

Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy

Going Above and Beyond: Striving for High-Quality Family & Community Engagement in Early Care and Education

**Findings from a Focus Group Study of Family and Community
Engagement in Center-Based Early Care and Education
Programs in Illinois**

Executive Summary

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This summary describes findings and recommendations from a focus group study of family and community engagement practices in center-based ECE programs in Illinois. The purpose of the focus group study was to describe diverse perspectives on promising practices and common challenges around working with families and communities in center-based ECE programs and to inform the state's development of supports and resources for programs seeking to achieve ExceleRate Illinois' Award of Excellence level in family and community engagement. Four focus groups were conducted across the state with ECE program staff from Head Start, Preschool for All, school-based pre-K, and other not-for-profit and for-profit ECE programs. Six focus groups were held with parents and other family members of children in these programs. All programs received high ratings on the state's quality rating system at the time of the study.

ECE programs vary in the emphasis they place on the role of families and family support in their programs, yet there is consensus across programs that supporting families is inseparable from caring for and educating young children. Programs that have specialized family support staff to work with families report more outreach and engagement opportunities. In programs without specialized staff, however, teachers and directors report forming strong relationships with families yet feel constrained by lack of time, training, and support for their work with families.

Programs report the importance of responsive staff-family relationships as well as positive staff attitudes and practices needed to foster these relationships including perspective-taking, care and commitment to the needs of the whole family, openness to change, and positive, two-way communication with families. Programs also report engaging families in their children's learning experiences and working with families to identify and set goals for their children and themselves. Despite these successes, ECE program staff cite numerous barriers and challenges they face working with families. These barriers include lack of staff training in working with families, parent circumstances, neighborhood context, and program policies.

Beyond family engagement, programs also partner with their communities on behalf of children and families. Programs leverage a broad array of resources for families. Programs without services or resources on-site, report using informal connections in the community to help parents obtain needed services. Program directors emphasize that community engagement requires time away from the center and a commitment to relationship-building which may pose a challenge for small programs with limited numbers of staff.

Documentation of program practices is a critical aspect of how ECE programs demonstrate quality yet relationships with families are difficult to measure and some data reporting requirements oversimplify the depth and complexity of the work. Finally, programs report the need for reflective supervision, support, and training focused on family and community engagement practices that will improve this domain of quality.

Table of Key Findings and Discussion

Findings	Discussion
<i>Family engagement policies, practices & attitudes</i>	
A. ECE programs across sectors offer a variety of formal activities for family involvement and implement an “open door” policy for families.	Individualizing activities is a promising strategy for involving families. Not all families want to or are able to engage in the same types of activities. Programs that offer a menu of options and multiple approaches to involvement and communication may be more likely to engage all families in their programs.
B. Relationship-building with families is central to engaging families in their children’s learning.	Working with families involves perspective-taking and understanding of family circumstances. Trusting relationships are central to building program-family partnerships around children’s learning. Programs that take the time and effort to learn about and interact with families may be more likely to help families reach their goals, build capacity, and become advocates for themselves and their children. (Bromer et al, 2011; Forry et al, 2012)
C. Positive attitudes of staff are an important aspect of engaging families. Among the attitudes described as most effective are respect, non-judgmental, openness to change, patience, and caring and commitment to working with families.	Positive attitudes can go a long way toward making families feel welcome. Small gestures such as greeting families by name or knowing a parent’s work schedule can be powerful actions for forging relationships with families that have the potential to contribute to children’s positive outcomes. Models of ECE programming that prioritize flexibility and sensitivity to families may help to change negative attitudes about “hard to reach” or “hard to serve” families. Programs that are open to new ideas about families may be most likely to engage families in ways that positively impact family and child well-being. (Forry et al, 2012; Bromer et al, 2011)
D. Programs have different approaches to helping families and children transition into the ECE program. Some programs encourage family participation in this process while other programs ask families to wait to engage until children are comfortable in the program.	Facilitation of transitions into and out of the ECE settings are a critical way that programs support continuity of care for children. When children experience smooth and consistent transitions between home, the ECE arrangement, and elementary school, they may have easier adjustments that foster learning and growth. The range of practices around transitions into ECE points to the need for research-based standards and guidance in this area.
<i>Program staffing</i>	
E. Programs that have specialized staff to work with families are able to reach out to family members including fathers and extended family, as well as be responsive to families who may need additional supports.	The intensity and reach of family engagement depends on staffing, training, support, and resources to implement family engagement activities. Programs with additional and specialized staff are able to allocate time and resources for working with individual families as well as children, and facilitating their engagement and connection to resources.
F. Skills to work with adults as well as children are seen by ECE programs as important components of staff qualifications.	Knowing how to communicate and work with parents and other adult family members may be a critical skill early childhood professionals. Programs that hire staff who know how to build partnerships with adult family members as well as nurture children’s development are more likely to have success in engaging in positive relationships with families.

Community engagement practices

G. Programs want to improve community engagement but lack adequate resources, knowledge, and time. Directors with limited administrative staff experience role burden as they are often the ones to take on family and community engagement work.

Community engagement allows ECE programs to advocate for children and families, secure needed services and resources, and educate communities about the importance of early childhood education. Yet, creating community connections requires time away from direct work with children and families. Collaborations across ECE programs around community engagement may be a promising strategy for small ECE programs with limited resources to develop community relationships beyond the program.

Documentation

H. Documentation of family and community engagement poses particular challenges. Documentation of interactions with families takes time away from working with children and families. Moreover, documentation requirements may not capture what programs actually do with families.

Documentation is increasingly becoming an important aspect of quality improvement initiatives and systems. ECE programs must demonstrate accountability by showing evidence of high-quality practices and procedures. Documentation and measurement of family and community engagement is an area where additional support and training is needed as well as strategies for programs to simplify procedures. Documentation requirements around family engagement should take into consideration the challenges of documenting relationship-based work. (Forry et al, 2012; Kim et al, 2014)

Support & training

I. Program staff lack relationship-based training on communication strategies, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution. Staff want more opportunities for reflective practice and supervision yet these supports are challenging to build into program schedules and priorities.

Reflective practice and supervision are critical components of creating more family-friendly and engaging programs for children and families. Programs that create a climate of support and reflection for their staff also model this for families. When staff feel supported and respected, they are more likely to engage in respectful and reflective practices with families and children. Programs that seek to understand and reflect on barriers to engagement rather than making assumptions about why parents do not get involved may be more successful in engaging all families.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORT & TRAINING AROUND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

1. **Develop and widely distribute a set of resources describing promising family and community engagement practices that help to align existing standards in this domain of quality.** The articulation of specific practices related to this area of quality may help programs meet standards across systems. Examples from the field could be compiled into a resource packet for programs seeking to achieve the ExceleRate Award of Excellence in Family & Community Engagement as well as other program standards.
2. **Develop new resources and supports for programs around community engagement.** Programs need additional support around strategies for developing collaborations with community organizations. Resources that detail strategies and provide examples of successful collaborations are needed.
3. **Create new opportunities for ECE programs to network, share ideas, and align promising practices around family and community engagement.** Local conferences, learning collaboratives, peer-support networks, and child care networks, offer program staff new opportunities for sharing promising practices, problem solving, and brainstorming with other programs about working with families.
4. **Provide programs financial resources and other supports for family and community engagement efforts.** Programs need additional resources such as classroom substitutes to allow teachers more time to work with families, additional staff positions dedicated to family and community engagement, and administrative support for center directors in order to allow more time for engaging with families and community members.
5. **Provide state-wide access to training and professional development opportunities focused on family and community engagement.** New training and professional development offerings on how to engage families are needed. Training should focus on the specific skills and knowledge required to work effectively with adults including relationship-based approaches to engaging families. Training topics should include adult learning, communication strategies, reflective practice, conflict resolution, and help-giving strategies and principles.
6. **Implement new documentation guidelines and strategies for reporting family and community engagement practices that align with the goals and objectives of ExceleRate and provide training to programs to ensure effective implementation.** Documentation strategies should aim to assess the quality of program-family relationships as well as the myriad ways in which programs engage with families and communities.
7. **Revise policies and procedures regarding the child care assistance program in order to allow families greater continuity of care and to reduce the administrative burden on ECE programs' work with families.** Extending the eligibility period from six months to one year would substantially reduce the administrative workload and allow programs significantly more time to develop

relationships with and engage families around goals for their children and themselves.