



ZERO TO THREE COMMENTS ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT BEFORE THE INTERAGENCY POLICY BOARD

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*It is **HOW YOU ARE** with families as much as what you do.*

From our inception over 35 years ago, ZERO TO THREE (ZTT) has focused on the family and had a deep appreciation for the critical importance of understanding and supporting parents and other primary caregivers for nurturing healthy child development. Family engagement has been an integral part of all the work we have undertaken. In addition to our extensive work on specific projects that support families of young children, our [Parent Portal](#) provides a range of science-based tools and resources that are designed to help parents nurture their children's health and development.

PERSPECTIVE ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

If we care about promoting the long term healthy development of children, we need to care deeply about their parents, as they have the greatest impact on their child's development. The better able we are to connect and provide parents with support, resources, and guidance, the greater the positive impact on children. Family engagement is not an add-on, it is an integral component of service provision for all children.

Recent research ZERO TO THREE conducted with a diverse group of families shows that parents are hungry to talk about the challenges they face. They want to learn and to do better. They would be eager to be engaged in their children's programs or schools if there were opportunities to talk with providers or teachers about their struggles and concerns, and to have a chance to reflect on their parenting, provided that they felt they were not an annoyance, or being blamed or talked down to. Important issues on their minds include how their own childhood experiences impact their parenting; how to manage their own big emotions and reactions; and how to find effective ways to discipline. When parents have opportunities to explore these issues that are at the root of much of their parenting practices, they are much more likely to make positive changes.

In crafting family engagement programs, we should not assume that parents come with a ready-made toolkit to be their child's first and best teacher—or to navigate the role expected of them as their children enter the more teacher-directed world of elementary school. They are often as fearful and intimidated as their children—not knowing what to expect or how the system works.

KEY MESSAGES:

It is HOW YOU ARE with families as much as what you do. It is a way of being with them that has to be embedded in all interactions with families—that makes them feel welcome, understood, and respected.

- **The foundation of family engagement is empathy and respect.** This means validating the challenges parents face in childrearing—not blaming, which only alienates parents. All communications need to respect parents’ beliefs, values, and perspectives, and avoid being patronizing—in other words, telling parents what to do, as if they are a pitcher to be filled up. Parents come with their own beliefs, values, goals and perspectives. These need to be heard, understood and respected in order for parents to build trust and be positively influenced by teachers and other providers.
- **The power is in partnering.** Families need and want a partner, someone who sees them as an equal, and who will collaborate with them to problem-solve whatever challenges may arise, versus telling them what to do.
- **Family engagement is not an add-on, but an integral part of any program serving children.** This means it’s not just about pizza night for families, but using every touchpoint with families as an opportunity to connect, support and inform.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- **Family engagement often IS an add-on,** not an integral part of a program.
- **Talking down to, judging, criticizing or blaming parents.**
- **Focusing just on the needs of the children, not the parents.** Unfortunately, **parents who have risk factors in their lives are often seen as the problem.** Such factors could include living in poverty, parental mental health issues, substance abuse, or domestic violence. Indeed, public investments often focus on supporting their young children, not the whole family. This makes parents feel like they are the problem, and that if only the child had different parents or a more advantaged family, they would be fine.
- **Staff seeing parents as adversaries, not partners;** feeling that the parents are just making their lives harder. Further, staff often may make assumptions about parents’ intentions or level of interest in their child’s education, rather than asking—being curious and wanting to help problem-solve. (For example, interpreting a parent’s absence from a school event as a lack of interest in their child when it turns out the parent works evenings.)
- **Parents may see staff as adversaries rather than supporters.** Parents who have had negative experiences in the past with institutions or programs, or who had bad experiences themselves in school, may approach staff with a defensive or dismissive posture. Rather than being reactive to these signals, staff should show an eagerness to understand the parent’s starting point—their perspective—to open up an honest discussion about what their past experiences have been and how their relationship can be different: more of a partnership characterized by mutual respect.

- **Staff are not adequately prepared for, or feel the burden of, an additional job responsibility.** Often staff do not have adequate training on forging strong, positive partnerships with parents; or they may feel this task is beyond their job responsibilities—one more item on an already full plate—and feel resentful.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

- **Provide training for all staff on partnering with parents.**
- **Integrate attention to parents at all points of connection**—drop-offs, pick-ups, email updates, etc.—not just at specific family events. Just as early development unfolds via the everyday moment, so does the most effective family engagement. This might mean:
 - Empathizing with a parent who is clearly stressed-out and harried at drop-off about how tough mornings can be, and asking what the staff can do to help mom transition her child to the classroom.
 - Sending a quick email to share some new developments staff have noticed about a child and acknowledging the parent’s part in these developments—pointing out what they have seen the parent do to support their child.
 - Showing empathy versus criticizing when there are tough times with a child, acknowledging how hard it must be for the parent and reaching out to work together to address the problem.

It is these everyday moments that make the difference—staff showing parents that they feel their pain, and are there to support and partner with them, not to judge or blame. This is the glue that bonds parents to programs and leads to greater participation and thus impact on the child

- **Co-create the family engagement approach.** Staff should ask parents what they need from the program/staff to best support their child; and staff should share what they need from parents to best support the child in the context of the program.
- **Create opportunities for parents to connect with each other:** It is easy for parents to feel like they are going it alone—that they are the only ones who are having a particular issue. Seldom is that the case. Facilitating peer-to-peer discussions about common childrearing issues can be very supportive to parents.
- **Infuse cultural competence into family engagement:** This is of critical importance. Differences in parenting styles and cultural beliefs and values, the degree of knowledge about what a program or school expects, and language barriers, can all contribute to misunderstandings, intimidation, adversarial feelings, and ultimately sub-optimal care for a child.

Consider the case of a parent we know in a low-wage job, who lacks financial resources, has a language barrier with the school, but who desperately wants to help her kindergartner succeed. Instructions came home from the teacher that the family should have new books available to her kindergartner every week. This mom thought that meant she must buy books on her small income. She had no idea that the school had resources, namely a library, to help. Approaching the teacher was intimidating, given the parent’s limited command of English. One of our bilingual staff guided this mom; she helped her get a public library card, and also encouraged her to reach out to the school, which led to her discovering that the staff was more than willing to help. The moral of the story is that when there are language barriers, it is essential that staff reach out to

parents to be sure they understand what is being asked of them to avoid a whole array of miscommunications which ultimately alienate parents and erode the quality of care for the child. Such outreach is a good rule of thumb for approaching all parents.

- **Help parents put the joy back in parenting:** For many parents, childrearing has come to feel more like a job—to fill their child up with a whole bunch of skills to get them ahead in the world. This can be stressful and erode the joy of parenting. Help parents see the power of everyday moments to shape children’s development. Focus on what really matters: tuning in to children; reading and responding sensitively to their cues—both verbal and non-verbal; engaging in reciprocal back-and-forth play and interaction; and incorporating lots of rich language into everyday moments. Help them connect with their kids and understand that strong, positive, parent-child relationships are the foundation of all future development.
- **Be attuned to parents’ needs:** Successfully engaging parents in their children’s early learning also means being attuned to the parents’ needs. For example, mental health issues such as maternal depression can affect a parent’s relationship with his or her child, as well s with the program. Early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) can be a key strategy to boost programs’ abilities to offer help to parents.

PROMOTING EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FROM BIRTH THROUGH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

- **Start early—even before birth—with *supporting parents in understanding and embracing the powerful role they play in shaping their child’s development.*** When parents are supported and feel competent in this role—that they are the guide for their children’s development and learning—it is easier for them to continue in this role and remain a prime partner as their children enter more formal education systems that are less likely to be family focused.
 - Early Head Start (EHS) is a prime vehicle for getting parent involvement off to a good start. They use the term *empowering parents* to mean staff supporting family members to recognize their influence on their children and build their sense of competence and confidence. EHS emphasizes supporting families’ self-efficacy, counseling avoiding the term “parent education” in favor of letting families reflect on what they know and take the lead. EHS research shows that children’s cognitive and social-emotional outcomes were improved when families came into the program during pregnancy. These families tended to stay in the program longer, benefitting from an increased period of services.
- **Some important recent steps in federal policy** can help in increasing family engagement:
 - **Extension of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program:** Like EHS, home visiting helps parents understand and become competent in the powerful role they play early on in their child’s life.
 - **Creating the EHS-Child Care Partnerships:** Because parent and family engagement is a core function in EHS, partnerships can help provide tools to child care programs that previously may not have had the time or the resources to actively engage their families.
 - **Child Care and Development Block Grant Reauthorization:** The new legislation added requirements related to consumer information, in particular giving parents more information about the safety and quality of available programs. But states also will have to make information available about early childhood development, expulsion and suspension policies, and developmental screening. Promoting greater understanding about developmental screening—what it looks for, what a delay or disability is, and how to access services—can help demystify a process and an aspect of development that can seem overwhelming to parents.