

GOAL 6

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES SHOULD CONNECT FAMILIES TO THEIR PEERS AND THE COMMUNITY

Personal networks are a key source of support for families with young children. Learning from one another and sharing common experiences can inform parent and families about resources, expand parenting strategies, and offer a source of comfort. Maryland initiatives and the family engagement practices of early care and education providers should support parents and families to form connections with peers and mentors in formal or informal social networks that are supportive and enhance social well-being and community life.

We have all heard the expression, “It takes a village to raise a child.” However, these days it seems more parents are left on their own to figure out appropriate parenting. Families are bombarded with information, but how do they know which information is credible? Social media is one of the most favored ways to communicate, yet comments from these websites on certain parenting practices can be harsh and critical, making parents feel they have to be perfect all the time. How can this be expected of new parents? How can this be expected for moms who are working and taking care of others in their families? To help families through day to day struggles and difficult situations, teachers, educators and providers are often there to listen and understand, but sometimes more help is required and we need to be prepared for those times. To help families when they are in need, providers should be aware of, and share information on available community resources. Also, a “learning community” can be created where families and staff feel comfortable sharing and learning from one another. Our children learn from their parents, their neighbors, their teachers and the community in which they live. Although it may not always seem like it, it still does take a village to raise a child.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Ellen Galinski, author of Mind in the Making<sup>1</sup>, defines learning communities as groups “of people who come together to learn with and from each other and then seek to act on what they learn. Their reason for being is ongoing inquiry for the sake of improvement.” This emphasis on learning with and from each other, and then taking action from that shared teaching and learning, truly speaks to the power of collaboration.

By building and acting as a community, participants from all different areas of early childhood education (e.g., teachers, parents, and administration) can come together to enact new policies and design new practices in response to family and community needs that are tied directly to children’s development.

FOUNDATIONAL AREAS

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

Early childhood classrooms are viewed as communities. Children are taught to look at their classmates as friends and children have jobs in the classroom to teach responsibility. They work together to take care of each other and the classroom. The same is true for early childhood programs and family serving agencies. Programs that support good family engagement practices provide environments where families feel welcomed and included as part of a larger community of parents and families. Family engagement efforts should build connections between families, peers and the community and support families’ interests and needs. Community partnerships enhance programs and enable programs to better support and connect families to community resources. The following programs are great collaboration models.

- Judy Centers  
May partner with other agencies to provide adult education, parenting classes, child development programs, health services, good nutrition etc.
- Libraries  
May work with local child care providers and other child care programs and agencies to plan library visits, storytimes, and share additional community resources for families.
- Head Start and Early Head Start Programs  
May partner with other agencies to provide services to families regarding good nutrition, adult education, financial stability, child development, parenting classes, etc.
- Local Child Care and Resource and Referral Centers  
May partner with programs to provide information on quality early childhood practices and training for staff and families.

MOUs

MOUs should address what services will be provided for staff and families and how services for each program will be delivered.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Creating a learning community - an environment that is safe and respectful where all adults, including staff and parents, can learn from each other – is important. Everyone can ask for the kinds of topics/information that they need and find helpful means for investing in high quality professional development and coaching. This is needed to support staff as they develop skills to engage children and families in appropriate ways at all times. Parents will participate differently because of past experiences, cultural reasons, and their personalities. Staff must be prepared to recognize and build on parent strengths.

10 KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES<sup>2</sup> ARE THAT THEY:

1. Bring new players together.
2. Seek to reach the most “in need”.
3. Focus on learning from and with each other and share a belief that there is expertise amongst everyone.
4. Focus on active learning that is experiential and engages participants in **self-reflection** and self-discovery.
5. Use new media to connect in creative ways.
6. Actively create new curricula based on sound principles of child and adult learning and development.
7. Focus on assessment, but tie assessment to child development.
8. Reframe teaching as teaching AND learning together.
9. Connect policy to practice.
10. “Pay it forward.”





IMPACT AREAS

PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

Programs that employ good family engagement practices will welcome and value families, but also recognize the support that families need to be successful and help to build those systems and connections. According to the Head Start Research to Practice Series on Family Outcomes, there are two key competencies that allow families to actively participate in their child's school:

- **Cultural Capital** –refers to the knowledge and skills needed to understand and participate in educational or other systems in a particular culture, or more simply, institutional or formal knowledge and support.
- **Social Capital** – refers to the relationships that help provide resources or information, more simply, relationships and support networks.

Parents need both social and cultural capital to engage in a program, but what does this mean? For parents to be actively engaged in a program, they will need peer to peer support as well as community resources and support. Use the following chart for examples of both.

Social Capital (relationships and support networks)	Cultural Capital (institutional knowledge and support)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A neighbor or family member who can transport to or from the bus stop.</li><li>• A neighbor who keeps the key to your house in case of emergencies.</li><li>• A Mommy or Daddy Weekly Support group.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Knowledge of school start and stop dates.</li><li>• Kindergarten transition information.</li><li>• Awareness of adult education classes and information.</li><li>• Early Intervention and Special Education Services.</li></ul>



FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Families look to their child care programs and schools for a certain level of support. They often seek information from these programs regarding their child's development and parenting strategies. They also look at these programs as a safe and secure place for their children while they are at work. Providers should recognize the formal and informal types of support systems that parents rely on and help them to not only recognize the supports they have in place but to utilize them when needed.

Formal Support Systems	Informal Support Systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Doctors and Pediatricians</li><li>• Early Child Care and Family Care programs</li><li>• Local School Systems</li><li>• Libraries</li><li>• Other family serving agencies</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family members and extended family</li><li>• Neighbors and friends</li><li>• Recreational groups</li><li>• Religious institutions</li></ul>

When providers bring these systems and families together, they create opportunities for families to build support networks and strong relationships that can support families through their child's entire educational career. Strong support systems are especially important in **migrant** communities where families might rely on each other for assistance with language, or for navigating new and unfamiliar educational systems, or social services. These support systems may simply provide needed emotional support during a transition period.

SCENARIO

Jennifer recently had a beautiful baby girl. She had a two year old toddler and a six year old at home. Her husband worked long hours and was gone for most of the day. The first few nights being at home were very difficult and the baby was soon diagnosed with a disability and was medically fragile. Jennifer was extremely overwhelmed with the amount of care needed for her newborn and her two older sons. She felt that she often was doing it alone since her husband was gone for most of the day.

Jennifer's provider worked closely with her and listened as she described how difficult everyday seemed for her with the doctor's appointments, medical care and the normal day to day life with three children. After asking her a few questions, the provider recognized that Jennifer's sister and friends lived nearby and had been helping to baby sit and get the older child to and from school while Jennifer was at the doctor or caring for her newborn (informal supports). Jennifer was really overwhelmed with not understanding how to help and support her newborn and who to go to for all of her questions and concerns. The provider was able to get her information regarding special education, as well as support groups in the area where she could meet other parents of children with disabilities (formal supports). By helping this mom to recognize the supports she already had in place, the provider was also able to identify additional supports she needed and then give her useful information.

The mom looked toward her provider as support and a safe place to ask questions. It opened the door to a larger support network that not only helped the family during a difficult transition period, but provided one that will continue to be a support throughout their children's education.

FAMILY VOICE

*It's important to have a school and organization like the Judy Center to care so much and do so much for your children and family. It makes a world of difference especially when you have five kids and your husband works extremely long hours. To know that the school and the Judy Center work together along with the community makes you feel good and a part of something special. My family has been to many of the Judy Center events – Family Nights, Harvest Fest, field trips and many others over the years. I have been able to meet and build relationships with a lot of parents I probably would not have known if it was not for some of the trips and events the Judy Center offers.*

- Parent, Charles County Judy Center





TEACHING AND LEARNING

We often think of the child’s classroom when talking about teaching and learning, but remember, in a learning community, staff, parents and children are learning. When programs create peer networks for parents, they feel comfortable to participate in the program more fully, including in the child’s classroom. They will be more likely to ask questions of the teachers and staff regarding their child’s development. To fully support families in this area, staff can:

- Encourage parents and caregivers to participate in training opportunities regarding child development and social and emotional development, (e.g., Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning).
- Parents, teachers and staff can exchange information about their children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. This includes talking about the importance of the home language (with families of children who are dual language learners).
- Encourage parent-to-parent support when participating in parent meetings about children’s learning and development.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Strong community partnerships enhance early learning programs and support parents in a variety of ways. To continue to build on your community partnerships:

- Participate in community meetings and initiatives that will build your program’s partners and increase your ability to respond to parent needs. Your Local Early Childhood Advisory Council (LECAC) is a great place to start to build those connections with other early childhood educators and family serving agencies. For more information on your LECAC, see the Resource Section.
- Enhance family experiences with community resources that support children’s learning and development, such as libraries and museums. Reach out to the local library for activities and events in the area that you can share with parents. You may also find that you can schedule periodic trips or story times for your program and build a partnership.
- Share information with families about resources and services for children with disabilities and special health needs. Connect with early intervention and preschool special education offices so that you can give parents updated information and help to support families with children with disabilities.

TO BUILD A STRONG COMMUNITY WITHIN YOUR PROGRAM:

- Schedule events at your program that bring together families, staff and community representatives.
- Help establish relationships between staff members and families. This helps staff quickly identify each family’s needs.
- Find families who are knowledgeable about the community and ask them to participate at events and meetings with parents.

EDUCATOR VOICE

*We had Mr. Kofi’s Wolf Trap Parent Involvement Workshop at our program and had everyone participate; all of our parents were involved and were able to appreciate each other a little more. These events help our program become a community beyond its identity as a learning institution. Cooking with parents, attending behavior training, attending Parent Café’s, all allow parents to empathize with the fact that they all have similar problems and can get to know and help each other. These activities have helped parents build rapport with each other and have promoted supportive friendships between parents. Sometimes parents just need someone else to talk to who shares the same concerns.*

- Greenbelt Children’s Center, Prince Georges County

EDUCATOR VOICE

*Seventy-seven parents and children showed up at our first Library Café. We partnered with the Judy Center and the Early Learning Division at our local school system focused on the Title I areas. Many of the families had not been to the library before. All staff were on deck, including our library director, staff and volunteers, to meet and greet families, guiding them through the evening’s activities. Our volunteer coordinator happens to be a culinary arts school graduate and prepared a special array of refreshments. Every Child Read to Read’s five practices were at the heart of our activities – four activity stations were set up in the library with one take-home activity-one activity per practice –talk, sing, read, write, and play. Our goal was to create a pleasant experience with the hope that parents would want to come back. We believe we’re moving in the right direction because we had several crying children who didn’t want to go home.*

- Wicomico County, MD Public Library

MARYLAND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Maryland Public Libraries offer a wide variety of programming for children from birth to age five and for their caregivers. Our researched-based early literacy workshops and programs support parents and caregivers in their roles as their child’s first teacher. Literacy rich story times are designed to foster a love for language and the library through age appropriate stories, music, finger plays and movement. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to try these activities with their child at home. By talking, singing, reading, writing and playing with their children, parents and caregivers help build the strong literacy foundation necessary for school readiness. In addition to books and music, many libraries have early literacy themed backpacks for checkout. Other library programs may include bilingual story times, art, music, dance, STEM activities, as well as fun and informative Library Café’s for preschoolers and their families. Activity centers, found in the children’s areas at many libraries, encourage free play, which is how young children learn best. Please check out the State Library Resource Center to access many library services and resources.

REFLECTION



When programs support family engagement practices to build community and peer networks, the entire program and community benefit. Relationships that children, families and the community build support one another not only in education, but in all other areas of life.

