



ENGAGING SCHOOL AGE FAMILIES

NORTH CAROLINA CCR&R SCHOOL AGE INITIATIVE

"Parents are the first teachers of their child." This ancient Burmese proverb highlights an important fact--that the success of a child depends on the support, encouragement, and engagement of those they live with. Family units are the primary spaces where children first learn the skills they need to thrive. From birth until adolescence parents, guardians, and family members are instrumental contributors to a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Family units instill ideas of culture, personal identity, and ethics that stay with a child throughout their entire life.

The key factors above highlight the importance of family engagement in your school age program. Including families into the daily and programmatic aspects of your program enhances quality, promotes equity, and ensures the success of the students you serve.

As you go through this guide, reflect on how your program currently approaches family engagement. What are some ways you help get parents and families involved? How strong are the relationships between families and program staff? Where can your program support families who might be overlooked? Remember, the key to a successful student starts with a strong and informed family.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

How well do you know the families you support? Do you and your co-workers know the names of each student's parents or guardians? What about family culture...do you know what values and traditions are important to each family in your classroom?

Successful family engagement depends on forming relationships. Remembering the names of family members and understanding what values they hold dear is key to getting families involved and students engaged. Current research highlights that school age students have higher program attendance and are more likely to perform better socially and academically when they feel their family culture is represented and respected (Sheldon, S. B., & Jung, S. B., 2015; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007).

Reflect on some of the tips below and think about ways you and your program can "get to know" the families you support.

- ✔ Have daily conversations with parents and guardians. Take time to ask about their day and how they are doing. A simple question can help form a strong relationship with a parent and provide deeper insight into a family's value system.
- ✔ Focus on a strong parent/family orientation at the beginning of each program year. Meet with each family, go over policies, and start your relationship off with a conversation about family culture.
- ✔ Family-teacher conferences are important. Meet with families to talk about how their student is doing and how their family unit operates. Family-teacher conferences don't have to be extensive. A couple of meetings each program year is all you need to help deepen your relationships with a student's family.
- ✔ Provide opportunities for students to share about their families. Journal time, afternoon group meetings, and art activities are great spaces for students to share family culture and events.
- ✔ Have students create family stories and scrap books. Students can write stories with family members as characters. Students can also bring in pictures from home and create a scrap book sharing favorite memories. These family centered books are great for helping students who might struggle with homesickness or periods of anxiety in your program.
- ✔ Send out a family questionnaire at the beginning of each program year. Use this questionnaire to understand specific family customs, family values, and family structure.
- ✔ Create a family tree in your classroom with pictures of each student's family members. This can be a long-term art project where students can update pictures every few weeks.



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND BIAS

Take a minute and think. Are there any personal beliefs, opinions, or personality conflicts that might alter your relationship with a family in your program? It's perfectly acceptable to have different personalities, beliefs, and worldviews. This is what makes us human. However, these differences become a problem when they negatively impact the care and attention we offer to students and their families.

Bias is a negative feeling towards another person or family that results in negative outcomes like exclusion, anger, and indifference. Personal bias can negatively impact family engagement. Families who feel under-represented are more likely to exclude themselves from events or roles of leadership in your program. Research shows that bias can also increase feelings of stress and trauma for families and students (Ghandnoosh, 2014).

ACTIVE BIAS

Visible discrimination against a family based upon personal stereotypes, fear, or prejudice.



- Not talking to a family member because of their race, gender identity, origin of birth, or other excluding factor.
- Openly gossiping about a family's culture.
- Willingly not respecting a families cultural needs because they don't align with your beliefs.

IMPLICIT BIAS

Subconscious discrimination against a family based upon public perception, family upbringing, and other factors.



- Unknowingly under-representing specific families in your program environment and program materials.
- Passing on your personal beliefs about gender, religion, and culture during activities and group meetings/conversations.
- Unknowingly adding families that look and act like you to leadership roles in your program.

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STEPS TO CHALLENGING BIAS

1. ACKNOWLEDGE

The first step to challenging bias is to acknowledge any attitudes that might hinder your relationships with families. Remember that everyone has bias. You are not alone!

2. WIDEN YOUR FOCUS

Many biases form because we do not expose ourselves to other people. Make an effort to see the world from another perspective. Knowing each family's story is instrumental in supporting student success.

3. PRACTICE UNDERSTANDING

As you challenge bias, make an effort to put your efforts to practice. Making families feel welcomed and supported in your program will increase their engagement and help their student thrive.

CONNECTING FAMILIES TO YOUR LESSON PLANS AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Your school age program is an extension of each student's family. Research from the National Afterschool Alliance highlights that students enrolled in afterschool programs spend almost eight hours a week in school age care (America After 3PM, 2014). The amount of time spent in afterschool programming increases significantly for students with working families and living in single parent homes.

Considering the large amount of time your program dedicates to each student, it is important to link family engagement to your classroom's curriculum and learning environment. Molding your lesson plans and classroom materials to represent the families you serve succeeds in:

- ✓ Increasing family buy-in to lesson plans and curriculum ideas.
- ✓ Widening your program's approach to diversity and other cultures.
- ✓ Providing students with visible representations of materials and ideas that their family values.
- ✓ Giving family members the opportunity to volunteer and share their worldview.
- ✓ Helping decrease separation anxiety during program hours.

LESSON PLANS

As you create lesson plans reflect on your families. Based upon what you know about each family and their student, make an effort to incorporate activities that highlight their family culture. Here are some lesson plan ideas to think about:

- ? Do any of your families love a sporting activity or a particular sports team? Introduce students to this sport, its rules, and its history. Have students SAFELY play the sport outside, make uniforms for dramatic play, and create their own personal mascots/logo in the art area.
- ? Are there any special foods that some of your families enjoy? Devote program time to exploring these foods and taste-testing during snack time. You can even have a family member come in and talk about the cultural significance of specific foods their family eats and any holidays where these foods are primarily served.
- ? Do your families have pets? Collect data on family pets by creating a bar chart and bringing in pictures. Set aside your dramatic play area with different types of pets and have students draw pictures of the different animals in their family.
- ? What types of music are important to your families? Bring in special books going over the music culture of your student's families and have your class create their own musical instruments. Have a family member who plays music volunteer and play for the students.



CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Your classroom environment is the perfect space to highlight each family and make them feel welcomed. Section off classroom walls, activity areas, and parent information tables to make each family and student stand out. Think about these ideas below:

- ✔ Dedicate a space on your wall for each student's family pictures. Frame these wall pictures to show their importance and meaning in the classroom. Have students write out captions for the pictures and invite families to bring new pictures each month. If you can't place materials on the wall, use string and clothes pins to hang pictures or use tri-fold boards to showcase family portraits.
- ✔ Place cultural materials that align with your families into the classroom. Put up pictures of historical figures, works of art, and cultural landmarks throughout your program. Take time to label materials and incorporate books in familiar languages.
- ✔ Incorporate family culture into your soft and quiet spaces. Each family has a different way to relax and unwind. Molding quiet areas to support relaxation is a great way to help all students decompress.
- ✔ Have students contribute to the look and feel of the classroom environment. Getting direction on the layout and aesthetics of your classroom allow students to insert aspects of their family culture while also experiencing the cultural ideas of their peers.



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

An important part of family engagement is student inclusion. No two students are exactly the same. Every child you serve develops at a different speed and requires specific support to thrive in your program. Below are three specific family development plans you might encounter each year.

IEP

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN

For students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), work with families to align lesson plans and room arrangement to IEP goals. If possible, join a student's IEP team or become informed of any specialized learning needs they have.

BEHAVIOR PLAN

Some students have crafted Behavior Plans that are created with parents/guardians. Remain up-to-date on these plans to help your program support the child's family as they develop healthy behavior skills.

KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION

Many students have a kindergarten transition plan as they move into primary education settings. Work with families and the local school on ways your school age program can use transition plans to extend learning and ease anxiety for emerging kindergarten students.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Successful family engagement requires good communication. Having families "In-the-Know" decreases stress, promotes participation, and helps ensure that program expectations are followed. More importantly, good program-wide communication builds strong relationships between families and program staff in a safe and professional manner.

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TIPS TO PROMOTE COMMUNICATION

- ✓ Focus on orientation with families. Make sure that you go-over program policies and answer any questions families have about the structure of your program. It is important to communicate any program changes to enrolled families in a timely and professional manner.
- ✓ Keep families up-to-date. Communicate classroom updates with weekly or monthly newsletters. Make sure that parents have a way to know when your program closes due to bad weather or schedule changes. Have daily conversations with families during departure to make sure they know how their student is doing. Small exchanges of information builds trust and engagement.
- ✓ Don't forget to communicate with other teaching staff. Forming a relationship with a child's primary classroom teacher can inform lesson plan ideas, solutions to challenging behaviors, and student interests. This important line of communication can help strengthen the impact of your school age program for each student and their family.

OPEN-DOOR POLICY

One way to strengthen your program's communication network is to practice an open-door communication policy with parents, guardians, and other classroom teachers.

Open-door communication:

- Allows parents to have access to the classroom to visit during program hours
- Ensures that parents and approved guardians can talk to program administration during program hours about any topic affecting their student
- Allows parents and guardians to have access to information and paperwork pertaining to their student.

Make sure that your program has a policy in place for open-door access restrictions for non-approved family members in accordance with DCDEE requirements.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is an important communication skill that will deepen your engagement and relationships with families in your program. These three easy steps will help you incorporate active listening into your professional tool kit.

1

Pay attention to what the family member is saying. Make eye contact and be sure that you understand their point by recognizing body language and other cues.

2

Show that you are listening. Repeating what you are hearing back to the family member and using positive facial expressions affirm that you are engaged.

3

Respond with respect when it's your turn to talk. If the conversation is about a difficult topic like a student's behavior or program expectations, make sure to highlight some positives throughout the conversation.

FAMILIES AND LEADERSHIP

Families succeed when they can help lead. Renowned novelist and activist Maya Angelou highlights this concept perfectly:

"When you do nothing you feel overwhelmed and powerless. But when you get involved you feel the sense of hope and accomplishment that comes from knowing that you are working to make things better."

For many, the idea of leading is an uphill battle. Factors like racism, prejudice, poverty, and mental health create barriers that leave individuals without a voice. Your school age program provides the perfect environment to counter these barriers. By creating a school age environment that fosters family leadership opportunities, your program can be the space where family leaders know that they "are working to make things better."

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The foundation of leadership is agency -- or the ability to enact change or influence direction. Giving parents agency in the decisions and structure of your program is fundamental in fostering family leadership and creating an equitable school age site.

One way to give parents a say in the direction of your program is by creating AND supporting a parent council. The scope of this council can vary from being a space for parents to communicate ideas to a more organized committee that helps guide program policy and practices. Allowing families to choose representatives is an equitable way to make sure all voices and cultures are respected and heard.

Another way to help families develop leadership is to help them advocate in their own community. Have families attend and represent your program during public events. Hold an advocacy night where parents can write letters to political leaders and share opinions and community improvement ideas. Giving families a way to share their voice builds confidence, accomplishment, and stronger students.

USE FAMILY STRENGTHS

Take time to identify specific strengths families bring to your program. Be it time, resources, connections, or community support, each family has a specific strength that benefits those around them. Tapping into these strengths and giving families an opportunity to use them helps develop confidence, accomplishment, and purpose.

- Have families organize a fundraiser for your program throughout the local community.
- Ask parents to help with building enhancement, repairs, and family beautification days.
- Have family members volunteer with homework help



FAMILY STRENGTH SURVEY

Creating a quick family strength survey is an easy way to help families get engaged with your program. The survey should include ways that families can help volunteer, advocate, and contribute.

Coupling the family strength survey with family orientation will help you get responses in a timely manner.

It is important that surveys like this remain optional.

REFERENCES

National Afterschool Alliance. "America after 3 PM." (2014).

Ghandnoosh, Nazgol. "Race and punishment: Racial perceptions of crime and support for punitive policies." (2014).

Henderson, Anne T., and Karen L. Mapp. "A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement. Annual Synthesis, 2002." (2002).

Jeynes, William H. "The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis." *Urban education* 42.1 (2007): 82-110.

Sheldon, Steven B., and Sol Bee Jung. "The Family Engagement Partnership." (2015).

RESOURCES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

National Afterschool Association

Website: www.naaweb.org

North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs

Website: www.ncafterschool.org

North Carolina Association for the Education of Young Children

Website: www.ncaeyc.org

Parent/Teacher Association - National Standards for Family-School Engagement

Website: www.pta.org

US Department of Education - Parent Engagement Portal

Website: www.ed.gov/parent-and-family-engagement

Communities in Schools

Website: www.communitiesinschools.org



SCHOOL AGE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT

The North Carolina CCR&R School Age Initiative is here to help your school age program thrive. For questions or access to our free support services please contact us:

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