

## Growing Understanding to Support Family Engagement

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Children succeed in an early childhood program when staff and their families are comfortable with each other. Strong partnerships are based on communication that meets the needs of children, staff, and families. Success comes from a strong partnership based on the type and quality of communication. A program leader sets the tone by providing warm, respectful greetings and timely responses to all those involved in the child's life. For some teaching staff, this comes naturally; others will learn from role modeling, understanding, and encouragement from the program leader. Family engagement begins with program staff understanding the families they serve while utilizing communication strategies based on mutual respect.

The first reality all program leaders and teaching staff must realize is many families face a variety of pressures daily. From the economic costs of maintaining a household to the cost of child care and additional family responsibilities, life can quickly become expensive and complicated to manage. Due to this, hurried families may come across as unwilling to engage and may not participate in the children's activities planned by the program. While outward signals may make families appear uninterested, the reality may be that families do not have enough time to stay current with daily notes. Another possibility is that language or reading barriers make program newsletters difficult to access or understand. Rather than make assumptions about families' abilities and motivation, program leaders and teaching staff must work together to find the best way to approach families. Ongoing relationship-building, observing, and inquiring about how to communicate best to meet their needs can be beneficial. Let us learn more from one program's experience as they grew their understanding to support an enrolled family.

*A couple of months ago, program director Liz enrolled the Perez family. They have two children: one 18-month-old in Rosa and Karli's class and a 4-year-old who enjoys Maria and Deb's class. During the enrollment process, Liz learned the mother was the only family member who spoke English, and their busy home life included the mother's parents, who lived with them, and the father's parents, who lived nearby. Most days, the staff observed the mother picking up the children. One afternoon, she shared with Deb that her home responsibilities included preparing large family dinners and caring for her ailing father. Karli noticed that the children's father rarely came to the program. When he did, the teachers in both classrooms tried to engage him. Most responses simply included a nod or smile, but he chattered with the children in Spanish. One evening, when the father picked up the children, Rosa and Karli attempted a conversation in Spanish. During the short conversation, the father appeared hesitant to answer questions about his toddler's care. Rosa mentioned the recent notes sent home stating they needed diapers and wipes. The father appeared frustrated with the inquiry and stated in broken English, "Talk Mama." When the mother came in the following day, she was visibly upset and close to tears. She apologized profusely and handed the teachers diapers and wipes with the promise to "try and do better." Both Rosa and Karli felt terrible that the mother was so upset and began to wonder if they had done the right thing by trying*

*to engage the father in conversation. They contacted Liz immediately to make her aware of the interactions.*

Inclusivity and diversity of children and families must be considered in all areas of program development, particularly in family engagement. Many resources encourage program administrators and staff to consider the following when engaging families:

- Provide inclusive communication opportunities (i.e., in the home languages of families) using voice software or online translation for all forms, paperwork, and electronic communications;
- Provide continuous teacher training on diversity to include ways to welcome and include all populations;
- Engage all families to serve in leadership roles, including boards and committees that serve the program; and,
- Support teaching staff by role-modeling inclusive practices within all program planning.

During the experience with this family, Rosa and Karli tried to connect by providing written and spoken communication. However, the attempts resulted in frustration and hurt feelings for everyone involved. The day after the upsetting interaction with the father, Liz brought the teachers in both classrooms together during naptime to discuss the next steps to rebuild the relationship with the family. During the shared conversation of observations and conversations that had taken place over the past few months in both classrooms, everyone became aware of the mother's enormous responsibilities in caring for her family. They also discussed the father's infrequent visits, which meant he was not familiar with his children's day-to-day program routines. The mother's response demonstrated how much she cared for her children and her respect for the teachers who cared for them each day. As they talked as a team, they decided to address the issue by doing the following:

- Schedule a time for Liz to meet with the mother sooner rather than later;
- Provide reassurance to the mother and discuss strategies together to best meet the family's needs;
- Gain further insights on family dynamics; and,
- Establish effective communication strategies to support the family.

Right after the teacher meeting, Liz contacted the mother, and they met that afternoon before she picked up the children. Liz apologized and reassured the mother that she was doing an excellent job as the children's mother, including gently reminding her she was her children's first expert and was highly valued in the ongoing relationship to care for them. Liz asked the mother what communication strategies would support her to address the children's needs. Was it text messages, conversations, notes, or something else they had not considered? The mother agreed that text messages were the best solution for her due to the ease of translation for the father.

Liz then approached the subject of communication with the father. The mother shared men rarely cared for children's specific needs in her culture, so he was confused by the teachers' attempts to talk with him that afternoon. Due to this, he was frustrated and could not understand why the need had not already been taken care of. The mother also said she wanted him to be more involved, but it would take time. During the conversation, Liz also learned that the father had conversations utilizing an app on his phone.

The mother expressed her gratitude for the teaching staff and agreed that the meeting together was helpful and appreciated.

Liz learned so much from the conversation and shared insights with both teaching teams the next morning. The teachers were relieved and pleased to know how to support the mother best and continue building a communication bridge with the father. From that day forward, the teachers engaged him by talking through the app when communication was needed. Over time, the father became more engaged, and the mother became more involved in program activities. This included her support of the teachers' program planning by working with other parents. Friendships with other families began to bloom, including play times at the local park. The teachers noticed the mother was able to grow a support network of other mothers, and the father began participating in more program events.

What did Liz and her teaching staff learn from this situation? First, programs providing enrollment information in the home languages of enrolling families should ask about the best way to communicate at the beginning of their relationship to avoid circumstances such as this. Second, rather than allowing the situation to spiral out of control or, worse, lack any resolve, strategies were quickly discussed and implemented to rebuild the relationship. Finally, Liz and the teaching staff decided it was important to share what took place so that others in the program could learn from their experience. Because the program valued family engagement, sharing with others at the next staff meeting helped the entire staff learn more about the continued commitment to building an inclusive program environment.

All families deserve to be a part of a warm and welcoming environment. Liz and her teaching staff took a negative interaction and completely turned it around by engaging in positive strategies to understand the dynamics and needs of the Perez family. When program leaders are role models and provide appropriate strategies to teaching staff, everyone learns more about families' unique and diverse needs. Family engagement becomes possible when interactions between staff and families are respectful, meaningful, and focused on supporting children's development in the early childhood program environment.

Did you know that Aim4Excellence™ has a module devoted to learning more about family engagement? Module eight of the program series will show you how to enhance family engagement as you transform your program's effectiveness and impact children's learning and development. Explore the role of linguistically and culturally responsive practice that energizes relationship-based teaching and fosters continuous quality improvement. Find out more by accessing this [link](#)!

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