

5 Questions: Engaging Families to Support Virtual Learning with Brandi Black Thacker

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Jennifer Boss: Hi, I'm Jennifer Boss, and welcome to "5 Questions: Engaging Families to Support Virtual Learning."

Brandi Black Thacker: My name is Brandi Black Thacker. I'm the director of training, technical assistance, and collaboration for the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.

Jennifer: What are the key considerations for program staff to keep in mind when they're planning to engage with families to provide supports for at-home or virtual learning?

Brandi: A couple of things come to mind, and this is specific for my Head Start family. Take a breath. We build relationships better than anybody on the planet. Not only do we know how to build them, we know how to sustain them. And it doesn't matter where we are and what we have in front of us, we know how to make deep connections. So, the thing that I would say first and foremost is lean in to what you know, because you know a lot. The second thing I would say is the same set of skills that we have to really contribute to those connections with families, with their most precious gifts of infants, toddlers, or preschoolers, live in the virtual space too. So, a couple of things that we've been thinking about are not so different than what we do all day, every day. Regular communication, a couple of modalities, different ways to make sure that families have feedback loops, so not only are they receiving information, but they're having the chance to share it too. Celebrations and challenges – we want all of that. So, I would humbly submit that to keep doing what we've always known and what we've always done. We're the nation's laboratory for a reason, and we live family engagement like nobody else. Snap! [Laughs] I feel like it's a fist-pound moment, like exclamation point. That's who we are. That's how we're wired.

Jennifer: What does building relationships and engaging with families in a virtual space then look like?

Brandi: One, think about how often you're offering these virtual opportunities. For families that have infants and toddlers who are really looking to keep and develop their parent-child relationship, thinking of ways to make sure that we're really bringing the caregivers into the space with the baby and with the toddler so that we can work with them, with ourselves and the two of them, or maybe even more family, depending on what the family constellation is. We welcome everybody. We think a lot about access. And I want to come back to this in just a little bit, but we want to make sure that families have access to the equipment and to the connections that they need. And in Head Start, we are wonderfully equipped and, I would say, uniquely positioned to support families to get access to what they may need if they don't have

it already. Really creating the space to think with families about what will work best for them is a huge part of this formula going forward.

Jennifer: So, can you talk a little bit more about some examples of the challenges that families are facing with at-home learning and a few strategies that program staff can use to support families?

Brandi: I've never been so proud to be part of the Head Start community that we share across this country. Here's some of the things we've been hearing. Families have challenges, for instance, with internet access. Here's one example that we've heard about. There was a program who actually took buses that were not in operation, kind of like an airplane ... They put a router, like a Wi-Fi router, on the bus, parked it in a neighborhood where bandwidth was low or not available, and gave our Head Start families a unique password to be able to access. This is how far our communities are going to make sure that our families have what they need to be with their kids in a way of learning and development in virtual times. We've heard things like ... There's a program called Lifeline that Head Start programs have been tapping into to access equipment for families if they don't have tablets or laptops or smartphones, so that we make sure that they have what they need to come into these interactions. And so, for families that have more than one little one and are working two and three jobs, scheduling has been an issue. And so, it goes back to what we talked about a minute ago with the timing. Some families are very grateful for just a 15-minute burst. Let's think about where your baby is in his or her development or your toddler or your preschooler. Really, what we want is a burst of activity, and we'll sprinkle those in throughout the day, in terms of what your routine at home looks like.

Jennifer: Wow, thank you. That's so important. OK, so Brandi, now I would like to ask you, what are some resources that program staff can access to learn more about engaging with families to support virtual education?

Brandi: There are lots of resources out there, not only for how to continue child development, but how to effectively connect with families. One that has come up over and over for us at PFCE is how to have sensitive conversations with families because even in these moments, for instance, in all things physical distancing, we're still watching and listening, especially for those of you out there that are home visitors, about what's happening for the families in the ways of their strengths, their needs, and maybe even challenges. So, when we're talking with families about things that might feel sensitive, like, "Do they have everything they need – food, formula-wise? Do they have access to basic necessities around cleaning or sanitation materials?" We're trying to offer that in a way, as we do, from a relationship-based space so that they don't feel judged or any stigma attached to questions that we might have, just that we care so much that we want to make sure that they don't have to ask if that's not a place of comfort for them, but that we offer the questions and curiosity so that they can share as they're ready. But if you guys aren't frequent fliers of the ECLKC, go and go often because our groups are always bringing new materials and, honestly, based on your voices, what you tell us when we get to interact with you in webinars, when OHS sponsors any kind of conversation, like the CAMP series. We're

listening, every single time you share, and we try to be very responsive to what you say that could be useful for your very important work. So come on over, check us out. I think we have a few things that you'll enjoy.

Jennifer: OK, and then the last question for you, Brandi, is please share your top tips for genuine and effective engagement with families that best supports learning at home.

Brandi: I want to give you an acronym that I've used in my life and in my work. And it's all centered around the word "humble." If I use the word, "humble" ... And I want to go backwards. I want to start with the letter "E." Here are my top tips. The "E" really, for me, stands for encouragement and empathy. Any time – especially in the current pandemic time – that we can offer somebody a word of support, a word of encouragement, a word of holding on, a word of ... Even though it's uncertain and we're all feeling untethered, we're going to get there because we have each other. When you can establish and keep and maintain connections for and with each other, it makes all the difference in the world. And when you can stand in somebody's shoes with that empathic approach, also makes a huge difference, even if all you say is, "I'm so glad you told me. I'm not sure what to say, but I'm just so grateful you shared." That's the "E." Exist in encouragement and empathy. And if I'm going backwards in the word, "humble," and I think about the letter "L," the social worker in me – this will surprise no one – the "L" is listen. Listen carefully. And one of the things I don't think we do enough is put aside the screen, put aside the phone, put aside everything and really lean in. Really listen. If I'm going backwards one more letter, we're to the "B" of humble. And this is one of my favorites, and I almost said it straightaway because it's just so natural to who I am and how I hope that we all get to operate in Head Start. It's "Be a guide from the side." It's all in the phrase. Don't walk ahead, above, over. This is a very flattened connection, meaning that we get to literally walk alongside family. I call the "M" "Match blues," and here's what I mean by that. When I was in college, there was a professor who told us, especially because it's social work-y stuff, she said, "If I told you to go to the mall and find me a blue shirt, what are the odds that you would come back with exactly the blue that I have in my brain?" And she's like, "I might be thinking navy. You might be thinking sky. If we don't communicate that clearly, are we going to have a mismatch?" And when you're doing very important work like we do every day, where it's kind of gray, we very much have to think about each other and how we're communicating in a way that conveys where we are. Alright, moving backwards one more letter in the word, "humble," to the letter "U," and this one is understand. And I think if I got to expand this a little more deeply, I would say understand a family's journey and their story. You can only do that if you're deep in relationships, so this one for me is a little bit layered. And even if a family isn't ready for you – and you guys, I know you've experienced that before, all of us have – don't give up. Many of you have told us in this virtual learning period, especially teachers, have said, "Oh, we have three Zoom calls today, and they didn't come to one." Or, "We had three Zoom calls this week, and I can't find the family. I feel like they aren't interested." Don't give up. At the same time that you guys have been saying the families aren't reaching back to us, we've had families say to us, "They're the only people that were reaching out to me. I couldn't get to them at the time. I wasn't ready. I was juggling this, or I had that or my job or all of my kids, but they were the only people at Head Start who were coming to me to make sure that I was OK, so don't stop."

[Laughter] And now, I love this one. I think it's maybe my favorite because it's about honoring, but it's about honoring the human connection and facilitating hope. I don't know about you guys, but I've needed a whole dose of that lately. I mean, we've just needed to keep each other held up and say whatever is in front of us, we're going to get beyond it. And we're going to get beyond it because we have each other. And we're going to get beyond it because we hold our children in common and what we want to see for them and the way that we come together as grown-ups, not only as colleagues within your Head Start buildings, but certainly within your families and within your community partners. And you're the heartbeat. You're the true heartbeat of your community. So, when you can be the, I want to say, ambassador – that's the word that's in my mind – that holds out a hand on each side, that brings families with community and with each other, there is no way that we can fail.

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