



HEALTHY STARTS HERE



How to Engage Early Care and Education Families

Overview

Families are the core of sustainable health outcomes for children. Our work with Early Care and Education (ECE) programs affects staff and families. This guide enhances AZ Health Zone staff's family engagement skills when working with SNAP-Ed eligible ECE sites. Building relationships with families increases family involvement, integrated community support and resources, and ECE program success.

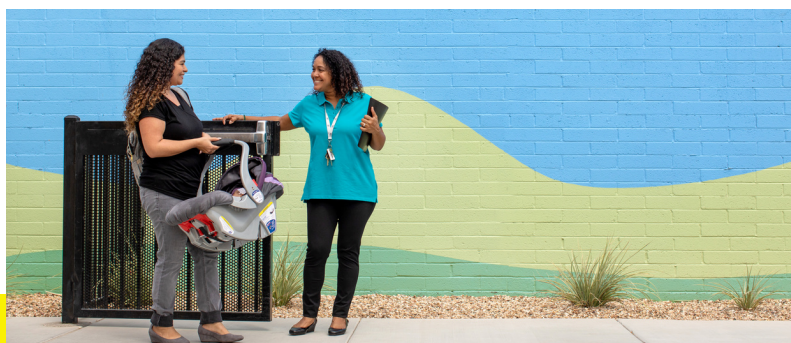
Family engagement is the process to build genuine relationships with families. Relationships with families support overall family well-being and children's healthy development.

Purpose and Background

The ability to engage families at ECE sites varies site to site. Site expectations can help or hinder family engagement. Engaged families are more likely to incorporate best practices in the home. Family engagement in schools contributes to:

- Decrease of disciplinary issues.
- Improvement of child achievement and school environment.
- Stronger parent-teacher and teacher-student relationships.
- Positive student outcomes.

AZ Health Zone is committed to community engagement and supports the implementation of Empower standards. Most Empower standards include family engagement and education components which require ECEs to provide families with information at least once a year. To build on those standards, AZ Health Zone aims to involve, consult, and collaborate with families to influence policy, systems, and environmental changes (PSEs) at ECE sites, communities, and AZ Health Zone programming. This enables sites to have shared goals and outcomes between providers and families which can have multi-generational effects and strengthen the home-to-school connection.



Process and Consideration

The ability to engage families at ECE sites varies site to site. Site expectations can help or hinder family engagement. Engaged families are more likely to incorporate best practices in the home. Family engagement in schools contributes to:

- Identify a point of contact at the site who can make decisions about family engagement.
 - Questions to ask:
 - Does the site have a staff development calendar?
 - Is family engagement a priority for the director and staff?
 - When is a good time to talk with or train staff about family engagement? What are the days and hours of operation throughout the year?
 - Are there any planned family engagement days such as graduation, open house, fall festival, field day, or parent training?
 - Are there opportunities to leverage early childhood specific days such as Week of the Young Child or Teacher Appreciation Week to engage families at the site?
- Plan - Do - Study - Act
 - Assess current family engagement level at the site
 - Invite site to enroll in Go NAPSACC if applicable.
 - Help the site complete a pre-assessment in their Go NAPSACC account for the module they want to improve. Each module has a Family Engagement component.
 - Encourage the site to set family involvement goals based on the pre-assessment recommendations.
 - Share tips, tools, and resources.
- Coordinate activities with programs' predetermined dates. Prepare for and be flexible to changes to pre-set dates or activities.
 - Family Engagement Events Reminders
 - Photo releases: Take photos of children's backs if no photo release. U of A staff cannot take photos or videos without a photo consent. Send the signed photo release to the program after the event.
 - Provide take-home activities and encourage families to document the activity through pictures, drawings, etc.
- Survey families or facilitate small focus groups to gain insight regarding:
 - Preferred activities.
 - Family engagement language and messaging and expectations.
 - Create or update a family engagement policy.
 - Family engagement successes and challenges.
 - What are common reasons that prevent families from engaging?
- Family Engagement follow up:
 - Simple call-to-action; create goals, mail out goals; provide relevant, cost-effective, and equitable support materials
 - Coordinate with Child Care Health Consultants for collaboration with shared ECE partners.
 - Assist site with completing GO NAPSACC post-assessment when applicable.
 - Help the site decision-maker and parents connect to find solutions for at least one of the barriers to family engagement.
- Partnerships:
 - Consider stakeholders, programs, and regulatory agencies programs are connected and accountable to; leverage these expectations, shared goals, and relationships.
 - Provide local resource lists; partner with First Things First regional councils to gain access to supplemental materials, funding applications, and program coordination.

Success Story

AZ Health Zone provided a short FSM training to Career Technical Education (CTE) ECE students at San Luis High School. As part of the education program, the school has a preschool called, Lil' Winders Preschool. Students care for the children and plan and provide activities. A few weeks after the training, students planned a family engagement activity on Family Style Meals. Students hosted an education session for parents during parent pick-up times. After a presentation, students demonstrated how FSM works. Parents were able to see their children serve themselves. To make tacos, children used child-sized tongs to hold a tortilla and then added meat and toppings. They took turns serving themselves and passing the serving bowl and utensils to each other. Two CTE students sat at the table to instruct and encourage. They helped the children as parents watched their children pour water and make their tacos. Parents commented on how the children did not serve themselves at home. Afterwards, parents got to enjoy tacos and were provided with child-sized tongs to take home to replicate the scenario at home. AZ Health Zone was there to provide support and provide Go NAPSACC materials to parents on the topic of Family Style Meals.



Lessons Learned

Unique and Cultural Considerations

COVID-19 procedures affected centers' ability to engage families. Centers suspended this best practice to comply with The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations. Therefore, parents and caregivers were not permitted to enter the child care facility. Some providers may still require masks to be worn or limit the level of contact they have with families and caregivers. Be aware of, respect, and adhere to each provider's policies and practices.

Child care, in or out of the home, is essential due to many parents and caregivers being employed or enrolled in school. Parents do not always have time to engage as they would like and staff may find it challenging to involve parents. Most child care providers do not have set drop-off and pick-up times, or allow for full-or-part-time enrollment. Therefore, drop-off and pick-up times and attendance can vary. This also creates a barrier to reaching parents. Work with providers to identify the busiest drop-off and pick-up times and days to maximize your family engagement efforts.

Parents and caregivers who work may not always be available during the provider's operating hours. These families may have various caregivers drop off and pick up their children. Providing written or electronic information helps keep families informed and involved.

Families whose primary language is not English, or the language of the majority population may be less inclined to engage due to language barriers. Working with providers to have materials, tools, and resources available in multiple languages is key to engaging these families.

Single parents and grandparents raising children are unique family dynamics. Some providers have a two-generational or grandparent model, such as the Western Arizona Council of Governments (WACOG) and other Head Start programs. Learn how these models use family engagement and work within those frameworks.

Work with programs to identify unique cultural aspects of children and families to adapt AZ Health Zone activities at the site. Search local grocery ads or tour nearby food retailers to identify what foods are available.

When planning physical activity engagement opportunities, consider: safety, accessibility, and abilities of the children and families. Are the planned activities modifiable? Do they range in levels of intensity? Can all ages, sizes, and abilities participate? Knowing and planning for various levels of abilities enables enjoyable family engagement.

Rural and Tribal Lens

Tribal programs are generally not licensed by the state. It is important to learn tribal regulations, best practices, policies, and decision-making processes related to early care and education. Seek out and utilize tribal resources for ECE programs that help with cultural preservation, such as language and food value. Leveraging tribal relationships and resources helps with overcoming barriers to engaging families.

Rural communities tend to be small and may have limited resources and services. Community members may have several roles within the community. They may also have informal processes. Learning how ECE providers are integrated into their communities will be integral for engaging the families they serve.

Summary

Effective and enjoyable family engagement is crucial to prevention of adverse and improvement of optimal health outcomes for children, families, and communities. AZ Health Zone supports ECE providers engaging families in ways that allow for sustainable policy, systems, and environmental changes.



This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP through the AZ Health Zone. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.