

Family Engagement & Gee Whiz

So now that you know a great deal about parent involvement, let's take that a step further and talk about family engagement. What is the difference between parent involvement and family engagement? Actually, quite a bit! Family engagement involves helping families assume an active role in planning experiences designed to benefit their children...both in your program and at home. It also involves promoting family well-being and supporting families as they seek resources for their children. Sounds challenging, right? It may be for some families and certain situations.

For instance, if you are working with a family members that perhaps did not have a positive school experience themselves, it may be hard to convince them to take an active role in their child's education. Additionally, many families are extremely busy and simply feel they do not have time to be involved. But, family engagement is extremely important because it sets the stage for parents/guardians to continue this active involvement as their children enter school. Even more importantly, it strengthens the parent/child relationship.

So, what are some practical ways you can promote family engagement in your program?

Educate! Too often, families do not recognize the importance of their engagement. They might not realize how it important it is for them to be actively involved. On the other hand, they might feel they have nothing important to share or that their feedback/input is not welcome. Let families know as soon as they enroll in your program that their input and participation is not just welcomed but strongly encouraged! While you cannot make a parent/guardian engage, you can open the door. Additionally, you are going to be their "go to resource" for learning about topics such as child development, enrolling in school, potty training and so much more. Be prepared to answer questions and provide as much support as you can.

Empathy is Key. Empathy is the key to any strong relationship. If you've had a bad day, the last thing you want is for someone to say, "Stop complaining." Families have all kinds of challenges they face. Some challenges you may be aware of and some they will prefer to keep private. The key for you is to recognize that it is important to demonstrate empathy when striving to increase family engagement. Parents and guardians will be much more likely to engage and participate if they feel they are understood.

Ask for Input. Your program is really a melting pot of many different children and their families. As such, the experiences and activities you plan should reflect this wonderful characteristic. Ask families to share input when planning events and activities. What topics interest their child? What types of field trips would their child enjoy? Use questions, such as those in our User's Guide, to help you gain input from families. Then use this input as you plan activities and experiences. This is a wonderful way to enhance your learning environment but also to show families how much you respect and value their input.

Be a Team! It's a fact that the team approach IS effective. When you are a team, you keep the needs of the child at the forefront. Working together as a team, you and families can make decisions, plan experiences and solve problems together. After all, two (or three or four) heads is better than one! Set time aside frequently to sit down with families to set goals and a plan to achieve them. On the next two pages, you will find goal sheets (English & Spanish) you might find helpful when working with families. This sheet can be helpful during an initial meeting as well as follow-ups.

