

Strengths-based Attitudes

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about someone or something. We often see attitudes reflected in a person's behavior. When we approach families with a strengths-based attitude, we show our respect and encourage collaboration.

Adopting a positive attitude does not mean avoiding challenges; instead it shows families that we want to work together to find a solution. In contrast, when we approach our interactions with negative attitudes, we may show distrust or judgment. We can use the following Strengths-based Attitudes to remind ourselves to begin relationships positively, with a family's strengths—even when we are also experiencing challenges.

- **All families have strengths.** Each family has unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths, even when there are challenges.
- **Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.** Children's healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
- **Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.** Families make choices every day that affect a child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
- **Families have expertise about their child and their family.** Families understand their children best and make important decisions everyday for their children's well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
- **Families' contributions are important and valuable.** Being open to a family's suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child. We can encourage effective partnerships when we invite their expertise and listen to their priorities.

What is a Strengths-based Approach?

A strengths-based approach involves the following:

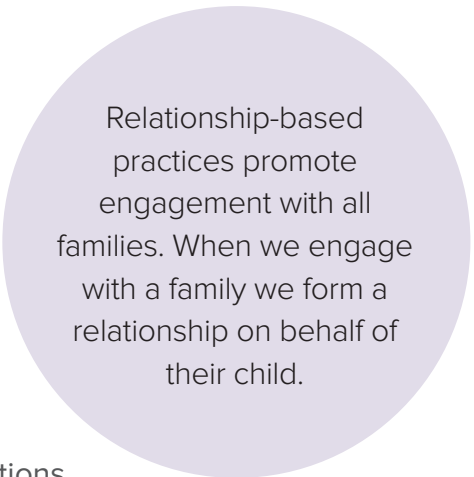
- acknowledging the strengths of families first
- respecting and learning from differences
- showing openness to adapting practice based on family preferences
- sharing decision-making
- approaching families as equal and reciprocal partners in support of their child



Relationship-based Practices

Relationship-based practices promote engagement with all families. When we engage with a family we form a relationship on behalf of their child. These practices, or strategies, are intended to guide what we say and do with families. We can use the following Relationship-based Practices to build strong relationships with families.

- **Focus on the family-child relationship.** Families need to know that their relationship with their child is valued and supported by staff. When we share observations of positive parent-child interactions, we provide reassurance that the relationship between them and their child is more important than any other.
- **Observe and describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family.** The child is the common focus for families and staff. When we ask for parents' observations of a child's behavior and share our own, we create opportunities for discussion.
- **Reflect on the family's individual and cultural perspectives.** Families share their children and themselves as soon as they join our early childhood setting. We can work toward strong partnerships by showing genuine interest in families. This practice is particularly useful when cultural differences emerge.
- **Reflect on your personal and cultural perspectives.** Our perspectives shape conversations with families. It's important to consider our own views when working with families. This practice encourages us to reflect on our interactions so that we can intentionally choose what we say and do.
- **Support parental competence (the parent's skills and self-confidence).** Families benefit when we acknowledge their successes, growth, and efforts. We share in their progress, encourage them to recognize their competence, and join them as they aspire to new goals.
- **Value a family's passion (working with both their positive and negative feelings).** Raising children and working with families always involves emotions. We can expect parents to have feelings about what is happening in their families. No matter how professional we are, emotions are also part of how we react to families. It is important to understand that these emotions come from our shared concern for the child. This can form a common ground to address challenges and move forward.



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Observe and Describe the Child's Behavior to Open Communication with the Family

Description

The child is the common focus for families and programs. When staff ask for parents' observations of a child's behavior and share their own, they create opportunities for discussion.

Simple, clear descriptions of a child's behavior, without interpretations or judgments, give families and staff the chance to make meaning of that behavior together. This creates a starting point for discussion that can help identify common ground and differences.

This practice invites families to guide the conversation about their child. Often families react and respond to the program's ideas or agenda. This strategy gives families the freedom to volunteer and share what they see, know, and want for their child.

Actions

- Share positive, genuine, and specific information about the child with the family.
- Recognize the child's strengths and share them with the family.
- Use simple, clear, and objective descriptions of the child's behavior.
- Ask for the family's observations and listen to what they think these mean about their child.
- Begin challenging conversations by asking parents about what they see, what behaviors concern them, and what they think these behaviors may mean. It's important to know what kind of meaning parents make of their child's behavior. Follow up with a description of what you see, and give parents a chance to offer their ideas.
- Wait before asking too many questions. Instead, start with a description of the child's behavior or a specific situation from the day.
- Leave time for the parent to share their ideas rather than be guided by a specific question based on your own agenda. Instead of sharing your interpretation, listen to how the parent makes meaning of the behavior.

Examples

"You and Elizabeth are always ready when the bus arrives. We really appreciate that."

"I saw that Victoria looked at you and grabbed onto your shirt as I came into the house."

"I've been watching Abdul explore with paint and get used to the different brushes. He also tells stories about his paintings. You told me you want him to paint more realistic paintings. I wonder if he'll begin to do that once his painting skills catch up to his ideas. Abdul is really sticking with it, and he loves it! I think we both want to help him work toward the same goal."

"I notice that Christina often pats other children when they are crying."

"I notice that every time you begin a conversation with me, David begins to tug at your arm."

Reflect on the Family's Perspective

Description

Families share their children and themselves with us as soon as they join our program. They trust us with their hopes, fears, and challenges. We can work toward strong partnerships by showing genuine interest in families – their goals, values, and dreams for their family.

We can gain a better understanding of the child and family if we listen to the family's perspectives. Both the staff and the family benefit from taking the time to consider each other's perspectives.

This practice is particularly useful when cultural differences in child-rearing and family roles emerge. Issues such as education, discipline, social behavior, and even the goals of learning vary a great deal within a multicultural society. All families bring their beliefs and values to discussions about their child.

Actions

- Invite families to share their perspectives on their child's behavior and development.
- Use the family's observations and interpretations to inform how to foster the child's healthy development.
- Before sharing data about a child, consider why you think the information is important and whether it will be important to the child's family in the same ways.
- Invite families to share insights about their child. Partner with families to set goals and make decisions.
- Ask family members what they would like to know about the program and other services in the community.

Examples

"I wanted to talk with you about Michael's progress in learning to get along with the other children. I've seen a lot of changes. I wondered what you've been thinking about this."

"Jacqueline is working so hard to learn to do things by herself. This morning she wanted to put her coat on all by herself. She got very frustrated and started to cry. I wanted her to be successful and, at the same time, I needed to go outside to help supervise the other children. She was very determined. I want to learn from you about what you do if you see Jacqueline struggling with this. We'd really like to work together on this with you. What do you do at home?"

"Last month you mentioned that you were going to learn more about the community center in your neighborhood. I'm curious if you found any programs that your family is interested in?"

"I wanted to follow up with you on our conversation about toilet learning last week. Can you tell me how you think it's going for Felipe?"

Support Competence

Description

This practice helps us to recognize and celebrate a family's successes, progress, and efforts in accomplishing their goals for their child and themselves. We share in their successes, encourage them to recognize their competence, and join them as they aspire to new goals.

Sometimes, because of our training, we think we know best and want to show or teach families how to do things better. We need to be careful not to interfere with their sense of competence by suggesting that we know more than they do. We have expertise to share and we want to choose the right time to share our ideas and suggestions. Follow their lead. Ask if they want feedback or suggestions before jumping in with advice.

This practice reminds us to embrace the strengths of the cultures and home languages of families. We can tailor opportunities to build on each family's individual strengths and interests. Invite parents to share their home language with children, staff, and families by teaching a song, sharing familiar words, or telling a story.

Actions

- Recognize and acknowledge family strengths.
- Celebrate each step taken toward a goal as progress.
- Help families identify and access personal and community resources.
- Attribute a child's progress to the family's efforts whenever possible.
- Build on the family's understanding with new ways to look at the child's behavior.
- Wait until you establish a relationship with a family, or until they ask, before you share your expertise and knowledge.
- Ask the family for ideas about how your program can help them achieve the goals they have for themselves and their children.

Examples

"You are doing a great job navigating the bus system to get Teegan to school. Would you be willing to share what you've learned with other parents?"

"I noticed that while we were talking, José and Leila worked together to separate the crayons and markers by color. Look how they separated them into four piles—blue, yellow, green, and red. I remember when they started at the program it was important to you that they be successful in math and science. You must have been working on sorting things with them at home."

"I noticed Christopher gave a make-believe cupcake to another little boy who was sad because he had fallen and scraped his knee. It reminded me of when you brought me flowers when I had been out sick. You both are so thoughtful of others."

"Last time we met you said you wanted to get your General Educational Development (GED) and we came up with some ideas for making that happen. Your husband mentioned that you seemed excited about these ideas. Is there anything I can do to support you in your progress?"

Focus on the Family-Child Relationship

Description

Strong parent-child relationships link with positive learning and social outcomes for children. Staff efforts to strengthen these relationships can help.

Parents need to know that their relationship with their child is valued and supported by program staff. Sometimes parents worry that their child may feel closer to program staff than to them, or they may feel that program staff judge their relationship with their child. When you share observations of positive parent-child interactions, you provide reassurance that the relationship between them and their child is more important than any other.

This practice reminds us that everything we do is meant to strengthen the relationships between children and their families. When you tie a family's efforts to make progress in their lives to the positive effect it has on their children, it reminds them how working toward their goals benefits the entire family.

Actions

- Share observations of parent-child interactions that demonstrate something positive about the relationship.
- Share what you learned about the child from your observations of family-child interactions.
- Welcome families to visit and volunteer in the classroom.
- Talk with parents about the things you see them do and say that are responsive to their child's individual temperament and that positively impact the child's development.
- Acknowledge how a parent's progress positively affect the child's well-being. Discuss how setting and reaching goals models important skills and qualities for their children.
- Discuss information that reinforces how much the family means to the child (for example, pictures the child draws that include family members, or times when you've observed the child acting as one of the family members in dramatic play).

Examples

"I noticed when I arrived that Sam ran over to you and hugged your leg. I can see he is really connected to you."

"I understand you are concerned that when you pick Abdullah up at the end of the day, he often seems upset or angry. I wonder if it is his way of saying how much he missed you all day. He manages his emotions all day and then gets to let go when he sees you. Maybe it's his way of saying how glad he is that you're back."

"Since you have been reading stories at bedtime together, Sara is spending more time with the books I bring on our home visits. Today she chose the book about dinosaurs. Would you like to borrow that book to read at bedtime this week?"

"I think Fatuma knows that school is important to you. She sees you going back to school, and it makes learning that much more exciting for her because she wants to be like her mom."

Value a Family's Passion

Description

Raising children and working with families always involves emotions. We can expect parents to have feelings about what is happening in their families, whether they are celebrating a child's successes, worrying about how to pay bills, or showing anger at a child's behavior. And, no matter how professional program staff are, emotions are also part of how we react to the families we work with in our programs.

It is important to understand that these emotions—both positive and negative—are parents' and staff's passionate concern for the child and family. Sometimes sharing emotions can be uncomfortable, but it is also a way to deepen partnerships with families.

This practice helps us remember that even when parents and staff have very different ideas about what a family needs, they all want what is best for the family. When our shared goal is positive outcomes, families and staff can work together to determine how to celebrate successes, share worries, and resolve disagreements.

Actions

- Accept and acknowledge the family's emotions, both positive and negative.
- Reframe the parent's emotions as passion for their family.
- Listen for what is behind the emotions and work with the family to understand them.
- Recognize and remember the family's passion from past conversations, and then build on it to provide focus when you set goals together.

Examples

"It is so important to you that Jack succeeds. All of these small successes with toilet learning don't always seem like enough when you are still facing wet laundry at the end of a long day. I want Jack to succeed too, and we can work together to make sure it happens!"

"You certainly want what's best for Jayda. What about you? Are there things you would like to do?"

"Last time we talked you were very concerned that Hiromi is not learning the alphabet as quickly as the other children in her classroom. I wonder if you have thought more about that."

"I can see that you're upset that the bus was late this morning. You've told us that it is important to you that Madeline gets to school on time so that you can get to your class at the college on time."

"I understand why you are upset about Francesca getting bitten today. We're sorry she was hurt and want to reassure you that no skin was broken. We cleaned the area and put on a bandage. We gave her lots of hugs. We know her safety is the most important thing to you."

Reflect on Your Own Perspective

Description

Both the family's perspectives and the staff's perspectives shape the conversation between families and staff. Our own perspectives include many elements—what we have been trained to do, what our program wants from us, our feelings about working with children and families, and, most importantly, the personal beliefs and values gained from our own cultural upbringing. All of these elements, both conscious and unconscious, affect our relationships.

It's important to consider our own views when working with families. Although we often are told to put aside our feelings in our work, the reality is that we bring our own beliefs and values into everything we do. Rather than put them aside, we can increase our awareness of them so we are more effective in our relationships with families.

This practice encourages us to reflect on our interactions with families, so that we can choose what we say and do to promote positive family and child outcomes. Each decision affects the success of our partnerships and the positive impact we can have.

Actions

- Be aware of your own biases, judgments, and negative assumptions.
- Identify how biases, judgments, and assumptions may affect your interactions with families.
- Choose to approach families by holding aside biases, judgments, and assumptions. Adopt one of the strengths-based attitudes to guide you.
- Identify common perspectives and work together to understand differences.
- Ask for help from co-workers and supervisors if you need help doing things differently.
- Make time to reflect on your perspective and how it is affecting your work and your attitudes toward families.
- Before sharing your views, ask the family to share their perspectives. Share your own when it can help you both come to a common understanding.

Examples

“Sebastian’s family says it’s our job to teach him letter recognition and they don’t have time to do extra at home. They want him to read by the time he is four and that’s just unrealistic. I want to partner with them and I’m angry they won’t work with us. Can you help me think about how to approach this?”

“I’m excited for Julia to learn English and Spanish, her family’s home language. Her family is concerned that learning Spanish will affect her English negatively. I’d like to find a way to share my passion for multiple language learning and the positive effects it has on brain development and still honor their concern.”

“I’m so frustrated with Rebecca’s family. They tell me all the time they are going to follow through on the referrals I give them, and then they always have excuses. It feels like a waste of time to be working with them on this. I don’t understand what they want from me.”

“David had a really hard drop-off again this morning. If his mom would just get here earlier and read with him like I suggested, the transition wouldn’t be so difficult. She is always running late, and it just makes it harder for him and for us. I don’t know what to do.”