

“You’re Welcome”

Parent Leaders Speak Out
on What It Takes to Promote
Real Parent Engagement

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Strengthening Families Illinois is a statewide movement to build six protective factors that keep families strong. SFI's network of parent leaders is mobilizing thousands of parents to strengthen families in their communities. At SFI early childhood programs throughout Illinois, staff and families are partnering to keep children safe. SFI offers a multitude of resources and training to build families' protective factors. To get involved, contact SFI at:

Strengthening Families Illinois
310 S. Peoria, Ste. 301
Chicago, IL 60607
312/421-5200 x 125
info@strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org
www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org

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Parent Leaders Speak Out on What It Takes to Promote Real Parent Engagement

What makes you feel welcome? A warm smile? Being greeted by name? A genuine question about how your day is going?

The single most important factor in whether parents get involved in the programs serving their children is: whether they feel welcome. And in order to feel welcome, they have to be welcome.

Why Engage Parents?

Programs and agencies that serve families have plenty of reasons to want to engage parents in their activities. For one, performance standards for NAEYC–accredited, Head Start, and other programs require parent involvement.

On a deeper level, children and families become stronger and safer when parents are involved in quality early childhood programs.

But to be successful in engaging parents, the program’s motivation for involving them must come from an even deeper place—from the heart. It must come from the genuine desire on the part of staff to connect with the parents of the children they serve, and to have those parents involved in what they do.

About This Paper

Strengthening Families Illinois’ (SFI’s) network of parent leaders held a facilitated dialogue on parent engagement at the SFI quarterly Confab, held in Chicago on January 22, 2011. Eighty-five English- and Spanish-speaking parent leaders from across the state answered the questions, “What can agencies do to promote parent engagement?” and “What do agencies do to impede or prevent parent engagement?” This paper shares their recommendations, which fall into four categories:

“Tired of Smiling”

When I go to pick up my granddaughter, as soon as I walk in the door the receptionist greets me by name, smiles, and asks me how I’m doing. Whatever stress I’m dealing with, it starts to melt away. Walking down the hall, the janitor does the same thing. Teachers catch me as I’m passing by and tell me a story about my granddaughter. By the time I get to her room, I’m tired of smiling! And I’m totally ready to focus on her. It’s a great feeling.

—Parent, Carole Robertson Center for Learning

☞ What Does Your Program Do? Services and Programs

☞ How Do You Do It? Approaches and Qualities

☞ How Does It Feel? Atmosphere

☞ What Is The Power Structure? Policy

Each section ends with a set of discussion questions to help programs and centers make changes that will enable them to successfully promote parent engagement.

What Does Your Program Do?

Services and Programs

“Parents need more education and opportunities to come together—not a lecture, but a conversation.” Agencies must ensure that their programs and services include the

types of activities that allow parents to talk with each other and with staff about issues that matter to them.

These include:

☞ “Events that appeal to families”: Parents noted that parent meetings and “opportunities to come together—not a lecture but a conversation” were important to giving parents the sense that their ideas were important to the program. They specifically mentioned Parent Cafés (see sidebar) and informal events based on the interests and needs of parents in the community.

☞ “Information that is relevant to families”: Programs must share information that parents need, on topics that are of interest to them, in formats that they are open to—from literature on the protective factors to parent leadership workshops to informal conversations. Parents specifically noted that there is a “lack of information for parents

Parent Cafés

Love Is Not Enough Parent Cafés build on parents’ love for their children, creating a continuum of opportunities for them to strengthen their families, be involved in programs, and reach out to others in their communities. Parent Cafés take place at early childhood centers and in other friendly environments (churches, schools, community centers). Over the course of three evenings, parents discuss three separate themes:

- Taking Care of Yourself
- Being a Strong Parent
- Building Strong Relationships with Your Children

These themes incorporate all of the protective factors and provide a way for parents to apply them to their own families. Hosting and facilitating Love Is Not Enough Parent Cafés requires in-depth training and ongoing development (see SFI Parent Leaders sidebar).

about our rights.” They asked for a range of information and education, not just about parenting but about opportunities to get support and get involved. And they pressed for teaching methods that are fresh, different, and effective: “[Programs] use the same methods to educate [over and over]. While the information isn’t boring, the methods often are.”

☞ “Counseling services that are convenient for families”: Counseling may not be the first thing that comes to mind when planning parent engagement activities. But having a mental health consultant present at times and locations that work for parents is crucial to enabling parents to open up and discuss issues that may be keeping them from playing an active role in the programs that serve them and their children. A parent’s conversation with a mental health consultant is often the start of a relationship with the program that continues in many forms and with many individuals.

Questions for Reflection

- ☞ At the end of a workday, how likely are you to go to an event where you’ll be lectured to?
- ☞ What is your favorite way to learn?
- ☞ The last time you had a personal issue that got in your way, who did you talk to?

How Do You Do It?

Approach and Qualities

“Danos la oportunidad de desarrollar el deseo ardiente de ayudar a los jóvenes”

“Give us the opportunity to develop the burning desire to help young people.”

Just as important as the services and programs offered is the way in which they are provided. Parents identified many examples of how program staff can best express an openness to and eagerness for parent engagement, including:

Protective Factors

Research shows that when programs work with parents to build the following protective factors, families are stronger. Sharing these factors with parents in plain language, as shown below, is a good way to promote parent engagement in programs:

- Parental Resilience: Be strong and flexible
- Social Connections: Parents need friends
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: Being a great parent is part natural and part learned
- Concrete Support in Times of Need: We all need help sometimes
- Social and Emotional Competence of Children: Parents need to help their children communicate
- Healthy Parent-Child Relationships: Give your children the love and respect they need

- ☞ “Open and frank relationships, communication, and attentiveness” between staff and parents are critical to getting and keeping parents involved. Staff must be supported in making relationships with parents an important part of their jobs as educators and caretakers for children. Staff make parents comfortable being involved in their children’s early education programs, schools, and other agencies in many ways: “Get to know each family—as people.” “Learn what their gifts are and what is important to them.” “Don’t send parents to use the computer for more information—put it in their hands, and their ears.”
- ☞ Confronting stereotypes, negative mindsets, and harmful language at all levels are crucial to promoting parent engagement. Parents reported barriers such as “not feeling welcome,” as well as the perception that staff think “parents—and in particular, fathers—don’t care.” Clinical language should be kept to a minimum—parent leaders noted that unmarried couples in some programs are called “paramours,” which parents found harmful. Parents stressed the importance of really knowing each individual parent and family member: “Recognizing and understanding [parents] requires communication.”
- ☞ “Work more on parent self-esteem and provide support for parents to grow.” Parent leaders pointed to self-esteem as a major stepping stone to increased parent engagement in programs. “Give us the opportunity to develop the burning desire to help youth,” said one parent. Others pointed out that when self-esteem and opportunities are in place, “Parents get themselves involved.” “We educate ourselves as leaders.” They recommended that staff be trained to always “keep an open eye to see who wants to really help.” In all aspects of the program, staff must “allow the parent to be a partner: ownership equals involvement.”
- ☞ Model positive characteristics. When parents see staff behaving with a sense of professionalism and with strong interpersonal skills, they are more likely to respect the program and want to spend time with and even model the people involved in it. As examples, parents pointed to the willingness to accept change rather than “doing the same thing as always,” willingness to put in extra work, knowing the mission of the agency, showing humility and selflessness. If the program uses titles (“Mr.” and “Mrs.”) for some people, they should be used for all people.

Questions for Reflection

- ☞ When someone asks you how you are, how can you tell if they really mean it?
- ☞ How would you feel if someone called you a “paramour”?
- ☞ Have you ever been invited to something that you knew you weren’t really welcome at? How did you know?
- ☞ When was the last time you got really good service somewhere? What did you like about it?

How Does It Feel?

Atmosphere

“You can put up all the signs you want, but parents won’t come unless you have a relationship with them.”

Relationships between staff and parents are the key to parent engagement. In order to build those relationships, staff must feel that parents are valuable and that they require and deserve support. It is important that staff know who the parents are and make them feel welcome, included, and involved—“not just to meet the program’s needs, but just ... because!”

- ☺ “Parents feel welcome when they are welcome.” Common sense and human empathy are where parent involvement begin. “If you have to try real hard to be real nice to parents, then it is indicative that you are not valuing them.”
- ☺ Staff must do their jobs but not let the professional mindset eclipse the basic human empathy they need in order to relate to parents. “Remember, there’s not a big divide between me and you,” said one parent. Staff have to be more excited about connecting than about having power or professional authority.
- ☺ Relationships aren’t just one person’s job. “Everyone has to welcome parents”—receptionists, custodians, teachers, food providers, finance staff, etc. Every encounter a parent has with the program is a chance to make—or lose—the connection that leads them to work with staff around their child, get involved in program and policy work, and take part in other activities using their valuable personal time.
- ☺ “Relationships are 24-7.” The good will built with parents in the “off times”—when you’re not asking for something and when you don’t have to discuss a problem with their child—lays the foundation for all kinds of conversations and for them to get involved.
- ☺ All parents must be equally welcomed. All too often, schools and programs recruit parents who agree with them, “parents they like” or who are expected to uphold the status quo. Many parents work very hard to be involved in their children’s programs and schools even though it’s very difficult. “Frankly, I didn’t like going to my child’s school, but I did it because I knew it would help my child do better.” Sometimes programs work harder to recruit parents who seem easy to relate to, but often if there’s friction with parents, it’s because they’re strong advocates for their children’s needs, and it’s especially important for them to be involved.
- ☺ In particular, it is important that programs “remove the stumbling blocks for fathers to be involved,” even when the mother and father are not together.

- ☞ As we all know from our own families, relationships aren't always on smooth terrain. Programs also must put in place mechanisms for honestly and openly dealing with conflict between staff, agency leaders, and parents so that parents will continue to share their honest opinions and stay involved.
- ☞ All areas should be welcoming to parents, but if there is not a place for parents to come and participate in the programs and activities mentioned above, they will not be able to occur. "Lack of a special place for extra programs for parents to feel welcome" was noted as a major impediment to parent involvement. If programs are located off-site, they are less likely to be associated with the agency in parents' minds.

Questions for Reflection

- ☞ Have you ever had to confront a neighbor you've never met before about something negative? What if you had said hello before that confrontation?
- ☞ If you are a parent, what has made you feel welcome or not welcome at a program your child participates in?
- ☞ What makes you want to come back to a place?

What Is the Power Structure?

Policy and Supports

"Parent engagement is often impeded by program policies."

"There is a lack of programs in our language."

Individual programs and staff behaviors are important in promoting parent engagement, but in order to be lasting and far-reaching, parent engagement must be embedded in agencies' policies and strategies. SFI parent leaders made the following recommendations:

- ☞ Parents must be involved in all of the organization's community needs and resources assessments and program self-assessments: "There has to be a way for parents to critique the agency." "Solicit input from parents, asking what they need." It is just as important that their suggestions be followed: "Agencies ask parents for their opinion and don't follow through."
- ☞ Logistical supports must be in place to make the most of parents' time at meetings and to communicate effectively on the organizational level: "Have an agenda—know what you want to get out of parents' involvement." "Conference calls have worked." "Use the technology parents have. Pay attention to technological disconnects with the community, like lack of email access." "It's hard to know what's going on. Email, call, mail—whatever works for parents."

- ☺ “Have more incentives for the parents to draw them in.” Stipends, awards, subsequent opportunities for leadership and development, as well as the supports listed below help parents make the decision to spend time participating in the organization on a variety of levels.
- ☺ Staff have to be informed about new parent engagement programs and their importance in promoting them. Usually, staff who are present when children are being picked up and dropped off are the main conduit of information to parents. They must have updated information about opportunities for parent engagement and special events and deadlines that are approaching. It is also important that staff be encouraged to identify and approach parents who would be a good match for specific engagement opportunities.
- ☺ Programs and agencies must engage in partnerships with other agencies to help families and promote parent engagement. “Promote partnerships with Local School Councils and the Parent Teacher Association—not just when it’s required, but voluntarily.”
- ☺ Boards and oversight committees should always include parents, but parents also need other ways to be involved. “Promote parents to go and do the footwork.” “There are too many procedures for parents to do to be involved, even medical exams and background checks.” It is important to provide parents with education and information about parent engagement and examples of how it works so that they can choose the level of involvement that is right for them.
- ☺ Finally, parents pointed out that supports are necessary to make involvement possible and appealing for families. These supports include:
 - Language: Parent leaders named language as a critical barrier. “They don’t provide translation of information.” “Pay attention to bringing staff [to events] who speak the language.” “Vocabulary is very important in an interpreter.” “There is a lack of programs in our language.” Agencies must do research to determine which languages are spoken by the families of the children they serve and reach out to individuals and institutions in their communities to ensure that quality, specialized translation is a part of all materials, programs, and services.
 - Childcare and transportation: Parent leaders pointed to the need for childcare during parent engagement activities as well as transportation to and from meetings and other events as crucial supports without which parents could not participate.
 - Publicity: Parent leaders stressed the importance of telling parents about opportunities for involvement in ways that they will see and notice—phone calls, posters, invitations, social networking sites—whatever parents in the community pay attention to.

Discussion Questions

- ☞ Are you more likely to go to an event you've never heard of if you see a poster or if a friend recommends it?
- ☞ Have you ever been in a conversation about something you're an expert on, but others didn't let you talk?
- ☞ What happens when you don't have an agenda at your staff meetings?
- ☞ How hard is it to express your deepest, most complex feelings even in your own language? How about another language?

More Parent Engagement Resources and Training

Strengthening Families Illinois has many resources to help programs, agencies, and parents develop parent engagement. The SFI parent leadership team can also provide leadership training to parents in your community, state, or agency.

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