



Families as Advocates and Leaders

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the “Families as Advocates and Leaders” Outcome: *“Parents and families advocate for their children and play leadership roles in Head Start and Early Head Start. They participate in decision-making, policy development, and organizing activities in communities and states to improve children’s safety, health, development, and learning experiences.”*

This resource presents a summary of selected research, promising practices, proven interventions, and program strategies intended to be useful for Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs.

Introduction

Families can be advocates and leaders at home, in their children’s schools, in their neighborhood and community, or in the larger society (Henderson, Kressley, & Frankel, 2016; Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Their advocacy and leadership may be far-reaching, shaping the development of children, programs, schools, and other families for years to come.

Head Start is a strong national model of family advocacy and leadership. Head Start and Early Head Start programs have always engaged families as advocates and leaders in their program activities, particularly through Parent Committees, Policy Committees, and Policy Councils.

Definitions

Family advocates may speak up for themselves or others to address needs, clarify rights, and aide in problem-solving (Justice Education Society, n.d.). Parents may advocate for their own children, or join with others to represent the needs of many children (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocón, 2012).

Family leaders use and develop resources and services to strengthen their family. They speak and act from those experiences (Reynolds & St. John, 2012).

What Parent Advocacy and Leadership Look Like

All parents are advocates and leaders in the lives of their children. They advocate for their children’s well-being, and as their children grow they develop as leaders and as parents. Parental responsibilities that are similar to those of other advocates and leaders include juggling multiple tasks, solving problems, making decisions, setting ground rules, balancing team members’ competing needs, and ensuring work is completed as a group (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997; Saad, 2016).

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

Positive & Goal-Oriented Relationships			
Equity, Inclusiveness, Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness			
PROGRAM FOUNDATIONS	PROGRAM IMPACT AREAS	FAMILY OUTCOMES	CHILD OUTCOMES
Program Leadership	Program Environment	Family Well-being	Children are:
Professional Development	Family Partnerships	Positive Parent-Child Relationships	Safe
Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement	Teaching and Learning	Families as Lifelong Educators	Healthy and well
	Community Partnerships	Families as Learners	Learning and developing
	Access and Continuity	Family Engagement in Transitions	Engaged in positive relationships with family members, caregivers, and other children
		Family Connections to Peers and Community	Ready for school
		Families as Advocates and Leaders	Successful in school and life

The Head Start PFCE Framework is an organizational guide for collaboration among families and Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families.



Family advocacy and leadership in early childhood settings, particularly Head Start and Early Head Start, can include a range of different activities. Parent advocates and leaders can:

- act as mentors or volunteers in the classroom,
- act as peer support for other parents,
- coordinate events for children and families,
- serve as cultural liaisons between programs and communities,
- participate in parent meetings, advisory committees, Parent Committees, Policy Councils, and other governing bodies as well as community or state coalitions,
- write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper to express concern about a community topic that needs more attention and action, and
- represent children and families in the development of policy and legislation.

Strong parent advocates and leaders tend to:

- gather information and ask relevant questions,
- understand how the educational system is designed,
- build relationships with and organize others,
- identify problems, propose solutions, and set goals (Wright & Wright, 2006).

Many parents enter Head Start and Early Head Start programs with strong advocacy and leadership skills. Other parents have great potential to develop these skills. Families' positive experiences with advocacy and leadership may further motivate them to advocate for broader systemic improvements (Trainor, 2010).

Some families become advocates when they mobilize around a shared concern or crisis, such as potential funding cuts. Others become advocates after realizing that they have the ability to change situations that once made them feel helpless (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Some family members enter programs with the motivation to strengthen their children's experience. Others bring strong advocacy skills from additional settings or their countries of origin.

Families as Advocates and Leaders: What the Research Says

Benefits to Children

Families act as advocates and leaders when they are choosing an early childhood program. Parents can use the advocacy skills they develop in Head Start and Early Head Start to positively influence their children's learning experiences throughout their education (Trainor, 2010). Families who are involved in advocacy and leadership activities serve as important role models for their children (Cunningham et al., 2012).

Benefits to Families

Family members involved in advocacy and leadership activities can experience personal growth (Cunningham et al., 2012). For example, they may develop or reinforce

their ability to express their concerns constructively, create and implement plans, and further refine other skills. Many become more confident and are then able to give back to programs that supported them (Cunningham et al., 2012; Henderson et al., 2016). When family advocacy and leadership extend beyond an individual child/program to the community or region, families develop additional networking skills and a deeper understanding of the issues that are important to them (Grenia, 2011; Trainor, 2010). As one father observed:

"One thing that I found that Head Start did for me was not only to enrich, empower, and educate my family, it enriched, empowered, and educated everyone around me. And that happened through the support of the teachers, the family service workers, the health coordinators, the parent involvement people.... About four years ago, I spoke as the keynote speaker for the parent award banquet and went on to go to the state association board and the regional association board, where I'm currently a member."

Opportunities for families to develop their leadership and advocacy skills can contribute to career advancement. For instance, many Head Start and Early Head Start parent leaders continue their education, become staff at Head Start and Early Head Start or other community programs, and improve the financial stability of their families over time. Often, they serve as positive role models for other families.

Benefits to Programs, Schools, and Communities

Schools that provide opportunities for shared leadership with families are better able to meet the needs of the school and community (Auerbach, 2010). Family advocates and leaders have knowledge about their communities and may help organizations become aware of a range of issues (Parent Leadership on the Great Start Collaborative, n.d.).

Head Start and Early Head Start formally and informally promote family advocacy and leadership in other community organizations. As one Head Start director explains:

"We make sure that families have the information they need, and we help them to advocate in meetings. Our expectation is that the other agencies know that our families will be speaking up, will be asking questions, and that we encourage them to do so."

One prime example of family advocacy and leadership having national, long-lasting impact is the evolution of special education services for children with disabilities. Families have been the driving force for creating civil rights and educational legislation at the national level.



Boosting Family Advocacy and Leadership

Relationships are the Key

Family advocacy and leadership is built on strong positive relationships between families and program staff. When staff members build relationships with families through home visits and communicate in the family's preferred language, they can identify family strengths, needs, and interests regarding advocacy and leadership. Once positive relationships are built, families feel respected, cared for, and are better able to share their ideas and concerns (Auerbach, 2010).

Both families and program staff bring their own experiences, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and views of child-rearing and education to relationships between families and staff. Family and staff interactions and expectations are important. Positive interactions may encourage families to participate in advocacy and leadership activities, while negative interactions may hinder them. Programs can include professional development opportunities that help staff learn how to encourage parent advocacy and leadership.

Below are a few effective strategies to strengthen relationships between staff and families:

- Provide opportunities for open communication and validate parental concerns (Stanley, 2015)
- Encourage mutual family-school relationships and positioning parents as experts (Welton & Freelon, 2017)
- Engage families in culturally and community responsive approaches; seeing families' culture and history as assets (Nava, 2016)
- Value parents for their input individually, rather than as a group (Parent Leadership on the Great Start Collaborative, n.d.).

Families bring a wealth of gifts and strengths to programs. They may be passionate and persuasive speakers, and committed to supporting their child and their community. Many families can give voice to the unique needs of a particular community and share important details about how cultural backgrounds can affect parents' experiences.

Families often advocate on behalf of parents who are wary about getting involved.

Staff members also bring gifts to relationships with families. Many staff are former Head Start and Early Head Start parents who can relate to the experiences, cultures, and languages of the families they serve. Staff can listen carefully to families and provide the support that encourages families to ask for what they want and need.

Communication, Negotiation, Cultural Differences and Conflict Resolution

Communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution are vital skills to building strong staff-family relationships. When conflicts arise, families and programs can engage in discussion and negotiation. Family members must be respected as capable of making choices to resolve conflicts and differences of opinion (Auerbach, 2010). Relationships are strengthened when conflict is addressed openly and respectfully.

Negotiation and conflict resolution skills are also important for families in advocacy and leadership roles (Cunningham et al., 2012). For example, these skills are useful in policy or advisory boards, such as the Head Start Policy Council.

Families can face challenges when becoming involved in a program. Some families may not feel confident, see their language skills as too limited, or may not have the necessary knowledge to be an advocate or leader in certain settings. Families tend to soften their own voices because they think their roles as parents are limited (National Parent Leadership Institute, n.d.). For some, negative experiences with other programs or schools, or their own difficult school experiences, may discourage them from getting involved in their children's education.

Cultural beliefs about teachers' authority may prevent some parents from expressing opinions that might seem to challenge teachers. Or, when families express desires for their children that go beyond a program's current practice, staff may feel overwhelmed or defensive (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Teachers or home visitors may feel unappreciated or discouraged if families are not engaged in ways that teachers expect and desire.

Traumatic refugee experiences may lead some families to feel powerless or fear the consequences if they express their concerns. Some families, including migrant families or recent immigrants without legal documentation, may avoid leadership roles because they are protective about their family's privacy. (For resources on serving refugee and immigrant families, see *Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development*, available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.)

Differences or misunderstandings related to staff and parent expectations or cultural differences may challenge relationships. Overcoming such challenges involves showing understanding and empathy for those with backgrounds or beliefs that are different from one's own. This also means not labeling or blaming others (Parent Leadership on the Great Start Collaborative, n.d.). When programs are open to diverse perspectives and see families as partners, they may discover innovative solutions to challenges. Programs can address differences in expectations with ongoing communication. It helps to focus on how all staff and families contribute to the well-being of children and their families.

Creating a Collaborative Program Environment

Family participation and engagement in a program's governance structure affects family advocacy and leadership. For example, when families have a real role in decision-making, they know they can make a difference, and their leadership grows (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Policy and advisory groups can provide opportunities for leadership by creating a climate of belonging, building trusting relationships, and developing common goals with a focus on the well-being of children and families (Auerbach, 2010; Doucet, 2008). Given the cultural and linguistic diversity of Head Start and Early Head Start families, special attention must be paid to how information, communication, and leadership opportunities are presented so that all families have a voice and all children benefit (Gordon & Nocon, 2008).

Beyond advancing family leadership and advocacy, true collaboration between families and staff leads to programs that are more likely to succeed (Parent Leadership on the Great Start Collaborative, n.d.) and to children who are more likely to make academic progress (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016).

Access to Knowledge and Information

Even when policies and governance structures promote family leadership, additional knowledge, skills, and confidence can help family members to become leaders (Cunningham et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010). Families need to know the rules of the game in order to play. For example, to make informed decisions that support children's learning and development, families need information about program expectations, legal rights and responsibilities, and how systems operate so that they can access services and supports for their children (Wright & Wright, n.d.). This is particularly important when working with families from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from those of service providers, or with families of children with disabilities.

Role of Professional Development

Like families, program staff need specific knowledge, skills, and actions to promote family advocacy and leadership. Teacher education programs tend to emphasize instructional skills with little focus on partnering with families (Doucet, 2008). Yet with support, staff can go beyond solving families' problems to working with families as equal partners in problem solving (Auerbach, 2010; Doucet, 2008).

When educational programs define parents' roles based solely on their needs, without also engaging their strengths, families may feel undervalued. When they are asked how they want to contribute to their children's schooling and their own goals, parents share important insights into how family-staff relationships can benefit children, families, and programs (Doucet, 2008).

Training and reflective supervision can help all staff understand that empowering parents is as important as empowering children (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Professional development can provide all staff with the understanding they need about family advocacy and leadership and the important role that parents play in their children's learning. Parents develop confidence, not only as they watch their children thrive, but also as they learn new skills, manage their own lives, and make a difference in the lives of others (Henderson et al., 2016).

Promising Practices: Strategies for Growing Family Advocates and Leaders

Staff begin to help family members become advocates and leaders by understanding how families see their caregiving roles and by appreciating the different ways they contribute to their children's learning (Doucet, 2008; Emarita, 2006). An early step is to listen and respond to families' concerns and ideas about becoming advocates and leaders. Programs can then offer opportunities to learn and lead that match family skills, interests, and readiness.

Families as Co-Trainers

A broad range of leadership opportunities that are culturally and linguistically relevant can expand the number of family leaders in a program. For example, family members are often part of training teams that present at local, state, or national conferences. Some Head Start and Early Head Start programs invite families that have graduated to join them as part of professional development activities. Families' experiences with trainings, conferences, or advisory meetings help build important relationships, expand understanding of systems and services, and increase self-confidence.

Parent-to-Parent Leadership Development

Parent-to-parent learning, sharing, and support are often effective strategies for family leadership development (Henderson et al., 2016). For example, when families of children with special needs develop relationships with each other, they gain useful information and learn strategies for effective communication with staff and administrators (Trainor, 2010). Father engagement efforts can give fathers an opportunity to become leaders who recruit other fathers into program activities.



- PACER has been operating for over 40 years, primarily staffed by parents of children with disabilities dedicated to educating other parents. Among its many programs for both youth and adults, it offers workshops, resources, and publications for parents about participating in local advisory councils, collaborating with state agencies, and influencing public policy.
- *Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)* is a parent leadership development organization, founded in Chicago in 1995, with the goal of strengthening the power and voice of low-income and working families. They aim to expand access to early learning programs through grassroots community organizing and building peer connections between parents and families.
- *Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors* is a comprehensive training program developed by and for Latino parents with children ages 0-5. Its two-generation approach builds parent leadership skills and knowledge to promote family well-being and positive education outcomes for children.

Promising Practices: Selected Resources for Growing Family Advocates and Leaders

The following (listed alphabetically) are not the only useful resources in the field, but represent some good examples of options for programs to consider:

- *Parent/Community Cafés* are focused on supporting protective factors in families and help to engage parents and other community members as partners. Led by parent facilitators, the cafés can be used to identify key issues for parents as well as to identify and develop parent leaders.
- *Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)*, a Latino legal civil rights organization, offers a Parent School Partnership that trains parents and community leaders to become effective advocates for improving educational achievements, schools, and communities.
- *National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI)* has operated for over 25 years in Connecticut and has been evaluated and replicated by other states (for example, the Colorado Family Leadership Training Institute [FLTII]). Participants attend a 20-week program developing skills to become effective leaders in their communities.

Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

Helping families become advocates and leaders is an important step toward supporting better family and child outcomes. As programs work toward a more systemic approach to promoting family advocacy and leadership, they can draw on PFCE Framework Elements, such as Program Leadership, Professional Development, and Program Environment.

The effects of family members acting to influence the programs, policies, and practices that shape their children's lives can be long-lasting. Experiences as leaders and advocates in Head Start and Early Head Start prepare families for those same roles when their children are in K–12 settings. Their advocacy and leadership can touch the lives of other families in the larger community and beyond.

What Can Programs Do?

The following suggestions work best when done with the guidance and counsel of families.

Help Staff and Families Work Together

- **Prioritize relationships between staff and families.** Personal contact is essential for authentic and meaningful connections. Daily communication makes a big difference—use greetings, quick conversations, notes, or text messages where program policies allow. Home visits are important opportunities to support the development of family advocates and leaders.
- **Provide opportunities for collaboration.** Parent/staff-run events and presentations help families become involved in their children’s education and build parents’ leadership skills. Collaboration can also help shape program policies to meet the academic, social, cultural, linguistic, and other needs of children.
- **Offer communication and leadership training for families and professionals together.** The “two-way street” of collaborative leadership requires families and staff to develop skills such as reflective listening, brainstorming, and compromise (Auerbach, 2010; Reynolds & St. John, 2012). Learning together strengthens staff-parent relationships and helps everyone practice these skills.
- **Create opportunities for program staff to meet with families and their children’s new kindergarten teacher.** Parents and teachers can share important information about children and create a smoother transition into kindergarten.
- **Use professional development and reflective supervision** to help staff address feelings of vulnerability as they share power with parents. Reflective supervision can strengthen staff skills to build collaborative relationships with families.



Plan and Run Meetings to Maximize Family Leadership

- **Provide clear background information before meetings to help families participate and feel prepared.** Choose materials that are at the correct reading levels and are translated into multiple languages if needed (Lim, 2008). Use visuals whenever possible. A pre-meeting can help families preview

and develop the agenda, clarify jargon, and set expectations for participation. Encourage parents to bring another person to meetings for moral support.

- **Provide logistical supports** needed for family leaders to participate in meetings and events, including stipends, transportation, child care, food, and the use of computers, and reimbursement for time and travel as policies allow.
- **Create ground rules and meeting norms that support engagement.** The many procedures that often dominate policy-making boards can limit family leadership (Douglass, 2011). Instead, start meetings with a family story to focus on families’ strengths, needs, concerns, and successes. Ask families to start the discussion from their perspective. Offer everyone a chance to speak. Collaborative leadership may take more time but can lead to stronger leadership and a more successful program.

Support Family Skill-Building

- **Work with family members who want to serve as advocates and leaders.** Invite parents to join a discussion about the many ways they can be advocates and leaders in the program and community. Family members may underestimate their skills and potential. Encourage them to reconsider these self-judgments.
- **Connect family members with skill-building opportunities.** Advocacy and leadership opportunities within Head Start and Early Head Start are plentiful, such as Parent Committees, Policy Committees, and Policy Council. Community agencies and informal groups offer opportunities to become involved and build skills.
- **Make the link between advocacy and leadership and career development.** Advocacy and leadership skills are highly valued in many jobs. Encourage family members to reflect on advocacy and leadership skills that might carry over to work opportunities, to add them to their resumes, and to “talk them up” in job interviews.

Review and Adjust Program Structures and Processes

- **Prioritize family advocacy and leadership in program values, strategic plans, and policies.** Consider policies and practices that support family advocacy and leadership as part of your program’s continuous improvement activities.
- **Ensure that decision-making groups and committees reflect the cultural and linguistic make-up of your program and community.** Groups can require a specific number of family representatives so that there is not a “lone” family voice. Have a balance in ages of children represented, racial and ethnic groups, mothers and fathers, primary languages, etc. (Lim, 2008).

Encourage New Parent Voices and Collaboration Between Parents

- **Ensure additional parent input** by inviting parents to participate in a range of activities, such as reviewing drafted materials and policies, attending/evaluating training sessions, co-presenting with other leaders, attending workgroup meetings, and sharing family stories.
- **Promote leadership from many different families** to ensure that families' strengths and needs are not represented by a small subset of leaders (Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Leaders can bring information back to other families and ask for input so that they represent the group's input, not just their own personal issues or interests (Lim, 2008).

Use Data and Other Information to Support Family Leadership

- **Use data to improve practices.** Evaluate how the program engages family leaders. Track the program's progress in supporting family leadership efforts.
- **Collect, analyze, and share information with families.** Identify leadership opportunities for families that match their interests and needs. Share program results with families. Communicate child progress data in meaningful, understandable, and actionable ways.

Encourage Family Leadership and Advocacy Beyond and After Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

- **Help early childhood family leaders transition to elementary school leadership roles.** Introduce Policy Council members and other leaders to elementary school volunteer coordinators. Accompany them to an elementary school advisory council meeting.
- **Build alliances with parent leadership and support organizations in your community or state.** Organizations that work with parents, train staff, and facilitate effective family-staff partnerships can strengthen your family advocacy and leadership efforts. You can help link families to organizations in the community. For more information on the benefits of relationships between families and communities, see Family Connections to Peers and Community, another resource in this Research to Practice series.

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