



Enhance Parents' Advocacy and Leadership Skills: A Guide for Head Start and Early Head Start Staff

Explore this resource to learn about the many ways that Head Start and Early Head Start staff can support parents as advocates and leaders in early childhood programs and at home.

Head Start and Early Head Start staff play an important role in encouraging parents as advocates and leaders for young children. Staff start by building relationships with families that respectfully recognize the abilities and experiences that parents already have.

Research tells us that when parents take on leadership roles in early childhood programs, schools and communities, everybody benefits:

- Children experience greater opportunities, both at home and at school (Henderson, Kressley, & Frankel, 2016)
- Parents develop knowledge and skills, while also building connections and self-confidence (Henderson, Kressley, & Frankel, 2016)
- Early childhood programs, schools and other programs are better able to meet the needs of the children, families and the community they serve (Auerbach, 2010)
- Communities are stronger when they understand the needs of the people who live there (Henderson, Kressley, & Frankel, 2016)

Parents are often the most powerful leaders for change (Morin, n.d.). Parents use powerful and complex leadership skills and abilities as they manage their households every day and guide their children in the little and big tasks of life. Many families may speak up for their own children or work with others to make changes that help many children (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocón, 2012). Effective parenting skills have a lot in common with effective leadership skills (Saad, 2016; Langford & Weisbourd, 1997).

The Head Start Program Performance Standards set out specific actions for programs that provide leadership and advocacy opportunities for parents. Participation in Policy Council (45 CFR §1301.3(b)) and Parent Committees (45 CFR §1301.4(a)), and involvement in transition services (45 CFR §1302.70(c)) and 45 CFR §1302.71(b)(1)) are areas where staff can support parents to strengthen and utilize leadership and advocacy skills.

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What Can Early Childhood Professionals and Programs Do to Partner with Parents as Advocates and Leaders?

Learn about and reflect on leadership. Look for resources to deepen your knowledge about leadership skills. Create opportunities to learn about leadership with families. Find opportunities to strengthen leadership skills, knowledge and practice.

Consider the following skills (Saad, 2016) that can contribute to effective leadership. Reflect on ways you can partner with families to support and strengthen their skills in these areas.

Plan	Plan. Create a vision, develop goals and a plan for how to reach those goals.
Lead	Lead by example. Act as a role model and hold yourself to high standards, such as being fair and honest and following through with commitments.
Communicate	Communicate and actively listen. Use two-way communication without interrupting, and make your points calmly and clearly.
Negotiate	Negotiate. Include everyone in making decisions when possible, but be able to make the final decision when necessary.
Value	Value feelings. Understand and manage your own emotions, and recognize and value the emotions of other people.
Motivate	Motivate and inspire others. Engage people in ways that boost their enthusiasm and confidence about completing a task or achieving a goal.
Be Positive	Be positive and flexible. Maintain a positive attitude by staying upbeat and optimistic. Be able to adjust and adapt when things do not go as planned.
Accept	Accept mistakes. See mistakes as an opportunity for growth and learning.

Respect and recognize parents' abilities. Many families have rich leadership experience. Some parents have had life experiences that may lead them to believe that they have little chance of positively influencing their children's futures. Hearing that others believe in their abilities and potential can be life-changing (Grenia, 2011).

Program staff and teachers can play a central role in developing parents' leadership skills by recognizing their abilities and acknowledging past leadership experiences.

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Support Parent Decision-making. Within programs, staff and parent leaders advocate for the inclusion of diverse family voices at all levels of the program, including in formal decision-making groups, such as Parent Committees and Policy Councils.

Identify opportunities for parent leadership working in partnership with community organizations and programs. Consider leadership roles in libraries, health centers, schools and school districts, higher education, human service agencies, faith-based organizations, businesses, and other organizations.

Build Culturally Responsive Partnerships with Parents. Create welcoming environments and use strength-based attitudes and practices to foster parent leadership. Relationship building requires us to be curious, listen, share observations, and ask open-ended questions to learn more about families. This can strengthen connections with families and build trust over time.

Families' perceptions of teacher responsiveness are an important aspect of parent-school relationships. Their perceptions are linked to the frequency of their involvement in their children's schools (Powell et al., 2010). In fact, parent leaders often report that the encouragement and sense of connection they receive from other people has been key to building their leadership (Henderson, Kressley, & Frankel, 2016).

As we develop positive, goal-oriented relationships, it often requires that we be aware of our personal biases and how those biases can affect mutual respect and trust.

Keep an open mind. Be aware of any judgements you are making about parents' choices or behaviors that might be based on your own cultural values or beliefs and may not be true for all people. True partnership requires an honest assessment of the positive and negative assumptions we make about others (Culture Advantage, 2006).

Practice Scenarios

Take some time to practice. Read the three scenarios below. Create a list of possible reasons for the parent's behavior in each scenario. Then, review the explanations for the parent's behavior in each scenario.

1

A young parent, Lydia, is enthusiastic about volunteering for school activities and attending parent committee meetings. She is often 20-30 minutes late for these events. Lydia does not apologize about her timing.

2

Patrick is an active parent volunteer. He regularly attends school activities and council meetings. He is social and loves to make connections with other parents and staff. In group discussions, Patrick tends to dominate the conversation and interrupts others when they speak.

3

Isabella is a Head Start Policy Council representative. She has grown into the role and steadily gained trust and respect from other parents and staff. People have noticed that she brings food to eat at meetings where food is not served.

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Explanations

1

Lydia comes from a family that places a high value on spending time with loved ones. She takes time to take care of her children at home before coming to meetings. As a result, she often arrives late to events.

2

Patrick comes from a large family where they often interrupted each other and talked loudly. When he feels comfortable in a group, he behaves the same way. He sees this as a way to make connections and build relationships. He does not mean to shut down others in the process. He expects others will step in when needed. He is not offended by others interrupting him.

3

Isabella is a single mother. She races to each council meeting after completing a 10-hour work day and dropping her children at their grandparents' house so she can attend meetings. Meetings are the only time she has to eat before rushing back home to put everyone to bed and prepare for the next day.

Reflection: Every individual and family has a unique set of cultures and values. Some may be similar or different than yours. All are important. How does your own background (e.g., family, experiences) impact the assumptions or judgments you made about each scenario?

- What did you discover about your perception of each parent's behavior?
- What leadership skills do you see each of these parents using?
- What leadership skills could you use to encourage their ongoing participation?

Use Family Engagement Strategies to Encourage Parent Advocacy and Leadership

Strengthening your ability to build relationships with parents will help you to engage them in conversations about the importance of advocacy and leadership. Learn how to integrate strengths-based attitudes and relationship-based practices into your interactions with families. Develop a plan to build your knowledge, skills, and practice by using the related resources listed in this resource as a guide for your professional development.

Related Resources

Review the Advocacy and Leadership—Tips for Families series with parents. Consider sharing these tip sheets at meetings such as parent committees, transition planning, goal-setting, or intake visits. Other opportunities include parent conferences, home visits, and posting on bulletin boards.

- Every Day Leadership Skills
- You Are a Leader
- Make Time for Leadership

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Additional Resources

- Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement
- Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes—Research to Practice Series: Families as Advocates and Leaders
- Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

References

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For more information about this resource, please contact us:
PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481



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