

Bringing Families Together: Building Community
Best Practices in Family and Community Engagement Video Series

[Music]

Narrator: Engaging parents can have powerful results. It can create a whole new community for families and their children. Science has shown that strong, positive relationships between parents and their children are critical to healthy development and that parents' connections to friends, neighbors, the community as a whole, is equally important to helping them be good parents.

Joshua Sparrow: Humans are social animals. We really need to be connected to other people when we're raising our children. And when parents are alone and isolated, they're really burdened by their stress and they don't have anybody to unload it on. And it actually has been shown that when parents are all by themselves and isolated, they may be more at risk of developing depression and even of abusing their children because of the isolation. So, it's really critical to do everything that we can to connect parents to each other.

Narrator: Connections to programs can make a difference for families, too. Children and families form close relationships with program staff that can open up opportunities for growth. At Sheltering Arms in Atlanta, Georgia, parent and family engagement is a foundation of all they do.

Steven White: Some of the ways that we engage relationships with our families is just that personal, one-on-one interaction that we have with our families here as a staff, not only in the classroom but out of the classroom. We understand that our relationships and the success that we ultimately have here at the facility, heavily relies on the – the personal nature to which we interact with our families day to day.

Narrator: But Sheltering Arms realizes that relationships don't end with the staff. Programs can play a vital role in helping families connect with peers and create an even stronger community of support.

Mom 1: I anticipated that she would be slower, but she actually isn't. And I just thought it was pretty interesting that she was a lot different than my two oldest children.

Narrator: They've created programs that get parents directly involved not only with positive relationships with their children, but in the life of the center and all its families. One of those programs is called Legacy Moms.

Maria Russell: We meet every single week, and it's moms in infant/toddler classrooms where they just come together and they just talk about whatever's going on in their lives.

Mom 2: All these kids are potty training.

Woman 1: That's awesome.

Mom 2: So it's – what is that? – 18 kids potty training. You just come and talk about whatever, breastfeeding, or whatever we were going through. It just seems like we all kind of went through it together.

Mom 3: Whatever character they like, that's what type of underwear I bought. So, like Bob the Builder. We don't peepee on Bob the Builder.

Maria: What it brings out in moms is different than any other meeting that happens. You don't have that kind of – kind of rich discussion about kind of feelings, dreams for your child. You know? But with Legacy, it's very individualized.

Mom 3: He loves apples. But for him to say, "I wanted some fruit," I was like okay that's something new. [Laughter]

Maria: There's a curriculum that goes along with Legacy. There's a different topic every week, but they all relate to each other.

Mom 4: She don't even want to use her potty. She want to get on the big toilet. So she going to learn how to get up there and everything.

Maria: You know, there's like 15 things on here that you all have shared with each other. And then the last section is called Parent/Child Time Together, where the moms actually go and get their children and bring them into the room for, you know, interaction time. And my role there is to just kind of listen and model if I need to, or talk to the moms and – about what they're talking about or giving them words to use with their children if I sense that they're kind of at a loss.

Narrator: The results of this program have been dramatic. For the mothers...

Maria: I've seen how the weekly engagement with the moms has sort of changed their outlook and their attitude on how they raise their children.

Narrator: And the children...

Maria: But what I see with the children is kind of a sense of, she's my go-to person. I feel safe with her. This is my comfort zone.

Narrator: It's having an added benefit.

Maria: They really are sharing with each other and becoming a kind of a community within themselves.

Narrator: Creating a community for parents is important for any program that wants to help families succeed. It helps reduce stress and feelings of isolation, and builds networks that can support families outside of the program. And when the kids transition to school, these social networks follow. Another Sheltering Arms program is called Parent Cafe. Each week, parents drop by for dinner, fun bonding activities, and serious talk.

Man 1: Speak from your own experience. Use "I" statements. Everything should be about what – what – how I do or how I feel.

Cinnamon M.: Parent Cafe is a group where you come in and you can take everyday issues and turn them into great topics.

Man 2: What helps you cope with everyday life?

Katina S.: The way your day starts is going to dictate how it – pretty much, what does – it sets the tone for the rest of the day. Parents here have good intentions; they love their children. They want the best for their kids. So, I was just amazed at the conversations at the tables.

Man 2: You was raised by your family a certain way and then Mia was raised a different way, and y'all had to bring that together.

Katina: It let me know that they want the same thing for their kids as I want for mine.

Narrator: Parents share with one another.

Mom 5: I'm in the process of getting my daughter adopted by my husband. So I'm very, very, very happy about it.

Laceltra T.: Parenting is not always easy, and they always have more tips and – and different ways to handle certain situations.

Steven: If I guard my ear gate and I keep my mind focused on what's before me, you know, I can come in here and smile. I can come in here and be happy.

Laceltra: They have truly helped me. I'm getting emotional; but, they have really helped me through a lot. Because I'm a single parent, but to just know that you're not alone, it kind of takes a weight off your shoulders.

Narrator: It's become a whole new system of support.

Woman 2: Think about a challenging time in your family; what made you feel proud of your family in that situation?

Mom 6: When I found out that I was pregnant, at the time – and I didn't have the support that I needed. I managed to find it through my counselors and also my peers, as well as my children. So, they all helped me to be able to cope with the situation.

Narrator: Parents are engaged in a new and very real way

Rashad C.: I wasn't really just paying attention. It was to the point of just dropping the kids off and going about my business, you know, because I'm a dad and I got stuff to do; you know? But as I kind of slowed my pace down and looked at things a little bit differently, and, you know, this is good for the community, this is good for me, you know, and this is good for my daughter.

Narrator: A sense of connection and a whole new sense of community.

Rashad: I feel like I'm in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. And right now, that's all that matters.

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