



Family Connections to Peers and Community

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the “Family Connections to Peers and Community” Outcome: *“Parents and families form connections with peers, mentors, and other community members in formal or informal social networks. These networks are supportive, educational, and enhance families’ well-being and community life.”*

This resource presents a summary of selected research, promising practices, proven interventions, and program strategies intended to be useful for Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs.

Introduction

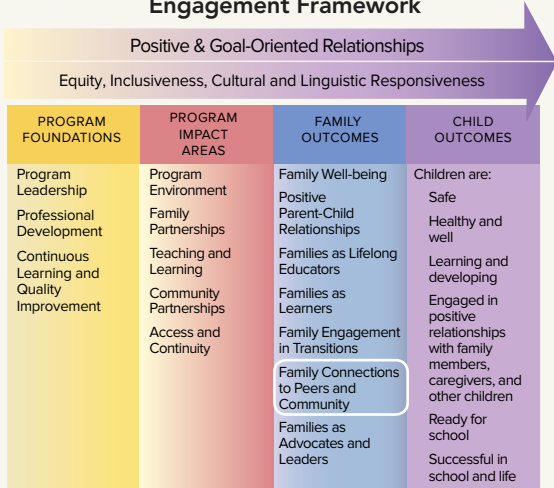
Families rely on other families and the support of their communities to celebrate the joys and face the responsibilities and challenges of raising children. Like most parents, Head Start and Early Head Start parents raise children with both informal and formal supports. Formal supports include school, health services, libraries, parks, community colleges, social service agencies, and of course, Head Start and Early Head Start. Informal supports include family, friends, and community relationships that are not provided through a particular agency or program.

Families relate to others in their communities in many ways. They relate through extended family networks, community institutions (school, church, recreation), and informal interactions in neighborhoods. One term used to describe these community networks and interactions is “a system of care”.

Head Start and Early Head Start can play a large role in these systems of care. Programs provide direct support, opportunities for parents to build relationships with other parents, and access to community services. Families keep many of these relationships with families and community partners when their children transition to kindergarten, and rely on them in this next phase of their lives. These connections provide a network of relationships that strengthen the capacity of families to support and engage in their children’s education and healthy development.

For children from migrant families or for those whose families are recent immigrants, these relationships may be even more important. Whether families are new to the country, or simply not part of a community’s majority population, they may not have the knowledge, skills or social contacts to fully engage with educational, health, and social services. Families from different backgrounds and with different caregiving structures (for example, grandparents, adoptive families,

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



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.



two-parent families, single parents, and parents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) may connect to resources in a variety of ways.

A family's capacity to participate in their children's school, and other social institutions, comes partly from their cultural and social capital. Cultural capital includes the specific skills and knowledge needed to engage with educational and other institutions in a particular culture. Social capital is the set of relationships that provide access to information and resources (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Involvement in school is related to a family's network of relationships (Sheldon, 2002). By connecting families to peers and community, Head Start and Early Head Start staff can help families build their cultural and social capital, and, as a result, their capacity to fully engage with their children's schools.

Connections to other families and within the broader community bring power and influence to families. Together their voices may have a stronger impact on social institutions.

Family Connections to Peers and Community: What We Know

Social Networks Benefit Parents

Social networks may be defined as the connections among people who make a difference in people's lives. Members of a parent's network can include friends, relatives, coworkers, neighbors, or professionals. Their interactions with each other may involve emotional exchanges (for example, reassurance or encouragement), material goods (such as sharing clothing or toys), services (for instance, running an errand or babysitting) or information (Cochran & Niego, 2002). Parents who have positive connections to friends and families and their local community are more able to meet their basic needs, achieve their goals, and successfully raise their children. They are better able to overcome obstacles such as unsafe neighborhoods, family violence, and homelessness in order to reach these goals.

An important outcome of belonging to a positive social network is social support—the experience of feeling cared for and receiving help from others. It is not totally clear which aspects of social support are most important in creating positive parenting behaviors but, in general, parents who have supportive relationships are more likely to provide sensitive caregiving. One study of African American mothers with lower incomes found that those with more supportive and extensive social networks were warmer, more responsive caregivers. They were more likely to provide more stimulating environments for their babies than mothers with smaller, less supportive networks (Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant, 1996). A study of primarily rural families with lower incomes found that parents with supportive relationships were less likely to be depressed (Lee, 2009). The Early Head Start home visiting program is one option that is expressly

designed to offer such support by helping families develop a positive relationship with caring home visitors.

There may be a number of overlapping reasons why positive social networks strengthen sensitive, flexible parenting behavior. One is that social networks provide concrete help with everyday tasks. When parents are able to share some of the responsibilities of parenthood, they can devote more time and energy to warm, responsive caregiving. For example, ongoing relationships provide help with everyday problems with child care or transportation. This hands-on support reduces living costs and helps with economic stability, making it easier for parents to engage in steady employment (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004; Runyan et al., 1998). In addition to contributing to financial security, regular employment enhances parents' psychological well-being and provides consistent contact with others—an even wider social network of people to whom they might turn during difficult times (Orthner et al., 2004).

When mothers with lower incomes perceive that they have a network of support to call on in times of need, they feel less stress. Social support buffers stress by enhancing parents' emotional and psychological coping skills and helps them feel more competent as parents (Lee, 2009), more confident, and more in control of their lives (Green & Rodgers, 2002; Simmons, Braun, Wright, & Miller, 2007). A study of mothers who participated in Head Start activities revealed a positive relationship between the amount of their participation and their feelings of competency and psychological well-being (Parker et al., 1987). When parents feel able to manage their environment, they feel they can better cope with the stresses of raising children in poverty, and better handle difficult situations in their lives. They exhibit more effective parent-child communication, greater confidence as parents, and more involvement with their children (Lee, 2009; Raikes & Thompson, 2005).

As a result of relationships with peers, relatives, and community members, parents often shape their behavior and beliefs to conform with the expectations and modeling of those around them (Cochran & Niego, 2002; DePanfilis, 1996). Fathers, in particular, may benefit from the support of other fathers in small groups (Casey, 2013). Social contacts also provide useful information to parents. When mothers have contact with others who give advice and positive feedback, they feel more competent and happy in their caregiving role (Burchinal et al., 1996). The size of the social network matters. Even if all personal connections are not useful, connection to a greater number of people gives an individual access to a wider range of role models and resources (Sheldon, 2002).

In an ideal world, social networks would always be supportive to parents, but these networks can be complex and may also have negative influences. Some friends or family members may give inaccurate information, and some may demand excessive attention, making it difficult for parents to focus on their own needs and those of their children (Cochran & Niego, 2002). Mothers who face too many demands on their time may be less aware of and less responsive to their children's needs (Crockenberg, 1988). Head Start and Early Head Start staff can help families develop supportive, rather than draining social networks. In doing so they enhance the lives of the children and caregivers they serve.

Head Start and Early Head Start staff can create opportunities for parent-to-parent contact through, for example, socialization groups associated with home visiting. Opportunities to socialize are especially important for isolated families, such as those with a new baby or those who are new to the area or unfamiliar with the cultures of the families around them. Helping parents connect with each other, even about issues that may not relate to Head Start and Early Head Start, helps create a support network that may last after the program ends. Groups of parents may want to meet with others who face similar issues and concerns. One study of Chinese immigrant parents of children with disabilities found that they developed a sense of belonging and confidence by meeting in a group with other Chinese parents of children with special needs who faced similar language and cultural issues (Lo, 2010). Many parents are comfortable connecting with a wide range of parents, and enjoy learning from each other's different perspectives. Sometimes helping different groups of caregivers—such as fathers, new mothers, grandparents, and LGBT parents—connect with each other may encourage participation in groups and promote support specific to their individual situations.

Social Networks Benefit Children

By helping to strengthen the family and encourage positive parenting behavior, social support networks for parents are linked to healthy development and school readiness for children. Research shows that parents with greater emotional support are more responsive and warm in their interactions with children. They also feel more effective in their parenting roles, and they provide a more stimulating home environment (Marshall, 2001). When parents are able to provide sensitive, responsive, and predictable caregiving, children are more likely to do well in school and to develop lifelong skills that will help them succeed (Center on the Developing Child, 2010). Such support is most effective when it begins before a child is born, when the family is experiencing the transition to parenthood. Maternal isolation and stress in pregnancy are related to negative health and developmental outcomes in children (Ruiz & Avant, 2005). Prenatal social support, offered in home visiting, for example, buffers that stress and leads to positive outcomes for children, families, and society (Olds et al, 2007).

To learn more about how positive relationships contribute to better child outcomes, see "Positive Parent-Child Relationships," another resource in the Research to Practice Series on the PFCE Framework Family Engagement Outcomes.

Children growing up in families without social support may be at greater risk for abuse or neglect. Social isolation is closely associated with family violence, and this is true across cultures (Gracia & Mitsu, 2003). In contrast, the presence of social support through positive social networks is strongly associated with a reduced likelihood of child abuse and neglect (DePanfilis, 1996). Both formal and informal systems of support protect children from the likelihood of maltreatment. Helping families develop and maintain supportive social networks, as well as formal connections to Head Start and Early Head Start and other community organizations, is an important preventive strategy. These efforts help to create safe and healthy environments for children's growth.

Social support for parents may protect children's health. A study of single mothers with lower incomes found a strong association between low levels of social support and high rates of childhood accidents and injuries. Children whose parents are socially isolated may be less supervised, and therefore may be more at risk for getting hurt. Without positive social networks, parents may not have access to backup from other adults and information that would help them keep their children safe. Likewise, they may not have the emotional resources to stay focused on monitoring their children's safety in unsafe environments (Leininger, Ryan, & Kalil, 2009).

Positive social networks directly impact children's development by giving children opportunities to interact with a larger set of safe and caring adults. When children have connections with other adults they are able to experience a greater range of activities and they may develop new interests different from those at home. Children's close relationships with a variety of safe and caring people provide more opportunities to develop flexible thinking and the ability to understand different points of view. The number of reliable adult friends in the social network of a family is positively associated with a child's happiness, more friendships with other children, and a greater involvement in community organizations (Cochran & Niego, 2002). When families are connected to their communities, children are more likely to enter school ready to succeed (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009).

Family Connections to Peers and Community: Bringing Families Together

Promising Practices

Increasingly, programs are recognizing the need to support families' social networks as an important way to help children thrive. Programs can create a variety of opportunities to encourage family connections. Options include events like picnics, on-site workdays for volunteers to spruce up the program site, and open houses. Programs can also connect families to community activities, such as library reading times, health clinics, and community celebrations. Social media has become an important communication tool that early childhood programs use to build relationships with and among parents. As social media becomes more popular, programs need to consider policies that reflect their particular culture as well as best practices in respecting the privacy issues of families and staff (Simon, 2011). *The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)* has good resources to consider.

Existing programs can find new ways to prioritize meaningful social networking for parents. A program at the University of Washington, for example, shifted its parenting education agenda. The program changed from focusing on parenting skills for managing child behavior to the broader goal of strengthening families' support networks. The program also looked at ways to help families become more involved in community and school activities. It offered training in interpersonal skills because parents who need social connection the most often lack the skills to make it happen (Webster-Stratton, 1997).

AVANCE, a parent-child education program in El Paso, Texas, creates opportunities for families to connect by offering a toy-making class. In addition to learning how to make developmentally appropriate toys and the importance of learning through play, family members form supportive networks with each other as they interact in classes.

Helping others is another way to strengthen relationships between people, and it also builds confidence. An important benefit of social capital is the help that members offer to each other. Head Start and Early Head Start can build opportunities for parents to share with each other in basic ways. When families are in transition and have concrete needs, others may be able to help by cooking a meal or offering child care. The Hilltown Cooperative Charter Public School in Haydenville, MA, has created a buddy system to help integrate new families into the school. The program pairs new families with families who have experience in the program. This allows the more seasoned families to share their expertise and help others and creates a connection so that these "buddies" can turn to each other for support in the future. Many Head Start programs have parent ambassador programs that function in the same way.



A valuable tool to help families identify and understand their social support networks is the Eco-Map, developed by social worker, Ann Hartman. Parents are encouraged to take the lead in creating this graphic illustration of their social network. Constructing an Eco-Map with families can provide a starting place to discuss goals, values, and needs. Its simple structure makes it accessible to families at all literacy levels. It can be used successfully across cultures because the family provides the context (McCormick, Stricklin, Nowak, & Rous, 2008). Eco-Maps can also be used as data to identify needs and monitor progress in a program's continuous improvement activities.

Interventions

The following approaches are not the only useful, evidence-based interventions in the field but represent some good examples of options for programs to consider.

- *Abriendo Puertas* on parent advocacy and leadership throughout its curriculum. It aims for positive impacts on families and children, such as increased parental confidence, more engagement in community activities, and school readiness.
- *Legacy Parenting* is an evidenced-based program that emphasizes parental self-efficacy, parent-child relationships, parental responsibility, and a sense of community.
- *Parent Cafés* are focused on supporting protective factors in families through meaningful conversations among parents about what is most important to them.
- *Centering Pregnancy* and *Centering Parenting* are related interventions that promote self-care, child development knowledge, and connections to other parents in a group setting.

Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

Programs can help parents develop supportive peer and community relationships, an important step to reaching better family and child outcomes. New strategies for connecting families to peers and community can be identified in the PFCE Framework. As programs work towards a more systemic approach, they can draw on PFCE Framework Elements such as strong Program Leadership, targeted Professional Development, and dependable Community Partnerships to integrate and improve services for families.

When programs create opportunities for families to connect with each other and with the larger community, leadership and staff may see how the families themselves make suggestions for new initiatives and start to build connections on their own. With support and practice, relationship-building skills grow in ways that will serve families long after they leave Head Start and Early Head Start.

With the support of Program Leadership, staff can create Continuous Improvement activities to collect data about families' goals and connections to social networks and community organizations. Using this data, programs can identify and strengthen Community Partnerships to connect families with each other and with the larger community. Programs may also share data and insights with community partners to address families' goals and needs.

What Can Programs Do?

Encourage Peer Connections

Create Opportunities for Parents to Meet and Communicate with Each Other. Build in social time and fun “getting-to-know-you” games for parents at meetings and gatherings to help them connect with each other. Invite parents to help organize social opportunities, such as potluck dinners or family game nights, to encourage other families to come out and meet one another. Share a family contact list for all interested parents so that they can be in touch with each other. Create parent message boards for electronic and hard-copy postings. These allow parents to swap goods and services and to share announcements and resources with each other.

Offer Family-Friendly Space. Provide an on-site, welcoming space where parents can meet each other, share a cup of coffee, or look at community announcements and resources as they build a social network for their families.

Create and Enhance Program Activities

Build Strong Head Start and Early Head Start Policy Councils. Policy Council is an important way to foster family connections. Programs and existing members can invite, welcome, and sustain active parent participation. Policy Council supports parents' skills, knowledge, power, self-confidence, and social networks.

Provide Parents with Volunteer Opportunities to Help Your Program. When families work together on projects, they feel more connected. Create a range of opportunities, such as work or clean-up days, building projects, and fundraisers. Be sure to provide child care, transportation, and offer food to make it possible for families to participate.

Create a Buddy System for Families. Encourage experienced families to mentor new families in the program. Make suggestions and guide mentoring families so that they can strengthen their own interpersonal skills by learning how to be welcoming and available to newcomers. Hold special events for buddy families to introduce them to a wider network.

Access Community Resources

Offer Workshops on Communication and Networking. In addition to sharing information about community events, help families access these opportunities by helping them overcome hesitations they may have about attending. Provide a contact name, organize a group of Head Start and Early Head Start parents to go together, or build trust by inviting staff from other agencies to meet and greet parents.

Implement or Refer Families to Relevant Support Groups and Parenting Skills Groups. Reach out to the groups in your community that may address the needs and strengths of the families your program serves. Community organizations may offer different kinds of groups, including groups for fathers, teen parents, or grandparents, parenting education groups, play groups, domestic violence support groups, etc. These kinds of groups often provide information and concrete, emotional, and social support.

Invite Community Partners to Conduct Training and Informative Sessions for the Families. Training and information from community partners will bring awareness of what other agencies provide and how they can support families. In addition, agencies may appear more approachable when a few of its representatives reach out to initiate personal connections in sessions.

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