

Guideline 4: Engaging Families and Communities

“A growing body of research suggests that meaningful engagement of families in their children’s early learning supports school readiness and later academic success” (NAEYC 2009; Henrich and Gadaire 2008; Weiss, Caspe, and Lopez 2006). Programs and teachers who strive to build genuine partnerships with the parents, guardians, and other primary caregivers at home and encourage families to become active participants in their child’s early learning and development help families to become advocates for their children. “High levels of engagement often result from strong program–family partnerships that are co-constructed and characterized by trust, shared values, ongoing bidirectional communication, mutual respect, and attention to each party’s needs (Lopez, Kreider, and Caspe 2004; NAEYC 2009, 6).

In addition, ECE programs have learned that when they can effectively partner with families, young children benefit and families are more likely to maintain involvement with school settings across the years. By strengthening family engagement during the preschool years, particularly with families from diverse backgrounds, families that have children with disabilities or other special needs, and families with dual language learners, early childhood education (ECE) programs can help to reduce the achievement gap. (See State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care 2013, Paper 4, Family Engagement, for a comprehensive discussion on the research and recommendations on engaging families with dual language learners.)

Ways to Engage Parents

Effective preschool programs and teachers strive to develop respectful relationships with families by recognizing their goals and values. Such relationships give families confidence that their own goals for their children’s development will be valued. Thus, instead of conveying information in one direction from the teacher to the family member, the teacher makes the effort to foster respectful two-way communication (NAEYC 2009).

Researchers have identified six components to family engagement: joint decision making, regular two-way communication, collaboration and exchange of knowledge, learning in the home and in the community, joint family–program goal setting, and professional development (see State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care 2013, Paper 4, Family Engagement). In essence, family engagement means that families and ECE programs agree to share responsibility for the well-being and education of the children. They work collaboratively to bring elements of the home into the preschool and elements of the preschool into the home.

4.1 Programs and teachers build trusting collaborative relationships with families.

When programs strive to build trusting, open, and collaborative relationships with families and genuinely seek the family’s input to inform program planning, family members receive the message that they play a key role in their child’s development and learning. In efforts to establish strong links between home and the early care and education setting, programs and teachers focus on developing strategies for family collaboration and being responsive to each family’s home language.

It is well documented that positive interactions between the dual language learner family and the school are important for promoting dual language learners’ development and well-being and that mutual respect is essential to fostering collaborative relationships. Programs need to make their centers warm and welcoming for all families, so that families with dual language learners feel comfortable, welcome, and enthusiastic about getting involved in school activities.

Engaging and Collaborating with Families

Programs

- Develop and implement program policies that give families and staff members opportunities to observe and discuss children’s development and behavior.

- Support families by providing tools and resources that help them contribute to their children's learning.
- Invite families to participate formally and informally in the development, governance, and evaluation of program services and policies, as appropriate.

Teachers

- Recognize that working with families promotes children's development.
- Build relationships with families to ensure meaningful two-way collaboration, supporting the children's learning and development and helping families to understand child development.
- Attentively greet family members when they arrive and depart from the program setting, and use those opportunities to exchange information about the family's child.
- Contribute ideas and resources to promote each child's learning and development in the home and community.
- Collaborate formally and informally with families and colleagues to share observations, describe children's accomplishments, plan for children individually and as a group, and address concerns about children.
- Support families as decision makers for and educators of their children.
- Actively solicit and listen to families' goals, aspirations, and concerns about their children's development.

Home Language

Programs

- Create strategies to engage family members from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and invite family members to share goals and strategies for supporting children's home languages in the group or classroom. This may require the use of interpreters and translators (please see table 6.2, "Sample Family Languages and Interests Interview," in chapter 6 as a way to gather important information from families).



Teachers

- Learn a few words in each child's home language, such as greetings, names of family members, words of comfort, and important objects or places. Parents and other family members can be good resources for learning their language.
- Seek and use resources to facilitate communication with family members in their home language, ensuring that all families are included.

4.2 Programs and teachers value the primary role of families in promoting children's development.

The family is central in children's lives, as it is through their experiences with their families that children learn about themselves and the world around them (adapted from CDE 2006, 56). In this publication, *family member* is used to define the people who are primarily responsible for a child, including extended family members, teen parents, or foster families (text adapted from CDE 2006,

56). Programs support the healthy growth and development of the child within the context of the family by creating continuity between the home and the early care and education setting. Programs are responsible for learning about the children's home life through communication with family members and, when possible, home visits. As part of this process, programs will learn to work with diverse family structures, including those headed by grandparents, foster families, same-sex parents, and teen parents. An essential aspect of high-quality programs is finding ways to support the growing relationship between the child and the family, and adapting to the strengths and needs of each child–family relationship (CDE 2006, 57). By getting to know families and understanding the importance of children's relationships with caregivers at home, programs and teachers can support the primary role of the family in children's learning and development.

Knowledge of Families

Programs

- Develop or adapt program policies, based on knowledge of the families and on their input and feedback, to support family engagement in the program.

Teachers

- Gather information from family members and engage in direct, effective communication to learn about family composition, values, and traditions to support the primary role of families in their children's care and education and to engage families in the early education setting.
- Learn about each family's values, beliefs, and practices by observing and engaging family members in conversation or by communicating with other staff members as appropriate.
- Find out about each family's language preferences and language goals for their child.
- Refer to and use pertinent family information when responding to needs of children and families.

Parent–Child History and Relationships

Programs

- Develop program policies that support children's relationships with their adult caregivers at home.
- Provide professional development for staff on facilitating parent–child relationships and identifying areas of concern.
- Provide resources or consultation as appropriate to address concerns related to children's relationships with adult caregivers at home.

Teachers

- Understand that all children develop in the context of relationships and that the quality of children's interactions with adult caregivers at home has an impact on child outcomes.
- Follow program policies or practices designed to support relationships between children and adult family members.
- Use a variety of techniques to facilitate and reinforce positive interaction between children and adult family members and support each adult family member's capacity to be responsive and sensitive to the child.
- Understand that culture influences approaches to nurturing young children.
- Identify concerns related to children's relationships with adult family members and follow up as appropriate.

4.3 Programs create a climate in which family members feel empowered and comfortable as advocates for their children.

When programs and teachers engage in open, respectful communication with family members and strive to develop positive, collaborative relationships with them, family members feel included and empowered. The experience of authentically contributing to their children's experiences in preschool helps family members become advocates for their children both within the program and in interactions with other service providers. For

example, they are more likely to seek or request services for their children, such as referrals to special education, when needed or appropriate.

Programs can help families with dual language learners recognize their families' cultural and linguistic strengths and learn the skills to ask for the types of services that they think will benefit their children. Families should be encouraged to share their strengths with the program and be asked to participate in joint goal setting and decision making about their children's education. The entire program benefits when educators incorporate diverse cultures, languages, and talents of families with dual language learners into the program's learning environment and curriculum. Once family members feel their contributions and opinions are valued, programs will benefit from their knowledge and experience.

Empowerment of Families

Programs

- Develop an open-door policy that encourages family members to visit the classroom or center at any time.
- Encourage families to offer recommendations for the program's structure and curriculum and to observe the ways in which their contributions are used in the setting.
- Invite families to share their areas of expertise with the teacher, other families, and the children in the program.
- Ensure all families have the opportunity to participate in a policymaking capacity or leadership role (e.g., as members of a board of directors or advisory board).
- Develop a climate statement that expresses the program's appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity and share the statement with both staff and families.
- Invite families with young dual language learners to participate formally as part of groups that contribute to decisions for the program (e.g., boards, committees, and the like), and to share on an ongoing basis their ideas on how to support and engage with families.

Teachers

- Solicit help from family members in solving problems their child may be having in an early care and education setting.
- Invite families to volunteer regularly in the class and to participate in activities.
- Hold conferences regularly, not just when there is a problem with the child.

4.4 Programs support teachers' responsiveness to the families' goals for their children's development and school readiness.

The most successful opportunities for parent engagement are those that address the ideas of parents about their roles in their children's education and their sense of efficacy in helping their children to succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Working with parents to define shared goals helps to strengthen the home-school partnership. In particular, when programs and teachers work to integrate school and family experiences, implement school-readiness practices, and identify strategies for school readiness and transitions, both families and their children benefit.

Researchers have found that preschoolers achieved at higher levels when families and teachers shared similar child-centered beliefs and practices. Thus, it is important that programs ask all families to collaborate and participate in joint goal setting for their children, and to ask families with dual language learners and those families who have children with disabilities or other special needs, about effective strategies and the contexts in which their children learn best.

Integrating School and Family Experiences

Programs

- Explain the program's philosophy on school readiness to classroom staff and families, with consideration for each child's level of development.

- Incorporate the role of family members in facilitating their children’s transition from preschool to kindergarten.
- Ensure that families with young dual language learners are included as partners in their children’s education. Families should be consulted regarding their children’s early language learning experiences, their educational goals for their children, and the educational progress of their children.
- Ensure that families of young children with disabilities or other special needs are included as partners in their education. Families should be consulted regarding their children’s unique learning needs, their educational goals for their children, and the educational progress of their children.
- Invite families to collaborate with program staff on long-term language development and learning goals for their children. Actively recruit families to participate in classroom activities.

Teachers

- Respond to children and family members in ways that encourage them to share family experiences.
- Share information about children’s experiences in the early education setting with families.
- Support each child’s home language and culture at home and at school.
- Maintain confidentiality of family and child information as appropriate.
- Design early education environments that reflect the diverse experiences of children and families.

Implementation of School-Readiness Practices

Programs

- Collaborate with local transitional kindergarten and kindergarten programs, schools, and support staff in preparing children and families for upcoming transitions.
- Provide professional development activities for staff on school-readiness issues,

including developmentally appropriate practice, communication with families, and social-emotional competence.

Teachers

- Describe the program’s philosophy on school readiness and transitions.
- Engage in discussions with families about children’s experiences in the group or classroom as the experiences relate to school readiness and transitions.
- Respond to questions from families or refer them to appropriate staff for inquiries related to school readiness.
- Articulate that school entry is one milestone in the context of a developmental and educational continuum.
- Include all families as partners in the education of their children with attentiveness to families whose home language is not English.

Strategies for School Readiness and Transitions

Programs

- Coordinate developmentally appropriate experiences to support children’s school readiness in all developmental domains, anticipating upcoming transitions to new programs or schools.

Teachers

- Know the previous early care and education experiences of children in the group and plan for upcoming transitions to new programs or schools.
- Identify indicators of school readiness and developmental precursors of school readiness, as appropriate, for the ages of the children served.

4.5 Programs and teachers use effective communication strategies that reflect the diversity of families served.

Honoring diversity strengthens relationships with families and children, thereby enhancing the quality of care and education for preschool children (adapted from

CDE 2006, 57–58). Being responsive to cultural, linguistic, and economic differences and how these differences affect the ways in which programs and teachers communicate with families demonstrates a program’s commitment to each family’s unique strengths. Programs and teachers can work to enhance their communication strategies, attending carefully to individual differences in family preferences for communication.

Two-way communication strategies have been found to be particularly effective with families with dual language learners who may otherwise feel disconnected from the program. Two-way communication allows both parties to share information about the learning progress and well-being of the dual language learner and to collaborate on ways to help the child reach important learning goals. This type of communication works well during one-on-one meetings with the teacher or in a more informal setting such as in the community or in a group setting with other families with dual language learners of similar linguistic backgrounds. Regular two-way communication may be the first step toward increasing family engagement and key to developing strong dual language learner family–program partnerships.

Communication Strategies

Programs

- Provide professional development for staff on the principles of and strategies for effective communication with families.
- Ensure confidentiality and privacy in communications throughout the program.
- Develop a language and communication policy that informs families with young dual language learners on the possible modes to communicate with staff.

Teachers

- Respect each family’s style and preferred method of communication and interact with families in a transparent, accountable manner.

- Interact with families in a timely and professional manner to establish relationships that encourage mutual, two-way exchange of information about children.
- Maintain confidentiality and ensure privacy in communications regarding children, families, and staff and colleagues.

Family Preferences for Communication

Programs

- Interpret and apply communication policies (as appropriate) to ensure that diverse families are included and complex situations are addressed.
- Help staff to understand and apply communication styles based on each family’s expressed needs and preferences.
- Ensure that all communications are accessible and comprehensible to families (i.e., in the family’s preferred language).

Teachers

- Use various ways to communicate with families (e.g., active listening, e-mail and telephone contact, text messaging), depending on each family’s preferences and on the situation.
- Model for families effective strategies for communicating with children, adapt strategies for communicating with children, and adapt strategies (as needed) to meet diverse language and literacy needs.

4.6 Programs provide a welcoming space in the environment for communication between staff and family members.

Establishing a welcoming environment is an important aspect of fostering family engagement. “A welcoming environment implies that a program has focused efforts on maintaining an atmosphere that is inviting to families and honors their presence” (Constantino 2008, 25). In a welcoming environment, families feel that

they belong and seek ways to contribute to the program. They become comfortable with exchanging information with their children's teachers and open to exploring ways to bring learning activities from the preschool program to home. An essential part of a welcoming environment for families with dual language learners is the program ensuring that they have opportunities to communicate in their home language. Encouraging communication between families with dual language learners who share a home language, hiring staff members (when possible) who are able to communicate in the families' home language, and providing translations help the families to feel welcome in the preschool setting.

A welcoming environment also benefits the children. The family members' presence strengthens the children's sense of comfort and belonging in the preschool setting. For young dual language learners, seeing that the program makes it possible for family members to communicate in the home language helps the children value their home language and culture and appreciate the importance of communicating in their home language.

Creating a Welcoming Space

Programs

- Express a warm welcome by having staff and teachers greet families at the door.
- Offer a family room, where family members can mingle with one another and find information on child development.
- Make a private space available for families and staff to communicate with one another.
- Arrange for support so families with dual language learners can use the home language to communicate with teachers and other program staff members.

4.7 Programs regularly provide family members with information about their children's learning and development, well-being, and everyday experiences.

A key to building successful partnerships with parents is to make them true partners by sharing with them the same kinds of educational information and ideas that are important to the teacher and staff. In a high-quality program, there is ongoing communication between the home and the early care and education center. As much as possible, what the children learn in the program should be supported and reinforced at home.

Family practices in the home are also important for young dual language learners to learn, practice, and reinforce concepts in their home language that were initially introduced in school, such as literacy-building skills. Recent research suggests the use of families' home language is a protective factor for children of immigrant families. When some amount of the family's native language is used regularly in the home, young dual language learners show improved cognitive and social development. Thus, it is important for preschool programs to encourage learning at home in dual language learners' home languages. This may be particularly beneficial in the realm of reading and literacy-building skills.

Information about Learning

Programs

- Offer regular workshops for adult family members that family members helped to design and implement.
- Provide resources for educating the children's family members in various media (print, audio, video) and in the home languages of the families served by the early care and education setting, if appropriate to do so.
- Provide current information about the role of the family in maintaining home language skills.

Teachers

- Inform parents regularly about the purpose and benefits of the activities in the program for their children.
- Provide information regularly to families with dual language learners about the benefits of developing both of the child's languages and promoting bilingualism.

4.8 Programs support and are advocates for strong families.

The better that families are able to meet their children's basic need for shelter, food, and clothing, the more that family members will be available to support their child's learning. Effective preschool programs provide support to families who want it, usually by linking families with resources in the community through referrals. To support family functioning and promote resilience in families and young children, programs and teachers can establish community partnerships and identify key resources for families, connecting them to those resources considered appropriate. In particular, services that help families become self-sufficient and prevent risk of stress or at least reduce ongoing, intense stress, allow family members to become sources of support for each other. Services that promote positive, nurturing relationships among family members enable families to become more resilient and strengthen the children's capacity for learning. Once working relationships with other service providers in the community are established, preschool programs can work to ensure that families receive needed services and children experience continuity in their learning and development.

Family Functioning

Programs

- Collaborate with staff, families, and social service providers to develop policies and procedures related to family support.
- Respond to questions or concerns from staff members or other adults and act as a professional resource.

Strengthening Families: Five Protective Factors

Five protective factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families Approach: parental resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence of children. Research studies support the commonsense notion that when these protective factors are well established in a family, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect diminishes. Research shows that these protective factors are also "promotive" factors that build family strengths and a family environment that promotes optimal child and youth development.

Source: Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.

- Provide professional development opportunities to staff on family functioning, protective and risk factors, and community resources.

Teachers

- Articulate an understanding that families function in a variety of ways and that children or families may require support outside the program.
- Demonstrate an understanding of risk, stress, and resiliency factors related to family functioning and how to support all families appropriately.
- Take steps for further inquiry when concerns arise based on observations of a child or family.
- Communicate daily with families about children's well-being.
- Refer questions or concerns to other staff members when appropriate.
- Work with colleagues to respond to signs of risk or stress in children, as developmentally appropriate and individually meaningful.

Community Partnerships

Programs

- Establish effective relationships with partners to ensure continuity of children's learning and development.
- Maintain professional connections to community and state partners.

Teachers

- Understand the importance of community partnerships in meeting children's needs.
- Form effective partnerships and collaborations with families, professionals, and community representatives.
- Support the needs of children, their success, and their well-being by maintaining professional connections to community and state partners.

Connecting Families with Resources

Programs

- Support staff and families in the referral process as appropriate.
- Work with community resources to conduct outreach or provide services to program families as appropriate.
- Anticipate families' needs for support based on knowledge of the families' circumstances or of current events that may affect them (e.g., economic climate, natural disasters).
- Identify key community resources that support program practices and family needs, including services that support families with dual language learners' communication with the program.
- Share information with colleagues and develop connections to the program.

Teachers

- Demonstrate familiarity with community resources to support children and families.
- Respond to requests from families about community resources and refer questions to appropriate staff members.

- Protect the confidentiality and privacy of families.
- Engage in conversations with families about referrals to community resources and assist in identifying or gaining access to services as needed, with consideration for the diverse linguistic and cultural experiences of families.
- Identify signs that children or families may require support outside the program, maintain documentation, and initiate closer observation or further inquiry, collaborating with families as appropriate.
- Provide resources linked to classroom instructions to assist families in supporting continued development and maintenance of the home language.

Use of Community Resources

Teachers

- Gain knowledge about the importance of community resources that can enhance professional expertise and children's learning experiences.
- Use community resources routinely to enhance their knowledge about families and services and classroom learning activities.

4.9 Programs and teachers engage families in supporting continued development and maintenance of the home language.

Programs and families with dual language learners are critical to children's language development as the sheer amount of words children hear and the richness of the speech they hear is strongly linked to their future language and literacy abilities. Thus, it is critical that programs communicate to families with dual language learners the importance of speaking to children in their home language and suggest that families seize as many opportunities as possible to engage children in conversation. Parents need to help families understand the importance of dual language learning concepts in their home language and engaging in extended language interac-

tions in their home language. In addition, preschool programs can provide families with dual language learners with the necessary provisions and resources to teach new concepts at home in dual language learners' first language.

Home Language

Programs

- Collaborate with families and colleagues to provide a variety of ways throughout the program for young dual language learners and their families to participate.
- Model one-on-one, group, and unstructured peer-to-peer activities.
- Collaborate with families and colleagues to design an educational program that incorporates each child's home language(s).
- Encourage families, colleagues, and community members to use children's home languages and provide training or support as needed.
- Conduct ongoing evaluation of programmatic support for children's home language(s) and use data to guide program improvements.

Teachers

- Assist in offering a variety of developmentally appropriate, individually meaningful, and culturally responsive ways for young dual language learners to participate in the group (CDE 2009).
- Work with colleagues to create various opportunities for young dual language learners and their families to participate in the group throughout the day.
- Demonstrate understanding that the early education setting is often the first place where young dual language learners encounter English and that honoring each child's home language fosters positive social-emotional development and the child's development and learning in all other areas.
- Support home language development.
- Plan with families, colleagues, community members, and others who support children's development and learning.
- Incorporate practices that honor the role of the home language as a vital foundation in English-language development.

References

- California Department of Education (CDE). 2006. *Infant/Toddler Learning & Development Program Guidelines*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.
- . 2009. *Preschool English Learners: Principles and Practices to Promote Language, Literacy, and Learning—A Resource Guide*. 2nd ed. Sacramento: California Department of Education.
- Center for the Study of Social Policy. n.d. *Parental Resilience: Protective and Promotive Factors*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- Constantino, S. M. 2008. *101 Ways to Create Real Family Engagement*. Galax, VA: ENGAGE! Press.
- Henrich C., and D. Gadaire. 2008. “Head Start and Parental Involvement.” *Infants and Young Children* 21 (1): 56–69.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., and H. M. Sandler. 1997. “Why Do Parents Become Involved in Their Children’s Educations?” *Review of Educational Research* 67 (1): 3–42.
- Lopez, M. E., H. Kreider, and M. Caspe. 2004. “Co-Constructing Family Involvement.” *Evaluation Exchange* X (4): 2–3.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2009. *National Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs*, Position Statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care. 2013. *California’s Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners: Research Overview Papers*. Sacramento: California Department of Education. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ce/documents/dllresearchpapers.pdf> (accessed April 3, 2014).

Further Reading

- Halgunseth, L. C., A. Peterson, D. R. Stark, and S. Moodie. 2009. “Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature.” *NAEYC and Pre-K Now*.
- Mendez, J. L. 2010. “How Can Parents Get Involved in Preschool? Barriers and Engagement in Education by Ethnic Minority Parents of Children Attending Head Start.” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16 (1): 26–36.