

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION TOOL

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This document was created as a supplement to assist the Parent Educators and Family Support Workers in their family engagement efforts. This tool may be utilized to engage parents and caregivers in conjunction with the parent/caregiver interview and the written plan for family support and education. Collaboration with the program's mental health consultant may be required if mental health risk factors have been identified. It is advised that the family plan should be developed utilizing the core values of family-driven and youth-guided care.

A critical first step in engaging families is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence, and respect. When outreach efforts reflect a sincere desire to engage families and community members as partners in children's education, studies show that parents respond positively. Here are some tips to begin this process: Actively welcome students and families; begin relationships on a positive note; highlight school successes; demonstrate that you care; show respect for all families; take family members concerns seriously; and, remember that trust-building takes time.

In addition, here are several communication discussion points to begin the process of engaging parents/caregivers:

- Introduce yourself and explain that you would like to get together to get to know each other and discuss the program. Ask the parents/caregivers when and where it would be convenient for them to meet.  
*Meet parents where they are; they may not want you to come to their home at first. Offer to meet for coffee or somewhere that parents/caregivers feel comfortable and safe. It is important to remember that they may not have positive experiences with schools or social service providers. Also, transportation assistance may be required.*
- Convey that the parent/caregiver is the expert of their child and they know him/her better than anyone else. Explain that you would love to hear more about their child to get to know him/her better. Ask the parent/caregiver to tell you what their child likes and dislikes at home. What are the child's favorite things to do with the parent/caregiver?  
*These should be open-ended questions that give parents/caregivers the opportunity to tell their story. A lot can be learned from the story regarding the family and their child's social emotional strengths and needs. Use reflective listening and "I" statements such as, "I hear you saying that..." Assist families in identifying their own needs.*
- Identify the best ways to communicate with the parent/caregiver. You can ask, "What are the best ways for us to communicate - phone, email, texting, communication notebook, in your home, or at school? You can also say, "I really enjoy talking with you, and I would like to be available when it is convenient for you."  
*Do not assume that parents/caregivers are all the same. Using multiple communication methods allows parents/caregivers to hear from you in ways that work for them. Be sensitive to ways that diversity in home cultures may impact methods of communication.*
- Find ways to highlight the child's strengths. For example, you could approach this by saying, "Good afternoon, I am a part of the team that works with your son/daughter at school. We love having him/ her in our program. He/she really enjoys (ex: story time and following directions). He/she is (ex: working hard on coloring, but is having a difficult time and gets frustrated). We have also noticed a few things about...social skills that I would like to discuss with you. Do you have a few minutes? Have you noticed any of these things at home?"  
*It is critical to use a strength-based approach. Families need to know how their child is demonstrating positive growth. Highlighting strengths becomes a foundation for motivation to tackle any challenges. Some parents/caregivers may rarely hear about their child's successes. Provide specific examples of behaviors and describe when they occurred.*
- Build a partnership with the parent/caregiver. This can be established by saying, "It is important for you to know that we are partners in your child's education and I am here for you. I am available to talk with you about how your child is doing. We can also talk about how you would like the school team to share information with you about your child. We can meet regularly to review your child's progress and needs. Your voice matters and you will have the final say in all matters regarding information sharing and planning. Do you have any questions for me at this time?"

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## The development of this tool was informed by the following sources:

Brewster, C. and Railsback, J. (2003). *Building Trust with Schools and Diverse Families: A Foundation for Lasting Partnerships*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Accessed on August 6, 2016 at <http://www.adlit.org/article/21522/>.

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Center for the Advancement of Mental Health in Schools Lasting Partnerships. *Effective Communication with Parents*. Accessed on August 8, 2016 at <http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/Resources/Educ/CAMHPS/Effective%20Communication%20with%20Parents.pdf>.

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Henderson, A. & Mapp, K. (2002) *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, Austin, TX. Accessed on August 2, 2016 at <https://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>.

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Pires, S. (2010) *Building Systems of Care, A Primer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Washington D.C., Human Service Collaborative. Accessed on August 6, 2016 at [http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/products/PRIMER2ndEd\\_FullVersion.pdf](http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/products/PRIMER2ndEd_FullVersion.pdf).

*The Family Engagement and Communication Tool was created through a collaboration between the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership (ICMHP) and The Early Childhood Center of Professional Development to support positive family engagement. This tool was informed by numerous publications and sources, including parents and early childhood professionals. The tool was developed by Christina Hendrix, ICMHP consultant and prior Statewide Family Leadership Coordinator, who has over 12 years of experience working in the children's mental health field and has navigated multiple systems as a parent.*