

Family Engagement in Early Care and Education Programs Serving Low-income Children: Providers' Perceptions and Resource Needs

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Executive Summary

Family engagement in early childhood programs, including parental involvement in centers and the provision of services for parents, is a key component of early care and education (ECE) quality that benefits both child and family well-being. Qualitative and quantitative data from early care and education providers indicate that providers employ various strategies to encourage parental involvement in program practices, and highlight the importance of community-based social and health services to address families' comprehensive needs. These findings call for further policy initiatives to enhance family engagement in ECE programs.

Family Engagement is Critical to Programs Serving Children from Low-income Families

Family engagement is a key indicator of quality in early care and education (ECE).¹ According to 2016 data from Child Care Aware of America, over 70% of states include family engagement in their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).² Family engagement in ECE is particularly important for children from low-income families, as ECE programs often serve as central hubs, connecting families to essential services such as parenting classes, family support services, and activities that foster social and human capital.¹ Research has shown that strong family engagement benefits children's early cognitive and socioemotional development, as well as parents' sensitivity and cognitive stimulation in low-income families.^{3,4}

A Mixed-method Study Examined Providers' Perceptions of Family Engagement

To gain insights into how to promote family engagement, a Massachusetts Child Care Research Partnership study assessed parental engagement through the perceptions of directors and owners of ECE programs serving children receiving Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA).⁵ Data were collected from 22 focus groups with 110 ECE providers (62 center directors, 48 family child care (FCC) owners) and an online survey of 1,867 ECE providers (646 center directors and 1,221 FCC owners) serving preschool-age children receiving CCFA.⁶⁻⁹

Providers Identified Family Engagement as Essential to Providing High-Quality Care

During focus groups, ECE providers identified several components of quality care, with family engagement being a key element. FCC providers in particular emphasized the importance of family engagement and expressed their strong commitment to creating a home-like environment for children.

"I think there are many factors that make up high quality of a program ... Family engagement, how to involve families with the program, with the children, that they are interested in their education and in everything that is happening with them within the program." - FCC Owner

Providers Shared Various Strategies to Engage Families

Through the survey, center directors and FCC providers shared a variety of approaches to engage families. The most frequent approach identified by center directors was sharing updates about classroom or center activities. Centers also engaged families by providing results of developmental screenings or assessments, communicating about learning opportunities at home, and, less commonly, organizing parenting classes.

In contrast, FCC providers most commonly engaged in direct conversations with parents at drop-off or pick-up time. In addition, FCC providers sent emails or messages, held parent-teacher conferences, and distributed family newsletters to communicate with parents.

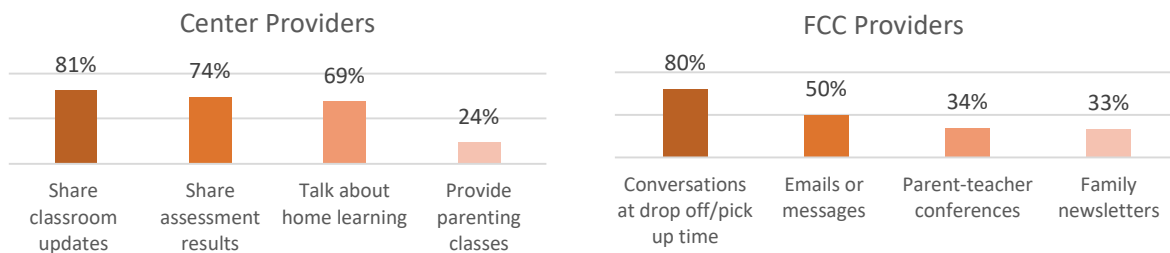


Figure 1. Most Common Approaches Providers Use to Engage Families

Providers Expressed a Need for Resources to Support Families Beyond the Classroom

Beyond keeping parents informed about their children’s activities, providers in the focus groups expanded on their commitment to supporting families by connecting them to community resources. For example, one center director shared:

I try my best to find the resources out there for them. I learned yesterday...there's a connection, connect.com, that you can look up different agencies that might be able to help families in the community, so that's a big help. Because you need to know how to reach out to your families, and you can kind of tell what they need. Especially if a child comes in without a coat, or warm clothing. - Center Director

FCC providers also shared their efforts through the survey, with nearly half having experience assisting families in accessing services such as government or private programs (44%), local coordinated family and community engagement programs (40%), food banks (39%), and housing or food assistance programs (36%). However, both center and FCC providers expressed challenges in connecting families to community services. Some providers were unaware of available resources, while others found them difficult to access.

Additional Policy Efforts are Needed to Improve Family Engagement

Providers recognize family engagement as essential to quality ECE and seek to foster it through various strategies, yet express a need for more resources to better support families. Additional policy efforts are required to support providers in strengthening family engagement.

Highlight Family Engagement in States’ Quality Standard Measures

Family engagement has been included in the quality evaluation systems of some states, but not all. Given its importance to program quality and the well-being of both children and families, states should integrate family engagement into their existing systems. For example, in 2018, Washington DC implemented a revised Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) that incorporated family engagement as a key indicator of process quality.^{7,8} Research found that most ECE providers believed participating in the revised QRIS helped improve their programs’ quality.⁹

Enhance Support to Providers in Linking Families to Community Resources

Assisting parents in finding needed community resources has been identified as a key component of ECE quality.⁹ This study’s results highlight the challenges that Massachusetts providers face in connecting families to needed resources as a significant barrier to enhancing family engagement. To address this challenge, more accessible information and tools are needed, such as resource sheets, online directories, or mobile applications that consolidate information on public assistance programs (e.g., housing or food assistance), parenting programs, and emergency supports. One example is South Carolina’s First Five SC platform, a one-stop information hub where parents can check eligibility and apply for over 40 public services for young children.¹⁰

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