

Family Involvement... It's Important!

Generally, when you ask staff why they provide family involvement opportunities, they tell you, "because it's required." That certainly is true. The Head Start Performance Standards require the provision of a variety of opportunities for family involvement at all program levels.

However, beyond regulations, the involvement of families can have a powerful impact on the child. Research suggests that parental involvement in their children's education can result in a variety of positive outcomes including, greater interest in school, better attendance, enhanced teacher-child relationships, and increased self-esteem.

Nearly every teacher has used the phrase "the parent is the first and most important educator of their child." If this statement is true, then we must recognize that developing and delivering appropriate strategies for supporting the growth and development of children cannot occur without parents being actively involved in the process and the program designed for their children. There is also evidence that indicates the greatest impact on a child's growth and development is not time spent in the classroom... but a lifetime spent with their family. Head Start programs need families to be genuinely involved in order to provide appropriate educational experiences and support long-term positive outcomes for children.

The architects of Head Start knew that family involvement could provide valuable opportunities for family skill building and development as well. These visionaries believed that parents had a right to shape the direction of policies and practices that affected their lives, their children, their families, and their community. They purposefully designed a program that encouraged family participation and understood that program decisions would have greater legitimacy when made in collaboration with those served.

Family involvement in Head Start benefits the child, the family, and the program. However, family involvement can be challenging. Programs may find that they have great success with some family involvement activities and very little with others.

Factors having to do with "life," such as work, school, schedules, illness, disability, as well as family disruptions, such as divorce, separation, or death are mitigating circumstances that impact participation. Life stages, such as being a teen parent or a grandparent, and the combination of work and taking care of children, are among the variety of factors that influence and impede the family's ability to become involved in program activities.

To help agencies address both program and family challenges to involvement, here are some strategies to consider that may make your family involvement activities more appropriate, more responsive to families, and hopefully more successful.

Plan for Successful Family Involvement: Significant opportunities for family involvement do not "just happen." When you talk to staff that consistently have

successful family involvement within their program, they will tell you that it takes planning, time, and preparation.

Planning helps programs identify goals for family involvement and recognize the need to budget money and time for family activities. Planning helps staff think about whether to provide an activity to a large or small group, or as individuals to accommodate the needs of family members. Planning helps staff engage community partners to assist in family involvement opportunities and activities. By being truly thoughtful and carefully planning for family involvement opportunities, programs may be able to address some of their challenges.

Recognize Family Involvement as Everyone's Job: Family involvement is too big a task to lay on any one employee. Family involvement is everyone's job and should be a part of every staff member's responsibility. Every interaction between staff and families can communicate and reinforce the importance of family involvement. Successful family involvement takes creativity, teamwork, and the skills of the entire Head Start staff.

Build Family Partnerships: The term family partnership characterizes an on-going, evolving, and integrated relationship between staff and family. Building a family partnership is an interactive process that takes time. Getting to know your families well and understanding their desires and challenges is important for successful family involvement.

Respect the "Uniqueness" of Each Family: Diversity in family composition and lifestyle is common in today's world. In working with families, staff must move beyond a traditional definition of family to one that recognizes that each family is unique, and that a broad and inclusive definition of family embraces all family ties and variation in composition and lifestyle. Respecting and responding to the cultures, religions, and preferences of Head Start children and families supports successful family involvement.

Individualize Opportunities: Staff must recognize that there is no "cookie cutter approach" to working with families. Because the interests and needs of each family will vary, programs need to individualize family involvement opportunities. An inviting and accessible opportunity or activity for one family may not be so for another. This means that programs must consider not only what opportunities to provide... but, also how to provide them.

Plan with Families: Being involved in the planning process creates a feeling ownership, builds a sense of pride, supports family strengths, and encourages families to become more involved. Staff must give up "control" and allow families to be actively involved in the planning and delivery of family involvement activities. Staff must work as partners with parents and provide guidance, support, and encouragement.

Positively Reinforce Family Involvement: When families are involved in program activities, it is not only important for the experience to be positive, but also for staff to acknowledge and reinforce the participation of each family individually. Positive reinforcement encourages family involvement.

Support Family Involvement: The decision to participate can be determined by whether childcare is provided for all the children in the family, whether transportation is provided, or if snacks are served. Keep in mind that parents are busy people with full and demanding lives. A little family support can go a long way in encouraging family involvement. Talk with families about the barriers they face and what support the program can provide for them.

Think Outside the Box: Technology has opened the door for programs to use non-traditional ways to involve families. Programs should consider using home or library computers to correspond with families or to respond to family questions. Conference calls can bring family support groups together and help the Policy Council meet during bad weather.

The Head Start vision for family involvement includes ensuring that every parent has the opportunity to experience Head Start significantly. Through creative planning and being responsive to families, their unique needs, and their concerns, programs can fulfill the requirements outlined in the Performance Standards and provide activities that are meaningful and memorable for the children and families they serve.