

## USING THE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP PROCESS TO SUPPORT VIRTUAL LEARNING IN THE HOME

A strong, meaningful, and authentic relationship between a staff member and a family is the cornerstone of an effective Family Partnership Process. Successful partnerships with families take time and patience to develop. They are built on trust, respect, and shared responsibility for child and family growth. Partnerships require cooperation and open, honest communication between the staff and family. These relationships are grounded in a strengths-based approach that identifies, celebrates, and draws on the strengths of families. As staff and families build relationships, they can combine their strengths, skills, and resources to accomplish common goals. This kind of planning and goal setting with individual families is critical to achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

As programs and families struggle with the realities of closed facilities and physical distancing, program staff are looking for ways to support parents to continue learning through at-home virtual learning. The Family Partnership Process offers programs the opportunity to look at both family and child learning and development goals at the same time.

A successful Family Partnership Process is based on a relationship-based approach that values different perspectives and contributions, explores options, and honors all types of family progress. Six phases make up the Family Partnership Process.



## EXAMPLE SCENARIO

The following example shows how a program might use the Family Partnership Process to support a family with virtual, at-home learning opportunities.

### PHASE ONE: RECRUITMENT AND ENROLLMENT AND PHASE TWO: FAMILY AND CHILD ASSESSMENT

The Alvarez family was enrolled in the local Head Start program before the program closed due to COVID-19. The family, who had their second child Amaya 6 months ago, were in the process of having her enrolled in Early Head Start (EHS). Monica, the family service worker, called to update them on the status of the enrollment process and assess their current situation. During the call, Mr. Alvarez mentioned that he has recently been furloughed from the construction company where he was a carpenter due to the economic impact of COVID-19. They recently had to leave the home they were renting and move in with Mr. Alvarez's sister.

Mrs. Alvarez has been struggling with episodes of sadness since Amaya's birth. She feels sad that she has not been able to visit with her mother, who lives in Texas, due to physical distancing. Angel, their 4-year-old son, was attending a Head Start program. He is artistic and loves music.

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT:

- What are some things you are learning about the Alvarez family?
- What additional questions can you ask the parents regarding their concerns for their children's growth, development, and learning?
- Are there community partners you might connect them to?

### PHASE THREE: COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

The family was happy about how much Angel was learning and growing in Head Start, and they want that to continue for both of their children. Mrs. Alvarez feels overwhelmed trying to provide those types of experiences in the home, and Mr. Alvarez isn't quite sure how to support her.

Because of their previous positive relationship with Head Start, Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez were relieved when Monica reached out to them. After talking with the Alverezes, Monica met with her supervisor to discuss the children's educational needs. They developed a strategy to include Angel's teacher Jackie and Sabina, one of the program's home visitors, in a comprehensive plan to support the family's child development and education needs. Jackie will offer Head Start educational supports for Angel, and Sabina will offer EHS educational supports for Amaya. They determine that Monica will remain the main point of contact for communication with the family.

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES:

- What do you see as the strengths, hopes, and challenges of the Alvarez family?
- What additional information about the family and children might the education staff need?
- Are there other staff the core educational support team might work with in the program?

### PHASE FOUR: GOAL SETTING WITH FAMILIES: SEVEN STEPS

#### STEP 1: SET A GOAL

Mrs. Alvarez wants Angel to continue the gains he made in the Head Start program. She remembers how excited he was during the fall to attend school, where he loved to read stories with Jackie and play make believe with his friends. She is worried that he is bored at home and notices that he has had a few more temper tantrums than normal. She is eager for him to return to school. She also wants feedback and assurance that she is doing all the right things to support Amaya's healthy growth and development. Mrs. Alvarez remembers relying on her mother for help when Angel was a baby, and she misses that with Amaya. Mr. Alvarez wants more strategies to help with caring for and teaching the children at home while he continues to look for work.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR SETTING GOALS:

- What strategies can Monica use to be sure she is asking the right questions to genuinely understand the family's educational goals for their children? How can Monica share this information with other program staff to effectively support the Alvarez family?
- What additional information can Monica gather to help Jackie and Sabina develop strategies for Angel and Amaya's learning in the home?

## STEP 2: IDENTIFY SKILLS

Mrs. Alvarez is a bilingual English and Spanish speaker and has strong organizational skills. Mr. Alvarez is creative and enjoys making up fun, silly games to play with Angel. Monica is a good communicator and has developed strong, trusting partnerships with families and colleagues. Jackie is a seasoned preschool teacher and has been successful integrating STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) into her curriculum activities in the classroom.

Sabina is an infant and early childhood development specialist with strong skills in early childhood social and emotional development.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR IDENTIFYING SKILLS:

- How can the team understand all that the family brings as skills to support their goal? What skills can they build on as they develop strategies to support the family's educational goals?
- What strategies can the team use to understand and build on their own skills?
- What additional skills does a team coming together to support a family like the Alvarezes need?

## STEP 3: ASSESS STRENGTHS

Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez are both flexible and open to new ways to help their children learn. Monica is very relationship-based and resourceful, particularly when organizing supports for the families with whom she works. Jackie and Sabina are both excited to help the family see the many ways they incorporate learning in their home and to show them ways to be even more intentional about it.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSING STRENGTHS:

- How can the team identify the strengths that they and the family can build on to meet the Alvarezes' goals?
- What other strengths or qualities would help the Alvarez family accomplish their goals?

## STEP 4: EXAMINE STRESSORS

Mrs. Alvarez has been having bouts of sadness since Amaya was born. Mr. Alvarez is worried about her and increasingly anxious about finding a job. They are both worried about their living situation and the family's current financial struggles, including concerns about paying their phone bill and losing internet access. The educational support team is excited about working with the family but worried about how to best provide supports virtually.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR EXAMINING STRESSORS:

- What challenges does the family face?
- What other program staff can Monica reach out to for help addressing some of the family's stressors?
- What strategies can the team use to provide supports for the children's educational experience while simultaneously helping the parents manage the challenges?

## STEP 5: EXPLORE STRATEGIES

In building the family partnership agreement, Monica and the Alvarez family agree to take steps that will not only help them with their children’s learning, growth, and development but also focus on their family well-being.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING STRATEGIES:

- What are the ideal steps to achieve the goals set?
- What options are you, with the support of other program staff, and the Alvarez family willing to take on to support the goals?

## STEP 6: DETERMINE SUPPORT

Mr. Alvarez’s sister is willing to help provide respite for Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez when she can. The family has one computer at home that Mr. Alvarez’s sister uses for work. Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez both have smart phones, although they have low data allowances. Jackie and Sabina worked together to create a package of learning materials for Angel and Amaya. Monica has enlisted the program mental health consultant to support the family in developing a plan for virtual mental health services that meet their needs. She is also gathering information on [Lifeline](#), a federal benefit program that lowers the monthly cost of phone or internet service for eligible low-income consumers. In the interim, they make a plan to provide services over the phone.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR DETERMINING SUPPORT:

- What questions should the team ask to determine the supports the family needs?
- How might the team capitalize on the supports to help incorporate the family’s education goals?
- What strategies can Monica use to connect the family to the most appropriate program or community resources for additional supports?

## STEP 7: TRACK PROGRESS AND CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

Monica was able to secure a loaner laptop for the family. She also helped them take advantage of the Lifeline program and connected them to an affordable cell phone and internet service provider in their community. The mental health consultant met virtually with Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez to assess their needs. The consultant also met with the team and provided some self-care and wellness strategies to share with Mrs. Alvarez. The educational support team met with Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez to develop a daily schedule for Angel that is flexible, but also helps Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez to incorporate some structure in their day. The team and the family decided that Angel, with help from one of his parents, will participate in a 30-minute per day virtual learning connection with Jackie and a small group of children from his class. Angel was very excited to see his friends and Ms. Jackie again. Mrs. Alvarez asked Jackie to include some simple art and science activities into the daily schedule that she can do in Spanish with Angel, as well as some ideas for fun games Mr. Alvarez can do with him. Jackie and Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez also started talking about Angel’s transition to kindergarten in the fall. Not knowing what the situation with schools will be, they decided to keep talking about it and share as much information as they can.

Sabina and the family planned a 30-minute outdoor, physically distanced “home visit” to talk more about Amaya and their goals for her. During the visit, Sabina noted how healthy Amaya seemed and pointed out how well Mrs. Alvarez was parenting her. She and the family reviewed the learning materials and discussed Amaya’s growth and development and some simple ways the parents can support her learning during regular, everyday routines at home. They discussed the self-care and wellness strategies from the mental health consultant and planned for another outdoor home visit the following week so Sabina and the parents can complete Amaya’s developmental screening. They also agreed to an ongoing schedule of 15-minute, once a week, virtual check-ins to talk about Amaya’s growth, learning, and development. They will determine if they can incorporate additional outdoor home visits.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR TRACKING PROGRESS AND CELEBRATING SUCCESSES:

- What strategies can the team use to track progress toward the goals?
- What would further contribute to achieving the goals?
- What successes would you celebrate with this family?

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**PHASE FIVE: FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW**

The educational support team set up a regular meeting to make sure they stay coordinated and continue to document and discuss the family's progress toward their goals. In partnership with the family, they decided to meet virtually once a month all together to discuss Angel and Amaya's progress and new learning goals and to assess any additional goals the family has. Monica will continue to be the point of contact for Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez, and they know they can reach out to her for support in between the monthly meetings. The education manager will stay in touch with her contacts in the school system to monitor decisions about school openings.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW:

- What have you learned about the family through this process?
- What ideas or supports can you offer the family as they continue working toward their goals?
- What additional strategies can the team put in place to ensure a coordinated approach for supporting this family?

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**PHASE SIX: CONTINUOUS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT**

The family supports, educational, and management staff meet regularly to assess the needs and progress of all the enrolled families. They use their data to determine how well they are meeting the needs of the families and to assess areas where they need to be flexible as situations continue to shift for their staff and families.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR CONTINUOUS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT:

- What other data sources will help the program best support this family?
- How can they use their data to better plan virtual educational supports with all families?