



## RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FOR HELPERS

Family engagement is created from relationships among caregivers, helpers, and communities in support of a child. Research shows that when families and helpers build strong partnerships, children 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 helpers as they develop strong partnerships with families.

### Keep Empathy Central

We are all more than one thing. It is hard to know all that is happening in the lives of families just as helpers may have many competing limits to their own time. We can build relationships by listening to families, acknowledging their experiences and perspectives, and creating a culture of empathy and understanding.

### Relationships Grow From Everyday Interactions

Family engagement happens during simple,

**“Wherever that family is, that’s the starting point. The goal is not for them to see us as the expert and the teacher, but that they are the most important teacher of their child.”**

**- Helper**

everyday moments. Sometimes small gestures such as a kind word about a child or a personal invitation to an event can make all the difference. What matters most is that families know their children’s helpers care about their child and have their best interest at heart.

### Meet Families Where They Are

As children’s helpers build relationships with families, they may find that one size does not fit all. Helpers can adjust their approach by asking questions and discovering what works for a particular family. By understanding expectations, needs, and background experiences, helpers can build strong partnerships.

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 helpers can use small moments that build towards partnerships with families.

Helpers can connect with families in many ways by being present with one another. Maybe helpers and families are both happy to celebrate a success or maybe they are both serious while working together to address a challenge. Helpers can build connections by:

- Matching the emotion of the family member when they reach out.
- Consistently communicating with the family, even if it is something mundane, and sharing with the family the strengths of the child.

Conversations between helpers and families are two-sided and both parties bring an important perspective. Engaging in back-and-forth interactions can help strengthen partnerships with families. This might look like:

- Learning about the background of each child’s family and about each family’s needs.
- Listening to the family’s perspective and finding opportunities for families to take the lead during conversations about their child.

Helpers can find ways to include all families, even those that may seem least likely or least able to participate. This might be similar to how helpers make sure all children are included in activities. Helpers can include families by:

- Trying different ways to reach out to families such as using communication apps, attending a child’s sporting event, or translating notes home into a different language.
- Encouraging families to build relationships with one another.

Families may need different levels of support to engage with their children’s helpers or with various systems. Children’s helpers play a role in empowering families as they navigate these systems to meet their child’s needs. Helpers can offer different opportunities to grow by:

- Asking families about their needs and preferences and, when possible, working to accommodate them.
- Connecting families with other resources, with other families, or with other organizations in the community.

**“One of the best things I’ve found is when educators truly understand your needs and your struggles as a parent.”**  
- Caregiver