

Five Questions with Dr. Guylaine Richard: Family Engagement

Jennifer Boss: Hi, I'm Jennifer Boss, director of the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. Family engagement is so critical to successful supports for children and families in Head Start. Let's listen in as Dr. Guylaine Richard talks about the best ways to approach family engagement and what you as an ed manager can do to support your staff. [Video begins] [Music]

Narrator: Why is family engagement so important?

Dr. Guylaine Richard: Communication needs to be open with the child, but with the parent, also, so you can learn more because parents are expert. They have expertise, they have competence, they know best. They are the first and most important teacher. So, if you don't go to them to find out what is needed for that child, you may not have what you need to really implement the curriculum that you had in mind for that child.

Narrator: "How can Head Start teachers engage busy parents?"

Guylaine: As an ed manager, I want to explore the opportunity that they have to be doing what we call "engagement sight unseen," because this is not all the time that I'm going to be able to, like you said, I'm not going to be able to see the parents because those parents, they have to run, they have to go to work because the families that we serve in Head Start and Early Head Start they are like, you know, vulnerable families that have multiple jobs, they need to run. They cannot be late sometimes. You cannot come late and get an excuse every day because you wanted to get that really good conversation that you needed with a teacher. So, therefore, as an ed manager, what I would do is to equip the teachers with what they need to be, like, you know, keeping that engagement between two adults, between two adults, like, two loving adults for that child, but keeping it in ways that are meaningful. For example, I would love to say that I don't need to – I can give you a "hi" and say we'll talk later, and that talk later may be a text. That talk later may be little notes. That talk later may be something where I could get your attention through a text to, you know, like, anything virtual that we can think of that is not going to be overly taxing on the parents, but letting us know that we can communicate.

Narrator: "How can we encourage follow through at home?"

Guylaine: Engagement is nothing more than relationship building; relationship building where trust is there, where we can talk with each other, and we can partner with each other on tasks – on a common goal that we may have. Tell me that Johnny did 10 blocks today. Describe the interaction. Just describe what you see. Describe what you see. That's all it is. So, you cannot go further. Don't tell me my child was good today. Don't tell me he was bad either because that separates us. Now, tell me he built 10 blocks, and I will say, "Oh, wow." And I will say, "OK, what can I do then?" "Oh, make him put two more blocks." And "Oh, my God. So, I'm going to go with you. I'm going to do 12 blocks." So, we both now are teaching Johnny how to do 12, but now we're partners.

Narrator: "How can we support families once children return to school?"

Guylaine: I would definitely say that the first thing we need to do is to understand that parent will be stressed as they bring their children back. They will be anxious. They will have a lot of questions. They will need to know a lot. So, patience is going to be the first virtue. And answers ... I'm not saying straight answers, but I'm saying also to the best that we can do in times like this is to let others know that you don't have all the answers. When you tell me that my child will be safe, and I find out that my child was exposed or something, that means I don't trust you, and that's the main thing. So, you can basically tell the parents, "We're going to do it together. We, not you or I. We're going to do it together. My job is to protect your child the best. This is how we're going to do it." Come to the classroom and see, this is why we're having six children in the classroom instead of 20 children in the classroom. This is not, you know -- and explain to me, but telling me that as we move together, we're going to find others solutions. So, as we get the solution, you will be informed, and we will be making those decisions together.

Narrator: "How can education managers support teachers during these challenging times?"

Guylaine: I want to say that it's time, as an education manager, for us to think that we will lean on other managers in the program to get what we need from the community. For example, if you find out that this is only one phone that they have, you know, and the phone is not enough to do that education plus everything else, you need to talk to your director, you need to talk to the family service manager, and find out how do we get community partners who can support the work that we do. So, I would say that everything now is everybody's business. I used to say family engagement is everybody's business. I say education is everybody's business. Everything is everybody's business. We need to do it together. [Video ends] [Music]