



Family Systems and Engagement

Family engagement is recognized as a foundation for success across the human services and education fields. The following domains includes statements, phrases, and/or quotations that explain the meaning of or provide a description of Family Systems and Engagement:

Child Welfare (CW)

Family engagement is a family-centered, strengths-based approach to establishing and maintaining relationships with families and accomplishing change together. At the practice level, this includes setting goals, developing case plans, making joint decisions, and working with families to ensure their children's safety, permanency, and well-being. It encompasses the inclusion of children and youth (when age appropriate), as well as adult family members, in case planning and case activities, and involves supporting the development of relationships between resource families and biological families. On an organizational or system level, family engagement means including families as key stakeholders and advisors in policy development, service design, and program and service evaluation.

Effective family empowerment is the act of engaging, involving, and lifting the voice of families throughout the child welfare continuum—at the practice and system level. It promotes family buy-in; enhances the helping relationship; and promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. When families feel they are a part of the process, they are more motivated to make needed changes. Family empowerment allows them to be the drivers of the decision-making process rather than being told what to do. When family buy-in is achieved, reunification rates are improved, and overall family outcomes are better.

Meaningful family engagement contributes not only to the well-being of the child and the family, but also to the well-being of the community. In effective family engagement:

- Families are regarded as essential resources and partners in their cases as well as throughout the child welfare system.
- Families are provided genuine opportunities for collaborative and authentic inclusion in decision-making about child welfare services, policies, supports, and systemic issues.
- Families are empowered. This empowerment is a shared process between families and child welfare professionals.

Family-Centered Principles and Values:

- Strengths based practice
- Collaborative problem solving
- Open, honest, and respectful interactions
- Culturally respectful and competent
- Joint planning and decision-making
- Community partners
- Formal and informal supports and resources

Systems of Care Principles and Values:

- Child centered
- Family focused
- Individualized
- Strengths base
- Family-driven care
- Interagency collaboration
- Child, youth, and family involved as full partners
- Culturally and linguistically competent and responsive
- Coordinated at both the system and service delivery levels
- Wide array of community-based services and supports

Juvenile Justice (JJ)

Within juvenile justice, family engagement occurs when the justice system respects family members as partners and facilitates their ongoing participation in decision-making regarding the youth's rehabilitation.

Family engagement: any role or activity that enables families to have direct and meaningful input into and influence on systems, policies, programs, or practices affecting services for children and families.

Effective family engagement includes the following:

- Shared decision-making with families and youth
- Encouragement of parents and family members to express preferences, needs, priorities, and disagreements
- Respect for families' experiences and input
- Strength-based practices
- Coordinated services across systems
- Cultural competence
- Wide array of community-based services and supports
- Least restrictive or intrusive placement settings
- Establishment of peer support activities for parents
- Staff trained on using a strengths-based approach and effective communication strategies with families

Behavioral Health (BH)

Family engagement within behavioral health concerns the attitudes, behaviors, and affect of family members regarding interventions or treatment options. Increased family engagement at the practice and system level often results in better outcomes for individuals being treated and involved family members. Recent research suggests that embedding family engagement strategies into behavioral health services can increase treatment adherence and reduce the need for emergency interventions (Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Family engagement is the process in which families and youth have a primary decision-making role in the youth's treatment. Families are involved in making decisions regarding providers involved in the treatment team, and are encouraged to express preferences, needs, priorities, and disagreements. In addition, families actively collaborate in treatment plan development and in identifying desired goals and outcomes. Families are provided with thorough information to guide their decision-making and make

joint decisions with their treatment team. Families actively monitor treatment modifications and treatment outcomes.

Family-Driven Care

Family driven means families have a primary decision-making role in their children's care and have a voice in establishing the policies and procedures governing care for all children in their community, State, Tribe, territory, and nation. Family-driven care includes the following:

- Sharing decision-making with families and youth.
- Providing information to ensure informed decisions and choices.
- Establishing peer support activities for parents.
- Focusing on cultural and linguistic competence.
- Encouraging parents and family members to express their preferences, needs, priorities, and disagreements.
- Monitoring changes to the child's treatment plan, as well as monitoring treatment outcomes
- Evaluating the effectiveness of all efforts to promote the behavioral health and well-being of children and youth.
- Allocating staff, training, and resources to make family-driven care a reality in organizations.
- Including families in agency policy, program development, and professional education.

Education (ED)

Family engagement in schools is defined as parents and school personnel working together at the classroom, local, and system level to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents. Family engagement in schools is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage parents in meaningful ways, and the parents are committed to actively supporting their children's and adolescents' learning and development.

Studies show that culturally responsive family engagement programs have improved educational outcomes among multilingual and racially diverse students (Leung & Thomas, 2024).

Parental involvement in education is the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving students' academic learning and other school activities.

Parental involvement helps ensure that the following occur:

- Parents play an integral role in assisting their children's learning.
- Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education at school.
- Parents are full partners in their children's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in their children's education.
- Family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Family engagement is continuous across a child's life and involves ongoing commitment but changing parental roles as children mature into young adults.
- Effective family engagement occurs and is reinforced in the multiple settings where children learn: at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool and summer programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

Effective family engagement must have the following characteristics:

- Relational: Educators need to be intentional about building relationships with families whose children they will be teaching.
- Interactive: Educators, students, and families need to work together.
- Collaborative: Families and communities have information and knowledge that educators need to enhance children's learning.
- Developmental: Educators need to build the capacities of the families to provide education and knowledge within the home.
- Linked to learning: Educators should provide opportunities for parents to learn about an educational tool or skill that will support their children's learning.

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Family engagement refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children's development, learning, and wellness, including in planning, development, and evaluation. For family engagement to be integrated throughout early childhood systems and programs, providers and schools must engage families as essential partners while providing services that encourage children's learning and development, nurture positive relationships between families and staff, and support families.

Family engagement is the process used to build genuine relationships with families. Relationships with families support overall family well-being and children's healthy development. When families are

engaged, partnerships are created that have a common focus— helping children grow and thrive. Family engagement happens in the home, early childhood program, school, and community. It is a shared responsibility of all those who want children to succeed in school and in life. Family engagement is based on the idea that parents and others who care for their children work together to prepare children for success. The specific goals of the partnership for each family may vary and can depend on family preference, culture, and economic or social stresses. A true partnership honors a family's strengths and culture, mutual respect, and shared goals for the child.

- Early learning programs expect, welcome, and support family involvement in decision-making related to their child's education.
- Programs that recognize and respect parents' roles as their child's first and most important teachers can encourage families to serve as advocates for their children and participate in learning activities at home and in the program.
- Families and early learning programs engage in consistent, two-way, and linguistically and culturally appropriate communication.
- Programs that provide opportunities for ongoing communication can acquire and share important insights about a child's strengths and needs so that both teachers and parents can more effectively support the child's development and education.
- Families' knowledge, skills, and backgrounds are integrated into the learning experience.
- Programs benefit from family members' unique knowledge and skills by providing opportunities for volunteering and other participation. Program staff glean valuable information about children's lives, families, and communities and use it to enhance their curricula and teaching methods.
- Programs help families develop a home environment that enhances learning.
- Engagement allows programs to assist families in providing a home environment that reflects the family's culture and supports the child's learning experience.
- Early learning programs promote an environment for ongoing and comprehensive family engagement.
- Programs that ensure program staff are trained and receive needed supports can fully engage culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families and promote meaningful relationships.

Head Start/Early Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework:

- Family engagement is embedded in the work of all staff members, management systems, and leadership priorities.

- Family engagement focuses on evidence of positive, goal-directed relationships.
- Family members, through ongoing relationships, are engaged in a variety of goal-directed ways related to PFCE outcomes.
- Programs that engage families use child and family data to improve services.

To promote family engagement, schools and Head Start centers can take the following actions:

- Align, integrate, and coordinate family engagement strategies in all aspects of programming, including, but not limited to, involving families in governance, establishing staff positions that focus exclusively on family engagement, identifying specific family engagement responsibilities and professional development opportunities for all roles across systems and programs, providing families with multiple and diverse opportunities for engagement, and creating physical environments that are welcoming and culturally and linguistically responsive.
- Promote a vision for family engagement that is consistent across systems and programs and that can set the stage for families' involvement in their children's development and education at all ages.
- Connect families to organizations that support families.
- Establish formal partnerships with community partners to promote family wellness and adult learning and enhance children's learning and family stability.
- Ensure that the learning environment, children's curricula, and all family engagement opportunities respect, reflect, and embrace families' cultures, are without bias, and are linguistically accessible.
- Encourage two-way communication by welcoming information from families on all aspects of the child's life and development, including their culture, traditions, and home language.
- Promote shared responsibility for children's healthy development, learning, and wellness by valuing families' experiences and strengths and providing opportunities for shared learning.
- Work with families to identify strategies that support children's development and learning at home, in the classroom, and in the community.
- Improve integrated and systemic family engagement practices by regularly collecting and analyzing data on the effectiveness of the practices to guide decision-making and policy change and to inform technical assistance and professional development.

Citations

- Gonzalez, A., Rivera, L. M., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Integrating family engagement into behavioral health interventions. **Journal of Family Social Work**, 28(1), 22–35.
- Leung, C., & Thomas, R. (2024). Enhancing academic success through culturally responsive family engagement. **Multicultural Education Review**, 16(2), 97–112.
- Bryant, H., Marshall, J., & Singh, T. (2022). Family partnerships across sectors: Best practices in school-social service collaboration. **Youth and Family Services Quarterly**, 34(4), 218–231.