

communities shift, change, and grow more diverse, and/or circumstances or conditions in the early childhood program change, so too must the practices teachers use to initiate and nurture partnerships.

However, the commitment, intentionality, time, and effort required of educators to nurture partnerships with families and support their engagement are worth it. Such relationships benefit children, and the adults involved, in several ways:

- › Children “tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.” (Henderson & Mapp 2002, 7)
- › Families can gain knowledge and skills for parent leadership, advocacy, and community activism. (e.g., Hong 2011)
- › Educators can grow deeper understandings of the diverse and often subtle ways families support their children’s learning (e.g., Espino 2016; Jeynes 2011), which helps them to embrace varied forms of family engagement as valid and to advance equity for historically marginalized families. (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez 2013)

Advancing Equity Through Reciprocal Partnerships with Families

Decades of research and generations of lived experience show that racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups, such as Black, Latino/a, Native American, and non-English speakers, have historically faced, and in many cases continue to face, inequitable and unjust treatment from teachers (e.g., Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez 2013). Unchecked attitudes, beliefs, biases, and assumptions about families and communities have the potential to result in inequitable policy, practice, and conditions that disproportionately affect certain groups. This is why self-reflection on beliefs and practices is so important. Professional learning to build awareness of historical inequities that may pose challenges to forming relationships with families

and communities—in particular, relationships with historically marginalized groups—is equally important.

Early childhood educators must be equipped, therefore, to advance equity and advocate for all children and families. NAEYC’s position statement on advancing equity (2019) offers recommendations for steps educators can take to establish reciprocal relationships with families:

1. Embrace the primary role of families in children’s development and learning.
2. Uphold every family’s right to make decisions for and with their children.
3. Be curious, making time to learn about the families with whom you work.
4. Maintain consistently high expectations for family involvement, being open to multiple and varied forms of engagement and providing intentional and responsive supports.
5. Communicate the value of multilingualism to all families.

Educators can advance equity by raising awareness of deficit-oriented beliefs and inequitable practices. They focus on strengths-based language and the positive, equitable beliefs and practices they already engage in and how to improve upon them. It starts with each teacher looking inward, but real change happens when everyone takes part. If reciprocal partnerships with all families are a goal, educators may need to adjust their ideas and practices to develop these partnerships and recognize that they will take time, insight, and sensitivity to develop.

Considerations for Building Reciprocal Partnerships

Evaluating your family engagement practices begins with, and requires you to constantly revisit, the self—becoming aware of and reflecting on your own beliefs, values, and biases and how these affect your interactions with families and your teaching practice. What do you believe about the families you serve?

What unchecked assumptions could potentially be driving your approach to family and community engagement? What educators think and believe about others can unintentionally seep into their practice (e.g., Bartolomé 2004; Souto-Manning 2007).

The following vignette illustrates one educator's use of self-reflection as a starting point that led to positive improvements in family engagement.

7.2 “Why Don't They Show Up?”

At Rosewood School, which serves children in kindergarten through third grade, the turnout at family events is typically low. For instance, adult English as a second language (ESL) classes for the growing Spanish-speaking community are offered because a group of teachers felt it was important for non-English-speaking families to learn English. The classes always have to be canceled, however, because of low attendance. It's frustrating for the teachers to see a lack of family involvement in the ESL classes. Why don't the families show up?

Ms. Grove, one of the teachers who coordinates the ESL classes, shares her frustration with a peer, Ms. Flores, who works extensively with Spanish-speaking families in a neighboring community. Ms. Flores listens and asks, “What do *they* need and want? You keep offering ESL classes because *you* think that's best for them. It speaks volumes that they don't show up. Maybe they don't feel they need or want ESL classes. What steps have you taken to get to know the community and understand their needs? What have you done to earn their trust and truly partner with them and not just *involve* them in ESL classes?”

Initially, Ms. Grove is taken aback by this response. However, after reflecting on the history of the ESL classes—and the low response from families—she can't help but agree with her. Ms. Grove and the group of teachers who helped with the ESL classes believe it is important for all families to be able to communicate in English. This belief led them to think that Spanish-speaking families would want to be involved in ESL classes. Taking the time to pause, reflect, and discuss Ms. Flores's feedback as a team helps Ms. Grove and her colleagues realize that their push for ESL classes is based on unchecked beliefs and assumptions as well as

deficit views about families whose home language is not English. In fact, one team member realizes that the messages they are sending the community is that not speaking English is a problem that needs to be fixed.

With this new insight and awareness, the group plans to identify ways to get to know the families and their wishes better, build trust with them and earn their respect, and create opportunities to collaborate and share decision making around family events at the school. One action step Ms. Grove suggests is to offer an introductory Spanish class for Rosewood staff interested in overcoming language barriers with families. Ms. Grove offers to connect with Ms. Flores to see if she would be willing to collaborate on organizing the class. The teachers at Rosewood School realize that they have been planning events for families without their input, and it's time to take a different approach!

This vignette illustrates three key considerations for building and maintaining strong partnerships with families.

› **Engage with families to understand their perspectives and what they want for themselves and their children.**

Assumptions about what is best for families, like those initially held by Ms. Grove and her colleagues about the need for ESL classes, can lead to blaming families for actions like not “showing up.” In particular, families of color, families living with economic insecurity, and families who have a home language other than English are often viewed as uncaring when they do not participate as expected (Valencia & Black 2002). There is a significant difference between *involving* families in events or activities planned without their input or collaboration and *engaging* with families to gather their input, understand their needs and their wishes for their children, and collaboratively plan events or activities that will mutually benefit educators and families. This difference is even more important to be aware of and understand to advance equity for historically marginalized groups.

› **Work from families’ strengths to plan program offerings that match their actual needs and preferences.**

Deficit thinking about families can lead to a disconnect between program offerings and families’ actual needs and preferences. The teachers in the vignette believed ESL classes were the solution to the perceived problem of families not speaking English. But did the families perceive their language as a problem that needed to be fixed? Ms. Grove and her colleagues understood later that the families did not consider ESL classes a priority because most of their community spoke Spanish and they did not perceive a need for learning to speak English. The next step would be to talk with the families to discover what else could be offered instead of ESL classes that would better meet their needs.

› **Listen, reflect, consider other perspectives, and respond thoughtfully to feedback from both families and colleagues.**

It is never easy to receive constructive or critical feedback. Recall that in the vignette, Ms. Grove was initially taken aback by Ms. Flores’s response. However, as with any relationship, partnerships with families call for spaces to give and receive constructive feedback. This can lead to moments of conflict or tension. One way to address such moments is to pause and reflect not just on individual practice but on the work within the context of broader inequities in education. In the vignette, we see how reflection helped Ms. Grove understand Ms. Flores’s perspective and identify next steps to resolve the situation. Seeking to understand the perspective of others can help identify possible solutions, such as the suggestion that Rosewood School offer Spanish classes to staff so that staff could better communicate with the

growing Spanish-speaking community. Building a foundation for two-way communication by taking the time to self-reflect, establish trust, and foster relationships will help when engaging with families in collaborative, reciprocal partnerships.

Remember, relationships can deepen and grow into partnerships. Engaging in ongoing self-reflection to generate self-awareness of attitudes and beliefs about families and communities is vital to establishing reciprocal partnerships.



Refer to “Appendix B: Digging Deeper into Knowledge” for additional resources on family engagement.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Examples to Consider

In the following charts, the left column (“Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practices”) reflects examples of developmentally appropriate practices that are the foundation for developing and growing reciprocal family and community engagement practices. The right column (“Examples of Practices to Avoid”) provides examples of practices that can hinder the development of reciprocal partnerships. The examples in the “For All Ages” chart as well as in the charts for each particular age group help educators evaluate and expand their current practices and develop a greater range of effective competencies.

For All Ages

Educators work together with families as members of the learning community to support children.

Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Examples of Practices to Avoid

Establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships

- Educators engage with families and community members in ways that are equitable, culturally and linguistically responsive, and rooted in trust and respect. They seek professional learning opportunities to build this capacity.
- Educators seek to understand the cultural and linguistic practices of the families and communities they serve, even those with the same racial, ethnic, and linguistic background as themselves.
- Educators seek to learn about families' goals for their children's learning. They work together with families to establish goals for children.
- Educators make eye contact when speaking with families, practice active listening, use family-friendly language, and monitor body language during conversations.
- Educators reflect on their personal beliefs, values, life histories, cultural practices, and experiences to understand potential biases and assumptions that can unintentionally influence relationships with families and communities. When formulating professional opinions, they check for bias and assumptions by asking themselves questions like "Why do I think that?" and "What am I basing this on?"
- Educators show that they genuinely care about circumstances and events affecting families and communities. They adjust their practice to better support the immediate needs of children and families (e.g., compile books and resources to help families discuss current events or situations with children, change their instructional plans in response to an event impacting the community, or collaborate with colleagues to organize a community food and supply share).
- Assuming educators are entitled to the trust and respect of families and communities and, therefore, do not have to earn it
- Not having opportunities for ongoing professional learning or not investing time in seeking out resources
- Not seeking to understand each family's situation, values, and beliefs and how these affect families' engagement and children's learning
- Not recognizing the cultural and linguistic diversity *within* ethnic groups and communities (e.g., assuming all ways of speaking Spanish are "the same" when there are many different dialects spoken within Spanish-speaking communities)
- Judging families' childrearing practices and the goals they have for their children
- Not communicating with families to learn what they think is important for their children to learn and be able to do
- Establishing goals for children prior to meeting the family and before offering them an opportunity to share their input
- Failing to prioritize and value information sharing and a shared decision-making process
- Using words, phrases, and/or acronyms considered professional jargon when communicating with families (e.g., "self-paced," "whole child," "concepts of print")
- Making eye contact with interpreters instead of family members during a meeting or conference
- Believing and perpetuating negative stereotypes of groups of people or communities (e.g., labeling some families as "uncaring" or "uninvolved" if they do not attend program events)
- Not acknowledging or questioning the role of bias within patterns of practice that result in inequitable outcomes for groups of children and families
- Valuing only certain forms of family engagement (e.g., reading books to children, being present at site-based events or activities)
- Placing blame on children and families, including those facing hardships or trauma, for not meeting expectations for participation, attendance, or engagement

For All Ages (cont.)

Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Examples of Practices to Avoid

Establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships (cont.)

- Educators demonstrate professionalism and ethical behavior (e.g., using respectful language to talk about children and families, even when they are not present; using professional judgment and respecting privacy laws when posting pictures or comments about children and families on social media).
- Demonstrating a lack of empathy to families and communities experiencing challenging circumstances (e.g., parent separation, long-term illness, loss of transportation or caregiving)
- Naming specific children and families during conversations with colleagues conducted in public spaces
- Posting pictures or videos of children to social media accounts without consent from the family

Maintaining regular, two-way communication

- Educators use various ways to share information and communicate with families (e.g., phone, texts, email, photos, video, journals, home visits, neighborhood visits). They provide ongoing, equitable, and linguistically and culturally responsive opportunities for two-way communication with families (e.g., scheduling interpreters, providing translations, ensuring opportunities to contribute to discussions and decision making).
- Educators seek constructive feedback from family and community partners on practices used to engage with them. They address concerns and establish a continuous improvement process to strengthen relationships (e.g., establishing a system for obtaining feedback on ways to improve partnership practices, asking questions like “What can we do together to improve how we support children’s learning?” during conferences).
- Engaging in one-way information sharing and communication with families (e.g., telling families what to do without asking for input, relying on written communication, not being responsive to linguistic barriers to communication)
- Not seeking or allocating resources to support communication with families in family-friendly, linguistically appropriate ways
- Overlooking the value and importance of constructive feedback from families and community members on practices used for outreach and engagement

Working in collaborative partnerships

- Educators share power in decision making concerning the care, education, and well-being of the child (e.g., family input is considered a vital source of information for ongoing assessment, evaluation, and planning).
- Educators and families work together in making decisions about how best to support children’s development and learning or how to handle problems or differences of opinion as they arise.
- Educators promote collaboration among all adults (e.g., educators, family members, community resource providers, other care providers) invested in the well-being of the child and family. They facilitate dialogue and information sharing for informed decision making around support needed.
- Avoiding difficult issues or making decisions unilaterally rather than problem solving with families
- Blaming families when children have difficulty in the classroom; seeing them as part of the “problem” rather than part of the solution
- Yielding to families’ demands even if these are not to the benefit of the child or the other children in the group
- Undermining families’ roles as experts and partners in the care and education of their children by not asking them for their input or thoughts on a recommendation
- Not seeking resources to help build knowledge and skills in conflict resolution when there is disagreement with families regarding services and support for their children