GOAL 2

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES SHOULD PROMOTE POSITIVE PARENT - CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Research clearly documents the link between competent parenting, strong parent-child bonds, and positive school readiness outcomes. Supporting this begins by developing warm, nurturing relationships among adults, including between staff members, and between staff and parents and other adult family members.

Promoting positive parent child relationships seems like an overwhelming task. What does that mean and how as providers and teachers can we help a family? What we often don't realize is that by working with children and families, providers are doing this already.

Remember CPR from the first goal? When we recognize parents' **C**oncerns, **P**riorities and **R**esources, we are supporting them in their relationships with their children. For providers, it is important to remember that this relationship starts early, even before birth, and is often when parents need even more support. It is this support that gives families the tools to better engage their children emotionally and **cognitively** by being caring, nurturing, and responsive through actions and words. This in turn gives children the confidence, the motivation and the support they need to be successful in school.

Children entering kindergarten without the social and behavioral skills needed to be successful may face long term effects. By the 4th grade, these children are[1]:

- Up to 80% more likely to be retained in their grade.
- Up to 80% more likely to receive services and supports through an IEP (Individualized Education Program) or a 504 Plan.
- Up to 7 times more likely to be suspended or expelled at least once.

By promoting nurturing relationships between family members and caregivers and children, children are provided with a strong foundation to help them enter school fully prepared with the critical skills necessary to be successful.

When children have a secure **attachment** to their families or parents, they are more likely to get along with adults and peers, have increased academic performance, and have higher self-esteem. This is also what contributes to a child's **resiliency**. When someone is resilient, they are able to identify problems, find ways to address challenges and recover quickly and move on. A resilient person will have many protective factors – characteristics, people and supports that help a person get through tough times[2].

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors are circumstances or characteristics that can help reduce or eliminate risks families face to the health and wellbeing of their children and family. Protective factors help parents find and use resources, supports, or strategies to help them effectively cope, even in stressful times.[3]

As educators, we want children to develop protective factors and characteristics. When we effectively support our families, we are building their protective factors. The Center for the Study of Social Policy developed the Protective Factors Framework as part of their Strengthening families Approach[4]. The protective factors include:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PARENT CAFÉS

Child care is a diverse system, mostly offered by private individuals, programs and organizations and paid for directly by families. Because the system must be so responsive to the needs of working parents and adults in school who have young children–some of the busiest people–child care providers report that supporting children's primary caregivers by offering parent engagement activities can be challenging. One promising approach being implemented through Maryland's Child Care Resource and Referral Centers (CCRCs) is the Strengthening Families Parent Cafés. These are guided conversations designed to share the collective knowledge of families and build a network of community support among them. These events promote family wellbeing (Goal 1) and connect families to their peers and to the community (Goal 6) by fostering social connections and parental resilience. Parent Cafés can support the development of families as leaders and child advocates (Goal 7) by engaging parents, child care professionals, and other community members in conversations about the needs of families, how to meet those needs, and the role each neighbor can play in strengthening families and communities. In Maryland, staff members from the CCRC network have been trained as Facilitators to conduct Parent Cafés for parents and providers of children from birth to age five, based on the five protective factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children. During a Parent Café, a group of 20-30 parents and other community members take seats, five at a table, set café-style. A unique question is discussed at each table for approximately 20 minutes. Then participants move to another table, where the Table Host presents the question, brings the group up-to-date on what

the last group discussed, and facilitates the conversation about the question available at that table. Participants visit at least three different tables. The process concludes with a list of themes identified by the participants and of next steps for future Cafés. The group may come up with some resources that meet identified needs, ideas or approaches that respond to common concerns, decide on a specific topic for the next discussion, or identify a speaker to invite to their next Café to address something they would like to know more about. In this way, Parent Café conversations harness community knowledge and address specific needs. Child care providers who facilitate Cafés report that the experience helps them understand what parents are facing and get useful ideas about how their programs can support families whose children are in their care. For more information about Parent Cafés, see the Resource section.

FOUNDATIONAL AREAS

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

Promoting parent child relationships is essential to any early childhood program and family serving agency. Encouraging positive relationships in early child care programs start with program leadership that understands and emphasizes the importance of strong nurturing relationships among children, families and staff.

Programs that are accredited by the Maryland State Department of Education follow specific criteria to promote and model positive interactions with adults and children. By addressing supportive relationships in policies and procedures, its significance is highlighted; ensuring staff make it a priority and intentionally model appropriate working relationships as well as professional relationships with parents. This is the first step to promoting positive parent child relationships. For more information on MSDE Accreditation, see the Resource section.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To support parent-child relationships, it is crucial to understand that families' experiences and cultural differences impact parent and child relationships. Additionally, staff need to be aware of their own backgrounds, knowledge, and biases and how that impacts working with children and families. The following training topics address these concerns and help to prepare staff to work with all families:

- Relationship building that is grounded in cross-cultural responsiveness and strengths-based perspectives.
- Reflecting on daily practices and personal experiences to increase self-awareness and effective relationship-building with families.
- Professional ethics in the areas of confidentiality, boundaries, and self-determination.
- Engaging fathers; how mental health and wellness affects families; trauma and its effect on relationships; communication styles; and relationship building.

The Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (SEFEL) program follows the pyramid model which has four levels – nurturing relationships, supportive environments, social emotional practices, and targeted intervention techniques. The base of the pyramid addresses an effective workforce and positive relationships as being the foundation for social and emotional development for children. This helps providers understand both the importance of relationships with others and how our own experiences impact our work with children and families. This is essential to understanding how to promote positive relationships with families. For more information on SEFEL, see the Resource section.

Pyramid Model
Promoting Social and Emotional Competence
in Infants and Young Children

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL FOUNDATIONS FOR EARLY LEARNING (SEFEL)

SEFEL is a nationally recognized framework of evidence-based practices that support the social and emotional development and school readiness of children birth through age five. In 2012, twenty-two of twenty-four school systems in Maryland used the SEFEL framework. The SEFEL Pyramid Model is organized around universal promotion, secondary prevention, and tertiary intervention practices that can be incorporated into everyday routines and relationships.

- **Universal promotion** includes practices that ensure the promotion of social development of all children.
- **Secondary prevention** includes targeted supports for children who are at risk of challenging behaviors.
- **Tertiary intervention** includes individualized and intensive interventions to the very small number of children with persistent challenges.
- A competent, confident workforce of early childhood educators is the foundation of the SEFEL Teaching Pyramid.

FAMILY VOICE

Our early care program promotes positive parent-child relationships and offers positive parenting classes and Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (SEFEL) parent modules. Every week we were encouraged to do the activities from the book. This changed my view on my child's education. Knowing how he learned opened my eyes and helped me to understand when he was having trouble learning something new.

- Parent, Union Baptist Head Start, Baltimore City

IMPACT AREAS

PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

To support positive parent-child relationships, staff must first establish a relationship with the family. Once the relationship is established, families will be more engaged in their child's program and their education. Programs can focus on relationship building by modeling open communication between staff, families and children and by sharing information with families about the benefits of strong relationships and the importance of early bonding. The program environment can reflect that sense of partnership. Maintaining and promoting the open-door policy, encouraging families to actively participate in the program, and providing resources that make families feel welcome and valued as partners in their child's education will go a long way in building these positive relationships.

Remember that your relationships will look different with every family. Differences in needs, schedules, personalities and responsibilities will impact how families and providers interact with one another. You may have families that are very engaged with the program and volunteer on a regular basis, but this may not be the case for every parent or family. It is important not to judge that family and assume they are not interested in their child's education. They may have supports from family and friends or feel comfortable with their child's progress. As providers, keeping the lines of communication open and checking in with families is a supportive family engagement practice that lets parents know we are here to support them when they need us. Consider whether your program is providing opportunities for partnership to meet the scheduling needs of all of your families.

FAMILY VOICE

As a single mom, I was never able to fully participate in the activities that were offered at the school. I had to work during the day and had other things that I had to do when I got home at night. I always talked to my son about the importance of education and staying on top of him about his schoolwork – I may have even been a little hard on him – but I wanted him to know how important it was. Just because I couldn't be there all the time didn't mean I wasn't as interested. I felt like the moms who could participate in all of the events or volunteer at the school or go to all the PTA meetings were favored sometimes. The teachers that I remember most were the ones who took the time to send an occasional email or call me to tell me how my son was doing or just to see if there was anything I needed. When he was younger, I would ask for things that I could do with him at home since he didn't have a lot of homework then. This made me feel like we were working together as a team.

- Parent, St. Mary's County

TECH TIP

Strong family engagement begins with communication, and today's families often use technology as their preferred mode for staying in touch. In the United States, 92% of all people aged 18-34, the age-group most likely to have children in care, own a smartphone[5]. Among families below the federal poverty-level, 91% have access to internet, with nearly a third of those only accessing information through mobile technology[6]. With so many of the families we are serving using web-based technologies, in particular mobile devices like smartphones and tablets, family-focused child care providers must have familiarity with these tools.

Luckily, there are many low or no-cost tools available to make communication between families and child care providers easy, organized, efficient, and secure. For example, WhatsApp allows you to send text messages and make phone calls using the internet – called Voice Over Internet Protocol or VOIP) – for free without using your text, or phone minutes on your mobile device (WhatsApp messages may impact plan data use). WhatsApp is available for iPhones, iPod Touch, and iPads; all Android devices; and over an internet connected computer.

WhatsApp is a great way to communicate with families. Here's what you need to do:

- Install WhatsApp on your device and ensure it is installed on the family's device, too. We suggest downloading the installation directions from the WhatsApp website to distribute to families along with your WhatsApp username.
- When families add you, or you add them, via searching for their username, you will be able to send text messages, files, and make phone calls wherever you have internet access. If you are on Wifi, this doesn't cost you any data minutes either!

The other advantage is you can do group chats – being able to talk with a number of families, family members, or colleagues all at once. Think about it – you could have a family outreach session where everyone is sharing tips on best practices right from your phone!
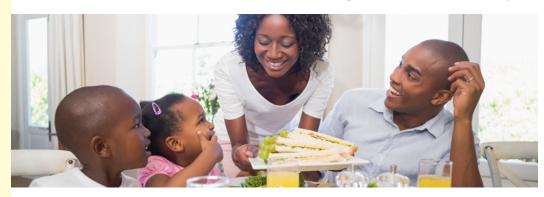
The other great feature about this tool is WhatsApp allows you to set your privacy settings, so the families with whom you are communicating do not see your actual phone number, and the messages they send you are kept separate from your personal communications. This helps you keep boundaries, protect your privacy, and be in control of the access the parent has to you.

Chris Swanson, Ed.D., Senior Director for Quality Care and Education & Associate Research Scientist, Johns Hopkins University, School of Education, Center for Technology in Education

FAMILY VOICE

Our child care provider promotes my relationship with my child and my family. They have provided me with a private room to nurse my daughter at lunch time, every day. If I am not nursing, I have enough room to play with my daughter and spend time with her and her providers. This has been critical to my success in returning back to work. We also receive texts, videos, and pictures on a weekly basis and the communication lines are always open, which makes me feel comfortable that I am a part of my child's first moments even though I am at work.

- Wonder Friends Learning Center, Baltimore County

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

When programs fully understand the importance of the parent-child relationship and promote it, they will recognize certain characteristics in their children and families, such as:

- Children will display open communication between parents and providers
- Parents and families will identify and attend to a child's needs quickly
- Children will seek help from their parent or provider
- Families will establish rules or guidelines for behavior

But, what happens when families are experiencing challenging behaviors? This is a common concern and many times, providers and families are experiencing these concerns together. That is why it is even more important to work together to support the family and the child.

Children being suspended or expelled from early childhood programs is a problem that impacts the relationship between the parent and the program, and can also lead to a negative view of school that children and families carry with them throughout the rest of their lives. Additionally, parents may have difficulty finding adequate alternate care for their child, which adds to their stress.

There are no easy answers when it comes to challenging behaviors, but there are things that providers can do to help support families when experiencing challenging behaviors.

- Be sure to talk with the family as soon as there is a concern. Often, behaviors may have resulted from a change in the home or a disruption to their routine. Families and providers can work together to come up with strategies and solutions. Sometimes, knowledge of the situation

or the circumstances gives providers the information to be more understanding and empathetic to the behavior.
- Do not be judgmental. Providers know about best practices, child development and developmentally appropriate practices and we often assume our parents know these things, too. Many times, they do not and are learning as well. By listening to them and offering strategies that support their efforts, we can often eliminate challenging behavior.
- Share resources and strategies that are effective in the classroom. Many of the strategies can be used by parents in the home. Providers can support parents' efforts by making materials or showing them the strategies they use and helping them to modify them for the home. SEFEL is a great resource for parents and offers strategies that both providers and parents can use together.
- Listen to the family to learn about their concerns. Parents may be hesitant to talk about their child's behaviors for fear of being expelled from the program or because of deeper concerns they may have. Sometimes behaviors stem from an undiagnosed disability. This can be very difficult for a family, emotionally and sometimes financially. Providers must be empathetic and supportive to help them.
- Don't forget to take a look at your own program and practice. Sometimes a simple change in the environment, how transitions occur, or just the daily schedule can help children with behavior issues. There are resources available for programs and staff to have another opinion of how best to deal with challenging behaviors. The Maryland Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMH) Project can be a valuable resource for programs. For more information, see the Resource section.

Families and providers who have concerns regarding a child's development can use the following resources and should contact their local or office for more information.

- Early Intervention Services through the Local Infants and Toddlers Program - Early intervention is a system of coordinated services for children with disabilities, ages birth to three, that supports families in promoting the child's age-appropriate growth and development. Early intervention services are provided to the child through and Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP).
- Preschool Special Education Services through the Local School System - preschool special education services are provided through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to children with disabilities, ages three to kindergarten. Special education and related services continue to be available through an IEP for eligible children and youth from kindergarten to age 21.
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program (ECMH) - Behavioral consultants provide parents and providers with support and strategies for children with challenging behavior. If you have concerns about a child's behavior in your program, contact your local Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Project partner or your local CCRC. They will work with you and the family to develop a solution.

The following are a few additional resources to help with challenging behaviors.

Resources	Description
Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)	This is a behavioral screening that providers and parents can do to identify concerns in their child's behavior. Providers can work together to identify goals and strategies to teach appropriate behaviors and skills.
Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (SEFEL)	SEFEL has a parent module that helps parents teach social emotional skills to their children and offers specific strategies to use. Materials are available through the website for free. Teachers also use SEFEL to teach social emotional skills and by working together, skills are reinforced at home and at school.
Making Access Happen	Making Access Happen was designed to support providers in addressing behavior challenges with young children. Each of the behavior support segments uses a video scenario of a challenging behavior to support the learning, discussion, and resources that will follow. Providers can personalize their experience by engaging with one or more segments as they consider what information to explore, how much information to engage with, and what tools and strategies to adopt in their experiences with young children.
Behavioral Support Plans	Behavioral Support Plans can be beneficial as parents and providers are working together to develop goals and strategies that are effective for the child, parent, and the provider. Components of a Behavioral Support Plan include prevention strategies, teaching replacement skills, responding to challenging behavior, person responsible/timelines. SEFEL reviews and provides guidance for effective Behavioral Support Plans as well.

Collaborating with families is essential when developing **behavioral support plans**. Parents have information that may help to understand the child's behavior and many times, parents and providers may be experiencing the same concerns. By working together, goals and strategies can be created that can help reinforce these new skills at home and in the classroom, ensuring positive outcomes for the family. The Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Development for Young Children provides resources for collaborating with families and the behavioral support. See the Resource section for more information.

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QUICK TIP

Here's a quick tip that can help providers and parents with behaviors.

Strategy - Describe what children are doing well so they know to do it again and they feel good about their accomplishment.

Descriptive Praise – For example, be specific in your praise for a job well done. Instead of saying, "Good Job" when children remember to clean up their area after playing, tell them, "You remembered to clean up your area after you finished playing! That's awesome!"

Result - When children know what they did well, they are more likely to do it again!

Children who experience the deployment of a parent for military service often show higher levels of stress and anxiety than their civilian friends. Younger children may not have the tools to understand where mom or dad has gone or when they're coming back. Older kids feel the burden of having to worry about the absent parent while they take on extra responsibilities at home.[7] Providers may not always know what to do or say in situations like this, but remember that just checking in with families to see how they are doing or if they need anything is a family engagement best practice. Below are a few tips from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).[8]

- Maintain consistent schedules and routines.

- Be more alert to children's behaviors, feelings, and conversations during play, routines, and other activities, indoors and outdoors. Through observation, teachers can identify children who are experiencing adjustment difficulties and may need additional assistance, such as counseling.

- Respect diverse family structures and living arrangements, such as children living with grandparents. For example, address correspondence to "Dear Family" rather than "Dear Parent."

- Recognize and validate feelings children may experience during a deployment, such as guilt, resentment, fear, anxiety, confusion, and anger. A teacher might say, "Carl, it's hard to be away from your dad. Would you like to write him a letter?"

- Display photos of the deployed parent at work in uniform.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

By participating in community meetings and committees, programs increase their capacity to respond to the needs and interests of their families. It can be overwhelming to keep up with all of the events that may helpful to families, but it is important for programs to be aware of these activities so they can appropriately refer their families.

Many providers and programs do not have the ability to offer additional programs, events, or workshops for their families, but programs may be able to enhance what they offer to parents through strong partnerships. For example, a local child care program may not have the funding or the staff to offer parent workshops. However, the program could partner with the local Judy Center which would allow the families of the child care program to attend a Judy Center workshop. This enables the Judy Center to reach more families that may need services, but also helps the child care program meet the needs of their families. When programs work together, we are supporting all children and families and ensuring their success.

Various types of programs may be limited in the services they can provide; therefore, it is essential to have strong partnerships within the community to improve our family engagement practices. The Local Early Childhood Advisory Councils (LECAC) are a great place to find resources and partners within the community and also become aware of new early childhood initiatives. For more information on the LECACs, see the Resource section.

FAMILY VOICE

When we first enrolled, I wasn't that active, but now I am more active. The reminders from the school helped. I am able to be more engaged with my daughter and the activities. The program has really helped me to be more motivated with parenting. I have a child that's willing to learn and that encourages me.

- Parent – Arlington Judy Center, Baltimore City

TECH TIP

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Another tool for your toolbox is the app Remind. The app Remind allows communication with individuals or groups, but it also offers a unique feature to structure people within classes so you can blast out reminders about upcoming events, things that are needed for the next day's activities, or any other reminders that you want. The great feature is you can schedule these in advance, and the system will automatically send them out to the groups you designate. So if you have a message for your three-year-old class and a different one for your four-year-old class, you can use Remind to send the information to the appropriate group. And if a child moves, it is as simple as a touch and drag to change your groupings. Remind also offers automatic translation into an ever growing list of languages and dialects.

The app also protects your privacy – creating a separation of your personal information like your cell phone number – from the parents, but allowing you to still have two-way communication that is stored and organized separate from your personal texts. Remind is available on all Apple, Android, and web-connected devices.

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TEACHING AND LEARNING

As providers, one of the easiest ways we can support families in their relationships with their children is by talking with them about their child's development and behavior. By sharing information, we can help them overcome behavioral challenges and help them to better engage with their children. Ensure that families feel welcome to join and observe in the classroom and participate in home visits. It is these experiences that help families become part of their child's learning and development, and also gives them an opportunity to practice these skills as well. However, providers need to ensure that they are reaching the families that do not have the opportunity to come into the program. Many programs use monthly newsletters that highlight events and activities being offered. Programs may also send home weekly updates of classroom or program events. Providers can support families and children even further by offering activities that families can do together.

More and more programs are using technology to communicate with all of their families and share ideas and resources. Families feel connected to the program when they receive regular updates, announcements and reminders. By keeping families informed, providers are working to support their families and children.

REFLECTION

Positive parent/child relationships are part of the foundation for school success. As a child care provider, you can promote positive parent-child relationships through your daily interactions with families, children, colleagues, and community partners.