



RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FOR FAMILIES AND HELPERS

Family engagement is created from relationships among families, helpers, and communities in support of a child. Research shows that when families and helpers build strong partnerships, children are more likely to learn and grow. The Pennsylvania Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework offers a resource for promoting effective family engagement. Here, the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media at Saint Vincent College builds on this tool and shares relationship-focused considerations for developing strong partnerships between families and helpers.

Keep Empathy Central

We are all more than one thing. It is hard to know all that is happening in the lives of families and helpers. A caregiver is not only a parent, grandparent, or guardian and a helper is not only a teacher, therapist, or support staff. We can build relationships by listening to one another and acknowledging each other's experiences and perspectives.

Relationships Grow From Small Moments

Sometimes it might feel like we have to do everything just right to best support our

**"The more we can understand one another and support one another to the best of our ability, the better off we all are."
- Caregiver**

children. Actually, focusing on building relationships with families, helpers, and our children is the most important thing we can do. Strong family engagement relationships are made of simple, everyday moments of interaction. We can focus on the small moments across all of our touchpoints with families and helpers that make those relationships possible. When we know and care about each other, we can work together through challenging moments and towards learning and growth.

Start From A Place Of Strength

Families and helpers can share goals around supporting a child's learning and development. Families know their children best and can share this expertise with helpers. Helpers have knowledge about strategies and learning for children. Understanding the strengths that families and helpers each bring to partnerships can help build a foundation of strong family engagement in support of children's wellbeing.

There is not a single “best” way to do family engagement. Rather, partnerships are built from everyday interactions that occur between families and helpers. Here are some small ways that caregivers and helpers can build a partnership together.

Families, helpers, and children are connected when they are present and emotionally in-tune with one another. This might be a time when everyone is celebrating a success or when thinking together about how to address a challenge. Families and helpers can build connections by:

- Acknowledging and listening to one another’s experiences.
- Being present with one another in moments that may be happy, serious, or frustrating.

Two-way communication is essential for building mutual trust and strong partnerships. Families and helpers both play important roles in supporting a child’s growth and development. Engaging in balanced exchanges, where all people have a chance to speak and listen, may help everyone move towards a partnership beneficial for the child. Reciprocity in family engagement can look like:

- Having back-and-forth conversations where families’ and helpers’ ideas are equally valued.
- Creating space for active listening and sharing related to the needs of the child, family, and helper.

It is important to include all families and helpers in family engagement relationships, especially those who may be less likely or able to engage. We all come from different backgrounds, we might speak different languages, and we have different needs and abilities. Families and helpers can welcome one another into relationships by:

- Inviting and including all family members and helpers into interactions and conversations about the child.
- Ensuring that all voices and people are present when relationships are being built and decisions are being made.

Families and helpers both bring expertise to the relationship. Helpers can learn from families about a child’s strengths, growth areas, interests, and dislikes. Families can learn from helpers about their child in a learning environment. Opportunities to grow in family engagement can look like:

- Providing scaffolded opportunities for all people to learn and understand the child.
- Prioritizing learning and growing together as partners in the child’s development.

“You have to release the judgement and understand that people come in all sorts of forms... Relationships have to be true and real. People can feel if it’s not.”
- Educator