



Engaging Community Partners to
Strengthen Family Services



Strategies and Examples



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Acknowledgments

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Strategies and Examples

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can work with community partners to make progress toward positive outcomes for children and families. Effective community engagement strengthens family services and supports. This resource describes how programs can:

- Identify strategies and actions to address three priorities for community engagement.
- Partner with families to make connections with other families and access community resources.
- Take steps to strengthen community partnerships.

Strategies and Examples is the second in a three-part Community Engagement Series. The series explores how programs can enhance community engagement and partner with families. Programs can use this series to guide efforts to strengthen child and family outcomes in line with the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).



Building Community Partnerships

Strategies and Examples

Planning Tools for Community Partnerships

What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement refers to the mutually respectful, strengths-based relationships between Head Start and Early Head Start staff and families, community members, and agencies. These relationships support parents' roles as valued community members. Staff partner with families to make progress toward goals for themselves and their children. Community partners can work with families and program staff toward such goals as parents' educational advancement, economic mobility, and other aspects of family well-being.

Head Start and Early Head Start staff actively seek out and respond to community voices, strengths, and needs. Staff know their communities, and many are members of the communities they serve. They collaborate with families, community members, and other local agencies to identify common goals, align resources, and share data for continuous improvement and effective partnerships.

Parent and family

In this resource, parent and family refer to all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, including biological, adoptive and foster parents, pregnant women and expectant families, grandparents, legal and informal guardians, and adult siblings.

What the Research Says

Community partners offer services and resources that respond to a range of family strengths, interests, and needs, and support family strengthening activities (Small, Jacobs, & Massengill, 2008). Through community partnerships, agencies learn to share similar practices and deliver services more efficiently. Families have consistent and positive experiences across agencies and families connect to one another (Bassok, Finch, Lee, Reardon, & Waldfogel, 2016). Other benefits include reduced stress (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009) and improved family well-being.

What are Engaged Community Partnerships?

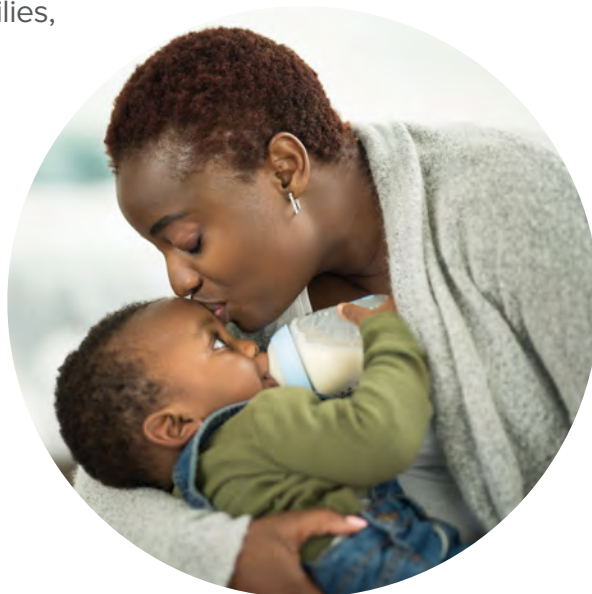
Engaged community partnerships are supportive relationships between programs and other community agencies. These relationships can be between individuals or groups. Partners value and nurture relationships. Each partner looks for ways to strengthen the partnership. Partners seek to understand each other's goals, perspectives, strengths, and challenges.

Communication between community partners is regular and responsive. The goals of each partner are best met through their work with each other. Together they share leadership and assess effectiveness to inform continuous learning and improve the quality of their partnership.

Three Priorities for Community Engagement

Engaged community partnerships benefit children, families, programs and staff, other agencies, and communities. Partners are more likely to meet their goals by working together. Head Start and Early Head Start programs can engage with community partners to focus on three priorities and learn how to best support:

- ❶ Individual Families in Head Start and Early Head Start
- ❷ Families in Head Start and Early Head Start
- ❸ Families in the Community



Priority 1: Supporting Individual Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

Staff partner with each family to identify their goals through the family partnership process. Staff work with every family connect to the services and resources that match their goals, strengths, interests, and needs. Consider the following strategies and examples for how to support each family in Head Start and Early Head Start.

Understand What is Important to Each Family

- Ask parents about the opportunities, supports, and events that are important to them. Create a parent survey or parent focus groups. Encourage parents to share their experiences with other parents.
- Identify the strengths, interests, skills, and hopes of families through the family partnership process. Identify family wishes and consider ways to build on family strengths. What resources and supports do parents want or need? (See Related Resources for a guide to using a strengths-based approach during the family partnership process).

Know What Supports and Activities are Available for Each Family

- Know whether a local Community Resource Guide is available. If not, create and maintain a resource guide for families in the program or work with partners to develop one. Consider an online directory as an option. Create a plan for updating the guide and invite parents to contribute. Include information about eligibility for services, and employment and education programs, where available. Consider organizing resources by children's age group.

- Recognize that some families need treatment or intensive services. Families may need support to address specific adversities such as substance use or misuse, a mental health challenge, housing instability or homelessness, or domestic violence. Establish a tracking and follow-up system aligned with confidentiality policies to ensure adequate treatment. Evaluate your program efforts to measure satisfaction and effectiveness, whenever possible.
- Maintain a list of family wishes, requests, needs or ideas. Consider use of an online survey that parents can complete. This information can help with connections to local partners and services.

Partner with Each Family to Strengthen Connections to Resources and Other Families

- Understand how the families in your program connect with one another. Is information about gathering places such as safe parks and playgrounds available?
- Identify and share a range of resources, services, and social networks. Include fun family events and peer-to-peer networking opportunities.
- Make plans with families for accessing referrals. Provide warm handoffs where possible to introduce families to a contact person at the partner organization. Follow up with the family and contact person and refine the process as needed.
- Describe the referral process in informational materials for families and providers. Provide clear enrollment steps in brochures and online information. Translate information into the languages spoken by families in the program.
- Reflect on how it might be for a family who is new to the area. Review the information you have about services and resources. Is the information accurate and clear? Are materials inviting and up to date? Are they available in the languages spoken by families in the program? Is the information at an appropriate reading level? Is there a specific person to contact for each service or resource?

Priority 1: Examples

- A Head Start center and early intervention program have a clear referral process that can be used to assist any family with concerns about their child's development.
- A family is seeking support to move to a safer neighborhood. Spanish is their primary language. A family services staff member who is fluent in Spanish reaches out to a local agency that provides housing information and assists with relocation. The staff member connects the family to a contact person at the agency who is fluent in Spanish.

Priority 2: Supporting Families in Head Start and Early Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start programs partner with other agencies to learn the best ways to provide families with services and resources. They work together to reduce barriers to access.

Consider the following strategies and examples for how to support families in Head Start and Early Head Start.

Learn about Families' Interests and Needs

- Aggregate and analyze family partnership agreement (FPA) data. Review community assessment and program self-assessment data. What resources do most families want and need?
- Learn from families about resources and services they use and value from informal networks.
- Partner with families and agencies to understand the best times and places for families to receive services. Offer services at Head Start and Early Head Start programs, whenever possible.
- Seek family input to identify barriers to access and work to develop solutions together. At one Head Start program, parents noted that traveling to a WIC office for services was expensive and took time. The travel was challenging with young children. The program partnered with the local WIC to brainstorm ideas for how to make access easier for families. Together, they found a way to offer WIC services at the Head Start center.

Establish or Expand Community Partnerships to Connect Families to Resources and One Another

- Explore ways to coordinate enrollment and referral processes across agencies. Parents can sign interagency release of information forms allowing confidential data-sharing about their children and family among programs.
- Write clear procedures for referrals, follow-up, and documentation.

Head Start Program Performance Standard: Community Partnerships

§1302.53 (a)(1) A program must establish ongoing collaborative relationships and partnerships with community organizations such as establishing joint agreements, procedures, or contracts and arranging for onsite delivery of services as appropriate, to facilitate access to community services that are responsive to children's and families' needs and family partnership goals, and community needs and resources, as determined by the community assessment.

Family Access to Services

Consider cost, ease of use, location, languages, cultural relevance, and accommodations for non-hearing, limited sight, and limited mobility. These factors affect families' experiences and how they can access services.

- Share aggregate program-level data (with parent permission) with partners to improve services. Encourage partners to reduce duplication of services and readjust to fill service gaps when possible. Explore how programs can work together to make it easier for families to access services.
- Consider ways to partner with informal resources available in the community. For example, what sports activities, cultural events, food pantries, farmers' markets, and play groups are available? How do you share this information with families? What are ways for parents to share their experiences with other families?
- Offer a "Getting to Know Your Community" tour for new families. Ask parents to lead tours. Use your program's or partner agency's buses to transport groups. Ask agency staff to welcome parents and provide information at each stop. Include education and employment settings on the tour.



Priority 2: Examples

- A local recreation center provides discounted pool passes for Head Start and Early Head Start families. As a result, parents learn of the recreation center's offerings. Enrollment in adult and child recreation center classes increase.
- Tribal community members offer sewing classes at the Head Start and Early Head Start center. Families make dance regalia for their children.
- The local health center provides hearing and vision screening at the Head Start center. As a result, fewer children miss appointments. Children and families become more comfortable with clinic providers because they see them at their Head Start center.
- A Head Start program partners with a community college to offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The Head Start program provides space and child care. The community college provides the instructor and materials. Some parents taking ESL classes look into vocational training or degree programs at the community college.
- A Head Start and Early Head Start program works with parents to create a "Free Family Activities" handout. It includes art programs, museum activities, and library story times. A map shows the location of playgrounds and parks.

Priority 3: Supporting Families in the Community

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can serve in a leadership or partnering role and help coordinate the early childhood system of care for families in the community. Agencies work together to reduce barriers and increase access for families.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs join with other agencies to create solutions that benefit all families in the community. Program staff also serve as advocates and educators for and about early childhood issues. They highlight the benefits of quality early childhood education. Staff describe the need for a two-generational approach to serving families.

Strong partnerships rely on a common vision, ongoing communication, and data-sharing (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Agencies partner with families and each other to map the opportunities and challenges that families face. They describe the strengths that children, parents, families and community members have and how they can support each other.

Consider the following strategies and examples for how to support families in the community.

Strengthen Relationships with Community Partners

- Learn about other organizations and their work. Tour other agencies, identify shared goals, and make personal connections. Meet school leadership and staff to support transitions. Engage parent leaders in the process.
- Review community and program self-assessment data. Consider existing partners and opportunities for new partnerships. Use Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), contracts, and letters of agreement as important ways to clarify shared goals. MOUs spell out the roles and tasks of each community partner. They convey the important details of a shared commitment to working with families. Review existing MOUs, contracts, or letters of agreement that support partnerships. Are they clear, detailed, and up to date?

Head Start Program Performance Standard: Coordination

§1302.53 (b) Coordination with other programs and systems. A program must take an active role in promoting coordinated systems of comprehensive early childhood services to low-income children and families in their community through communication, cooperation, and the sharing of information among agencies and their community partners, while protecting the privacy of child records in accordance with subpart C of part 1303 of this chapter and applicable federal, state, local, and tribal laws.

Strengthen Relationships with Community Partners, cont.

- Communicate regularly. Hold face-to-face meetings to begin and strengthen relationships, to work out agreements, and resolve conflicts. Use phone calls or in-person meetings share complex information. Emails can be effective to communicate simple, objective information such as scheduling calls, meetings, and local events. Form agreements with partners about how to communicate. Determine how often and the most effective way to meet, for example, email, text, video conference, or face-to-face.
- Offer training and professional development opportunities for staff. Consider opportunities for shared training with community partners to foster cross-agency relationship-building.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships. Use surveys or focus groups to understand how services are working from parent and partner agency perspectives. Ask about what works well and invite recommendations for improvements.

Enhance the System of Care for Families

- Engage professionals and families in the community to identify opportunities to strengthen the system of care.
- Share wait list information with other agencies while maintaining privacy and confidentiality policies. Find ways for families on the wait list to receive supports.
- Share application forms with partners or create streamlined referral and application forms. Make these applications available both on site and online, along with brochures, flyers, and other materials that include contact information for referrals. Translate information into the languages spoken by families in the program.

System of Care

A system of care is the network of formal and informal supports that surround young families. Formal supports include a variety of agencies and professionals. These include schools, clinics (including mental health and substance use services), libraries, parks, sports and other recreational facilities, and the professionals who provide these services. Other formal supports are Head Start and Early Head Start, child care, family care, K-12 schools, and family-led organizations. Businesses, faith-based organizations, community colleges, courts, police and fire departments, social services, local government, and public housing agencies are also potential community partners.

Informal supports include family, neighbors, and friends. Local events and businesses can provide opportunities for families to connect with each other. A system of care responds to families' strengths, interests, and needs and improves based on families' input and ideas.

Enhance the System of Care for Families, cont.

- Bundle services to reduce the number of family visits. Work together to reduce family stress that can result from contact with many different agencies.
- Develop data-sharing practices that strengthen interagency relationships and identify service gaps. Maintain privacy and confidentiality policies and practices.

Join or Form an Early Childhood Council or Community Network

Early Childhood Councils or similar groups include leaders of programs that serve children and families, family and community members, and cross-sector agencies. Early Childhood Councils may go by different names in communities. These Councils or associations have a similar purpose. Councils inform the community vision and highlight the strengths, interests, and needs of families with young children.

Councils or community networks may develop strategic plans for the community. At times councils advise

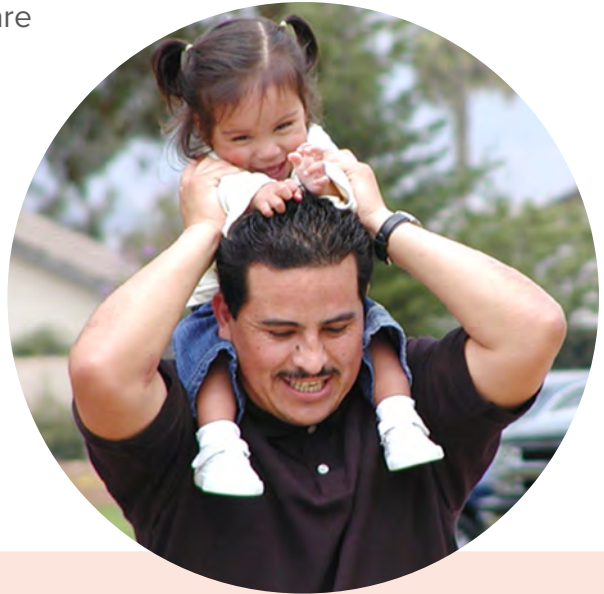
local officials on early childhood issues. Goals may focus on children's development, health, and learning. Consider ways that Early Childhood Councils or similar groups and their members can support families in the community.

- Use a coordinating agency that provides support for the work of the council. Coordinating agency staff can schedule meetings, distribute minutes, support outreach, and carry out related tasks. Discuss the resources (staff, costs, etc.) available to support and sustain the work of the council.
- Discuss ways to support parent participation. Consider stipends, child care, meals, and/or travel support.
- Share the council's goals and progress with other staff and families. Communicate with policy makers, elected officials, and funders about early childhood benefits and challenges facing the field. Consider how to connect with other community-wide early childhood efforts. Identify system-wide issues to resolve. Do policies need updates? How does the council support quality early childhood services? How can the council connect with other community-wide early childhood efforts?
- Partner with families to set a vision for community-wide efforts to partner with families and children. Identify opportunities to participate in Early Childhood Councils or other community efforts to support family well-being.

Foster-Fishman & Watson (2012) found agencies that come together in Early Childhood Councils do better in the following ways:

- 71% of agencies improved their partnerships
- 89% of agencies had more knowledge of early childhood systems
- 97% of agencies expanded their partnerships
- 74% of agencies felt more effective

- Develop messages and use social media to share information about events, services, and the importance of early childhood.
- Work with partnering agencies to create a service hub at a neighborhood center, school, or library. Families can access a range of services in one location. A service hub may offer counseling and neighborhood-based foster care. It may meet emergency needs, such as for food and clothing.



Early Childhood Councils

Early Childhood Councils include the leaders of programs that serve children and families as well as family and community members. These cross-sector groups may not be called Early Childhood Councils in every community but typically engage in similar activities. Council members may include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • School Districts | • Family Representatives |
| • Economic Support | • Health Care |
| • Women, Infants and Children (WIC) | • Child Support |
| • Recreation Centers/Parks | • Child Protection and Child Welfare |
| • Early Care and Education | • Cultural Groups |
| • Child Care and Family Care | • Home Visiting |
| • Libraries and Museums | • Higher Education |
| • County and Tribal Agencies | • Police and Fire Departments |
| • Informal Community Groups | • Chamber of Commerce |
| • Community Colleges | • Local Employers |
| • Faith-Based Institutions | • Courts, Correctional Facilities |
| • Local Public Health Departments | • Local Housing Authorities |
| • Local Volunteer Organizations | • Local Government |

Priority 3: Examples

- Agencies coordinate “Service Agency Speed Dating” meet and greets. Agency providers meet and spend five minutes talking in pairs. They learn from each other about the services they offer and exchange contact information. Participants rotate and meet with other providers. Programs hold these events on a regular basis.
- A community network blends and integrates resources. They share fiscal, in-kind, and volunteer resources. The network co-hires and co-locates staff, and open satellite offices. These steps sustain and integrate services.
- Head Start parent leaders, program staff, community partners, and local for-profit agencies, including banks and credit unions, join forces to support families to build economic mobility after a recent and devastating hurricane.
- Head Start program staff, parent leaders, and a local elementary school partner to strengthen kindergarten transition practices for all children and families. Together they:
 - plan a shared professional development opportunity for Head Start and Kindergarten teachers.
 - design an in-service day to address ways to partner with families and support children.
 - discuss opportunities for a kindergarten registration event with other community partners.
 - create an agreement for data-sharing, with parental consent.



Three Priorities for Community Engagement: Example

A Head Start and Early Head Start program has identified nutritional health as a priority. The program is working with a local health clinic, farmers' market, and a community college that offers nutrition and exercise programs. Consider how this approach can meet the three priorities for community engagement.

1. Individual family: A family who is concerned about their child's weight talks with the clinic staff. They learn about healthy, local, and affordable food choices available at the farmers' market.
2. Head Start and Early Head Start families: Families recognize the benefits of physical activity and choose and prepare healthier meal options.
3. Families in the community: Families exercise together at the college and shop at the farmers' market. They understand the benefits of healthy food choices and advocate for more accessible and affordable healthy food options.

Closing Thoughts

Programs can engage with community partners to focus on how to best support individual families, families in Head Start and Early Head Start, and families in the community. Relationships with community partners may differ based upon your goals and objectives. When agencies work together, they are able to enhance the ways families access and experience services.

What is your current community engagement approach? What new strategies could you try to enhance your community engagement efforts?

What are your priorities for community engagement? How do you work with community partners to address families' goals and interests?

Explore Resources in this Series

- **Building Community Partnerships**

Explore how to use the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework to support community engagement. Consider three priorities for community engagement. Find recommendations for how staff and programs can engage in community partnerships.

- **Planning Tools for Community Partnerships**

Find tools and resources to strengthen community engagement. Consider how to use data about family and community strengths to expand current efforts and plan for the future.

Related Resources

Explore these related resources on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

Family Engagement

The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and Goal-Setting with Families

Use this guide to learn about the family partnership process. Explore how to use data to inform decisions about program and community level services to address the strengths and challenges of all of the families in your program.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

Use this resource to understand the collaborative relationships among families and Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families.

Head Start and Early Head Start Relationship-based Competencies

Refer to this set of resources to review competencies for all early childhood professionals, including supervisors and leadership. Explore practices to connect families with community partners and follow up on referrals, and build and nurture relationships with new community partners.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

Refer to *1302.53 Community partnerships and coordination with other early childhood and education programs* to understand requirements for establishing collaborative relationships and partnerships with community organizations.

Measuring What Matters: Using Data to Support Family Progress

Use this set of resources, including an overview, four exercises, and a three-part webinar series, to learn more about using data to track family and program progress. Explore program examples that consider how to use community assessment data to strengthen community engagement efforts.

Related Resources, cont.

Program Management and Fiscal Operations

Community Assessment Matrix

Use this resource to understand the context in which Head Start and Early Head Start programs operate. This matrix is useful for ensuring that the correct services are provided to the appropriate population.

Foundations for Excellence: A Guide for Five-Year Planning and Continuous Improvement, 2nd Edition

Use this comprehensive guide to learn what Head Start expects from programs' strategic planning. Discover ways to ensure that programming is responsive to community needs throughout the five-year grant period. Consider program examples that illustrate the role of community partnerships to meet planning objectives, goals, and expected outcomes.

Head Start Management Systems Wheel

Use this resource to understand the twelve program management, planning, and oversight systems that are critical to sound program infrastructure and high-quality service delivery. Specifically, refer to the Program Planning & Service System Design and Community and Self-Assessment systems to inform community engagement efforts.

Explore this family engagement resource on the Child Care Technical Assistance (CCTA)

Website:

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems

Use this resource to understand the collaborative relationship between parents and early childhood systems, programs, providers, family caregivers, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring change for children, families, and communities.

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