awareness to our work with individual families.

Attitudes guide our behavior but we may not always be aware of them. Attitudes come to the surface in real-life situations. For example, a family services worker (FSW) feels worried when she sees a mother not comforting a crying child in distress. The FSW may feel see the parent as lacking empathy. It is important to be aware of our reaction and think about the parent's perspective. Perhaps, there is a cultural variation in how this family responds to a child's distress. Maybe, it is a conscious decision not to encourage dependence. Variation in child-rearing is normal. However, our responses to those differences often characterizes some as right, and some as wrong.

One response may be a negative judgment of the parent. We can use the Strengths-based Attitudes to step back and reflect on this mother's perspective. The FSW can begin to explore with the mother what she is trying to teach her child, and how she interprets her behavior. This is an opportunity to form a partnership with the parent and to support the parent-child relationship. The partnership will develop when the values and beliefs of the parent are engaged. Concerns that might need to be addressed must come from the parent's goals for her child.

Supervision may involve helping the FSW to see that her own beliefs may be interfering with the development of a partnership with this parent. Using the Strength-based Attitudes, the supervisor and FSW might discuss how to engage the parent by asking the FSW to consider her perspectives on the child, the behavior, and her own experiences. Often, in supervision, this means first helping staff recognize assumptions or culturally-based responses to the situation. We often learn the most from the situations we are challenged by. They can teach us about ourselves and our own beliefs about children and families. Those beliefs can best be understood in a safe and supportive supervisory relationship.



The FSW does not need to abandon her own beliefs about how children should be raised. Indeed, it is likely some of those beliefs that brought the FSW to this work. The use of the Strength-based Attitudes allows the FSW to establish relationships with families even when there are different perspectives. The FSW can work with the family to understand what is best for this child.

Opportunity for Reflection:

Consider how you might use the Strengths-based Attitudes to help the FSW reflect on the situation and what to do next.



Relationship-based Practices

Practices are our behaviors, or how we interact with families and colleagues. Attitudes are less visible and shaped by family and culture. Practices are more easily observed and developed through training. Practices can guide staff to focus on what is important and help them select words and actions to support that focus.

Relationship-Based Practices

- Observe and describe the child’s behavior to open communication with the family.
- Reflect on the family’s perspective.
- Support competence.
- Focus on the family-child relationship.
- Value a family’s passion.
- Reflect on your own perspective.

Consider the example of the mother who doesn’t seem to comfort a child in distress. The FSW observes the behavior and can simply describe it to the parent. “I noticed Kiki crying and breathing quickly when she lost track of her book today.” This simple description gives the mother the chance to comment on the behavior. The mother may or may not see Kiki’s behavior as distress. Or if she does, she may not see it as a concern. She might share her own perspective on the behavior. This process can give the FSW new insight into the mother and the parent-child relationship.

The Relationship-based Practices can help staff develop a picture of what strengths and concerns there might be and how to address them. The Practices, along with the Attitudes, give the FSW and supervisor shared language to try and understand the family. They can identify how each of the Practices might apply to work with a family and make decisions about how to proceed.

By selecting a practice to focus on in interactions with families, staff can further develop their skills. In the example, focusing first on observing and describing the behavior might lead to a better understanding of the parent’s perspective. Through this understanding, the staff member may be less judgmental and able to build a more open and effective partnership.

Opportunity for Reflection:

Consider how you might use the other Relationship-based Practices to help the FSW reflect on the situation and what to do next.

Strategies to Integrate the Attitudes and Practices

Consider these strategies to integrate the Attitudes and Practices into a strengths-based approach with families and staff.

- Practice using the skills yourself.
- Use the skills with staff and leaders who work in the program.
- Expect diversity among families and staff.
- Engage in reflection with staff.
- Consider existing professional development models.

Practice using the skills yourself.

Understand and use the Attitudes and Practices as the first step in guiding others to use them. Staff can watch you use them and see that they are important and effective skills to learn and practice. Ideally, you can master the skills before guiding others. Look at how the Attitudes and Practices reflect your own approach to work with families. Where are they most helpful? Where do they challenge you the most?

Use the skills in work with both families and staff members.

Apply the Attitudes and Practices within your program to work with both families and staff. Use these skills to communicate with and supervise staff. The Attitudes and Practices are intended to guide work with families but they also apply to relationships between staff. Staff can apply the Attitudes and Practices with families more effectively if they learn to use them with other staff. This is called “parallel process.” Relationships between administration and staff, among staff, between staff and families, and between parents and their children affect each other. When your relationships with staff reflect the Attitudes and Practices, those between staff and families are improved.



Expect diversity among families and staff.

Appreciate and respect differences among staff and families. Staff and families may come from different backgrounds and cultures and have different experiences. They may have different beliefs that influence their interactions and relationships. Applying the Attitudes and Practices will vary based upon life experiences, education, and cultures.

Perspective-taking helps us appreciate these differences and understand how to best support families and staff in the program. Supervisors can work with staff to look at program expectations and policies from different perspectives. This provides opportunities for professional growth and program improvements.

Engage staff in a reflective process.

Supervisors can introduce the Attitudes and Practices in team trainings and follow up with staff in individual meetings. Supervisors and staff can master the use of the Attitudes and Practices by engaging in a mutual and reflective process in supervision meetings. Initially, the supervisor may lead the conversation, encouraging the staff member to learn and practice the new skills. Staff can apply the skills to specific interactions with families and discuss their experiences with supervisors. Staff and supervisors may have these discussions as part of a process of reflective supervision or coaching models.

For example, the supervisor and staff member may first discuss work with a family and talk about how to apply the Attitudes and Practices. Staff then apply them in the interaction with the family. As a follow-up, the staff and supervisor discuss the interaction and how the Practices worked. The staff member integrates the Practices and becomes more familiar with how to use them. Over time, staff begin to master the use of the skills. Staff may then take the lead in conversations with their supervisors.

Staff can learn to apply the Attitudes and Practices in several ways, depending on the time and resources that can be applied by the program. Observations of staff with families, directly or through video, is one option. Staff will need sufficient time for planning interactions with families and for discussion and reflection after meeting with families.

Consider existing professional development models.

There are a number of models of professional development that can guide staff to use a strengths-based approach to working with families, in line with the Attitudes and Practices.

Consider professional development models that offer training over time. Isolated training is typically not effective in helping staff enhance their practice. Models with a sequential and interactive process that is embedded in supervision have been found to be more effective.

These models help staff:

- Become familiar with the elements of the approach
- See the elements in action through modeling or observation
- Apply the elements with families
- Monitor, document, and discuss their use
- Reflect on and refine how the elements are applied
- Evaluate whether the elements are effective

The sequence of the models can take many forms depending on the experience of the workforce, the resources of the program, and the previous experience of the supervisor.

Head Start Program Exemplary Practice: Coaching

A model that shows particular promise is one that was adapted from a coaching model for teachers at Southwest Child Development in Phoenix, Arizona. It involves coaching family service workers in 16 specific practices that roughly correspond to the Attitudes and Practices.

In this approach, a coach who may or may not be the worker's supervisor engages staff in a sequence which includes:

- Modeling the practice(s)
- Observing the use of the practice(s)
- Receiving feedback from the coach
- Using reflection between the coach and the worker
- Planning for future interactions

Coaches document the application of the practices according to a monthly schedule with input from the workers. This data is used in the reflection process. Discussion of the approach also takes place within a larger learning community either within the program or among several programs.



Closing Thoughts

Supervisors play an important role in supporting staff to apply the Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices. Supervisors can use a strengths-based approach and model the use of the Attitudes and Practices with staff and families. Supervisory relationships that are built on strengths and trust create an environment where staff can take risks, share challenges, and learn from each new experience. Supervisors and staff can engage in individual and shared reflection and perspective-taking to consider how the application of the Attitudes and Practices may vary based on cultures, backgrounds, and professional training.

How do you build trusting relationships with staff?

Which Attitudes and Practices do you currently use with staff and families?

How do you support staff growth and development?

Resources

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

Building Partnerships with Families Series

Explore this series for information and strategies for strengthening relationships with families. Find resources on various topics including cultural perspectives, partnering with families of children who are dual language learners, engaging families in conversations about sensitive topics, and preparing for challenging conversations with families.

Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices

Find out how family engagement and practice strategies are key to building relationships with families. Learn how to use Strengths-based Attitudes to work with families toward building a positive relationship—despite the challenges that may come up. This tool can also support training and reflective practice and supervision.

Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement: Overview for Early Childhood Professionals

Learn how to use Relationship-based Competencies (RBCs) as a guide to engage and partner with families effectively. Explore this overview of the 10 RBCs to learn about ways to build on family engagement efforts and support positive outcomes for children and families.

Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement for Family Services Professionals

Explore this guide to learn what knowledge, skills, and practices are necessary to successfully engage with parents and families. Family services professionals can use the self-assessment tools to review their progress in each competency and find areas for professional growth.

Supportive Supervision: Promoting Staff and Family Growth Through Positive Relationships (Family Connections Short Paper)

Learn about strategies for both the supervisor and supervisee to make supervision an effective professional experience.

Practices for Effective Supervision to Support Skill-Building

Consider the following strategies to encourage professional growth.

1. Establish a regular and protected time for supervision. Learning and using new relationship-based skills requires time and commitment. It is important to schedule a regular time to specifically address the use of new skills. Consistent and regular meetings show staff that supervisors value the development of these new skills.

2. Create and maintain a positive relationship. A supportive and trusting relationship between the supervisor and staff member is essential. This may be difficult if the supervisor is also the person who evaluates job performance. If the staff member is worried about being evaluated, the relationship necessary for growth may be threatened. Trust in the supervisory relationship may take time to develop. Trusting professional relationships do not require friendship but they do require honesty and respect on both sides.

Some characteristics of trusting supervisory relationships are:

- A common sense of mission toward work with children and families
- Tolerance of risk-taking and mistakes in trying out new strategies
- Fairness and equity in dealing with multiple staff
- Awareness of personal-professional boundaries
- Emotional support when the work becomes difficult
- Recognition that perspectives vary based upon life experiences, education, and cultures

3. Encourage staff to direct professional growth. Supervising staff in family engagement works best when staff feel that they have a say in what they do. Staff may choose which skills they wish to develop first, and with which families to apply them. Working in this way establishes a partnership between the supervisor and staff member in which learning is the goal. Supervisors may already be familiar with certain skills but have opportunities to learn more in the process of working with staff.

4. Listen. Listening is central to all of the work we do. It is an essential aspect of our work with families and is essential to good supervision. Listen without judging what staff are experiencing (e.g., how it is affecting their mood, concentration, motivation, ability to connect with others, and the demands on you). Often our own agenda overshadows another's experience, preventing us from seeing the important pieces of the picture.

5. Value emotions. Create a safe and professional space where staff can talk about their emotional responses to their work. Their emotions represent the energy and commitment to their work—both positive and negative. Emotions are essential tools in their work, but they can also make the work more difficult when unregulated. Sharing emotions with a trusted supervisor or peer helps with that regulation.

6. Manage conflict. Recognizing that conflict is an essential part of our work with families helps us to understand challenges and strategize to address them. Often, the content of supervision is about different perceptions about what is good for children. That is inevitable when adults care for children together. Conflict between staff and among agencies is also inevitable. When managed openly this can lead to stronger relationships. It can also clarify what other issues may need to be addressed.

7. Make time for reflection inside and outside of supervision. Reflection allows us to consider our reactions, responses, and options. Taking time to consider how effective our response was in a past situation can help prepare us for similar situations in the future. Thinking about how our relationship-building skills affect partnerships with families allows both supervisors and staff to refine their skills over time.

8. Recognize supervision as part of a system. Staff partnerships with families don't stand alone. They are embedded in a program and a community. How the program operates, and how it interacts with other agencies and within the community can affect and be affected by partnerships with families. Remember that you are not alone. Call on the resources available to you in your agency, community, extended network, or your own supervisors. Staff will work more effectively when they have the support that they need, and so will supervisors.

9. Establish healthy boundaries. Know your time and content boundaries. This is emotional work, and self-care is essential for you and the staff you supervise. When you become available to staff in more emotional ways, you will need to take time for yourself to rejuvenate, reflect, and make time for your own supervision and support. Be aware of dual relationships such as being friends with a supervisee. Such dual relationships are inevitable, and can be managed when we are aware of, and even point out which hat we are wearing.

Adapted from the Family Connections materials available on the Head Start Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center (ECKLC).



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