



Five Strategies for Partnering with Families

1. Reflect on your perspective.

Imagine you're working with a family going through a challenging situation. Maybe this family reminds you of a different family you worked with in the past. Maybe you've faced a situation like this in your own life. It's easy to generalize from those experiences to the family in front of you and make assumptions about what they "must" be going through or what they "should" do. But if you do, your suggestions might not be appropriate for this family in this situation—even if they're what you would do yourself.

The key is to pause and reflect on your own perspective. Examine your thoughts and experiences and realize how those are shaping your understanding of the family in front of you. Then, instead try making statements and asking questions to find out what the family really thinks. Work on setting aside your own perspective and judgments that may get in the way of partnering with families effectively.

Instead of:

- ▶ "You must be feeling..." or "Why don't you just..."

Try:

- ▶ "What's all this like for you?" or "Do you have any thoughts about what might make things better?"

2. Help the family identify and work through their own assumptions.

Just as you may bring assumptions into a situation, family members can also have experiences and biases that make it harder to see solutions to their own problems. So, as you reflect on your own perspective, consider how you can support family members to feel safe in identifying and working through their assumptions, too. Different family members may even have opposing biases, sometimes without even realizing it! You can play a valuable role in helping to bring these assumptions into the open and work through them together. This is a great way to help families who feel "stuck." It deepens your relationship with family members, and most importantly, it strengthens their relationships with each other.

- ▶ "What do each of you think about this situation?"
- ▶ "What other experiences does this remind you of?"

3. Identify and build on the family's strengths and core relationships.

Family relationships come under a lot of strain in times of crisis. And when emotions are running high, it's easy for family members to lose sight of the strengths and support they can draw from each other. It's also easy in these situations for both families and workers to assume solutions or support will come mainly from the Head Start or Early Head Start program. Instead, first try engaging the family in a reflection on the strengths that exist within the family, their friends, and their community. Those relationships are the family's most important resource as they face any challenge.

- ▶ "What suggestions do you have for each other?"
- ▶ "How can you help each other through this?"
- ▶ "What kind of support do you have right now from your family and friends?"

4. Celebrate successes while acknowledging struggles.

Another way to acknowledge the family's strengths is to celebrate their successes and help them keep sight of everything they have accomplished despite their struggles. This helps families see themselves as still making progress. The fact that they've solved problems in the past makes it easier to believe they can do it again. However, if you offer praise in vague ways that don't highlight a family's specific strengths, it won't mean much to them; and, if you focus too much on what went right in the past, the family might feel like you don't realize how hard things are right now. It's a delicate balance, and it gets easier with experience.

Celebrating vague success might not go over well:

- ▶ "You're doing such a good job!"
- ▶ "You're great with your daughter."

Celebrating specific success has much better outcomes:

- ▶ "I want to take a moment to acknowledge what you've already accomplished..."
- ▶ "You've made so many steps in the directions you wanted to go already, let's not lose sight of that."
- ▶ "Remember where you were a year ago?"

5. Focus on their core values and aspirations, including important goals they are working toward. Explore their perspectives.

One final strategy is to help the family refocus on their core values and aspirations, including important goals they are working toward. Explore perspectives and listen carefully. What do family members want for each other? What do they want for themselves? Helping a family remember what matters most can spark their motivation and inspire optimism and hope. That can make a huge difference as family members work through difficult times.

- ▶ "How does this tie in to your goal to find a better job?"
- ▶ "It sounds like you'd love to see him get his GED."
- ▶ "Let's not lose sight of the bigger picture—your dream of having your own home."