

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Guide to Developing
Relationships with
Families



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Discover definitions, tools, and strategies for reflective practice and supervision to help program staff develop positive goal-oriented relationships with families.



POSITIVE GOAL-ORIENTED RELATIONSHIPS

Explore the role that Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships play in effective parent, family, and community engagement. This guide offers definitions, tools, and reflective practice and supervision strategies to help program staff develop positive, ongoing, and goal-oriented relationships.

This resource is intended for the entire Head Start and Early Head Start community and professionals in the early childhood field. Individuals, groups of staff, and supervisors can use this tool as part of training and reflective practice and supervision. This guide is aligned with the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework.

1 Getting Started

Learn about family engagement and Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships.

2 Tools

Explore tools to develop Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices.

3 Reflective Strategies

Discover reflective practice and supervision strategies.

4 Additional Resources

Find more resources on family engagement and related topics.

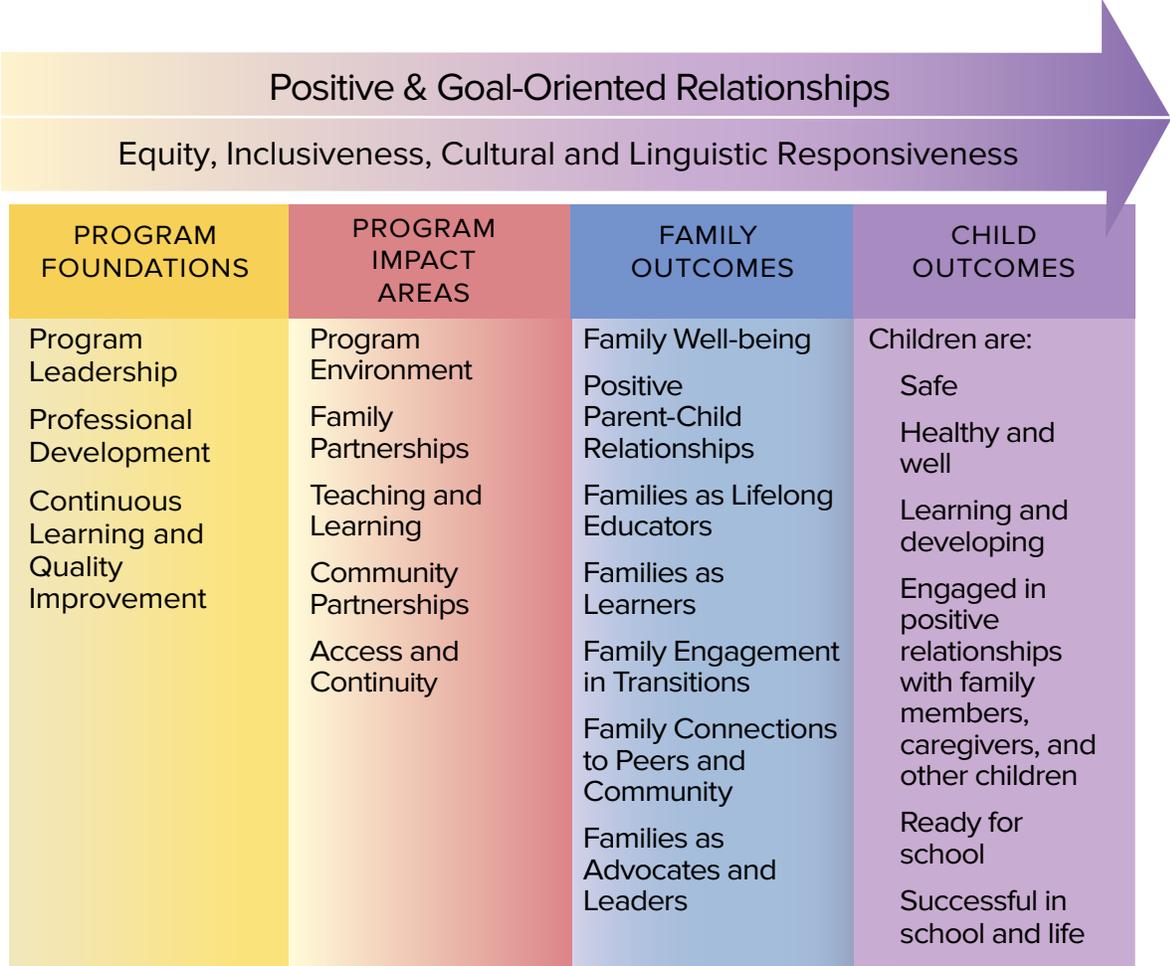
1 Getting Started

Family Engagement and Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships

From the beginning of life, families nurture their children to be healthy and to develop the capacities they will need to be ready for school and successful in life. Head Start and Early Head Start program staff share these goals and collaborate with families as they work toward these goals. 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.

The Head Start PFCE Framework describes the program elements—Program Foundations and Impact Areas—in early learning programs that can work together to positively influence child and family outcomes. The Framework identifies equity, inclusiveness, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and positive goal-oriented relationships as important drivers for these outcomes.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



1 Getting Started

What are Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships?

Positive, goal-oriented relationships develop over time through interactions among families, family members, and staff in Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs. These relationships

- are fueled by families' passion for their children,
- are based on mutual respect and trust, affirm and celebrate families' cultures and languages,
- provide opportunities for two-way communications,
- include authentic interactions that are meaningful to those who participate in them, and
- often require an awareness of one's personal biases and how those biases can affect mutual respect and trust.

Positive, goal-oriented relationships improve wellness by reducing isolation and stress for both families and staff. When these relationships focus on shared goals for children, staff and families can experience the support that comes from knowing that they all are on the same team. These relationships support the aims of equity, inclusiveness, cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

Why Do Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships Matter?

Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships support progress for children and families. These relationships contribute to positive parent-child relationships, a key predictor of success in early learning and healthy development. Through positive interactions with their most important caregivers, children develop skills for success in school and life. They learn how to manage their emotions and behaviors, solve problems, adjust to new situations, resolve conflicts, and prepare for healthy relationships with other adults and peers.

Healthy relationships between parents and children develop over time through a series of interactions that are primarily warm and positive. There may also be brief disconnections or misunderstandings in relationships. For example, there will be times when parents and children are not perfectly in sync. A toddler may be laughing and playing with her mother and be surprised when her scream of delight is met with her mother's raised voice, telling her to be quieter. An older infant may be enjoying his breakfast of rice cereal but he may be confronted by an unhappy face when he smashes the cereal into his grandmother's work clothes. These temporary disconnections are natural and necessary, and they build a child's capacity for resilience and conflict resolution. As long as interactions are primarily positive, children can learn important skills from the process of reconnecting.

Disconnections and challenges can occur in our relationships with families and colleagues as well. A father arrives to find his toddler fingerpainting and immediately becomes upset with the caregiver. He is in a hurry and doesn't have time to change her clothes. A mother is frustrated that her child is not making more progress learning her numbers and letters and blames the caregivers. Imperfect interactions help us learn how to tolerate discomfort and how to resolve challenges. These are important skills for building strong partnerships.

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Getting Started: Why Do Relationships Matter, cont.

Positive
Goal-Oriented
Relationships with families
lead to positive parent-child
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Positive relationships between parents and providers are important as families make progress toward other goals, such as improved health and safety, increased financial stability, and enhanced leadership skills. Strong partnerships can provide a safe place where families can explore their hopes, share their challenges, and let us know how we can help. Staff, community partners, and peers can be resources as families decide what is important to them and how to turn their goals into realities. Parents help us enhance their children's learning and healthy development. When we focus on families' strengths and view parents as partners, we can work more effectively to support parent-child relationships and other outcomes for families and children.

Everything we do is intended to give families the emotional and concrete supports they want and need to reach better outcomes. When a family makes progress, parents have more capacity to give to their children. For example, a family may be struggling financially and constantly worried about where the next meal will come from. The parent may be overwhelmed or embarrassed, unsure of how to ask for help. If the parent trusts the program or a staff member, the parent might share their distress and worry. The program can work with the parent to find and access food and nutrition resources in their community.

As the family stabilizes, the parent might work with staff to identify how to improve the situation in the long term. The parent may decide to go back to school to increase his or her earning potential or might join a group to talk with other families about educational goals. The parent might work with the program and peers to find and access educational resources. As families take steps to reach their goals, they can engage in relationships with their children. Strong relationships between parents and caregivers contribute to better outcomes for children and families.

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Getting Started: Perspective Taking

Programs can partner with parents to understand the child's and family's strengths, goals, interests, and challenges.



Recognize What Families, Staff, and Children Contribute

Building a relationship is a dynamic and ongoing process that depends on contributions from everyone involved: families, program staff, and children. Families have a set of beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives that affect relationships with staff. Likewise, providers have a set of beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives, both personal and professional, which affect our relationships with families. Children live and learn in specific environments and are influenced by the parents, families, and other adults and peers in their lives. They also bring their own unique contributions to relationships in the form of behavior, temperament, emotion, and stage of development.

Understand and Appreciate Differences

Successful partnerships are created when families and staff value the perspectives and contributions of one another and care about shared goals and positive outcomes. Programs can partner with parents to understand the child's and family's strengths, goals, interests, and challenges. In each interaction we can learn more about each other and about ourselves as professionals. When we understand and appreciate the family's perspective, we are more likely to set aside our own agenda and create a shared agenda with the family.

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Getting Started: Cultural Perspectives

Meet Families Where They Are: Cultural Perspectives

Understanding cultural beliefs and priorities is key to building relationships with families. Each family comes to early childhood programs from unique cultures that give meaning and direction to their lives. Cultural influences are complex and involve family traditions, country of origin, ethnic identity, cultural group, community norms, experiences, and home language. The cultural beliefs of individual family members and the entire family affect caregiving behaviors and inform decisions made about the child and the family.

Culture affects our view on key issues such as education, family roles, child-rearing practices, what constitutes school readiness, and how we think children should behave. When we reflect on families' unique history and perspectives we have the opportunity to think about how cultural beliefs and values influence choices and goals. In addition, we need to fully understand our own perspective and how it is shaped by our experiences, biases, and cultures.

The ways that cultural beliefs affect relationship building can be obvious or subtle. Regardless, cultural perspectives inform the choices families and professionals make. The following questions can help you discover how culture can influence perspectives, decision-making, and child-rearing practices:

- **Communication.** *How do the parents want their child to address a teacher, grandparent, doctor, or neighbor? Is saying "hello" important when meeting someone new? Is eye contact a sign of respect or disrespect?*
- **Role of Professionals.** *Is it acceptable for parents to disagree with their child's teacher? Are there specific areas of development and behavior that are seen as the responsibility of the professionals? Of the family?*
- **Caregiving (e.g. sleeping, eating, toileting).** *Will a child sleep alone or with her parents? Will she be breast-fed or bottle-fed when she is an infant? Will she be expected to use a spoon to eat her food or will she be encouraged to eat with her hands? When will she be expected to start using the toilet?*
- **Discipline.** *How will he be disciplined if he is in danger? What if he bites a friend? What if he throws a temper tantrum at the grocery store? Are there specific discipline strategies that parents think are more or less effective?*
- **Language.** *Is there a home language that is important to the family? Do family members want her to speak English at school and speak the home language with family? Are there important cultural traditions that rely on an understanding of the family's home language?*
- **Learning.** *Do family members see themselves as important teachers, or is learning something that only teachers are responsible for? What kind of activities does the family like to do at home? Is there a certain age when the family expects him to be reading?*

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Getting Started: Cultural Perspectives, cont.



Understanding cultural beliefs and priorities is key to building relationships with families.

Culture is an important influence when building relationships with families. However, understanding a family's cultures are not necessarily simple or easy. It takes patience, commitment, and a willingness to feel uncomfortable at times. It also takes courage and humility to look at our assumptions and biases to see how they affect our attitudes toward families.

Program leadership can encourage these types of reflections as part of regular professional development, reflective practice, and reflective supervision. Activities that encourage new insights can support the development of strong partnerships with families. Respectful partnerships are created when families and staff care about shared and positive outcomes and when they value the perspective and contributions of one another.

Explore guides for working with families from diverse cultures at the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), Culture and Language Topic Page: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language>.

2 Tools

Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices

We all know how important families are in the lives of their children. When we have strong relationships with families, we are helping to promote healthy child development and school readiness. Strong relationships with families also make it easier to have conversations involving uncomfortable feelings or challenging topics. In this section, we will explore tools that we know work well when building relationships with families.

Strengths-based Attitudes for Building Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about someone or something that is often reflected in a person's behavior. Our attitudes create a frame of mind that shapes how we behave in our personal and professional life. Attitudes are shaped by experiences, beliefs, and assumptions. When we begin our interactions with positive attitudes, we tend to see families in a more positive light, giving us a strong foundation to build an effective partnership. In contrast, when we approach our interactions with negative attitudes, we are more likely to see fault, make negative judgments, and expect a negative outcome. Adopting a positive attitude does not mean avoiding challenges and only talking about positive observations and ideas. Instead, it includes adopting a frame of mind that begins with a family's strengths. We begin with Strengths-based Attitudes to express our belief that all families can make progress and that we are ready to strive for better outcomes together.

Our attitudes create a frame of mind that shapes how we behave in our personal and professional life.



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Tools: Relationship-based Practices

When you engage with a family, you help strengthen the partnership with that family. There are six Relationship-based Practices that can help promote family engagement. These practices are intended to guide what we say and do with families to support open communication and promote better understanding. Reflecting on how we apply Relationship-based Practices can improve our efforts to strengthen our relationships with families.

Relationship-based Practices	Sample Interactions Reflecting these Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe and describe the child's behavior to open communication with the family • Reflect on the family's perspective • Support competence • Focus on the family-child relationship • Value a family's passion • Reflect on your own perspective 	<p>Intake Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite the family's input and use it in making decisions about the child and family. • Be aware of your own biases. <p>Follow-up During Informal Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use simple, clear, and objective descriptions of the child's behavior. • Acknowledge and share child and parent behavior that demonstrates something about the parent-child relationship. <p>Home Visit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the family's observations and interpretations to inform how you support the child's development. • Invite parents to share their perspective on the child's behavior and development. <p>Challenging Behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the child's strengths. • Reframe the family's emotions as passion for their child. <p>Within an Established Relationship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share positive and specific information about the child with the family. • Attribute the child's progress to the family's efforts.

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."

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

Reflect on a time when you used this practice with a family. What did you say or do?

Reflect on a time when this practice would have helped you build a relationship with a family. What would you have said or done?

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?"

Reflect on the Family's Perspective**Your Reflections**

Reflect on a time when you used this practice with a family. What did you say or do?

Reflect on a time when this practice would have helped you build a relationship with a family. What would you have said or done?

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?"

Support Competence**Your Reflections**

Reflect on a time when you used this practice with a family. What did you say or do?

Reflect on a time when this practice would have helped you build a relationship with a family. What would you have said or done?

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."

Focus on the Family-Child Relationship**Your Reflections**

Reflect on a time when you used this practice with a family. What did you say or do?

Reflect on a time when this practice would have helped you build a relationship with a family. What would you have said or done?

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."

Value a Family's Passion**Your Reflections**

Reflect on a time when you used this practice with a family. What did you say or do?

Reflect on a time when this practice would have helped you build a relationship with a family. What would you have said or done?

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.”

Reflect on Your Own Perspective**Your Reflections**

Reflect on a time when you used this practice with a family. What did you say or do?

Reflect on a time when this practice would have helped you build a relationship with a family. What would you have said or done?

3 Reflective Strategies

Sustaining Effective Practice

One key to building relationships is taking the time to reflect on our work with families. When we look at what's working and what's not, we can make changes that strengthen our relationships with families. Individual and shared reflective practice helps us work more effectively with families and contributes to better outcomes for children and families.

Reflective Practice

Taking the time to reflect—to stop and think about what has happened, what is happening, and what should happen next—is essential to creating and maintaining Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships.

Reflection on our work with families allows us to:

- Understand how our own experiences and beliefs influence our work
- Sharpen our observation and communication skills with children and families
- Improve our skills in building mutually respectful partnerships with families
- Enhance our ability to communicate and build relationships with peers and community partners

Individual and shared reflective practice helps us work more effectively with families and contributes to better outcomes for children and families.



3

Reflective Strategies: Self-Reflection

Self-Reflection

Reflection is an important part of our own continuous improvement process to understand why and how we make the choices we do. Taking the time to look at ourselves and our work gives us the opportunity to acknowledge strengths and challenges to improve our skills. In this section, we will explore reflective practice strategies to support our work in building relationships with families.

- **Observe and remember what happens with children, families, and staff.**

We see and experience so much with children and families every day. It can be hard to keep track of every moment. You can record children’s progress, staff-parent interactions, and the information shared among staff. This creates an opportunity for staff to understand what does and does not work. Remembering and reflecting on our observations is useful for improving what we do. Recording our reflections in a confidential notebook can be a valuable learning activity.

- **Think about how your own experiences affect you and your work.**

Each of us has personal and professional experiences that shape who we are. We often act in ways that are familiar and comfortable. It can be difficult to question what we already know and think is right. Through self-reflection, we allow ourselves to understand our personal reaction (how a professional situation makes us feel) and our professional action (how we choose to respond professionally) as two separate things. Because caring for children and families is so important, and at times very emotional, we need to be aware of how our personal perspectives influence our work. This strategy is aligned with the relationship-based practice of *“reflect on Your Own Perspective.”*

- **Think about the perspectives of others.**

Each family in our program is unique. Take the time to wonder about how the experiences of families may influence how they behave or respond in certain circumstances. However, keep in mind that sometimes wondering about others can be similar to making assumptions about them. We tend to rely on what we have learned and experienced in the past. Acknowledge that you may not know what is motivating someone to think or act in a certain way.

When there are opportunities to respectfully communicate about these circumstances with families, it can open us up to a greater understanding of others and of ourselves. Reflecting on the perspectives of families helps us make better sense of where they are coming from. This gives us insights about what strategies might be most effective for engaging them. This strategy is aligned with the relationship-based practice *“Reflect on the family’s perspective.”*

- **Identify stressors.**

Working with children and families can be highly demanding. Professionals may experience high levels of stress when working with families who face hardships such as poverty, community violence, social spending cuts, and a shortage of jobs and affordable housing. This can lead to increased risk of job dissatisfaction and professional “burnout.”

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Reflective Strategies: Self-Reflection, cont.

A unique aspect of Head Start and Early Head Start is that many professionals are also parents in the communities they serve. Staff may feel stress from their own lives, as well as from their experience working with families in the community. It can help to identify these stressors and talk about them with co-workers and supervisors.

Programs can create opportunities for staff to get the support they need and help them feel valued for the work they do every day. Leadership can prioritize regular times for individual, paired, or group reflection. Promoting self-care among staff in this way can have a positive effect on their skill and productivity.



Taking the time to look at ourselves and our work gives us the opportunity to acknowledge strengths and challenges and to improve our skills.

What strategies do you already use in self-reflection?

What new strategies could you apply to your current reflective practice?

How might perspective-taking inform your work with families?

3

Reflective Strategies: Reflective Supervision

Reflective Supervision

Head Start, Early Head Start, and early childhood program staff strive to engage parents and families in healthy, trusting, and respectful relationships. It is equally important for program staff to have strong relationships with their colleagues and supervisors. Supervision involves the commitment to nurture and guide staff so that they have the tools to engage children and families successfully. Effective relationships between supervisors and staff help staff reflect upon and cope with the stresses and demands of their work. Reflective supervision is an important aspect of building a safe and healthy climate for staff, families, and children.

Supervision is more than a program requirement for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Like the relationship between a professional and a family, the relationship between a staff member and supervisor can offer qualities of mutual care and respect. Reflective supervision is an opportunity for leadership to use the strategies of reflection to foster growth, reinforce strengths, and encourage resilience. In addition to giving staff the encouragement and guidance they need, it also keeps leadership in touch with the real issues that programs face.



Supervision is an opportunity for leadership to use the strategies of reflection to foster growth, reinforce strengths, and encourage resilience.

3

Reflective Strategies: Reflective Supervision, cont.

Structured supervision ensures that there will be times when staff may not know what to do, but that there is someone—and a time and place—dedicated to helping them express their feelings, problem solve, and strategize. If staff feel judged and constantly evaluated, then everyone misses out on opportunities for reflection, creative discussion, and meaningful growth.

Supervision ensures that there is a time and place dedicated to helping staff express their feelings, problem solve, and identify action steps.



Confidentiality is essential for effective supervision. It's important for supervisors to help staff feel safe enough to take risks within the relationship. An effective strategy for establishing safety is using messages like those we use with our families, such as *"You have strengths,"* *"Let's talk about what you need to be successful,"* and *"Take care of yourself."* These messages can build resilience among staff and let them know that they are valued partners in the program.

As the supervisory relationship develops over time, supervisors and staff can share the responsibility for the quality and content of the relationship. You can discuss questions such as: *How does the relationship feel? How is the time used? What topics require more attention?* Shared responsibility begins with scheduling regular time for supervision. Time spent building teams and brainstorming about how to develop the work is important to everyone's efforts. That time should be valued, built into schedules, and prioritized.

3

Reflective Strategies: Reflective Supervision, cont.



When we provide supervision, we also have the opportunity to model effective strategies to build relationships with families. It is a parallel process. How we behave with staff models how we want staff to interact with families. The Strengths-based Attitudes and Relationship-based Practices for working with families can also be adapted to build relationships with staff.

Strengths-based Attitudes for Effective Supervision

- Staff deserve the same support and respect we are asking them to give families.
- Staff are our partners with a critical role in achieving outcomes.
- Staff have expertise about their own fields of practice.
- Staff's contributions are valuable and important.

Relationship-based Practices for Effective Supervision

1. Reflect on your program staff's perspective.

Have an ongoing dialogue with your staff that allows them to have input about the structure, content, process, timing, and tone of supervision. This offers an opportunity for staff to reflect on what type of supervisory relationship they would like to have and how to negotiate goals and needs together. Ask staff to consider with you how you can work together to respond to complex situations. This can provide staff with an opportunity to consider different viewpoints within a system and reinforce teamwork.

2. Support your program staff's competence.

Accentuate the positives among staff members and in the work that they do. Staff need to be reassured about their knowledge and expertise. Strengths-based supervision helps staff feel that they are valuable members of a team. Staff may feel encouraged to reflect on their own professional competencies and goals, recognize their contributions, and feel safe to explore their challenges.

3. Focus on the family-staff relationship.

Work with staff to learn new skills for building partnerships with families. Use strategies that help you look at what's working and what's not and how they can use what they discovered to determine next steps with the family.

4. Value your program staff's passion.

Listen to what the staff is experiencing without judging. This may include how different situations affect their mood, concentration, motivation, ability to connect with others, and what they need from you. By creating a safe and professional space where staff can talk about their real emotions, you help each other to better understand the roots of problems and strategize about how to address them.

5. Make time for your own reflection.

Make time to reflect on your own experiences, goals, and challenges. As a supervisor, you often put your staff's needs before your own. Reflection allows us to consider our reactions, responses, and options. Reflection on a past situation can help us prepare for similar events in the future. This is emotional work, and self-care is essential for you and your staff. You will need to take time for yourself to rejuvenate, reflect, and focus on your own professional development. Explore what helps you feel refreshed and inspired to learn and grow. What role can your supervisor play in your growth? How can your supervisor give you the best chance at success?

One of the joys of working with families of young children is that it creates an opportunity for everyone's growth: the child, the parent, the provider, team members, and program leadership. Reflective supervision is one way in which programs can attend to the growth of staff. The shared experience of supervisor and staff ensures that no one is alone in doing this very important work. Just as staff feel that their work is meaningful when families grow, supervisors can find satisfaction in knowing that staff are expanding their skills and finding meaning in their work.

4

Additional Resources

Head Start NCPFCE Resources on Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships

Best Practices in Family and Community Engagement Video Series

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/community-engagement/article/best-practices-family-community-engagement-video-series>

Building Partnerships with Families Series

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/building-partnerships-families-series>

- Guide to Developing Relationships with Families
- Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes
- Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices

Head Start and Early Head Start Relationship-Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work with Families

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/foundations/ohs-rbc.pdf>

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Framework

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-parent-family-community-engagement-framework>

PFCE Simulation Series—Boosting School Readiness through Effective Family Engagement

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/getting-started-parent-family-community-engagement-simulation-series>

Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes: Research to Practice Series

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/understanding-family-engagement-outcomes-research-practice-series>

Related Head Start Resources

Cultural Backgrounders on Various Refugee and Cultural Groups New to the United States

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/cultural-backgrounders-various-refugee-cultural-groups-new-united-states>

Family Connections Materials: A Comprehensive Approach in Dealing with Parental Depression and Related Adversities

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/family-connections-mental-health-consultation-model>

News You Can Use: A Circle of Support for Infants and Toddlers—Reflective Practices and Strategies in Early Head Start

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/professional-development/article/news-you-can-use-circle-support-infants-toddlers-reflective>

Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/raising-young-children-new-country-early-learning-healthy-development>

Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

Appendix A: Building Partnerships

Strengths-based Attitudes for Building Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships

- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.
- Families are our partners with a critical role in their family’s development.
- Families have expertise about their child and their family.
- Families’ contributions are important and valuable.

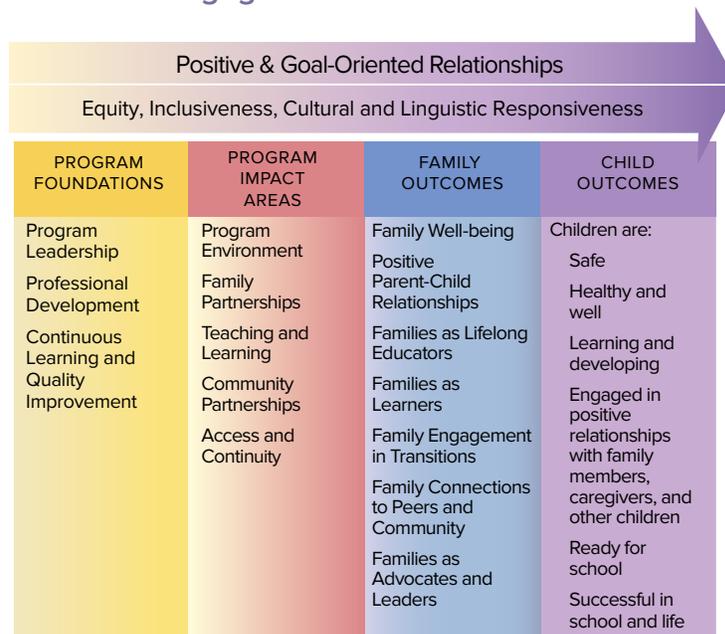
Relationship-based Practices for Family Engagement

- Observe and describe the child’s behavior.
- Reflect on the family’s perspective.
- Support competence.
- Focus on the family-child relationship.
- Value a family’s passion.
- Reflect on your own perspective.

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.

The Head Start PFCE Framework describes the program elements—Program Foundations and Impact Areas—in early learning programs that can work together to positively influence child and family outcomes. The Framework identifies equity, inclusiveness, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and positive goal-oriented relationships as important drivers for these outcomes.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



Appendix B: Building Partnerships

Reflective Practice

A key to building positive, goal-oriented relationships is taking the time to reflect on our work with families. When we look at what's working and what's not, we can make changes that strengthen our relationships with families. Self-reflection is also an important part of our own professional growth.

Strategies for Effective Self-Reflection

- Observe and remember what happens with children, families, and staff.
- Think about how your own experiences affect you and your work.
- Think about the perspective of others.
- Identify stressors.

Reflective Supervision

It is also essential for staff to have healthy, trusting, and respectful relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Reflective supervision helps to nurture and guide staff so that they have the tools to engage children and families successfully.

Strategies for Effective Supervision

- Reflect on the staff's perspective.
- Support the staff's competence.
- Focus on the family-staff relationship.
- Value the staff's passion.
- Make time for your own reflection.

Strengths-based Attitudes for Effective Supervision

- Staff deserve the support and respect we are asking them to give families.
- Staff are our partners with a critical role in achieving outcomes.
- Staff have expertise about their own fields of practice.
- Staff contributions are valuable and important.

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Adapted from Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/building-partnerships-developing-relationships-families.pdf>

For more information about this resource,
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