

GOAL 3

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES SHOULD SUPPORT FAMILIES AS LIFELONG EDUCATORS OF THEIR CHILDREN

Parents and family members are their child’s first teachers (i.e. The first ones in line to support their children’s learning.). Maryland initiatives and the practices of early care and education providers should create collaborative relationships with a variety of service entities to support and empower the family in its role as first teacher.

For children and families to be successful, early childhood educators and providers need to support parents in their understanding of the importance of the earliest years in a child’s education. These early years set the foundation for a child’s success in school and in life. When parents recognize the importance of providing early learning experiences, they are more involved and engaged in their child’s learning from the very start.

EDUCATOR VOICE

While working with families from other cultures, I have gained an awareness of how other cultures view teachers. For example, with some families, a teacher is held in very high regard and families do not feel that education is their role. They feel their child’s education is the teacher’s responsibility, not theirs. When we tell them the parents are the child’s first teacher, they do not understand what this means. It is my responsibility to help my families understand their roles in their child’s education.

- Taken from the Ready at Five, Symposium, April, 2016



FOUNDATIONAL AREAS

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

When programs recognize a family’s needs and how to support them, they have a true partnership which supports early childhood learning. The mission of a program should include supporting staff as they bring parents into an educational partnership.

The chart below is a helpful guide to establish your goals and strategies to support families:

To support parents as their child’s first teacher, <u>programs and providers</u> need to:	To be effective first teachers, <u>parents and families</u> need:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Build relationships with families so that they see you as resource and a trusted source of information.▪ Provide parents with resources and skills so they feel empowered in their roles as parents and teacher.▪ Develop a consistent message about ways in which parents can help.▪ Ask and listen to what parents and families need to provide learning opportunities for their children.▪ Provide professional development to support staff to appropriately engage with families and collaborate with families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ An understanding of how and when children learn, including an awareness of developmental milestones▪ Ideas for supporting and planning spontaneous and intentional learning opportunities▪ Knowledge of the benefits of early learning▪ An environment in which learning is encouraged and supported

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To support families in learning about their child’s development, early childhood educators and providers will need to expand their skill set as well. Teachers are responsible for informing families about children’s progress, skills, and abilities, the **curriculum**, activities to reinforce learning at home, and even behavior modification, but do we support teachers in their efforts to do this? Staff receive training on how children develop and learn, but if teachers are being asked to educate families, then programs need to ensure that their teachers and staff have the skills to do this. The following is a list of training topics and strategies that will help teachers and staff to inform and support families.

Training Topics	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Relationship building▪ Communication▪ Partnerships▪ Professional ethics (confidentiality, boundaries, etc.)▪ Cultural Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Create “learning communities” for staff. (This is discussed further in Goal 6.)▪ Include teachers/teacher assistants in parenting education sessions so parents and teachers can share information about child development and program curriculum.▪ Create safe and respectful environments where adults - staff and parents - can learn from each other and ask for the kinds of information they find helpful.▪ Become familiar with education and training opportunities available to families within the community.



IMPACT AREAS

PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

Early childhood educators often use phrases like “*parents are their child’s first teacher*” and “**teachable moments**” but we do not often think about how parents interpret these phrases and what they mean to them. Depending on a family’s experience, background and culture, these phrases may mean many things. Early childhood educators and providers need to be more intentional when using certain phrases and terms so that families know how to best support their child.

When you use the phrase...	Also say...
Parents are a child’s first teacher	A parent or family is teaching throughout their day. Children learn through their interactions and experiences with their family and also through the behavior they see and hear.
Teachable moments	These are times when your child is more likely to be open to learn something or be made aware of something. These are great opportunities to build skills, reinforce lessons and it also offers an opening for parents to communicate with their children. ¹
Children learn within their daily routine	To keep your child engaged and help to build skills, use the opportunities that occur in your day-to-day routine. For example, have your child help sort the laundry. They learn colors, build math skills through sorting and classifying, build language skills, and also learn responsibility by helping with daily chores.
Developmentally Appropriate Practices	What I’m doing with your child every day is just right for your child’s age, background, and personality.

By ensuring parents understand our messages, we are building relationships and supporting parents as they learn about their role in their child’s education. When speaking with parents, be sure to pay attention to the things they do and say. It helps to look for cues to ensure they understand your message.



TEACHABLE MOMENT

As a provider, one of the most important skills for you to help parents gain is the ability to recognize and capitalize on “teachable moments” in everyday life. A teachable moment can happen almost anywhere - in the supermarket, when picking your child up from child care or school, walking through a shopping mall or setting the table for dinner. Chances are that many of the valuable moral lessons that you learned from your parents as a child were not consciously taught at all. Rather, they were learned in the midst of casual moments of real life, just as our children’s real lessons come from being, living and interacting with us in a hundred different ways we could never predict in advance.¹

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

When parents and families take pride in their roles as their child’s first teacher, they are becoming your partners in education. Starting this partnership in the early years and nurturing the relationship by listening to what parents and families have to say will help build a strong network.


Listening to families and gathering information about their family and child is the first step to supporting parents in their role as their child’s first teacher. Providers can use that information to make families feel included in the program, and also as a guide for the types of suggestions and strategies to offer the family. To expand our understanding of how this can be done, let’s look at the following example:

A father you have been working with really wants his child to do well in school. He came in to talk with you because every night he sits with his four year old daughter, Liv, for 30 minutes and they practice writing her name, but she gets upset and refuses to practice. It seems every night they end up in an argument. He wants Liv to do well, but she just doesn’t show any interest in her school work.

This is a common complaint for parents and one that many times can be easily solved. It may be necessary to first help the parent understand what is developmentally appropriate for that age and for that particular child. Parents may have the best intentions, but may be putting unrealistic expectations on their child or not fully understand how the best way their child learns a new skill.

Give parents specific strategies to help reinforce learning that can be done throughout the daily routine. Families are often not aware that they do not have to do anything new; they just need to include their children in the things they are already doing. These simple routines provide a lot of learning for children. Use the following chart to help families identify activities that they can do with their children and the skills they are building.

Activity	Skill
Sorting laundry	Identifying colors, math skills (classification), language, fine and gross motor skills (picking up, carrying)
Bath time (filling and emptying cups)	Language, math skills (measurement, comparison), fine motor skills (squeezing, pouring)
Helping to cook (as appropriate) mixing, stirring, setting table	Language, fine and gross motor skills (mixing, stirring, pouring), math skills (sorting and classifying)
Walking to the bus stop or driving to school or other places and pointing out letters and numbers, colors and shapes of signs	Language and literacy (identifying letters), identifying colors, math skills (identifying numbers and shapes)



QUICK TIP

Parents often feel that having children help with the chores around the house is not appropriate for young children, that it may take too long, be too difficult or not be done “right.” Parents may think, “It will be easier if I just do it.” We can help parents understand that by taking the time to teach children these routines and activities, they are supporting their child’s learning, building their confidence and helping them be successful. Another benefit – they are more likely to help with the chores as they get older if they learned how to do them when they were young!

FAMILY VOICE

We come every week. You can see in every center that learning is the goal. After coming here, my child asks me to help sort socks and tells me about the colors. She also talks about different types of food at the grocery store.”
- Parent, Storyville, Baltimore County Public Library

There are also many free apps and websites where parents can receive daily ideas for learning activities. Programs can support parents by creating a list of these free online resources for families. Here are a few to get you started.

App or Website	How it Works
Vroom - http://www.joinvroom.org/	Vroom offers activities within the daily routine that encourage skill building.
I Learn With Emotions (available in the App Store)	Children are encouraged to watch short videos or animated clips of real world scenarios and then are asked to identify the emotions felt by the characters by choosing the right emoticons. Children learn how to help engaging characters work through their emotional situations.
Counting 1,2,3 (available in the App Store)	Through four mini games, children learn how to count and recognize the numbers from 1 to 10. Games also focus on color names and on the pronunciation of numbers.
FitnessKids (available in the App Store)	FitnessKids contains 25 animated exercises that can be performed independently or in groups. Each exercise has buttons for music, movement and speed.

The Center for Technology in Education (CTE) at Johns Hopkins University developed *Tech for Tikes* which is a list of apps that promote learning and development in young children. *Tech for Tikes* was created to help parents and teachers identify which types of apps target critical areas of development and learning during the preschool years.²

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community organizations can play a huge role in providing parents with the knowledge they need to support their children's learning and be effective first teachers. Many community programs offer ongoing events and resources to give families fun ways to build skills together. For teachers, it is important to become familiar with community programs and what they offer. This information is valuable to parents and shows them different ways to engage their children in learning.

Local libraries and museums offer a variety of activities and play groups that provide learning experiences for children, but also encourage parents as they learn ways to support their children's learning.

EVERY CHILD READY TO READ @ YOUR LIBRARY

Public libraries in Maryland implement a number of strategies designed to meet the goals of the Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework. A signature initiative of the public libraries is Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library, a research-based early literacy outreach education program for parents and caregivers. The program enlists parents and caregivers as partners in preparing young children to read and provides them with effective tools and strategies, thus supporting families as lifelong educators of their children (Goal 3). The program also puts library resources into the hands of parents – connecting families to their communities (Goal 6). Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library supports families by engaging them in meaningful learning activities that provide a unique context for promoting positive parent-child relationships (Goal 2). Through the workshop(s), parents and caregivers learn strategies for developing emergent literacy skills through engaging parent-child activities that incorporate singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing. These practices are all familiar to parents and caregivers, which makes them easy to use and integrate into everyday life. Through the Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library program, families gain access to knowledge, resources, and community supports that help them engage in positive parent-child interactions and foster their young children's emergent literacy skills. Through the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Grant, every library system in Maryland received a copy of the Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library toolkit. Library staff are trained on the program and parents and providers are encouraged to talk with their local librarian about how their library is making use of the resources that Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library provides. For more information on the national program, see: <http://everychildreadytoread.org/>



EDUCATOR VOICE

Through programs and activities, such as Every Child Ready to Read, or in the Library Café discussions, we are offering a learning structure for parents to think about how to be their best. For example, we give tips to parents encouraging them to ask questions of their young children when they are in the grocery store – “What is the name of this fruit?” When families are driving in the car – “Let’s sing The Wheels on the Bus song.”

- Cecil County MD Public Library

LEARNING PARTIES

One effective family engagement initiative implemented in Maryland is Learning Parties, created by Maryland's Ready at Five. Guided by a trained facilitator, the interactive, hands-on, parent-child parties promote positive parent-child relationships (Goal 2). Based on the belief that parents are lifelong educators of their children (Goal 3), Learning Parties teach parents how to make everyday moments learning moments through playing, singing, talking, reading, and engaging in fun, developmentally appropriate learning activities. Learning Parties also connect families to their peers and community (Goal 6) by cultivating social networks and enabling parents to meet, talk with, and learn from other parents/families. Often, Learning Parties are held in schools and bring preschool children and their families into a school environment prior to being enrolled. As such, they support the goal of family engagement in transitions (Goal 5). Ready at Five has developed a Learning Party Curriculum in seven key Domains: Language & Literacy, Math, Science, Social Foundations, Physical Well-being and Motor Development, Social Studies and The Arts. Additionally, Ready at Five has developed the Learning Party curriculum to be aligned to the Vocabulary Improvement and Oral Language Enrichment Through Stories (VIOLETS) program, which they also developed. This program is often offered to children and their parents/families enrolled in classrooms implementing the VIOLETS Read Aloud Program. Health Learning Parties, developed by the School of Medicine, University of Maryland and Ready at Five, are offered in the University's Health Clinics. The Learning Party series for each domain includes curriculum for four 90-minute Learning Parties (for a total of 28 across all domains) during which parents learn a variety of techniques and strategies for supporting children. While parents are learning, their children are in another room building their skills and abilities while participating in activities related to the content that is being provided to their parents. At the Learning Parties, parents have an opportunity to practice the activities with their children while trained Learning Party leaders provide positive feedback and constructive suggestions. Parents are also given activities to complete with their children at home, as well as a variety of books, developmentally appropriate materials, and educational toys to start a learning library in their home. Learning Parties have been offered to hundreds of parents and children throughout Maryland's 24 jurisdictions at no cost to participants. For more information, see the resource section.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Classrooms and early learning settings are often the best place for parent's to learn how to support their child's learning. When families feel welcome and a part of the school or program community, they are engaged in their child's development and learning.

To support parents as they become familiar with their role as their child's first teacher, programs can provide many opportunities in the classroom or learning environment. For example, some programs have a parent job board when parents come in to volunteer. Similar to a child's job board, it provides a list of several activities that parents can do in the classroom or child care setting. By spending time in the child's setting, families have opportunities to practice these skills and then apply them at home as well. Here are a few that activities that parents can do in the classroom or child care setting and also use at home.

- Read a story to children- Parents learn how to read stories to children and how to ask questions about the story.
- Helping children in small group activity (art, writing, etc.)- Families learn how to help children with their activities and learn the importance of **scaffolding**. For activities to do in the classroom, Johns Hopkins CTE, created a Pinterest page with all kinds of engaging activities across the seven domains of learning. For more information, see the Resource section.
- Helping children in classroom centers- Families practice **facilitating** children's play and to follow the children's lead. They also learn about the skills children are developing during their play.

Providers often hear from families that “children just play.” It is important to let parents and families know what skills children are developing through play so they recognize its importance and value. To help parents understand what children are learning, Purdue Extension created a *Block Party*. Teachers and providers set up their classroom with different types of activities that children do in the block area. They included all types of blocks of different sizes, colors and textures. Families would rotate through each center which had different types of blocks. Each center had a poster explaining what skills children were developing and how the parents could engage with their child during the block play. Parents left with an understanding of why play is important and how their children learn. They also left with new skills to support their child's learning at home.³ For more information on this activity see the Resource section.

When providers invite families into the classrooms and early learning settings, families not only discover new ways to encourage their child's learning, but they also learn about their child's development. This helps parents recognize their child's developmental milestones, and also gives the parents opportunities to discuss any concerns or address questions they have with the provider. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) is a simple screening tool that parents can do with their children to identify their child's strengths and weaknesses and identify any areas that might be of concern. This tool can also be a great way to start conversations between the provider and the parents where they work together to establish goals for the child. For more information on the ASQ see the Resource section.



EDUCATOR VOICE

Parents are asked to do the Ages and Stages Questionnaires as their child is enrolled in the program and teachers do them as well. This gives them a developmental perspective of their child. Parents are encouraged to ask for suggestions if they are having difficulties with child rearing. We also share a Backpack Connection Series each month. The Backpack Series provides a way for teachers and parents to work together to help young children develop social emotional skills and reduce challenging behavior. The monthly handouts help the parents to stay informed about what their child is learning at school and offers specific ideas on how to use the strategy at home. We encourage parents to embrace their role and know that we will work with them to do what is most beneficial for the child.

- Johns Hopkins Bayview Child Development Center, Baltimore City

QUICK TIP

Remember – Learning begins at birth. Simple activities such as supervised tummy time helps build fine and gross motor skills, cooing and babbling are the beginning stages of language development and responding to a child’s cries sets healthy foundations for social and emotional wellbeing. Sharing this information with families can also help them support younger children they may have at home.

REFLECTION

We often assume that parenting is automatic for families and they naturally know how to support their child in all areas of development. While parents are the experts on their child, they may need more support to help their child be successful. We must ensure that we are supporting, encouraging, and helping parents gain the skills and knowledge needed to ensure their success in the role as their child’s first teacher.

