

Parent Involvement, Family Engagement & Gee Whiz



A Child's First Teacher

When a child is born, he or she already has many teachers! Parents, guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, neighbors... and the list goes on. This is because from the time children are born, they are learning...every moment of every day. Even as newborns, they are absorbing everything that is going on around them. They learn by using their senses as they build critical bonds with parents/family members.

So... why is this important? Because as a provider, it is very important for you to understand and recognize that parents/guardians/families are a child's first teacher. While you may come into the picture shortly after a child is born as his/her caregiver, a child's parents/guardians and family will ALWAYS know their child best. Understanding and appreciating this concept sets the stage for you to build upon what parents/caregivers share about their children. It also sets the stage for you and parents/guardians/families to become a team which supports, guides and engages the child.

This guide is designed to help you recognize build positive, goal-oriented relationships with parent/guardians and families. We will discuss the differences between parent involvement and family engagement. There is a difference! We will also help you better understand how you can encourage parent involvement and family engagement in your program. This involves partnering with parents/families in many different ways. There are helpful tools built into the Gee Whiz curriculum you can use to address both parent involvement and family engagement. This guide is a key tool in this process as well. Please take time to read it in its entirety!

Also, be sure to keep in mind that ALL families are unique and special. Sometimes, we have our own personal ideas about what a "family" looks like. Just remember that the definition "family" is going to be different for different families. You will need to take these different definitions of "family" into consideration as you strive to increase parent involvement and family engagement. It is simple. Just embrace the fact that ALL families are wonderful, special and unique and ALL parents/guardians truly want what is best for their children!



Parent Involvement & Gee Whiz



When we talk about “parent involvement,” what does that actually mean? Well, first we need to define what a “parent” is. When we talk about parent involvement in the Gee Whiz curriculum, we define “parent” as a child’s biological parents, step-parents, adoptive parents, grandparent... in other words... a child’s primary caregivers. This is going to vary from child to child and family to family. In some families, a child’s “parents” might be grandma and grandpa. In another family, it might be a single parent father. It is important for you to know who each child’s primary caregivers are so you can work hard to actively involve them.

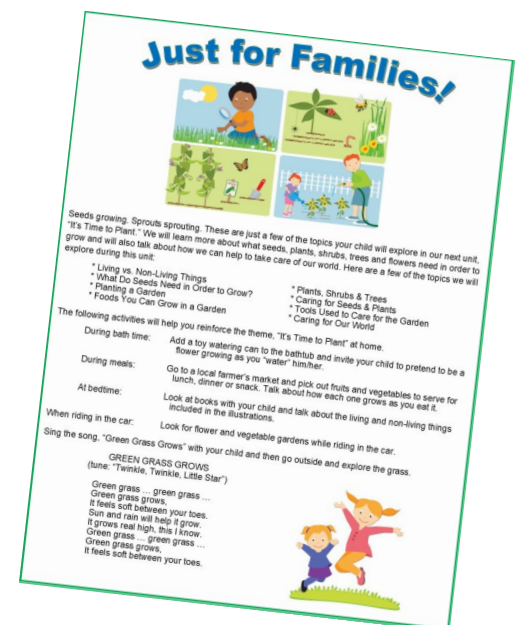
So ... step 1 is to find out who are a child’s primary caregivers if you do not know this information already!

Parent involvement is exactly what it sounds like ... helping parents become more involved in your program. This might be something as simple as sending home a newsletter to keep parents informed or inviting parents to participate in a special event. You might also share resources about child development or point a parent in the right direction if they need help with providing a service for their child. The Gee Whiz curriculum includes specific tools to help you enhance parent involvement in your program. These include the following components:

Family Letters - Available in English & Spanish

These letters are included with each Gee Whiz unit (2 per month). As a PDF file, they can easily be printed OR emailed to parents/guardians. Each Family Letter includes:

- An overview of the unit
- Skills/Topics to be addressed
- Activities parents/guardians can do at bath time, mealtime, bedtime and when riding in the car that enhance the unit concepts
- Simple song, rhyme or chart parents/guardians can do with their child/children at home



Parent Involvement & Gee Whiz

Digital Family Notes

Available in English & Spanish

Digital Family Notes are unique! There are 2 Digital Family Notes with each Gee Whiz unit. These are JPEG images that can be printed, emailed or even texted to parents/guardians. Each Digital Family Note includes a very simple experience parents can do with their children at home that link back to the monthly unit. The goal of many of the Digital Family Notes is to help parents turn every day routine times into learning times. This further reinforces their role as their child's first teacher!

When riding in the car with your child, see how many different colors of vehicles you can "spy" together. Can you find all of the colors?



All About My Week Reports

Available in English & Spanish

These notes are designed to be used by you to help parents learn more about their child's week. There are 2 All About My Week Reports for each Gee Whiz unit. You will want to complete a note at the end of the week to send home on Friday. It would be an excellent idea to make a copy of each completed note before sending it home. Then you can add it to each child's portfolio. At the end of the year, you will have a running record of each child's interests, growth and development!

Please see the Gee Whiz User's Guide for printable English & Spanish versions of our "All About My Weekend" Report that parents complete and send in on Mondays.

In addition to the components detailed here, Gee Whiz also supports parent involvement in other ways. Here are just a few ways Gee Whiz encourages parent involvement:

- Inviting parents to participate in special events (e.g., Wheels Day, Family Celebration Day, etc.)
- Challenging parents to help gather and send in needed items (e.g., family photos, paper towel rolls, etc.)
- Recipes sent home parents can prepare with their children
- Games sent home parents can play with their children at home (e.g., lotto, patterning, etc.)
- Encouraging parents to share feedback (e.g., via the All About My Weekend Report—see GWE User's Guide)
- **Use our printable, "Just a Note" (next page) to help you communicate about things you need and/or special events. Available in both English & Spanish.**

Just a Note

Date: _____

Child's Name: _____

Here is/are some things needed from home. Please send in before _____ (date):

Clothing: _____

Diapers/Pull-ups

Wipes

Toothbrush

Tissues

Recyclables to use for activities:

Other: _____

SPECIAL EVENT!

Date: _____ Time: _____

Event Name: _____

For this event, please...:



Solo una nota

Fecha: _____

El nombre del niño: _____

Aquí hay algunas cosas que se necesitan desde casa. Por favor envíe antes de _____ (fecha):

ropa: _____

pañales / pull-ups

toallitas para pañales

cepillo de dientes

tejidos

reciclables para usar en actividades:

otro: _____

Evento especial!

Fecha: _____ Hora: _____

Nombre del evento: _____

Para este evento, por favor ...:



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.





Let's Set Goals!



Child's Name: _____

Date: _____

People Present at Meeting: _____

Developmental Area or Skill to be Addressed	Goal	Steps to Take at Home toward Reaching the Goal	Steps to Take in Program toward Reaching Goal	Results



¡Establezcamos metas!



El nombre del niño: _____

Fecha: _____

Personas presentes en reuniones: _____

Área de desarrollo o habilidad que se abordará	Gol	Pasos a seguir en casa para alcanzar la meta	Pasos a seguir en el programa para alcanzar la meta	Resultados

A Few Parting Thoughts...

At Gee Whiz, we recognize how hard providers work every day. We know that running a business and being responsible for the health, well-being and education of a mixed-age group of children is challenge...to say the least! We also know that while there may be times that working as partners with families can be challenging, it is also VERY important. Here are just a few parting thoughts:

Make sure your expectations and policies are crystal clear from day one

What do you expect from your families? What are your payment policies? What happens when a child gets sick during the day? What defines a child as "sick?" These are all important questions that you need to answer in writing and then share with families as they interview for your program. When policies and expectations are clear, there is much less chance for misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Does this mean that you will never have a misunderstanding with parents/guardians? Of course not! But, it does mean that the likelihood will be reduced.

Start and end the day with a smile!

We know. We know. Some days this is can be very hard but it is also very important. It is very hard for others to be angry, disagreeable or irritated with you if you have a smile on your face. For the benefit of all the children in your group, if you've had a bad day, wait until the last child leaves to stomp your feet and grumble.

Deal with issues when they occur but NOT in front of children.

When issues arise ... and they will ... plan a time to sit down with parents to discuss them but NOT in front of the children and NOT during drop off/pick up. This is very important. Pick up and drop off are hectic, busy and sometimes stressful times for children, parents and you. They are not the time to deal with potential issues or problems. Instead, make a phone call to discuss when might be a good time to sit down face to face to talk about concerns. This is a two-way street! Parents should feel empowered to reach out to you at any time when they might have a concern as well. When this happens, the door to communication is wide open and the child will definitely benefit.

Help parents/guardians embrace their role as their child's first teacher.

In addition to the tools supplied in the Gee Whiz curriculum, give parents/guardians ideas of things they can do to further learning and development at home during family time. Even a simple trip to the grocery store can be a wonderful learning experience! Quick notes, emails or even your own personal monthly newsletter are great ways to achieve this goal. One of the most powerful things you can encourage families to do is read together... every single day! Remember, your role is not just educator of children but supporter of families as well.

