

GOAL 1

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES SHOULD PROMOTE FAMILY WELL-BEING

Maryland's vision for family engagement is a two-generation strategy. Families are the key to a child's early development and learning. A goal of family engagement initiatives must support family well-being. Maryland's family engagement initiatives and the family engagement practices of early care and education providers should promote the safety, health, and financial security of families so they may successfully parent their young children.



TWO GENERATIONAL APPROACH

A focus on creating opportunities for and addressing needs of children and their parents together. For more information on the two generational approach, see the Resource section.

It is necessary to be aware of family concerns, priorities, and resources because this helps us better support them. For example, you may have attempted to reach out to a parent regarding the child's behavior, only to leave the conversation with several unresolved issues. Perhaps the parent was even dismissive about your concerns. When you met with the parent, you discovered that the family was going through a difficult move or was struggling financially. Maybe the parents were not dismissive of your concerns for the child but, at the time, had other priorities. To effectively work together, we have to be aware of each other's concerns and priorities. When this happens, not only do parents feel validated but we are establishing a give-and-take relationship with families that will lead to improved outcomes for all.



CPR - Concerns Priorities Resources

To effectively partner and build relationships with families, we must be aware of and validate their concerns, priorities and resources.

These sound like some pretty lofty goals, right? However, sometimes it is the simple things that we can embed into our programs and our interactions with families that really give families the support they need.



FAMILY VOICE

"Being homeless a few short years ago I got into the routine of bringing my children into the library each day. One day before we got to the library, Miss Sue (from the check-out desk) was walking down the street on her lunch break. She greeted us saying, "Hello, how are you? Will we see you in the library later today?" "She talked to us as if we were any other family that goes to the library. That conversation was a turning point in my life. I began to think of myself in a more optimistic and confident way. In time, I was able to get out of a troubled marriage and move into an apartment with my children."

- Parent, Library Cafe, Carroll County Public Library

FOUNDATIONAL AREAS

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

As stated before, family wellbeing is critical to children's success. However, recognizing when families need assistance and knowing how to approach a family can be difficult. Programs need to have systems and supports in place that focus on high-quality professional development, continuous improvement, program environment and community partnerships to ensure they are supporting a family's well-being and providing them with appropriate resources. What does all that mean? Programs that are invested in improving a family's well-being will have specific policies and procedures in place to provide professional development opportunities in this area. Also, policies regarding community partnerships will be necessary to support the program as they help families meet their individual goals.

For example, programs that are accredited by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) collaborate with the community and use community resources to strengthen programs, promote family and child learning, and address the needs of families. A unique aspect of Maryland's early care and education system is the presence of Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Family Education Centers (Judy Centers). Maryland's Judy Centers are another great model for community partnerships. It is through these partnerships that Judy Centers are able to offer services or parent trainings that are designed to meet the specific needs of parents they are serving.

For more information on MSDE Accreditation and the Judy Centers, please see the Resources section.

EDUCATOR VOICE

The Charles County Judy Center has numerous useful and reliable community partners; however, the University of Maryland Extension partnership has strengthened our Judy Center in five of the 12 component areas the Judy Centers must meet. The Maryland Extension teaches nutrition lessons to Judy Center children but also provides professional development to our teaching staff as well as parent trainings. Parent trainings are always at times that are convenient to our working Judy Center parents. The Maryland Extension can always be counted on to offer an

activity for our family nights throughout the year as well. Families always enjoy the activities and the food samples. When we discuss and plan take home projects, the Maryland Extension provides free materials that can be incorporated into a developmentally appropriate parent and child home activity. This partnership as well as many others helps to provide an array of services to our families.

- Charles County Judy Center

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN THE STATE'S JUDY CENTERS

Judy Centers are located at or near Title I schools, and provide access to high quality early childhood education programs, as well as comprehensive family support services. Judy Centers serve families with children birth through five years of age that live in designated Title I school zones. The goal of these Centers is to support school readiness. Judy Centers are unique because they promote school readiness through collaboration with community - based agencies, organizations, and businesses. This integrated approach promotes program and service delivery that is conveniently located under one roof at or near the schools, ensuring that young children who may begin school at a **deficit** are given opportunities to start their formal education on a level playing field with their peers. The focus on family wellbeing (Goal 1) and an Adult Education Component (Goal 4) are key aspects of the Judy Center model. Judy Centers must meet 12 Component Standards that are deemed essential to children's school readiness. Component V is Family Involvement. The Judy Center's role in family involvement is centered on the family's ability to participate in and support their child's early learning. Supporting positive parent-child relationships (Goal 2), families as lifelong educators (Goal 3), and family engagement in transitions (Goal 5) is accomplished through a host of different activities that may include Parent Cafés, programs for dads and other significant men in the lives of children, playgroups, puppet and children's theaters, story time, and family field trips. Activities and events are focused on the seven **domains of learning** used to assess school readiness when children enter kindergarten. Family activities provide social networking opportunities that connect parents and caregivers to their peers and community (Goal 6) and support family empowerment and child advocacy (Goal 7) through event planning, volunteer opportunities, and membership on Judy Center Partnership Steering Committees. The family engagement services provided at a Judy Center depend on the collaboration of all the partners and the specific needs of the children and families. Judy Center staff communicates on an ongoing basis with parents through face-to-face contact, home visiting, regularly published newsletters that include calendars of events, flyers and brochures that include information about their programs and services, and many have websites. There are currently 51 Judy Centers located throughout Maryland.



Make an Immediate Impact on a Child's Life

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Since we are talking about professional development, we should talk about what kind of training is most helpful for staff regarding family wellbeing. If we are truly supporting families, then specific training on *how* to partner with families is essential. High-quality professional development should not only include knowledge of community resources, but should also be supported in cross-cultural responsiveness and strength-based perspectives, meaning that staff need to be self-aware and value child and family cultures and experiences. Using this approach, staff can begin to build strong, respectful relationships with families. The following are examples of different types of staff training that are useful when engaging families:

- Professional Ethics (confidentiality, boundaries and self-determination)
- Diversity
- Child Development
- **Developmentally Appropriate Practices**
- Trauma and its effect on children and families
- Family and Youth Engagement
- Relationship building
- Collaboration with families
- Communication
- Collaboration with communities

Training can be obtained through local resource and referral agencies, accredited colleges and universities, and approved community trainers and training organizations. Training is developed and aligned to *The Knowledge and Competency Framework for Child and Youth Care Professionals*. For a complete copy of *The Knowledge and Competency Framework* and more information on training, see the Resource section.

IMPACT AREAS

When programs have quality professional development and strong leadership that supports family well-being, you will see the improvement in the impact areas, or more simply stated the services you provide.

PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

First and foremost, you want your program to be welcoming of all families – of all family structures, sizes and arrangements – and will hold the family in high regard and partner effectively with parents. Relationships between providers and families will be receptive, responsive and respectful.



THE THREE R'S

When working with families, relationships should be built on the Three R's:

- **Receptive** - families and staff will listen and be more accepting of what is being said or given to each other.
- **Responsive** - families and staff will react in a positive manner to what is being said or given to each other. Staff and families will be more open to suggestions and sensitive to each other's needs.
- **Respectful** - families and staff will behave in a way that shows regard for each other.

Programs should establish family-friendly environments with pictures and materials that **affirm** and accept all families and allow opportunities for families to connect with other parents or staff for reflection, information sharing, ideas and support. Materials and resources, including information for children with disabilities and special health needs, should be available to connect families to the community resources they may need. Specific examples of this include:

- Providing opportunities that support parents' needs to connect with other parents for reflection, information, ideas, and support. This can be done through parent nights, parent meetings and Parent Cafés.
- Having information and pamphlets available on community resources available for families.

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Family partnerships will look different in various programs, but to be successful, providers and educators should look at their families as teammates. When you partner with someone for work or for a project, you are working together because they have information and an area of expertise you need. The same applies to families. When we partner with our families, they provide us with information about their child that will help us work together for that child's success.

Just like we look to families for news about their child, they look to us for information as well. We need to be prepared to help families identify their needs and develop individual goals as well as provide resources and information to help accomplish the goals.

Helping families identify their needs seems like it could be a bit challenging, but it can be a lot easier than you think. To help families feel comfortable and start to open up, some providers use Conversation Starters.¹ Asking families about typical daily routines such as bedtime, getting ready for school, or doing homework, is a great way to gather information from families and helps to identify difficulties so that providers can help problem solve with families. By taking the time to check in about their day and offering suggestions to help make their day a little easier, you are listening to them and validating their concerns. This often leads to more in depth conversations where providers can continue to encourage family growth and development.



The following are some examples of conversation starters that can be used to help support families.

BEDTIME CONVERSATIONS

When a parent expresses concerns about their child's bedtime behaviors, a mini-assessment of the bedtime routine could help to identify some areas that you could provide support.

Begin by telling the parents that you are going to review the bedtime routine step-by-step. In order to do this, you will need to ask open-ended questions. Here are some examples of open-ended questions you could use:

HEALTHY FAMILIES BULLETIN BOARD

Create a bulletin board for families with information about vaccination clinics, doctor's offices, dentists, mental health providers, state insurance information and other relevant news.

EDUCATOR VOICE

Head Start conducts home visits prior to enrollment to get a brief assessment of the family's concerns and priorities. We then come together as a team, staff and parents, and develop a plan for that family, if needed. These types of policies not only support families and their wellbeing, but are the reason Head Start has been successful for 50 years. Head Start understands that for children to truly be successful, families need to be engaged with their children. Head Start ensures parents understand their role as their child's first and most important teacher.

- Union Baptist Baltimore City Head Start

Bedtime Conversations:

- Tell me more about bedtime.
- How does your child know that it is time for him to go to bed?
- What happens first?
- So when you tell him it is time for bed, what is the first thing that she does?
- What is everyone else in the house doing at this time?
- Who usually helps your child get ready for bed?
- If you have stairs to go up, how does your child get up the stairs?
- How does tooth brushing go?
- How does dressing/undressing go?
- Does your child have any favorite books or songs that you read/sing prior to bed?
- Does your child sleep in a crib or a bed?
- Does your child sleep in his own room, or does he share with someone else?
- Does your child have a favorite toy, blanket or pacifier that she uses to help her fall asleep?
- Once your child is in bed, does she stay in bed?
- If not, tell me more about what it looks like when he is getting out of bed?
- Does he leave his room?
- Once your child is asleep, does he wake up again during the night?

Once you have exhausted all of your questions, identify those things that the parent has sounded concerned about, or things that sound to you like it is a concern. Make a list of these things, and ask the parent if they agree. Also ask the parent, if they had to choose one thing they would like to focus on, what would it be? After this is identified, then together with the family, number in order of priority the other items. This will help to identify if it is sleep related issues, routine related issues, or behavioral issues. That should then point you in a direction for where to go next.

Contributed by Mary Hendricks, M.S. Certified RBI Trainer.

Special Educators, who are certified in the use the **Routines Based Interview** (RBI) approach, help families with identifying what works well and what challenges they have within their daily routine. This method helps to determine the routines in which to embed interventions and learning opportunities. For more information on RBIs, see the Resource Section.

Some programs use home visits or parent conferences to discuss family concerns and needs and then identify appropriate resources. Many times, families are not aware of the supports and resources that are available within their family, their neighborhood, and the larger community. The **Eco-Map**, developed by Robin McWilliam, is a tool that can be used to help identify these resources for the family. Providers can use this tool to gain additional information about the family and identify the family's formal and informal supports.

WHAT IS AN ECO-MAP?

An Eco-map is a graphical representation that shows all of the systems at play in an individual's life. Ann Hartman developed these ecological maps, or eco maps, in 1975 as a means of depicting the ecological system that encompasses a family or individual (Hartman, 1995). (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eco-map).

Robin McWilliam, Ph.D., began using eco-maps as a component of his Routines Based Intervention approach. In his article *Understanding the Family Ecology* (2001), Dr. McWilliam calls the eco-map the "most important activity of the intake visit". It provides the team with the family's "perceived informal, formal and immediate supports."

The team member explains to the parent that they want to get an idea of all of the people involved in the family's life in order to know where they might need additional information. The team members begin by asking about all of the people living in the house with the child. Questions are asked so as not to make any assumptions. The question may be posed as, "Who else besides you and your child live in the house?" The names of the people living in the house are recorded in a box or a circle in the center of the paper.

Once the members of the home are recorded, the team member asks about other people involved in the child and family's life. It is important to be sure that you are clear that this is about the entire family. Specific questions about relatives and friends are phrased in a sensitive manner, such as "Do you and your child's father have family that live close by?" Once family is established ask, "How often do you see them/talk to them?" Other areas explored are the parent's friends, places of work, and regular weekend activities. You might ask if there are special people in their lives from any of those activities. Questions are asked about the child's service providers, health care providers, support groups and community activities. You might ask about the relationship with these professionals by saying "Can you talk easily with them?" or "Do you like them?"

As the parent is talking, you are determining based on the amount of time they see or talk to, as well as how they are describing the relationships, whether these are sources of stressors or support. This is indicated on the eco-map by thick lines, thin lines and broken lines.

An eco-map should not take any longer than 10 minutes. It is a way for the team working with the child to get a good picture of the support that the family has, as well as supports that the team may need to help the family to access.

The eco-map ends with the provider asking the question, "If you have news to share, whether it is good news or bad news, who is the first person you call?" The team member then thanks the family and once again explains that the information will be helpful as they assist the child and the family during the intervention.

For more information on Eco-maps, see the Resource section.

Contributed by Mary Hendricks, M.S. Certified RBI Trainer.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:

Many programs develop contracts or agreements with other community agencies to enhance or expand their services and meet families' needs. When early learning programs and other community organizations share parents' concerns and interests, partnerships will develop that can enhance opportunities, including training, for families.

An example of this would be the Local Child Care Resource Centers. They collaborate with various programs and agencies to ensure that educators, providers and families are getting needed training and information. For more information on your Local Child Care Resource Center, see the Resource Section.

**MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)**

A MOU is a formal agreement between two or more parties. Companies and organizations can use MOUs to establish official partnerships. MOUs are not legally binding but they carry a degree of seriousness and mutual respect. An MOU will outline the responsibilities of each agency for their roles in how they will each serve children, families and staff.

**EDUCATOR VOICE**

In Early Head Start, the family engagement practices that support family wellbeing are provided by the Family Services Coordinator and by teacher led classroom experiences. Parents share ideas that can help families raise strong, happy children by attending Parent Cafés. The March of Dimes Mama and Baby Bus comes monthly to educate parents about health services for their families and provide screenings. Parents have daily opportunities to volunteer in their child's classroom. During this time, parents are involved and learn how to understand and address the children. They also gain understanding about how caregivers provide growth in physical, behavioral, social, and cognitive areas.

- Pre-K teacher, Centro Nia, Takoma Park

MARYLAND CHILD CARE RESOURCE NETWORK

The Maryland Child Care Resource Network is administered by Maryland Family Network and began over 25 years ago with three pilot programs. Today, this Network continues to provide professional development and technical assistance services to child care providers, as well as resource and referral services to families. Consisting of 12 regionally located Child Care Resource Centers (CCRCs), the Network serves all licensed and registered child care providers within the State of Maryland. Through a comprehensive and systematic approach, the Network works to ensure that child care programs have access to the resources and supports needed to improve the quality of care for children birth to 5 years. With professional development, child care providers are offered a series of high-quality training workshops, conferences, and other opportunities to increase their knowledge base and build new skills and strategies. These opportunities are aligned with local initiatives and national standards and are based on adult learning principles to ensure providers are able to implement the knowledge and strategies learned. Research has shown that training is not enough to change behaviors so the CCRCs also provide comprehensive technical assistance services. These coaching and mentoring opportunities assist providers in implementing developmentally appropriate and research-based practices which work to ensure that all children have access to high-quality care and the opportunities necessary to enter kindergarten ready to learn and succeed. Technical assistance is provided in one-on-one and group settings at the CCRC, the child care program, and virtually (by phone, email, and webinar) based on the identified and expressed needs of the child care providers and program. Additionally, the Maryland Child Care Resource Network provides a free resource and referral service to families called LOCATE: Child Care. Families may call the community line and speak to a referral specialist who will assist the family in understanding high-quality child care (what it is and how to identify it), connect families to resources, and assist in identifying child care programs that meet the expressed needs of the family. The referral specialists search an extensive database of all licensed/registered child care programs to help families find the care that meets their needs, such as location, hours, and cost. LOCATE: Child Care Assist is a website which families may utilize to search for child care with criteria determined by the family and accessing the same extensive database. For families seeking care for children with special needs, the referral specialists provide additional support in finding child care such as contacting child care programs to determine if there are openings.



TEACHING AND LEARNING

The family's wellbeing has a direct impact on the child and how their behavior may influence the classroom. Because of this, teachers and providers may be the first to recognize when a family may be dealing with challenges. Teachers may not know what the family is experiencing all the time but they often notice changes in the child or even the family's routine that may indicate that there is a concern. For instance, teachers may notice changes in:

- Attendance
- Health
- Mood
- Schedule
- Interests
- Eating habits
- Family situation

When teachers and providers notice these changes, they should take the time to talk with the family and identify the problem. They may be able to help the family problem solve or give them the resources they may need.

SCENARIO

Charles is a three-year-old boy who has been attending your program for just over a year. Lately, Charles has not been coming to your program as regularly as he did in the beginning, and when he does arrive, it is in the middle of the morning circle time. Sometimes, your assistant teacher has to give him breakfast when he arrives, so he misses a lot of the activities and interactions during that time. You barely even have a chance to wave to Charles' dad when he drops him off. You also notice that Charles has been losing his temper more often and he does not seem to want to participate in quiet activities anymore, preferring to build towers in the block area and then knock them down. You have tried to spend some individual time reading and talking to Charles, but he seems anxious and does not want to participate.

You have noticed many changes in Charles recently and you realize something must be going on. You arrange to have your assistant handle circle time so you can walk out with Charles's dad after drop off to have a chance to talk with him. You tell him that Charles seems to be on a new schedule, and ask if there is a reason that the schedule has changed. He tells you that Charles's mom lost her job, so now she is taking training classes that require her to travel much further away from home. Charles' dad now has to get all three of the children to school before he gets to his own job and many times the children do not have time to eat breakfast before they have to rush out the door.

Charles is dealing with changes or challenges to family wellbeing in several areas:

- **Financial Security** – Charles's mom lost her job so they are bringing in less income while she takes training classes.

- **Mental Health** – Charles is dealing with changes to his schedule and to the absence of his primary caregiver. Charles is acting out in response to the stressful situation.
- **Food security** – While Charles's family may be able to provide meals and food, they have not yet worked out an adequate morning schedule to allow Charles time to eat. Charles is hungry by the time he gets to your program.

By taking all of these factors into consideration, you will be better able to support Charles and his family through this stressful time. You might suggest to Charles' dad that if he can get him to your program 30 minutes earlier, Charles can have breakfast with his friends. This strategy can help alleviate stress at home and also provide a more consistent meal time for Charles.

Charles's parents now see you as a source of support instead of feeling guilty for being late. By helping to reduce the burden or stress related to security, health and safety, you help them focus on positive parenting strategies.

EDUCATOR VOICE

"During our Professional Development, we are always told that we need to understand our parents' priorities. We don't know what they are experiencing and our priorities may be different. As a teacher, this has helped me to be more aware as I'm working with my children and families. I look and listen for clues that something may be different. For example, when a parent picked up her child, I noticed that her car was packed full of clothes and furniture. I spoke to the Family Service Worker, who had a relationship with the family. We were able to help the family with housing and food and not only did I know the family was safe, but I knew the child would be able to come to school rested, fed and ready to learn."

-Teacher, Howard County Head Start

FAMILY VOICE

"When my child has been sick, the staff have checked on her and also provided helpful information to help her feel better. It leaves a good feeling to know the staff cares about our well-being."

-Parent, Greenbelt Children's Center, Prince George's County

REFLECTION



Many early childhood educators and providers have no idea of the extent of the impact they have on families and that it all starts with relationships. Taking the time to simply check in with a family and make them feel welcome is the start of a relationship that can make a significant difference in that family's life.