



FACTSHEET

Top Eight Good Practices For Parent/Caregiver Engagement With Black Families

01. Ask parents/caregivers how they think your organization can better support them.

Rather than assuming that you know what parents/caregivers need, ask them! Professionals often believe they know what will work best for families, but relying on assumptions or past experiences can sometimes reinforce stereotypes – and can mean we miss out on opportunities to genuinely engage parents/caregivers to create successful partnerships. Gathering information can happen through surveys, focus groups, interviews, or any other approach that might be a good fit for the context in which you work. The most important part of collecting this information is listening to what families have to say and recognizing their expertise.

02. Reflect on the beliefs and assumptions you and/or your organization hold about families and parenting.

So much of what and how we think about families and parenting is informed by our culture. But many people, especially those who are part of dominant groups in society, are unaware of how their own cultural lens impacts their perceptions of others. Cultivating awareness about how our cultural lens influences our communication with families – and the assumptions we hold about how they should engage – can help us become more nonjudgmental and more effective collaborators.

03. Assume that all parents/caregivers want the best for their children.

Instead of accepting and reinforcing simplistic or preconceived ideas about families, focus on their assets and resilience. People often assume that there is a connection between:

- family composition (e.g. two-parent vs. lone parent families) and children's potential for success
- parents/caregivers showing up for school events and how much they care about their child
- material wealth and capacity to contribute to a child's future

When we challenge these assumptions, we can challenge negative stereotypes and create a more inclusive community, recognizing that:

- All families have different challenges and assets, despite their compositions.
- Parents/caregivers take care of their children in many ways, and this may not include being able to be physically present in the school/program building.
- Low-income parents/caregivers are not passive beneficiaries of professional expertise; they bring a wealth of knowledge and experience that we may miss out on if we don't actively acknowledge it! And if we don't recognize their contributions, we risk making low-income parents/caregivers feel like "bad parents," which could make them even less likely to engage with us in the future.

04. Explicitly recognize the less visible ways that parents/caregivers are engaged.

Parent/caregiver engagement should not be seen through the narrow lens of whether or not they are physically present in a school or other program space. All of the things that parents/caregivers do outside of school to help their children succeed should be recognized. For Black families, this may include sharing their first language or helping their children to deal with racism. By acknowledging the value of this often unseen work, we can expand conceptions of "good parenting" and make schools/programs more inclusive.

05. Offer parents/caregivers the opportunity to engage in ways that are manageable and convenient.

Parents/caregivers often face barriers to traditional engagement activities: they have other children to care for, they need to prepare food for their family, they work shifts that conflict with school events, they don't have access to fast and reliable transportation, or they experience other challenges. Programs that ask parents/caregivers how they want to engage and what barriers exist – and then take steps to reduce these barriers – are more likely to get them involved.

06. See traditional engagement activities as important, but not as necessary for every family.

According to the research, the most important things parents/caregivers can do to support their children's education are to have high (but reasonable) expectations of their children, create a home environment that encourages learning, and take care of children's physical health.

Other tasks that have been understood as parent/caregiver involvement – such as volunteering at school, attending events, participating in parent councils, communicating with teachers/schools, and managing homework completion – should be seen as important and welcome additions. However, it is crucial to recognize that children's success is not dependent on these activities, and parents/caregivers who don't participate in them may be engaged in other essential tasks – creating a pro-learning environment and a healthy home, and holding high expectations of their children.

07. Work in collaboration with existing community-based organizations.

Working with community-based organizations that have existing relationships with families can help build relational bridges, especially when trying to support parent/caregiver engagement in children's education. Organizations that have been working with communities for longer periods of time can highlight assets and strengths, helping us to avoid deficit-based approaches to engagement.

08. Make sure that parents/caregivers feel welcomed in your space(s).

If parents/caregivers do not feel comfortable in the physical space, or with program staff, they are unlikely to get involved. Without making assumptions, be aware that families from different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds may have different expectations about what a welcoming space means. The best way to find out how to make people feel safe and welcome in your space is to ask!

References

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