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Reimagining Involvement: Parent Engagement

Carolyn, a family child care provider, has planned a family night for her program to celebrate the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. She has sent an email and several notes about the event requesting that parents volunteer to bring side dishes, and so far has only heard from one parent that they will bring a package of dinner rolls and the event is scheduled for tomorrow. She wonders why the parents don't seem to care about participating in this with their children and whether she should even bother trying to plan events like this in the future.

What is Parent Engagement?

Understanding parent engagement begins with recognizing that parents all want the best for their child and for their child to develop into a contributing member of the community. Parents may support the goals they have for their children in various ways, such as by sending their child to your program fed, clean, and rested, by reading to them, nurturing them, and instilling cultural values. Parents may be actively engaged with their children, even if they are not regularly participating in activities in your program, so to understand parent engagement, you must form relationships with parents.



What about the parents who never seem to show up or participate in program activities?

It is essential to refrain from making assumptions about parents and why they might not appear to be participating in the way you believe they should. There are many reasons why a parent might not appear to be engaged in different aspects of your program. Parents might have had a very different experience in their own early care and education that did not offer them a model for feeling comfortable participating. Parents might be investing their extra time and energy into other activities that they view as equally important to supporting their child's growth and development. Parents might feel uncomfortable when their child has a close relationship with their family child care provider because it might feel threatening to their own relationship with their child. The parent may be struggling financially and embarrassed to interact with the provider out of fear. One of the biggest advantages for family child care programs is that the small size allows for more opportunity for the provider to really form close, strong relationships with families and to better understand the goals parents have for their children and the constraints they may face.



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Strategies for Engaging Parents:

The best strategy for engaging parents is to include them in planning and decision-making. Ask parents what kinds of things they are interested in and have conversations with them about how these interests could support your program. This might mean that you need to be flexible about what you had in mind, but is more likely to help parents feel valued and invested in your program.

Special Activities or Events:

- When planning, ask parents for their input about days and times that an event or activity would work best for them. An 'open-house' kind of event that goes on all day can be an option that allows parents to be there when it works best in their schedule.
- Include food! Food brings people together and makes an event more special. It also alleviates stress around rearranging a busy schedule.
- Consider ways for parents to attend remotely via technology if they are unable to attend in person.
- If a parent is unable to attend encourage parents to arrange for another person (such as a grandparent, sibling, neighbor, etc.) to be there if possible.

Other Ways to Participate:

- Parents might be able to support your program through bringing in supplies, helping with certain jobs (such as pet care or gardening), or serving as an expert for a current project.
- Parents might also be willing to help with jobs that the provider finds difficult to have time to do such as a weekly stop at the library to return and pick up books, or a run to the grocery store to get cooking supplies for a snack.
- The best way to offer parents opportunities to participate in supporting your program in ways that they feel comfortable is to get to know them and recognize their Funds of Knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006).

What are Funds of Knowledge?

Funds of knowledge is a perspective that recognizes that each family has unique and valuable assets that can support children in their growth and development. This is a strengths-based perspective and assumes that all parents and families have incredible resources in the way of talents, skills, experience, and knowledge that can be used to support children and the program. Using this perspective, a family child care provider can build relationships with families that uncover the potential ways families can participate and be engaged. This offers children the opportunity to have a broader view of the incredible contributions that individuals can make to a community, and models respect and valuing of differences.

Carolyn has rethought her plan for a Thanksgiving family event and has reached out to her families to survey the best time of day to have parents spend some time in the program. Several have indicated that staying a little longer when they drop off in the morning is an option that might work for them, so she asks Fiona's mom, who always eagerly chats with all of the other parents, if she would be interested in taking the lead to coordinate a breakfast event next month. She is enthusiastic about it and encourages other parents to contribute food and coffee. When she surveyed the parents, Carolyn also asked about parents' interest/hobbies and discovered that one of the parents is interested in photography and another enjoys hiking. She decides to ask if they would like to help on an upcoming trip to the nearby nature trail where the children have visited in the past.

Resources:

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2006). Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms. Routledge.

Olivos, E. M., Jimenez-Castellanos, O., & Ochoa, A. M. (2011). Bicultural Parent Engagement: Advocacy and Empowerment. Teachers College Press. 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027.

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