

Embedding Equity in Community Assessments to Inform the Development of Family Engagement Programs

Manica F. Ramos, PhD, Tiffany Bamdad, BS, & Kristin Carney, MEd

Introduction

Family engagement programs are a promising method to support children's learning and development.ⁱ Through the use of tailored activities, curricula, or protocols, early care and education (ECE) programs and schools can connect with, engage, and partner with families to better meet their and their children's learning goals. Community assessments (i.e., talking with various community members about their backgrounds, strengths, and challenges as well as identifying opportunities for new supports) can improve the design of the family engagement programs so they are relevant, valuable, and rooted in community members' needs.ⁱⁱⁱ

To ensure just and fair inclusion in community assessments, and ultimately equal opportunity to inform programs, it is important to embed equity in community assessments. Embedding equity in community assessments (and other research) involves using strategies to intentionally reach and raise the voices of those who do not usually have a say in decision making. When equity is embedded in community assessments, we can improve the chances that meaningful and critical perspectives are considered in the design of family engagement programs to address underlying factors that maintain inequalities.

In 2019, PBS KIDS collaborated with Child Trends to help develop family engagement programs in communities across the United States. The family engagement programs aimed to build meaningful community connections and support PBS KIDS' mission to make a positive impact on the lives of children by involving families, teachers, caregivers, and communities as learning partners. By including community partners in these efforts, family engagement programs can extend beyond individual schools and homes, increasing access to supports and ensuring that schools, families, and community members have the support they need from one another to promote children's healthy development.

In this brief, we describe the approach we took in conducting community assessments to inform the development of four PBS KIDS Family Engagement Programs and outline key strategies from our work that helped embed equity throughout the process:

1. Examine backgrounds and biases.
2. Shift power dynamics to honor community strengths.
3. Meaningfully engage the community.
4. Avoid assuming one normative, standard, or default position.
5. Make a commitment to understand the root causes of issues.

Family Engagement

A collaborative process between early care and education staff, parents, and their children to build positive goal-oriented relationships with the goal of supporting child development.ⁱⁱ

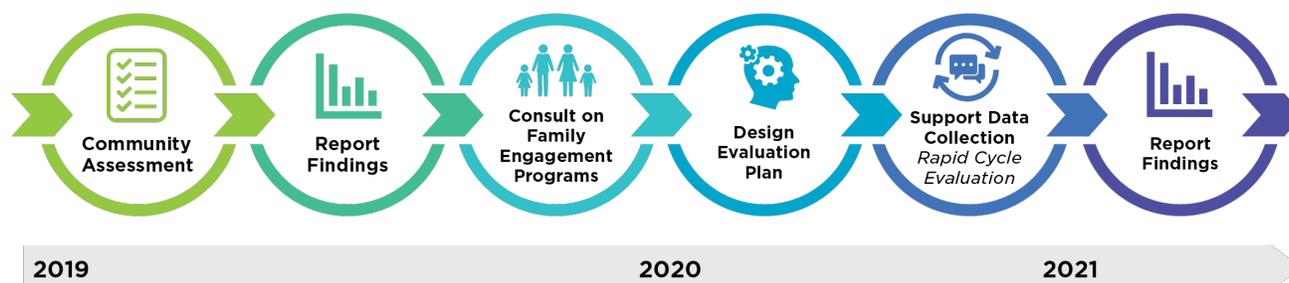
ECE programs and schools, community organizations, and other partners can consider including equitable strategies in their community assessments to develop relevant and sustainable programs to support family engagement.

PBS KIDS Family Engagement Programs

Education is core to PBS' mission. By leveraging existing relationships with the community through more than 330 PBS member stations, resources developed by experts, and programming familiar to millions of users, PBS KIDS has the power to positively influence the school readiness of young children. By developing local family engagement programs, PBS member stations across the nation can help strengthen partnerships between families and teachers to support children's development and learning.

Child Trends worked with Parent Engagement Specialists (PES) from four PBS member stations (PBS North Carolina, Georgia Public Broadcasting, Idaho Public Television, and Montana PBS) to design and evaluate family engagement programs. We used a multi-phase approach, with community assessments being the first phase of the process (see Figure 1 for full process). The insights uncovered during the community assessments informed technical assistance provided to PESs as they designed family engagement programs.

Figure 1. Family Engagement Program Development Process



Source: Child Trends, 2019

Community Assessment Approach

Engaging community members prior to the development of the PBS KIDS family engagement programs was an intentional and critical step in the design process to improve the value of the program for the community. By learning from community members, the family engagement programs were tailored to meet families where they were, providing supports they wanted, rather than using a one-size-fits all approach.

Child Trends talked with various community members through one-on-one virtual interviews. In each community, the following people were interviewed: PESs, community or early care and education program (ECEP) leadership, preschool teachers/caregivers, and parents of preschool children. Conversation guides (also referred to as interview protocols) were used to ask the same questions of all participants, although wording was changed slightly based on their role. Example topics from the conversations included: respondents' understanding of and vision for family engagement; perceived assets and needs to fulfill vision of family engagement; and preferred methods for partnership and communication. See Appendix A for a high-level summary of

What are community assessments?

Community assessment involve identifying the strengths, assets, needs, and challenges of a specific community to inform a community resource or program.

conversation guide topics by role. All interviews were one hour or less and parents and teachers/caregivers received a Visa gift card as a thank you for their time.

Strategies to embed equity in community assessments

At Child Trends we are committed to becoming more skillful at incorporating an equity perspective in our research.^{iv} We recognize our responsibility to think critically about the role of race and ethnicity and power differentials, as well as the history and contexts that shape and perpetuate inequalities. Conducting research with an equity perspective more accurately reflects the real-life experiences of children and families of color. We also hope that equity-centered work may help to disrupt disparities, inequalities, and stereotypes about populations of color.

Because community assessments require that we first learn about the specific strengths and challenges in a community before jumping to a solution, they are inherently a more equitable approach to design, relying less on the individual assumptions of researchers or program implementers and more on the specific needs and desires of community members. However, there are several ways in which equity can be embedded throughout the community assessment process to ensure that meaningful and critical perspectives, especially those that have been historically ignored, are not being left out.

Next, we describe the ways in which we integrated equity in our community assessments to inform the development of PBS KIDS' family engagement programs. Given that all research is unique, there is no single approach for embedding equity in projects. Our strategies and approaches fit with the specific project needs and are aligned with the **five guiding principles to embed equity in research**^v paraphrased below:

1. Examine backgrounds and biases.
2. Shift power dynamics to honor community strengths.
3. Meaningfully engage the community.
4. Avoid assuming one normative, standard, or default position.
5. Make a commitment to understand the root causes of issues.

While these principles can be applied to all research efforts, below we describe how they were used to integrate equity in our community assessments. For each principle, we provide a description of the strategy implemented in the community assessments and the benefit of or rationale for that particular strategy.

Examine backgrounds and biases

Everyone brings their own values, backgrounds, and experiences to their work. Recognizing that when conducting community assessments, we should try to be as objective as possible, our team reflected on our own cultural backgrounds and experiences with privilege and access to services and resources prior to engaging with communities. This included an open team discussion about how our experiences may differ from experiences of families within the four communities. Specifically, we were challenged to stay aware of how our backgrounds and experiences could introduce bias and inform how we approach communities and who we choose to engage.

As a first step to partnering with each of the four communities, we conducted a brief landscape assessment to learn about the demographics, cultures, and existing family engagement initiatives and partnerships. See Appendix B for an example community context template that was provided to PESs. This template was used to collect basic and consistent information across communities. We later met and consulted with each PES to discuss the community and cultural contexts and how they may emerge within our interactions with the community during the assessment. Learning about the context within the communities informed whose

perspective were critical to understanding family engagement. Specifically, we identified key community organizations to invite to be a part of the community assessment.

Shift power dynamics to honor community strengths

When working with communities, especially communities of color, it is important to recognize power dynamics between researchers and communities and use our power responsibly. During community assessments, Child Trends balanced power dynamics by acknowledging existing community assets. In this way, we did not enter communities as “the experts” and assume that communities were “helpless.” Rather than focusing solely on community needs, which tend to be what the community is “missing,” we intentionally identified and highlighted assets and strengths that already exist in the community. Leading with communities’ strengths acknowledges that communities hold a lot of power and know what they value and need. By sharing our power as researchers, we can focus on designing programs and services on a solid foundation of understanding community priorities, which results in services that are relevant for families.

For this project, we identified community assets with questions in the conversation guide about existing supports (e.g., community events and resources) and shared values (e.g., what matters to community members, how do they come together). This meant honoring existing cultural and community values and beliefs. Rather than starting anew, we recommended that PESs layer upon or adjust programming to highlight the assets that already existed in the community.

Avoid assuming one normative, standard, or default position

Historically, family engagement work has centered on middle income, White experiences, values, and beliefs, which are assumed as the standard or ideal in comparisons to other groups.^{vi} In assuming one standard position we downplay strengths in other cultural and community groups. By examining multiple perspectives, we acknowledge varying strengths and needs, and can identify tailored solutions that meet communities where they are rather than assume a standard that is likely not relevant.

Child Trends employed a “360-approach” to the community assessment to understand family engagement in schools by examining the perspectives of various stakeholders and exploring how their roles work together to promote a shared vision of family engagement (see Figure 2). We interviewed various people in each community, including leaders in the community, school teachers and staff, and family leaders in the community. Each perspective contributed valuable information about the context and dynamics of family engagement to provide a full picture. Using this strategy helped us to identify strengths and supports that would be helpful for each role, rather than assuming that one strategy would work for all people, and across different roles.

Figure 2. 360-Approach



Source: Child Trends, 2019

Meaningfully engage the community

Meaningfully engaging communities requires a true partnership throughout the entire community assessment process. For our community assessment, developing true partnerships meant inviting community members, who were already involved in family engagement initiatives we were trying to study, to offer their perspectives. Our main community partners were PESs who were based and worked in each of the four PBS member station communities. PESs were our partners at each phase of the community assessment. For example, PESs were a main point of contact to schools in each of the communities. To invite different people to the community assessment, we relied on existing, trusted relationships (see Figure 3 for recruitment flow).

Figure 3. Engage the Community During Recruitment



Source: Child Trends, 2019

We also met with PESs to discuss the best recruitment strategies for their communities, which allowed us to use an individualized, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, one of the communities had a large migrant Spanish-speaking population. For that community we ensured that a Spanish-speaking researcher was the main point of contact, we learned about the parents' agricultural work schedules, and recruited during work break times. We also partnered with a migrant liaison to reach families and answer questions about the assessment. By taking the time to learn about the background and contexts of the communities, we were able to reach and involve more families in the assessment as well as ensure all families had the same level of information about the study opportunity, based on their needs and preferences. We were also able to express the respect and honor we have for communities, programs, and families in ways that were meaningful for them.

We also meaningfully engaged PESs and community members by reviewing initial findings with them. Through this review, we were able to ensure that the interpretation of findings were accurate and proposed solutions were meaningful and effective. In each phase of the work, we acknowledged the PESs and communities' contribution and frequently publicly expressed our gratitude. For example, we have co-presented with PESs multiple times at national conferences. The PESs were vital to the success of this work; we are grateful for the opportunity to have partnered with them.

Make a commitment to understanding the root cause of an issue

A key purpose of doing community assessments is to identify community needs. Understanding the root cause of those needs and issues means uncovering why they exist. By identifying the root cause, we can: (1) acknowledge historical, systemic and contextual causes for issues to avoid blaming a community for existing issues or making assumptions about deficiencies of communities because those issues exist and (2) identify potential lasting solutions to the underlying issue rather than merely addressing a surface level concern.

In this community assessment, Child Trends committed to understanding the root causes of issues by designing the conversation guides to ask why issues exist rather than only documenting the issues. We involved PESs in the interpretation of the community assessment findings to ensure they offered insights as the ones directly involved in serving and working with families. When we analyzed data, we also examined the data in multiple ways before identifying potential root causes. In Table 1, we list the steps taken to uncover root causes and make recommendations to PESs for each community. We shared findings in two formats (PowerPoint slides and a summary document) and discussed the results with PESs.

Table 1. Steps Taken to Search for Root Causes of Issues

	Step 1: We organized participant responses by community. We considered context of each community, noting how context may emerge in family engagement desires and needs.
	Step 2: For each community, we organized responses by major concepts and themes related to family engagement, then examined responses for patterns. After patterns were identified, we searched for the root cause by community using the “5 Whys technique.” ^{vii}
	Step 3: We considered the perspective of each role: PES, ECEP leader, ECEP center or classroom staff, and family leaders. We searched for root causes of patterns (using the 5 Whys technique) by each perspective.
	Step 4: We explored how patterns and perspectives fit together to tell the story of family engagement in each community (e.g., considered whether there were shared perspectives across roles and communities).
	Step 5: We organized results by themes and examined similarities and differences across communities. For each community, we offered practical examples (based on unique community context) of how to incorporate recommendations in PBS KIDS family engagement programs that build on community assets, while also addressing needs.

Source: Child Trends, 2019

To see a summary of community assessment findings as well as examples of how findings were embedded into programs, please see Appendix C.

Community Assessment Study Limitations

The benefit of conducting this community assessment was that we were able to talk with people in different roles in the community to identify assets and needs/gaps to consider when developing PBS KIDS family engagement programs. Given the scope of work and timeline, the number of people we were able to interview was small (~10/community); to offset this small sample size, we asked each person to reflect on the perspective of others in their respective roles.

Our method for recruiting interview participants has potential limitations. We used the “snowball sampling” technique where one study participant is asked to identify another. While the “snowball sampling” method allowed us to connect with ECEP leaders, ECEP staff, and family leaders more easily, it may have introduced bias in the sample as the study’s participants, compared to others, may have been better connected or more involved (e.g., through connections to stations, directors, or teachers). However, speaking to families with strong community connections may also be considered a strength of the study design as these families may have been better able to speak to the needs of the whole community.

Reflection Questions

By using multiple strategies to embed equity, the community assessments demonstrated that we could reach more people and make recommendations for the design of relevant and meaningful family engagement programs. We recommend the following considerations for practitioners (and people supporting practitioners) interested in embedding equity while conducting community assessments to serve families or design family engagement programs.

Considerations for embedding equity in community assessments

- Do I understand basic demographic and background information about the community as well as the cultures represented within it?
- Who are trusted supports in the community (people and/or organizations)? Where do people tend to congregate and who do they feel comfortable communicating with? How can I understand the strengths they bring to the community?
- What are the immediate and longer-term community needs? What is the history and/or context of how those needs emerged and evolved over time? What are the root causes of those needs?

Designing (or adjusting) family engagement programs

- How can I connect with families to understand their family engagement goals?
- What would family engagement look like if it was centered around the strengths and needs of families?
- What supports do providers/staff need to fully support families?

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Appendices

Appendix A. Community Assessment Interview Focus by Role

Family Engagement Initiative Roles	Focus of Interview
Parent Engagement Specialist/PBS Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore family engagement initiative vision (e.g., identify PBS KIDS family engagement model that will be used; vision for activities for schools, teachers, and families; values and beliefs that should be incorporated in the initiatives; community context that should be considered).• Identify materials and resources available for the PES and local programs. Identify key messages and expected outcomes.• Explore opportunities to share the results of work locally.• Map relationships with the local program and mode of delivery.
Leadership (e.g., program director)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand program-level assets and needs for family engagement (e.g., current initiatives, community resources, and connections; context of community and families that should be considered; feasibility of evaluation options).• Identify key messages and expected outcomes.• Explore ideas about how to share the results of work locally.
Teachers/Caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand the classroom-level assets and needs for family engagement (e.g., current family engagement approaches and practices; vision of family partnerships; community context that should be considered; feasibility of evaluation options).• Explore ideas about how to share the results of work locally.
Family Leaders (e.g., family group leader)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand the family assets and needs for family engagement (e.g., families' goals for their children, including cultural values and beliefs; communication preferences with school; facilitators and barriers to involvement in activities at school and engagement with teacher/caregiver; beliefs about media use for education).• Identify preferred channels for accessing information.• Explore ideas about how to share the results of work locally.

Source: Child Trends, 2019

Appendix B. Community Context Template

Station	PES/Role	Structure of Pre-K in Community	Family Engagement Program Idea	Progress of Family Engagement Program	Community Context provided by PES
Example 1	PES Name	E.g., pre-K is housed within the school system	4-week family program where each activity builds on the next	Developed 2 weekly activities, in the process of developing 2 more activities	Example context categories shared <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community/population size • Demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, languages spoken, etc.) • Percentage of students enrolled in free or reduced lunch • Percentage of childcare attendance for children • Other context that is relevant to community

Appendix C. Community Assessment Findings & Applications

Community assessment findings were presented as recommendations for PESs to consider when designing PBS KIDS family engagement programs in their respective communities. PESs were presented with community-specific findings as well as the five common findings (presented below) observed in all communities. The common findings presented below surfaced in slightly different and nuanced ways based on community context and were woven throughout the community-specific findings. Themes were identified for two sub-populations based on their unique experiences: Spanish-speaking families and rural families.

Assets

- Families care and want to be engaged.
- There are existing community resources and initiatives upon which PBS KIDS programs can build.

Needs

- There are logistical and financial barriers that impede family engagement. Language and cultural barriers were observed in most communities.
- There is a need for a shared understanding or vision of family engagement and respective roles.

Approach

- Families desire personal, meaningful connections.

ⁱ Jeynes, W. (2012). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students. *Urban Education*, 47: 706 – 742.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2018). Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

ⁱⁱⁱ Community assessments can use various methods of data collection, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, etc. For more information on what community assessments are and how to conduct them, see this resource: https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/healthprotection/fetp/training_modules/15/community-needs_pw_final_9252013.pdf

^{iv} The community assessment and evaluation phases of this project were considered human subjects research and underwent Institutional Review Board (IRB) review.

^v Andrews, K., Parekh, J. & Peckoo, S. (2019). *How to embed a racial and ethnic equity perspective in research: Practical guidance for the research process*. Child Trends.

^{vi} Ramos, M.F. (2014). The strengths of Latina mothers in supporting their children's education: A cultural perspective. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Strengths-of-Latinas-Mothers-formatted-6-10-14.pdf>

^{vii} National Implementation Research Network (2015). Root cause analysis resources: Understanding community need. https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/RCA%20Resources_11.7.18_0.pdf