



Recommendations From North Carolina on Family Engagement and Leadership in Early Care and Education

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As part of North Carolina's Preschool Development Grant Birth to 5 (NC's PDG B-5), the state invested in activities that provided opportunities for family engagement and leadership in the early childhood system. Child Trends and a community researcher partnered with the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) on a two-phase deep dive evaluation to learn more about these activities, gathering data from over 400 parents and caregivers who participated in them. This document presents key findings from this work, each of which is associated with recommendations for organizations and agencies seeking to meaningfully engage families in their work.

When organizations are fully prepared to work with families, family engagement and leadership can be a positive experience for everyone involved.

By working closely with families and being responsive to their input, organizations can both strengthen their work and build trust with families. However, when organizations are *not* fully prepared to engage families as leaders and be responsive to their feedback, these efforts can be ineffective or even harmful to family leaders subjected to tokenization and mistreatment. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Require training for everyone who will interact with family leaders so that all are aware of the value of engaging them and of ways to do so effectively.
- ▶ Conduct an organizational readiness assessment before starting work with family leaders to ensure that all parties are prepared to work closely with families and be responsive to their feedback. If groups are not yet ready to engage family leaders effectively, adopt an alternative approach—for example, convening family leaders separately rather than as part of a larger group.
- ▶ Hold groups accountable for using best practices for family engagement and leadership.
- ▶ Engage groups of family leaders simultaneously rather than one or two at a time.



Decisions related to activity and event logistics influence who can and cannot participate.

While it would be impossible to organize each activity/event in a way that is convenient for all families, be mindful of who is included and excluded by decisions related to logistics (e.g., whether events are in-person or virtual, the timing and location of events) and adjust your approach to ensure that activities are as inclusive as possible. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Regularly solicit feedback from participants about logistics, starting in the planning phases, to determine which arrangements work best for them and whether adjustments are necessary.
- ▶ When possible, offer multiple options for participation to maximize opportunities for involvement. For example, facilitate hybrid meetings that participants can attend in-person or virtually, or offer families the option of attending virtual meetings live or watching a recording at a later time.



Technology can be both a facilitator and barrier to families' participation.

In many cases, families can more easily access activities held virtually. However, there are also disadvantages to virtual participation, including fewer opportunities to form connections with other participants and technology-related challenges. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Weigh the pros and cons of virtual events and activities when determining how to engage families. For example, consider participants' level of comfort with and access to technology, as well as barriers that may affect their ability to attend events in-person.
- ▶ When offering virtual events, use well-known, straightforward platforms that families are already familiar with (e.g., Zoom).
- ▶ Offer and advertise technical support and training to families to address technology challenges.



Families without an existing connection to other early childhood programs and services (e.g., child care, home visiting, therapy services, etc.) may have fewer opportunities to learn about activities and events than those who already have these connections.

Families often learn about activities and events through service providers with whom they are already connected, which may mean that families without one of these connections will not hear about these activities. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Publicize events more widely and broadly, both within and outside of early childhood programs and services. For example, advertise through services and organizations—including schools, child care centers, playgroups, doctors' offices, and libraries—while also attempting to reach a broader audience by advertising through social media, fast food restaurants, grocery stores, and community events.



Supports for families that speak a language other than English often fall short of meeting their needs.^a

In some activities and events, interpretation and translation are not offered at all, or what is offered is incomplete. This can cause families to feel unwelcome and lead to comprehension challenges that make it challenging to fully participate. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Assess community needs and demographics to determine translation and interpretation needs.
- ▶ Offer interpretation and translation at all activities and events and ensure that translated materials are written at a reading level accessible to families. Engage families that speak languages other than English in planning to ensure that their needs are met.
- ▶ In consultation with family leaders, consider holding Spanish-only events or creating Spanish-speaking spaces within events (e.g., holding conference breakout sessions in Spanish with English interpretation).
- ▶ If families are involved in translation or interpretation, compensate them fairly.

^a During our data collection, we heard only from families that speak English and Spanish. Similar accommodations are likely needed for participants who speak languages other than English or Spanish.



Paying families a stipend to compensate them for their time is an essential way to support their participation and recognize their expertise.

Reimbursement for other costs associated with participating in activities—including mileage, lodging, and child care—can also facilitate parents' and caregivers' participation. However, the ways in which this compensation is administered (e.g., the type of compensation offered, the timeliness of payment, etc.) makes a difference for families. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Be mindful of all the costs parents and caregivers take on to participate in activities and ensure that they are appropriately compensated.
- ▶ Compensate families for all their time, including time spent preparing for meetings and carrying out action steps.
- ▶ Be transparent about compensation options, payment processes, and timelines.
- ▶ Process payment as quickly as possible.
- ▶ Offer multiple compensation options such as payment via cash, direct deposit, paper check, or gift cards.
- ▶ Consider other ways to incentivize families' participation in activities (e.g., meals and giveaways) while noting that these should not replace reimbursement for expenses or stipends.



When deciding whether to participate in events, groups, or other activities, parents and caregivers weigh their interests with their families' needs.

Many parents and caregivers want to attend or join activities to learn to better support their children and connect with other families. However, most have many competing demands on their time and need to weigh that interest against their availability and their families' needs. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Offer supports that families need to participate (e.g., options to participate virtually; kid-friendly events; stipends and reimbursement for transportation, meals, and child care) and check in regularly to ensure their needs are met.
- ▶ When recruiting families to participate, clearly communicate the purpose of events, what participants can expect, and what supports will be available.
- ▶ Offer multiple and flexible opportunities for participation.
- ▶ Schedule meetings and events as early as possible to share with families and send reminders in advance of each event. Update families well in advance about changes to this schedule.



Parents and caregivers highly value the opportunity to form connections with their peers.

Families report that opportunities to connect with others both motivate them to participate in these activities and represent one of the primary positive impacts of their participation. Build time into in-person and virtual events to facilitate both structured (e.g., breakout groups) and less structured or informal (e.g., ice breakers, mingling) connections among families. Recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Consider creating a contact list so that activity participants can reach out to other parents and caregivers to connect outside of meetings and events.



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