

GOAL 7

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES SHOULD SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILIES AS LEADERS AND ADVOCATES

When parents and families are empowered, they can be a strong force for positive change in their child’s education and in many other areas of life. Therefore, family engagement practices of early care and education providers should support families to participate in leadership development, decision-making, program policy development, and community and state organizing activities to improve children’s development and learning experiences.

Families often look to their child care provider and school as the experts for their child’s education. They may not feel comfortable telling teachers and providers what is needed and what they feel is best for their children. It is important to work with, and empower, parents when preparing children for school. When parents understand their child’s development and how learning occurs, they not only help them learn at home, but are then able to recognize and ensure their child receives quality education experiences. Parents develop the skills to participate fully in their child’s program, advocating for what is needed. As the child continues through school, parents continue to advocate for their families, contributing to their success.



FOUNDATIONAL AREAS

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

We know it is important to empower parents or caregivers in becoming leaders, but how do we do this? We often tell them to participate at meetings and to voice their opinions, but it is not enough to simply tell them what to do, we must teach relevant skills. Educators and providers can do this by modeling leadership skills and allowing parents and families opportunities to practice these new skills in their programs. This builds the parent’s confidence so that they might advocate for their children in other settings. To do this, program management must intentionally plan for parental participation in program planning, such as:

- Parent Meetings or Parent Councils – These are parent led meetings. Staff need to train the parents to coordinate and run the meetings, ensuring parents have a voice in all program decisions.
- Mentoring – Many programs will work closely with parents, and as they gain new skills, they then become mentors to new parents. This gives parents an opportunity to practice leadership skills with their peers.
- Planning activities – Many programs will allow parents to plan center events or committee meetings, giving parents leadership roles in the program.

EDUCATOR VOICE

We will often have parents who have been attending the program for a while help new parents who have just started to attend. This gives parents an opportunity to act as mentors and explain the program to new families, making them aware of the program’s services and other community programs.

- Kent County Family Support Center

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

When supporting families as they grow into leaders, providing professional development and training for both families and staff is essential. Staff members need to be aware of how they can provide support and can help to coach and teach families the skills they need to help their children. Ensuring the program is supportive of training for both staff and families can be challenging. To meet everyone’s needs, programs can:

- Provide staff training in the following areas:
  - Professional Ethics (confidentiality, boundaries and self-determination)
  - Diversity
  - Relationship building
  - Collaboration with families
  - Communication

- Form partnerships with adult educators who creatively enhance education and training opportunities for families.
- Provide advocacy training and opportunities for families to develop and use advocacy skills in the context of their child’s lifelong learning and in other ways of interest to the parent.

More information on professional development is available in the Resource Section.

MARYLAND FAMILY NETWORK PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Maryland Family Network, Inc. (MFN) has developed and offered Parent Leadership training since 2000. The curriculum and service delivery has changed over the years, and has been shaped to meet the needs of families. However, the underlying concept has always been that parents are their children’s first teacher and who better to advocate for their children than their own parents (Goal 3).

The goal of the Leadership Program is to provide parents the opportunity to recognize, build, and enhance the skills necessary to take an active and effective leadership role within their families, schools, and communities. As a result, parents are able to influence policy and program service delivery within the systems in which they participate (Goal 7).

The program is comprised of introductory and advanced level trainings. Each training consists of two, six-hour days of skill-building for a total of 12 hours. The introductory level training is designed to increase parents’ self-confidence, discovery and enhancement of leadership abilities and style, and to develop an awareness of the impact they can make through advocating for the needs of themselves and their families (Goals 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7).

The Leadership Institute for Parents curriculum is designed to strengthen the leadership abilities of parents and to increase the confidence and ability of parents to advocate. Parents get to meet other parents from around the State, affirming their needs and dreams while joining collaboratively with their peers. The Leadership Institute Curriculum (Part I) offers seven core topics that serve as an introduction to the skills necessary for advocating effectively and expanding parents capacity to get their needs met. Parents develop an awareness of their “power”, responsibility for making effective decisions, and serving as change agents in their communities (Goal 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7).

The Leadership Institute for Parents curriculum—Part I provides training and practice in the following areas:

- Understanding leadership
- Active listening
- Critical thinking
- Decision-making
- Communicating with impact
- Public speaking and advocacy; and
- Action planning.



The curriculum provides opportunities for parents to master the definition of leadership and to dispel any related myths—the goal being that they can all be leaders! Parents engage in activities to sharpen listening skills, make informed decisions, and strengthen abilities to effectively communicate with others. The training involves actual practice with public speaking within small and large groups. Incentives/prizes are provided to stimulate active participation during the various individual and group activities. By the second day, these incentives are no longer needed as participants willingly engage in the myriad of activities (Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7).

During the action planning session, parents are tasked with deciding how they will use the learned skills. Parents can decide on a project or an activity to demonstrate use of their leadership skills.

Advanced Leadership Institute for Parents is held during MFN’s Annual Staff Development Conference (Goals 1-7). It is also conducted for two days, six hours each. Topics include:

- Review of Leadership Concepts
- Managing Stress
- Maintaining Healthy Relationships
- Positive and Negative Self-Talk
- Looking Like a Leader—Presenting and Dressing for Success
- Closing Exercise

The highlight of day two of the training is the closing exercise. Parents present what they have learned in leadership training to the network staff. Some of the parents showcase the projects they developed after attending Part I. Others conduct role-plays or skits demonstrating the use of leadership skills. A number of parents give speeches focusing on what leadership and the related training has meant to them. Staff are inspired by the participants and what they have learned. The closing exercise is also an affirmation to the staff as to the strengths of their participants.

The practice and use of leadership skills is pervasive in Family Support Centers (FSC) and does not begin and end with the training. Family Support Centers are required to provide formal leadership training in the FSCs on a quarterly basis. Other opportunities provided to parents are inclusion of at least two parents on the Center’s advisory board. Also, FSCs have parent committees. The committees meet monthly and are facilitated by parents with assistance by staff. Agendas and minutes are generated by the parents. The purpose of the committees is to provide parents a venue for input into FSC operations, particularly activity and program planning. A fundamental philosophy of Family Support is that all parents have strengths. Underlying the Parent Leadership Training is that “Parents do make the difference!” (Goals 1-7).



FAMILY VOICE

*“If I can speak up for myself here, with all these people, then I can do it anywhere else for my child because I need to.”*

*- Parent, Maryland Family Network Parent Leadership Training*

EDUCATOR VOICE

*“Parent Leadership Training is so important. This training gives parents a safe place to practice these skills.”*

*- Instructor, Maryland Family Network Parent Leadership Training*

IMPACT AREAS

PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

As parents are building their leadership and advocacy skills, they will become more comfortable and participate more fully in the program. Families will be more receptive to new experiences. To support families as they grow into these new roles, make sure to:

- Create events that give opportunities to practice new leadership skills.
- Ensure that parent meetings and trainings are announced routinely, that announcements are inviting, and that language is not a barrier to parent participation. Send announcements home in the family’s language, when possible, and provide interpreters for meetings. To cut down on cost, many programs use their partners to collaborate for parent meetings. For example, two programs can invite their families to a parent meeting. One program provides the food and location while the other provides the interpreters.
- Engage in honest dialogue with families about their expectations and staff/program objectives and have agreed upon understandings of how to partner and collaborate with each other. Many parents may not understand what their role is within the school or program so giving them specific jobs or responsibilities, such as typing up parent meeting minutes or creating flyers for family events, may be helpful.

Instead of saying...	Say...
Parents need to come to parent meetings.	We have monthly parent meetings. Parents help create the agenda by letting us know their concerns and interests. Please let us know what topics interest you so we can provide that for you.
We have an open door policy. You can come to the school anytime.	We have an open door policy which means you are welcome at the center anytime. While you are at the center, you can volunteer in classrooms, help us plan parent meetings, or help us create parent information boards, etc.
You are required to attend parent teacher conferences.	We view families as partners in the children’s education. Parents are the experts on their child and the information you have is essential to the child’s success. We review the assessment information and develop and achieve goals together.



Communication to families should include three types of information:

- Information about what is happening at the program (schedule changes, meals, policies)
- Information about important content (school readiness information, developmental milestone guidelines)
- Information about the child (sharing portfolios, anecdotal about the child’s daily activities)

Remember, communication is key! Both informal and formal communication is essential to family engagement.

Informal Communication	Formal Communication
Emails/phone calls (Be sure to find out the parent’s preferred method to communicate.)	Newsletters
Bulletin Boards	Conferences
Conversations at pick up and drop off times	Materials sent home

Communication from families can be spontaneous, elicited, or prompted. Let parents know the best way to communicate with you (emails, phone calls or face to face) and promote your open door policy (remember to be specific and tell them how to participate in the program). When asking parents or caregivers for information, here are some things to include:

- Medical and logistical information (allergies, emergency contacts).
- Parent observations about their child’s growth and development and any concerns they may have.
- Information about a child’s dislikes, likes and interests. This helps plan for children in the classroom and builds on their existing skills.
- Ask families what type of information they would like to get from the program or school and how often. When parents are given the information they need, they communicate more openly and are more engaged with their child’s school or program. Many programs use an All About Me form or activity. This may include questions about the child and the parents and gives teacher useful information about that family and their interests and needs.

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Having strong family partnerships will support you as you work with families to help them become leaders and advocates. To start, you will need to assist families in identifying their interests, help them to articulate their strengths and needs, and work with them to develop and accomplish their goals. The following are a few tips to get you started:

- Assist families in using resources and systems of support as necessary and appropriate. Remember the EcoMap from Goal 1? Using this method, or a variation of it, can really help families identify their resources.
- Families with children with disabilities may need support as they navigate the special education system and advocate for their children. The first place to start is knowing and understanding their rights. Ensure that families are aware of services and know about their rights under federal and state laws, including their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Many times parents are just given the Maryland Procedural Safeguard Notice, which explains their rights under IDEA. Remember to help parents understand this document; it is not enough to just give it to them. Discuss the information and give clear examples of what is being explained so that parents understand the information. A link to the copy of the Maryland Procedural Safeguard Notice is available in the Resource Section.
- Provide opportunities for parents to identify their strengths as leaders/ advocates and to use them in the program and community. This could be as simple as having parents design the parent information board or having them collaborate with staff and coordinate meetings and events for the school.
- Share information with families about family peer networks and/or parent initiated school community efforts.
- Partner with parents to engage in advocacy groups that work on issues related to child, family, and community needs or on other issues of interest to parents. Remember to look to your county’s Local Early Childhood Advisory Council and other local advisory councils. Many of these groups invite parents to attend these meetings because the parent’s perspective is valuable to the work they are doing!

QUICK TIP



Remember it is not enough to tell a parent to attend a meeting or to just take them to the meeting. As staff, we must prepare them for the meeting so they know what to expect and how to participate.

- Tell them what the purpose of the meeting is and list two or three questions they can ask to help them participate.
- Attend the meeting with the parent so you can coach them and make them feel more comfortable.
- Sometimes just looking the part can help the parent feel more comfortable! Giving parents a notepad, pen, and a bottle of water helps them to look and feel more prepared. (Next time you’re at a meeting, look around the room. Nearly everyone will have these three items!)

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Leadership is important but how does it impact teaching and learning? Remember that when families understand their child’s development and understand the importance of their role in their child’s education, they work as partners with their teachers and provide information that is needed for the child’s success in the classroom. The following strategies will help parents be a part of their child’s education:

- Make sure families have ongoing opportunities to discuss child assessment data. This could be any screenings or assessments that are completed as well as the children’s portfolios (a collection of the children’s work throughout a period of time). This helps families to see how their children are progressing and gives them an opportunity to discuss specific developmental skills and milestones. Reviewing this information with them helps prepare families to initiate and/or participate in similar discussions with teachers in the formal education system.
- Ensure families have ongoing opportunities to discuss their observations and concerns about their child’s strengths and challenges. This helps families and providers to work together to develop appropriate goals for the child.

QUICK TIP



Remember - Educators and early care providers may be the expert on education and child development, but the parents are the experts on their child. Their information is critical to ensuring children’s success!





COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community partnerships are essential to a program’s success in supporting parents and families. Not only do these strong partnerships create opportunities to link families to community resources, but it also allows opportunities for parents to be involved in community organizing activities. This allows families to advocate for their children to improve their development and learning experiences. Programs can:

- Link families with support systems, peer-to-peer groups, and resources, like Parent Café’s and Library Cafes.
- Participate in community meetings and initiatives that increase program capacity to respond to the needs and interest of families.
- Share information with families about resources and services for children with disabilities and special health needs.
- Collaborate with community organizations that share parent concerns and interests.

Helping families to become leaders and advocates gives them a wide range of duties. Think of the several examples discussed. Family advocates can provide information to staff and to other families; they can organize events and assist in the classroom. Family advocates can also help raise awareness and participate in leadership meetings, and even testify in support of legislation around an issue.

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

Research shows that children are more successful in school when their families are involved in their development and education. For children with disabilities, the importance of parent involvement can be even greater.

Very often, parents are the only or best source of information about their child’s strengths and the impact a disability has on their child’s development or learning ability. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that parent be equal members on the team that evaluates their child’s abilities and creates an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP) to meet the unique needs of their child.

The Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Special Education/ Early Intervention Services maintains a network of local Family Support Services coordinators that assist parents of children with disabilities to fully participate in planning early intervention and special education services for their child.

- **Family Support Network** coordinators for families of children ages Birth to three years
- **Preschool Partners** coordinator for families of children ages 3-5 years
- **Partners for Success** coordinators for families of children ages 3-21 years

Family support service coordinators are available in each Maryland jurisdiction to:

- Answer questions about early intervention and special education services
- Help foster connections among families
- Provide resources and lend library materials
- Organize parent trainings
- Facilitate parent support groups
- Support families in planning for transitions
- Informally assist parents in resolving concerns with local school systems
- Provide information about Maryland’s formal process for resolving disputes with local early intervention systems and local school systems

EDUCATOR VOICE

*Parent involvement is crucial to our program’s success! Our parents complete an annual survey on the center policies, procedures and educational philosophy. This feedback is essential for us as we grow and meet the needs of our community here at Johns Hopkins Bayview Child Development Center.*

- Johns Hopkins Bayview Child Development Center, Baltimore City

FAMILY VOICE

*The staff encouraged me to keep coming to the program, even when I didn’t want to. They encouraged me to get my GED and helped me to find a job. When I started at the Family Support Center, my goal was to get my GED before my daughter graduated high school. She not only graduated high school, but she is enrolled in college.*

- Parent, Our House Family Support Center, Maryland Family Support Network Spring Training

REFLECTION

Improving the outcomes for children and families takes more than just telling parents they need to be advocates for their children. Leadership and advocacy are skills taught through modeling, coaching and practice. When this is done successfully, parents have not only improved their family well-being, but they have modeled motivation, persistence and accomplishments for their children and have improved their family’s outcomes.

