

Engaging Families in Child Care

BY CARA MURDOCH & SHERRY ROCHA

What is “Family Engagement?” Early childhood program administrators often hear that they should “engage” families in order to best meet the needs of children and ensure understanding of their programming. Family engagement is a partnership with the families in your program. It can develop and grow from birth to school age, and change with circumstances. Family engagement may look different from family to family and can also contain some similar qualities from family to family.

WHY ENGAGE FAMILIES?

What happens when we engage families? [Engagement can have a lasting effect](#) and sets the stage for a positive future, for both the child and the family.

Family engagement includes actions, habits, and collaborations which can change as the child ages.

WHO SHOULD ENGAGE FAMILIES?

Directors are the first to engage the family, but it doesn’t stop there. The classroom teacher and other staff need to get involved as well.

HOW TO ENGAGE FAMILIES

In your daily work as program administrators, many of the things you are already doing contribute to family engagement and help families feel secure in their decision to use your facility to help care for and teach their children.

These can include:

- Sharing photos you take with parents
- Talking with parents at enrollment about important items in your parent handbook
- Learning about each child’s developmental history
- Greeting each child and parent daily
- Sending at-home activities for parents and children to do together

Directors and teachers need to be [responsive](#), [strengths-based](#), accessible, and effective. There are surveys that can help directors and teachers to [understand family needs](#). They can help identify things like time constraints that might make it difficult for families to engage in program activities.

Get creative as you see the needs in your area. Involve other agencies, businesses, and other programs. Establish collaborations within your community that can help each family in your program. Offer volunteer opportunities for the caregivers to get involved with the program and classroom. Continually

invite feedback from the families. Make sure parents and relatives know that they can volunteer to read books or share information about the family customs etc.

One specific example could be to have the program stay open a little longer for a day and offer a meal as parents pick up children. Parents and children can eat together, then have time for separate parent and child activities. Invite a speaker to come for the parent session on a topic of interest while children complete a planned activity.

WHAT DO YOUR FAMILIES NEED?

To determine how best to help families and encourage relationships that grow, remember to consider family structures. There are many types of family structures today. Learn about your families, how they say their names, who is important in each child's life, and how you can understand and support them.

The environment in your child care center or home shows what is important to you. It comes through in your engagement with families, the displays families see, and the organization of your child care space. Looking over your environment can be a starting place for directors and teachers as you imagine how it feels to someone who has never entered your space before.

This first engagement can lead to engaging other families and the community, and it can set the stage for continued engagement with the schools and community as the child ages.

Some family engagement ideas:

- Potlucks
- Reading nights
- Date nights
- Resource nights
- Food pantries
- Health departments
- Library days
- Community gardens
- Host social events
- Participate in community events
- Host fun and educational activities

In closing, start implementing your strategies for engaging families. Keep it as an item for your staff meetings, so new ideas always come forward. The better you get to know your families, the stronger your program will be.

***Cara Murdoch, B.A.**, is an assessor and training specialist at the McCormick Institute, Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University. Cara earned a baccalaureate degree in art and psychology and a lifetime teaching certificate for Art K-12 from Culver-Stockton College. Previously, Cara was a Quality Specialist. She spent 20 years in the Early Childhood Education field in classroom settings*

and as an assistant director. Cara initiated, advised, and was a consultant in the development of the year-round Essentials Preschool Curriculum for Gospel Publishing House.

Sherry Rocha, MS.Ed., *is an assessor and training specialist at the McCormick Institute, Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University. She holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction with a specialization in multicultural education. Sherry has been dedicated to children and their welfare, safety, and emotional growth for over 30 years. She designed Nurturing Creativity in Children, a curriculum that won a national award from the National Extension Association of Family Consumer Sciences (NEAFCS), and was the recipient of additional awards for state and regional diversity work as the leader of the Education and Community committees of the Chicago Latino Coalition for Prevention. Sherry took the lead in creating the coalition's video, Choosing Quality Childcare, in Spanish with subtitles in English.*