



Using Social Media to Engage Families



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
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NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Using Social Media to Engage Families

A national survey conducted in 2015 indicated that 75 percent of parents use social media. Results from this survey also tell us that parents use social media sites for social support and for parenting information (Pew Research Center, 2015). Data from this survey indicate that Head Start and Early Head Start programs can reach many diverse families through thoughtful use of social media.

Introduction

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can use social media to partner with families to support their children’s learning and healthy development. You can use this guide to assist with:

- Developing and managing a social media plan
- Identifying audiences and connecting your social media efforts to your mission
- Choosing the best sites and times to post based on your audiences and objectives
- Taking into consideration such issues as technical requirements, promotion, and quality assurance
- Creating posts that are strengths-based, easy for readers to understand, and culturally and linguistically responsive
- Responding to comments and questions from families on social media

The guide is organized into three sections:

- How Families Use Social Media
- Considerations for Using Social Media
- Using Social Media to Engage Families: Planning Tool

If you are responsible for developing and posting content yourself, or if you work with staff who do, you can directly apply this information to your work. If others manage your social media, or if you work with a vendor to develop and post content, you can apply this information to your plans, requests, and quality improvement efforts. You can use tips and resources in this guide along with the social media planning tool to assess and inform how your program uses social media.

How Families Use Social Media

Understanding how families use social media may be useful as you create or enhance your social media plan. The ways families use specific social media sites can change based on evolving preferences and new options. Recent surveys conducted in 2015 and 2018 provide some insight into current usage.

The information in this section comes from three nationally representative surveys: a parent survey completed in 2015 and two completed in 2018. These surveys look at social media use by teens and adults in the United States. You can find comprehensive data tables of these surveys and their methodologies at <http://www.pewinternet.org>.

Which Sites Do Parents Use and How Often?

Seventy-four percent of parents who use social media report using Facebook daily. More than one-third of parents who use social media report using Instagram and Twitter daily. More than half of these parents log on to these sites multiple times each day (Pew, 2015).

Data suggests that mothers are more likely than fathers to use Facebook and Pinterest. Fathers are more likely to use LinkedIn and Twitter. Thirty-five percent of parents with children under age 6 use Instagram. Twenty-two percent of parents with children age 6 and older use Instagram (Pew, 2015).

What Do Parents Seek and Find on Social Media Related to Parenting?

Many parents seek and find social support on social media. Parents use social media to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances. They give and get general support from social media, sharing and responding to both good news and bad. Mothers are more likely than fathers to report offering or receiving general support through social media. Forty percent of parents report receiving social or emotional support for a parenting issue through their social media networks. Mothers are twice as likely as fathers to report receiving parenting support (Pew, 2015).

“Parent” and “Family”

We use the words *parent* and *family* to honor all adult caregivers who make a difference in a child’s life.

Parents refers to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents.

Families can be biological or nonbiological, chosen or circumstantial. Members of families are connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support.

Many parents also seek and find parenting information on social media. The study referenced above asked parents about the kinds of information they had sought and found in the 30 days prior to the survey. While most parents who use social media report finding useful general information on social media sites (79 percent), fewer (59 percent) report finding useful information about parenting. Only 10 percent of parents with lower incomes reported “frequently” finding useful parenting information on social media. Further, more than one-third of parents with higher incomes said they “rarely” find useful parenting information on social media. Parents typically reported coming across parenting information while browsing and looking at other content. Yet 31 percent of parents reported asking parenting questions on social media (36 percent of mothers and 24 percent of fathers) within the month (Pew, 2015).

How Do Specific Groups Use Social Media?

The information in this section describes social media use among U.S. teens (ages 13–17) and adults (ages 18 and older) in general. These findings, gathered in 2018, are more recent than the 2015 parent survey highlighted earlier. They include, but are not limited to parents. If you are interested in sharing information with family and community members who are not currently parents—for example, people who might be parents in the future, grandparents, extended family members, and the general public—this information may be especially useful.

Teens

Ninety-five percent of teens ages 13–17 have smartphones and most use social media. YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram are by far the most popular sites among teens. More than two-thirds of teens report using these sites. While roughly half of all teens report using Facebook, a significantly larger percentage (70 percent) of teens in households with incomes less than \$30,000 use Facebook (Pew, 2018).

YouTube and Facebook . . .

. . . are used by nearly twice as many American adults (ages 18 and older) compared to other social media sites. This is true regardless of income, educational attainment, and type of community, urban or rural. However, surveys suggest some differences in usage based on age and racial or ethnic backgrounds (Pew, 2018).



Percentage of U.S. Teens Ages 13–17 Who Say They Use . . .

	YouTube	Instagram	Snapchat	Facebook	Twitter	Tumblr	Reddit
Boys	89	69	67	49	33	9	11
Girls	81	75	72	53	32	9	4
White	86	73	72	48	33	10	8
Black	79	72	77	57	29	11	5
Hispanic	85	72	64	58	36	7	7
Less than \$30K	86	74	77	70	40	10	10
\$30K to \$74,999K	84	72	71	56	30	8	4
\$75K and up	85	71	64	36	30	11	8

Source: Survey conducted March 7–April, 2018. “Teens, Social Media and Technology.” Pew Research Center.

Younger Adults

YouTube and Facebook are most popular with adults ages 18–49. However, Snapchat and Instagram are especially popular among younger adults ages 18–24. Seventy-eight percent of adults ages 18–24 report using Snapchat, and 71 percent report using Instagram. More than half of adults ages 25–29 use these two sites. Use drops significantly, however, among adults age 30 and older (Pew, 2018).

Percentage of U.S. Adults Ages 18–49 Who Say They Use . . .

	Facebook	YouTube	Pinterest	Instagram	Snapchat	LinkedIn	Twitter	WhatsApp
18–24	80	94	31	71	78	25	45	25
25–29	82	88	39	54	54	34	33	31
30–49	78	85	34	40	26	33	27	32

Source: Survey conducted January 3–10, 2018. “Social Media Use in 2018.” Pew Research Center.

The Millennial generation includes the average range of ages when women have their first child (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). Data on Millennials (people born between 1981 and 1996, ages 22–37) indicate that most (85 percent) use social media, and most (82 percent) use Facebook. Around half of Millennials use Snapchat and Instagram, 47 percent and 52 percent respectively (Pew, 2018).

Older Adults

Older adults also use social media, specifically Facebook. Three quarters of Gen Xers and more than half of Baby Boomers use social media. Approximately two-thirds of adults ages 50–64 (those we might think of as most likely to be grandparents) report using Facebook. Fewer than one-quarter of adults in this age range report using other social media platforms (Pew, 2018).



Ages	Percentage Who Use Social Media	Percentage Who Use Facebook
Gen Xers (born 1965–1980, ages 38–53 in 2018)	75	76
Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964, ages 54–72)	57	59
Silent Generation (born 1945 and earlier, ages 73 and older)	23	26

Source: Survey conducted January 3–10, 2018. “Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life” Pew Research Center.

Race and Ethnicity

As mentioned earlier, Facebook and YouTube are the most widely used social media sites among U.S. adults ages 18 and older, regardless of race and ethnicity. There are some differences, however, among races and ethnicities in the use of other social media sites. Available data looks at use among White, Black, and Hispanic adults ages 18 and older.

- White adults are more likely than Black and Hispanic adults to use Pinterest.
- Black adults are more likely than White and Hispanic adults to use Instagram.
- Black and Hispanic adults are more likely than White adults to use Snapchat.
- Hispanic adults are more than twice as likely as White and Black adults to use WhatsApp.

Percentage of U.S. Adults Ages 18 and Older Who Say They Use . . .

	Facebook	YouTube	Pinterest	Instagram	Snapchat	LinkedIn	Twitter	WhatsApp
White	67	71	32	32	24	26	24	14
Black	70	76	23	43	36	28	26	21
Hispanic	73	78	23	38	31	13	20	49

Source: Survey conducted January 3–10, 2018. “Social Media Use in 2018.” Pew Research Center.

Adults in Rural Communities

Most adults ages 18 and older living in rural areas are connected to the internet and go online. However, adults living in rural areas are less likely to have access to a broadband internet connection in their homes. And, when they do have access at home, the connection speed tends to be slower. They are also somewhat less likely to have a smartphone, tablet, or desktop/laptop computer (Pew, 2017). Still, nearly 60 percent of adults in rural communities report using YouTube or Facebook (Pew, 2018).

Using Social Media Data to Begin Your Planning

As you develop your social media plan, think about the audiences you want to reach. Start with what you know about the community you serve and the resources available to engage families on social media.

Use data about how families use social media to help you match social media sites to your audiences.

Overall, data from the surveys discussed above indicate that having a robust presence on both Facebook and YouTube might be useful for reaching parents and grandparents. Snapchat and Instagram might be good choices for reaching younger parents and future parents. Think about how you can use Facebook and other social media sites to help draw parents to your program's website. Consider how you might use social media to complement the education and engagement that can happen through your website.

Other examples of how you might consider using social media include:

- Including family perspectives in plans and decisions about resources and services for families' use
- Helping families build on their knowledge and make informed choices about early childhood and school-age care, education, and comprehensive services
- Demonstrating your program's efforts to be inclusive and culturally and linguistically responsive by including information written in the languages spoken by families in the community, using pictures that reflect the diversity of families in the community, and recognizing varying child-rearing values from within the community
- Engaging families as advocates who can amplify messages by sharing information with their peers. **Tip:** In social media terms, individuals who effectively amplify messages are called "influencers." Effective influencers understand and communicate concepts and information to their peers, not as authorities but as other parents who care and have similar needs.

You can use social media to influence the information that families share with one another, enhancing the social support that families give one another. Social media is a newer version of "word of mouth" for many. Posts, comments, "likes," and "shares" serve as added resources for parents to share information with each other.

Texting Systems

In locations where lack of access to a broadband connection is a challenge, consider using a texting system instead. Bright by Text (<https://brightbytext.org/home>) and Vroom (<https://www.vroom.org/tools-and-resources/>) are national examples of texting programs.



Social Media Planning

Use a social media plan to guide your program's efforts and develop your team's capacity to engage families using social media. As you begin to create, review, or enhance a plan to engage families through social media, consider the following steps:

- Identify your mission, audiences, and purposes for posting.
- Establish goals, objectives, and quality assurance measures.
- Develop policies and allocate resources.
- Choose where and when to post.
- Promote your efforts.
- Create posts that are easy to understand and encourage engagement.
- Engage with parents and others after you post.

You will find tips to address each of these topics in this section of the guide. As you review and begin to plan, you may find you need to collect and analyze data. Much of this information may be available to you (in the form of web analytics) and just needs to be gathered and organized. If you cannot find the information you need through web analytics, you may find it necessary to do additional work to collect data and complete the plan.

Consider having staff meetings and discussions with your team about these topics before and as you develop your plan. Your discussions can help align the team's understanding about the information, skills, and assets needed to develop and implement a social media plan. Your thoughtful planning and teamwork upfront can help your program use social media to inform and build relationships with families and other audiences and to achieve your desired results.

Strategic Use of Social Media

HHS.gov offers helpful resources for the “how to” strategic use of social media. These resources are designed for federal agencies and programs. However, much of the information can be applied broadly for Head Start programs. Much of the content in this guide is adapted from other resources from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), including “Social Media Considerations: Should My Office Be in There?” and “What’s In a Plan.” Learn more at <https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/index.html>.

Identify Your Mission, Audiences, and Purposes for Posting

Consider the mission of your program. Determine how your program's social media use will contribute to your mission and work with families and children. Connecting your social media use to your mission will help to ensure alignment between the two and may help you create a social media plan with realistic and actionable goals related to your mission. As you consider your mission, this might also be a good time to reflect on how your program can use social media to address a need rather than duplicate existing resources.



Identify your primary audience and any secondary audiences that you hope to engage.

Consider how you currently interact with these audiences. Audiences may include family members of children currently in the program, community partners or others. You might find it helpful to reflect on these questions:

- Who is or might be interested in your message, program, or service?
- Why might they care about your message, program or service?
- How do they currently get information online and offline?
- How are you currently connecting with these audiences online?
- What challenges may exist that prevent you from reaching your identified audience segments (HHS, 2017)?

Also consider the following questions:

- What specific interests and needs of my audience can be addressed through social media?
- What is unique about my program that I can use to make my messages stand out from other general ones?
- What makes my messages different from other messages from similar organizations?

Be clear about the purposes of your social media efforts. For example, are you interested in using social media as a tool for outreach, to encourage parent involvement, or to increase family or community engagement?

Potential Purposes for Posting and Relevant Reflective Questions

Potential Purpose	Reflective Questions and Ideas to Consider
Outreach	<p>How far is your message spreading? Are you reaching diverse audiences? Are you reaching your identified audiences?</p> <p>Tracking “Likes,” “Shares,” and “Comments” are some ways you can measure how many people are responding to your posts, how often, and in what ways. Comment threads are key to reviewing the extent of engagement. Comments provide opportunities to have two-way conversations. Others can observe or join. You also can insert hyperlinks to move a conversation elsewhere or initiate other kinds of contact links for continuing conversations.</p>
Promoting your website (or, in web-based industry terms, “driving traffic” to your website)	<p>Are people moving from your social media activity to your website? What do users do once they are at your website?</p> <p>The web analytics for your website will include counts of visitors and unique visitors as well as other information. Visitors and unique visitors combined equals your total “traffic.” Unique visitors refers to the number of distinct individuals who have visited your site within a period of time.</p>
Raising advocates and gaining fans	<p>Based on who is participating and reacting to your posts, what type of impact do they have?</p> <p>For example, are people and agencies with influence re-sharing your posts?</p>
Increasing voice share	<p>To what degree do conversations about early childhood services in your service area include your program’s voice?</p> <p>Consider the purpose and focus of your social media posts and how they can help determine the definition of your program’s voice (Child Care Aware® of America, In press).</p>

Establish Goals, Objectives, and Quality Assurance Measures

Identify what you want to accomplish. Create broad goals with ample timelines for achievement. Create specific, shorter-term objectives as steps toward your goals. For example, if you are just starting your program’s social media activity, you might want to begin with a goal to generally increase community awareness of your program and what services it provides to families. An example of a related objective might be to see that “likes” increase weekly by a certain percentage compared to a baseline number when posting started. An example of parent involvement might be to see an increase in “Comments” and shared photos or videos from parents showing how they are extending their children’s classroom learning activities at home.

Focus on a realistic, limited number of goals and objectives. Consider which goals and objectives have the highest values for your program and mission. A “SMART” approach (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) can be useful for creating short-term objectives linked to measurable outcomes.

- **Specific.** Set objectives that are as specific as possible so that you know exactly what you are trying to do.
- **Measurable.** Use exact, quantitative language so that you can clearly determine if you have achieved your objectives.
- **Attainable.** Be realistic so that you strengthen your chances of success.
- **Relevant.** Relate your goals and objectives to your larger, program-wide mission and goals so that your efforts are coordinated and coherent.
- **Timely.** Set realistic and short timeframes so that you can make—and readily see—your progress (for example, “Gain 50 more Facebook users in the next two months”).

In the chart below, see examples of broad goals, SMART objectives, and social media sites that can best help you with your objectives, based on each site’s characteristics.

Broad Goal	SMART Objective	Chosen Social Media Sites	Site Functionality
1. Establish a strong and effective social media presence for your program.	Attain a 5 percent increase in the number of “views” and “likes” each month for 6 months. (Measured through social media sites’ analytics.)	Instagram and Facebook	Focuses attention on visuals, pictures, and videos with minimal use of words other than brief comments.
2. Increase the number of people who visit your program’s website.	Bi-weekly posts on Facebook will increase the number of visitors to your website by 20 percent each quarter. (Measured through your website’s analytics.)	Facebook	Suitable for multimedia content to tell stories and share information. This can be a highly effective method for sharing strategies, ideas, and success stories.
3. Increase peer-to-peer sharing, strengthen relationships among professionals, and increase the visibility of your program.	Weekly posts on LinkedIn will increase the number of new participants in the group by at least 10 percent monthly. Reassess quantitative goal after first 6 months in use.	LinkedIn	Provides a place to share information in writing and/or with pictures and videos or to encourage back-and-forth communications and to field queries through online conversations.

Identify how you will determine if your efforts are successful, including how you will track your progress and make improvements.

The best way to measure your program’s social media success is to conduct an ongoing evaluation of your progress. Success means that you have reached your intended goals and objectives, based on your plan.

You can measure the effectiveness of your social media usage with a stand-alone evaluation process or as part of a broader, program-wide process that includes all of your program’s activities. Consider the following tips:

- Determine how regularly you will monitor and evaluate your social media efforts.
- Consider the mechanisms (tools) you can use to get feedback. Web analytics (your website’s analytics and those available on the social media sites you use) are good sources of information.
- Identify what metrics (standards of measurement) are available and which you will use to measure progress toward your goals and objectives. For example, you can use web analytics to measure how many people view your posts and open the links you provide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2017). You also can track “Likes,” “Retweets,” “Shares,” views, and numbers of comments.

Web Analytics

Web analytics is the collection, reporting, and analysis of website data. Web analytics can tell you a lot about how your site is used. This website data can show how many pages were viewed, how many people visited your site, how long they stayed on a particular page, and if they opened any links or downloaded information. Web analytics does not give you information about how a person used the information after leaving. Consider ways you might also gather qualitative data, for example, through surveys, live chats, and focus groups.

Develop Policies and Allocate Resources

Determine roles and responsibilities to get started and keep going. Coordinate roles so staff can cover for each other when “assigned” staff are not available or have other priorities. Some roles and responsibilities to consider include:

- Developing, designing, and approving content
- Creating a schedule for posts, and then posting the messages
- Establishing and maintaining protocol, policies, and procedures
- Monitoring online activity and engaging with parents after you post
- Reviewing dashboards (progress reports), analyzing data, and planning for continuous quality improvement

More About Content Approval

In employee orientation materials, be sure to address protocols for communicating and approving content. It is important for all employees to be aware of, understand, and follow your program's social media policies and procedures. Be sure to address when staff should seek assistance in managing communications—for example, if online communication becomes inappropriate or negative, or when it presents an imminent threat.

Program policies may also include guidelines for employees' use of their personal social media accounts. An advisory from the U.S. Office of Government Ethics offers guidance for federal employees' use of social media. You can find it at <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/oip/legacy/2014/07/23/dag-memo-personal-use-social-media.pdf> and use it as a reference.

It is important for staff to be well versed in these protocols so workflow can be smooth and inquiries and challenges can be handled efficiently and effectively. A comprehensive approach to handling online communications will enhance your program's ability to achieve its goals to serve parents well.

Procedures will likely need to change over time to adapt to new situations that arise and that may not be covered in your current set of protocols. Review your procedures regularly and update them as necessary. Be sure that all staff are made aware of any updates.

Identify standards and policies. Plan for how you will ensure standards are met and policies are followed, and how you will monitor compliance. Some examples of issues to include in your standards and policies are listed below. You can find more information, including sample policies, at <https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/policies/index.html>.

- **Approvals.** Include policies for developing, approving, posting, and managing content.
- **Access and Security.** Online activity presents risks regarding the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information. Be sure to consider threats and ways to mitigate potential risks before posting.
- **Copyrighted Content.** Make sure you have permission to use trademarked pictures and images or logos.
- **Branding.** Include standards and policies for branding that clearly identify your program's ownership or sponsorship and brand.
- **Accessibility.** Ensure that content posted or produced through the use of online technology is accessible to people with disabilities by following, for example, the requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
- **Records Management.** Include policies that address when or if a post or comment can be deleted. Also address how to respond to a request for a record of your social media activity.

- **Comment Moderation.** Create or link to an existing “comment policy.” Determine processes to monitor and respond to comments. (For tips, refer to the “Engaging with Families After You Post” section of this guide.)
- **Linking, Liking, Following, and Endorsing.** Include an exit disclaimer when providing hyperlinks that take a user outside of your website. (Go to <https://www.hrsa.gov/hrsa-exit-disclaimer.html> for an example of an exit disclaimer.) Create criteria for what entities are appropriate to follow or “like” from your account (HHS, 2017).

Identify any new technical resources that you will need to set up to manage your plan. Assess whether your program has the technical resources needed to implement your social media plan. Some examples of technical resources may include accessing a large volume of graphics and pictures; owning software programs that enhance the information shared and that catch the eye of the user (with dynamic visuals, including videos); and securing the services of a vendor to assist you with your data analytics process. Arrange to acquire what you need, or adjust your plan so that your program can reach the determined goals with existing resources.

Choose Where and When to Post

Choose the right social media sites for your audiences and purposes. In the first steps, you identified your audiences. In this step, consider which social media sites your identified audiences use; when and how often they use them. (Refer to the “How Families Use Social Media” section above for some insight into these answers.)

Consider the purposes of different social media sites and how they align with the purposes of your plan, goals, and objectives. This consideration is key to effectively engaging parents through social media. The chart below provides examples of types of social media sites and the specific purposes of each. Some sites are used in a variety of ways to serve multiple purposes.

Site Type	Purpose	Examples (not all that apply)
Networking	Provide a place to share information in writing or with pictures and videos, encourage back-and-forth communications, and field queries from parents through online conversations.	Twitter, LinkedIn, Google, Facebook
Streaming	Focus attention on visuals, pictures, and videos, with minimal use of words.	YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Instagram, Facebook
Blogging	Integrate multimedia content to tell stories and share information. This can be a highly effective method for sharing strategies, ideas, and success stories.	Twitter, Reddit, mobile apps, company forums, company blogs
Customer service/ education/ engagement	Focus on concise messaging. Messages are used to drive users to other sites/places for more information or next steps. Often used for “live” messages and events coverage.	Facebook, Twitter, online reviews, opportunities within your website (chat spaces, for example)

Source: Family Voices, Quality Choices. Child Care Aware® of America.

Each site has its own mechanism for posting. You can find basic information about how to post on each site’s “help” or “FAQ” webpage. For maximum effectiveness, schedule your posts during times when parents are most likely to view and respond. The chart below suggests peak times for posting on each site.

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Pinterest	You Tube
Optimal Day to Post	Friday	Monday–Thursday	Monday	Saturday	Any day
Time to Post	1 pm–4 pm	1 pm–3 pm	Evenings and weekends	2 pm–4 pm 8 pm–11 pm	Any time
How Often	1–2 per day	5 per day	5–10 per week	5–10 per week	Post consistently so that people are drawn to your channel.

Source: Family Voices, Quality Choices. 2017. Child Care Aware® of America.

In addition, if they are set up as a business page, social media sites often have dashboards in which you can find data on your own activities. Dashboards are progress reports provided by individual social media sites that provide data about your use of a site. They are part of your web analytics. Review your program’s dashboards for clues to identify and schedule optimal times for your audiences to see and respond to your posts.

Promote Your Efforts

Plan how to promote your social media efforts. Consider ways that you already interact with or otherwise have people’s attention. For example, encourage newsletter recipients or parents you work with in person to find you on Facebook.

You may need to use a set of different strategies to meet each of your plan’s goals. This approach will help you to reach a broader group of users. Never rely on one strategy to do all the work and to meet your goal. Diverse strategies increase your chances for successful outcomes.

Cross-promote over other available channels. *Cross-promote* means to bring attention to resources related to or similar to a resource that has gained attention already. In other words, once you have attention on a resource, share information about additional related resources. Your original audience may benefit from being exposed to additional resources, and cross-promoting provides you with an opportunity to draw attention to other topics that you wish to promote.

Explore opportunities to partner with others. Partnering with other agencies and campaigns can increase your program’s reach to audiences that otherwise might not be aware of your services. Consider what agencies and programs might be involved in efforts similar to yours. Think about ways you can work together to advance one another’s efforts. For example, work out cooperative agreements with partner organizations to refer parents to your partner’s website and social media pages; and your partners can refer parents to yours. Determining in advance what kinds of materials and resources will be cross-shared is very important. Provide guidance to staff (and contractors, if applicable) regarding trusted partners and resources, and what to do if they have a question about a source.

As a program, consider joining larger social media campaigns by using a specific hashtag. A hashtag is a label that highlights keywords within a post. A hashtag starts with the pound symbol (#) and is followed by a keyword with no space in between, for example, *#HeadStart*. Social media users use hashtags to search for information about a specific topic and also to express affiliation with a topic. When you include a hashtag in a post, your post will show up in lists of other posts that use the same hashtag.

Make sure that any sharing that occurs is aligned with your program’s mission and goals, as well as with the goals of your communication and social media plan.

Create Posts

Social media is one tool you can use to encourage two-way communications and information exchanges with parents.

Create posts that are easy to understand and that encourage engagement.

Use plain language. Write as you would speak. Be clear and concise. Keep sentences short and direct. Use short, simple, familiar words. Consult the *Federal Plain Language Guidelines* for more information (available at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>).

Consider literacy and reading level. An eighth-grade reading level is widely accepted for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, aim for a sixth-grade level when developing content for parents (ECLKC, 2017). The Flesch-Kincaid readability test can be useful in measuring the grade level of your content. You may find this readability test in your word processing software. You also can use plain language strategies to help lower the reading level. For example, try shorter sentences and words with fewer syllables.



Convey a strengths-based approach. You can encourage positive relationships with families by conveying strengths-based attitudes in your social media content. Examples of strengths-based attitudes to convey to parents in all your interactions, web-based or in person, include:

- All families have strengths. Each family has unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths, even when there are challenges.
- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children. Children’s healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
- Families are our partners, with a critical role in their child’s development. Families make choices every day that affect a child’s development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
- Families have expertise about their child and their family. Families understand their children best and make important decisions every day for their children’s well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
- Families’ contributions are important and valuable. Being open to a family’s suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child. We can encourage effective partnerships when we invite their expertise and listen to their priorities (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018).

Develop action-oriented messages that are grounded in strengths-based attitudes. Key messages are shorter statements intended to communicate information and follow-up actions clearly to parents. Consider using these statements or your own similar statements in your social media posts:

- You are your child’s first and most important teacher. Talk with us about your child’s and your family’s approach to learning so that we can better understand and support what works for you and your child.
- You have a critical role in your family’s development. Talk with our program staff about your family’s needs and goals and how we can support your efforts.
- You are the expert on your child and family. We welcome, value, and respect your input. Talk with our program staff about how we can best support your interests and goals for your child and family.
- Since you are your child’s first teacher and decision-maker, your input is important and valuable. Work with your child’s teacher to find ways to support your child’s learning in our program and at home.



Use people-first language. People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation they may be experiencing. When you use people-first language, you avoid defining a person by his or her circumstance. You acknowledge the circumstance as simply an attribute. For example, refer to “resources for families experiencing homelessness” instead of “resources for homeless families.”

Be culturally and linguistically responsive. Your social media posts can be the first places where you can help families feel welcome. A culturally and linguistically responsive social media post appeals to and communicates effectively with diverse users. It recognizes, affirms, and showcases families’ diverse cultures, knowledge, and experiences. It helps to eliminate and prevent disparities related to access to information about early care and education and comprehensive family services.

Some tips for developing posts that are culturally and linguistically responsive include:

- Choose visual images that will encourage all families to feel included. Consider getting permission to use pictures of the diverse children and families served by your program, and use these in your posts.
- Describe your program’s efforts to be inclusive and serve diverse families.
- Consider highlighting the cultures and languages (English and other languages) represented by your staff.
- Consider race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and family composition when making decisions about visual, audio, and written content.
- Include representatives of diverse populations from your community to field-test or co-construct potential posts.
- Perform a rigorous quality review process for all written translations, as you would for English versions. Consider such aspects as spelling, grammar, punctuation, plain language, clarity, and cultural context.
- Perform the same rigorous quality review for audio interpretations (relevant for videos posted on social media). Consider such aspects as tone, word choice, pace of speech (not too fast or slow), facial expression, and cultural considerations for all elements of the audio track.

Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness

Each family in the community you serve has a unique set of beliefs, values, and priorities to be respected and taken into account when developing social media content. Key issues—including education, family roles, caregiving practices, and even what determines acceptable child behavior and school readiness—are all strongly influenced by a family’s culture. The cultural beliefs of families directly inform the decisions they make about their children.

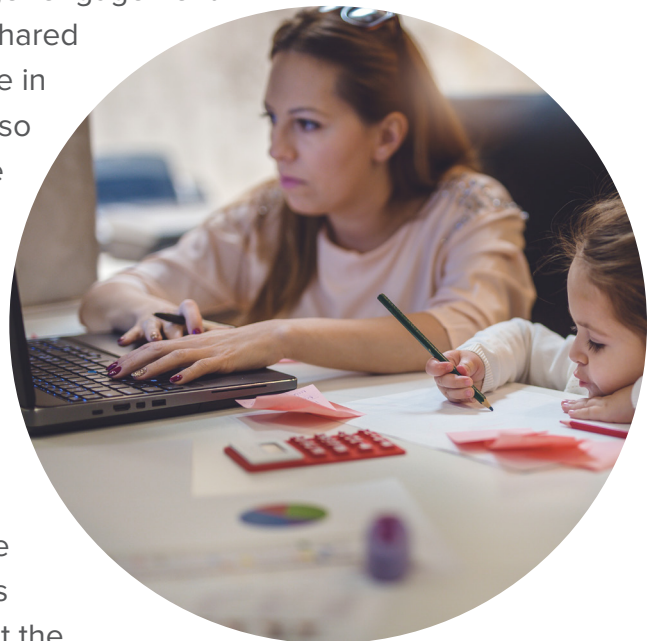
Engage with Parents and Others After You Post

Engaging with parents on social media means to communicate back and forth, adding information as the online conversation proceeds. Some tips for engaging parents after you post include:

- Respond to a comment or a question made to your post by responding with a comment on the same site. For example, if a post is made on Facebook and feedback was received on Facebook, the response should be on Facebook.
- To help build relationships, respond to feedback in a personalized manner whenever possible—in a way that treats the user as a person. For example, Jane Smith asks in Comments, “When can I sign up my child for Head Start?” One possible reply might be, “Great question, Jane Smith! Enrollment begins on August 15. You can find more information on our website: [www.....](#)”
- Sometimes it is best to delay your response briefly and give other parents a chance to make additional comments, or to begin a longer engagement and discussion with several parents about a shared topic of interest. You want others to participate in and even lead the online conversation. You also want to avoid taking over or monopolizing the conversation yourself by posting multiple comments in succession in response to others without pausing for comments, queries, or input from those you are addressing.
- Redirect users to your website where you have a more extensive venue, such as a live chat space. This allows you to engage in more individualized, back-and-forth messaging. This redirection also can help with venues that limit the length of messages for users and allow you to refer the user to the more extensive resources and information available on your website.
- Sometimes an appropriate response is simply to thank parents for their feedback, or comment that the question they asked is a good one.
- Be aware that some questions might be baiting questions, meant to start an online

Posting on Social Media

Posting your carefully crafted message is an important step. How you engage with parents after you post is equally important.



challenge. In this case, be simple, kind, and clear with your responses and know when to end the exchange by making a polite final comment. A good strategy in this kind of situation is to send a link that will refer a parent to some additional resources.

- Never engage in online conversations that disclose personal, identifying information. Redirect anyone sharing sensitive or confidential information online to other venues, such as email, hot lines, or program phone numbers.

“Comment Policy” or Guidelines

Consider using a “comment policy” or guidelines to encourage respectful dialogue. Here are some examples:

- You can help others using the site by focusing your comments on the discussion topic at hand.
- All viewpoints are welcome. Please be respectful of others. Avoid personal attacks, profanity, and arguments.
- You can help ensure that information on this site is accurate by making certain that your comments and any information you share is truthful and offered in good faith.
- You can help keep this site clutter-free by avoiding repeated postings of identical or very similar content and refraining from aggressively promoting services or products.



Learn more about strategies for engaging families by visiting the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement webpage on ECLKC: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement>; email: pfce@ectta.info; or call (toll-free) 1-855-208-0909.

Using Social Media to Engage Families: Planning Tool

Use this Planning Tool to support your efforts to create a plan for using social media. This tool is meant to enhance your use of the *Using Social Media to Engage Families* guide—not as a replacement. We encourage you to consider tips, resources, and this planning tool together.

Considerations to address in the planning process:	Status: “Yes,” “No,” or “In Progress”	Next Steps: What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments: Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
IDENTIFY YOUR MISSION, AUDIENCE, AND PURPOSES FOR POSTING			
Consider the mission of your program. Document how your social media plan and use will contribute to your mission.			
Identify your primary audience and any secondary audiences you hope to engage.			
Define the purpose of your social media efforts, e.g., outreach, parent involvement, family or community engagement.			
ESTABLISH GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE MEASURES			
Identify what you want to accomplish. Create broad goals with ample timelines for achievement.			
Create specific shorter term objectives as steps toward your goals.			
Link short-term objectives to measurable outcomes by using a “SMART” (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) approach.			
Determine how often you will monitor and evaluate your progress toward your goals and objectives.			
Identify the mechanisms (tools) and metrics (measures) you will use to gather feedback.			
Create a plan for responding to (making changes) based on feedback.			

Considerations to address in the planning process:	Status: “Yes,” “No,” or “In Progress”	Next Steps: What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments: Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
DEVELOP POLICIES AND ALLOCATE RESOURCES			
Determine roles and responsibilities to get started and keep going. Coordinate some overlap of roles so staff can cover for each other when “assigned” staff are not available or obligated elsewhere.			
Identify standards and policies. Plan for how you will monitor compliance. (See pages 12–13 in the guide for a list of potential policy topics.)			
In employee orientation materials, be sure to include protocols for communicating and approving content so that all employees are aware of, understand, and can abide by your program’s social media policies and procedures.			
Regularly schedule and conduct reviews of protocols. Be clear on steps for communicating to staff any changes in these protocols.			
Assess whether your program has the technical resources needed to implement your social media plan (e.g., software, or access to a collection of images/photos). If not, arrange to acquire what you need. If that is not possible, then adjust your plan so that your program can reach the determined goals with existing resources.			
CHOOSE WHERE AND WHEN TO POST			
Find and consider data about which social media sites your identified audiences tend to use, when, and how often. (The tables on pages 4–5 in this guide may be helpful.)			
Consider the purposes of different social media sites and how they align with the purposes of your plan, goals, and objectives.			

Considerations to address in the planning process:	Status: “Yes,” “No,” or “In Progress”	Next Steps: What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments: Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
CHOOSE WHERE AND WHEN TO POST, cont.			
Review data and dashboards to better understand peak times for posting on certain sites. Plan and schedule optimal times for your audiences to see and respond to your posts.			
PROMOTE YOUR EFFORTS			
Consider ways that you already interact with or otherwise have people’s attention (e.g., through a newsletter or in-person interactions) and how you can cross-promote your social media pages through these activities.			
Identify potential partner agencies. Engage in cooperative agreements to refer families to the websites and social media pages of partners.			
Consider joining larger social media campaigns and using hashtags to connect your posts to others’ posts on related topics. Be sure that these types of efforts are included or aligned with your program’s overall mission and goals as well as with your communication and social media plans.			
CREATE POSTS			
Create posts that are easy to understand and that encourage engagement.			
Use plain language. Write as you would speak. Be clear and concise. Keep sentences short and direct. Use short, simple, familiar words.			
Consider literacy and reading level. An eighth-grade reading level is widely accepted for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, aim for a sixth-grade level when developing content for parents.			

Considerations to address in the planning process:	Status: “Yes,” “No,” or “In Progress”	Next Steps: What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments: Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
CREATE POSTS, cont.			
Convey a strengths-based approach. You can encourage positive relationships with families by conveying strengths-based attitudes in your social media content.			
Develop action-oriented messages that are grounded in strengths-based attitudes.			
Use people-first language. People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation he or she may be experiencing.			
Ensure that posts are culturally and linguistically responsive. Posts recognize, affirm, and showcase families’ diverse cultures, knowledge, and experiences.			
ENGAGE WITH PARENTS AND OTHERS AFTER YOU POST			
Before you post, plan for how you will engage with parents (and others) after you post. Include this aspect of social media use in your policies, and ensure that staff are well-trained in these policies.			
Develop and/or adopt and post a “comment policy” or guidelines to encourage respectful dialogue on your social media pages.			

Resources

Building Partnership Series—Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/building-partnerships-families-series>

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) Social Media (resource page)
<https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/index.html>

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