



Boosting School Readiness through Effective Family Engagement

Course Summary

A strong relationship between families and Head Start staff is essential to promoting healthy child development and positive learning outcomes. Strong relationships are rooted in trust and comfort, which you can build by being genuine, sincere, curious about them and their goals, and supporting them as they work toward those goals.

There are a number of communication techniques you can use to build relationships with families. While these techniques are especially relevant to the first visit with a family, they can be applied to all interactions with families.

These techniques are:

1 Observe and describe the child's behavior.

- Use positive or neutral descriptions.
- Be specific, clear, and objective.
- Elicit behavior through use of a toy or object.
- Avoid interpreting, judging, or giving advice.

2 Listen actively.

- Summarize what the family says and repeat it back in your own words. This shows the family you hear and understand what's important to them.
- Accept parents' emotions, both positive and negative. This establishes you as a supportive, non-judgmental presence.
- Avoid interrupting with an agenda of questions.
- Avoid interpreting, judging, or giving advice.

3 Encourage sharing about the child.

- Invite parents to share their perspective on the child's behavior and development. They are the real experts on their child.
- Use open-ended questions or statements to open up communication.
- Use parents' input and observations to inform your decisions about the child and the family.

4 Support parental competence.

- Encourage and support the family in their strengths.
- Attribute the child's progress to parents' efforts.
- Lead families to reflect on their child's behavior and better understand it.
- Recognize and acknowledge parent efforts, trial and error, discoveries, and strengths.



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There are also some pitfalls to avoid in conversations with families. These will shut down the conversation or damage your relationship with families.

Do not:

1. Let paperwork and regulations guide the conversation. Instead, let the child's behavior guide the conversation.
2. Begin asking questions for paperwork before you have built a strong relationship with the family. Filling out paperwork can impede the development of a personal connection, and some questions can feel invasive without a strong relationship in place.
3. Judge the parents or child. This will only make parents feel defensive and bias your perceptions.
4. Give unsolicited advice. This can sound pedantic or patronizing to parents. Wait to give advice until the parents know they can trust you.
5. Take sides. Encouraging a conflict is counterproductive.
6. Give over-generalized praise such as "You're a great parent!" This can sound patronizing to parents.
7. Empathize in a trite way, such as "I understand." This can provoke a defensive response.
8. Overload families with information and jargon. This can hinder the development of a personal connection with families.
9. Reassure parents with general statements such as "Don't worry." This can feel like you're brushing off parents' concerns.
10. Try to engage the child before the family is comfortable with you. This might result in a negative reaction from the child.