

# **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND CHILD/FAMILY SUPPORTS**

## **Family Engagement**

Children who are successful in school have many healthy interconnections between family, school, and community. Parent/family involvement in the learning process strengthens learning at home and is directly linked back to positive child outcomes at school. Programs can demonstrate that they value parent/family involvement in a variety of ways - from partnering with parents/families to establish child development goals to sharing anecdotes of children's learning.

Communication and strong relationships are the keys to successful parent/family involvement. The purpose of frequent and informal interactions is to strengthen the connections between home and school. Virtual meetings are allowable as long as programs plan carefully to ensure plentiful opportunities for parents/families to see their child in the classroom space are also occurring. Staff should use an interested and unhurried manner when talking with parents/families. Staff and parents/families should update one another about children's recent home experiences and preschool activities through:

- Conversations during drop-off and pick-up times;
- Notes;
- Telephone conversations; and
- Electronic communications.

Ideas for parent/family involvement activities include:

- Sharing special interests with children, such as fishing, photography, or sewing;
- Providing recyclables and helping to make play materials;
- Logging books taken/returned from a lending library;
- Creating displays of child-initiated works;
- Attending parent/family meetings, workshops, and serving on the family participation group and/or the Great Start Collaborative School Readiness Advisory Committee representing Strong Beginnings;
- Participate in the periodic formal data analysis meeting to analyze program quality and child outcome data;
- Meeting with teachers to set developmental goals and discuss children's progress;
- Supporting children's learning at home; and
- Reading or contributing to a parent/family newsletter.

Teaching and/or Child/Family Support staff support parent/family involvement at group or parent/family meetings by:

- Providing child care;

- Arranging transportation;
- Scheduling events at times convenient for parents/families and/or offering a virtual option for participating;
- Orienting parents/families to the depth and breadth of the role of parents/families at meetings;
- Making reminder phone calls;
- Distributing agendas or other materials ahead of time;
- Supporting parent-to-parent and/ or family-to-family communication;
- Addressing needs of non-custodial parents/families;
- Addressing language, culture, and work barriers; and
- Demonstrating that parents'/families' contributions are valued by following up appropriately.

Staff members support parent/family involvement in the classroom when:

- A plan that outlines the roles of classroom volunteers is included in the Strong Beginnings Parent Handbook. The plan identifies the leader (e.g., teacher, Family Liaison, ECS) who will provide ongoing support to volunteers and reinforce how they help advance children's learning;
- A parent's presence (mother, father, or guardian) is invited and welcomed by staff;
- Worthy classroom experiences are offered to parents/families, for example, assisting in the implementation of the daily routine with children versus assigning parents' minor roles such as wiping tables or cutting out shapes. For example, volunteers might support children at a learning area during choice time or by reading aloud to children;
- Volunteer opportunities are announced to parents/families ahead of time;
- Responsibilities are offered that match volunteer's interests, skills, schedules and facilitate children's development; and
- Parents/families are invited to participate in special events such as field trips or program evaluation efforts.

## **Program Requirements**

### **Family Participation Groups**

Strong Beginnings sites must provide for active and continuous participation of parents/families of enrolled children. A high-quality Strong Beginnings program supports parents/families as active decision makers by developing and implementing training to instill confidence in parents/families as active members of an advisory committee.

Each Intermediate School District (ISD) is also required to have Strong Beginnings parent/family representation on the regional Great Start Collaborative (GSC) Parent Coalition; working with other committed parents/families to support early childhood practices in the community. These Strong Beginnings parents/families, in turn, act as liaisons to local parent facilitation groups, sharing ideas and activities in person, virtually or through emailed reports. A proportional representation of

parents/families from Strong Beginnings and GSRP should be included in these activities. Refer to the Intermediate School District Administration of Strong Beginnings section of this manual for more information on advisory committees.

Another opportunity involves participation in a school readiness advisory committee convened as a workgroup of the GSC that provides for the involvement of classroom teachers, parents or guardians of three-and four-year-old program participants, and community, volunteer, and social service agencies and organizations. The advisory committee annually reviews and makes recommendations regarding the Strong Beginnings and GSRP components. The advisory committee also makes recommendations to the GSC regarding other community services designed to improve all children's school readiness.

### **Family Contacts by Early Childhood Teaching Staff**

The purpose of home visits and parent-teacher conferences are to involve families in the children's education at school and to help them provide educational experiences for the children at home. Center-Based programs require a minimum of four family contacts per year by early childhood teaching staff, preferably two home visits and two parent-teacher conferences. When the 2+2 pattern is impossible for a particular family, other arrangements should be made to complete the four required contacts. If a parent/family prefers the visit not take place in the home, a mutual location may be chosen such as a park, restaurant, or a parent's workplace, or the visit may be conducted virtually. During home visits and parent/teacher conferences, staff:

- Seek input from parents/families about the program and its relationship to the child's development;
- Seek input from parents/families about how they are supporting the child's development at home;
- Partner with parents/families in setting appropriate child development goals;
- Assist parents/families to implement child development strategies for home which fit into normal family routines. For example, color naming or classification while sorting freshly laundered socks, practicing counting with meaning when children serve themselves food (e.g., carrots/crackers/raisins), talking about shapes of different foods children are eating (e.g. some cookies, crackers), etc. (sending home worksheets is not appropriate);
- Work together with parents/families and Family Liaisons/School Social Workers as appropriate to write referrals for suspected or diagnosed disabilities or other developmental needs of the child. After the visit, staff members follow up by working with the Early Childhood Specialist, district, and parents to locate and access special education services needed by the child;
- Assist as appropriate Family Liaisons in working together with parents to write and follow up on referrals for needed family services. For example, staff can provide documentation for parents to share with providers, staff can

make an initial phone call to help arrange an appointment, staff can help parents/families find child care or transportation so they can use community resources (When these activities are undertaken primarily by the Family Liaison there should be appropriate communication with and support from the classroom teacher); and

- Document each home visit and parent/teacher conference.

## **Home Visit General Guidelines**

Home visits are planned to last at least 60 minutes, exclusive of travel time, and include both the child and parent(s). Many programs determine that credentialed Associate Teachers may complete home visits. Where Lead Teachers and Associate Teachers complete individual home visits, each adult often makes home visits with the children that they consistently work with in the classroom, e.g., children in their small group/child planning group/recall group. One member of the teaching staff may be accompanied on the home visit by the Family Liaison/School Social Worker when the circumstances make this advisable. Where staff safety is a concern, teaching teams often complete home visits in pairs. Itineraries should be distributed to pertinent staff who should know of the home visitor's location(s). A cell phone should be carried and valuables should be locked in the trunk before arriving at the destination.

It is strongly recommended that the **initial home visit** occur after the child is enrolled but before the child begins the classroom program. The main purpose of the initial visit is to create a foundation for the beginning of a positive partnership between home and school. It is designed to ease the transition into Strong Beginnings for the child and family. Activities might include:

- Taking photos of parent/family and child, family pet(s), home, etc.;
- Leaving photos of staff and classroom;
- Discussing transportation to and from the program;
- Discussing parents'/families' interests and hobbies;
- Discussing the importance of parent/family involvement and the various opportunities;
- Sharing program philosophy and curriculum information;
- Reviewing results of developmental screening;
- Discussing goals, the parents/families have for their child for the year;
- Generating a list of possible activities/discussion topics for the next home visit;
- Sharing the role of the Family Liaison/School Social Worker with families; and
- Discussing the required enrollment paperwork.

Upon arrival, appropriate introductions are made, and other family members are included in conversation. The parent/family is asked for suggestions for an appropriate area within the home to meet. Staff members partner with the

parent(s)/family to modify the environment as necessary (e.g., distractions such as a baby crying, television, pets, etc.)

Second and subsequent visits are designed around the individual child and parent/family needs. Staff should prepare by scheduling visits one week to ten days in advance, at convenient times for families, and allow for travel time between appointments. The staff member and parent/family should agree upon beginning and ending times for the visit and discuss what to expect during the visit. The purpose of the visit should be reviewed. It may be useful to include the Family Liaison/School Social Worker in some of these visits. Throughout the visit, staff looks for opportunities to encourage parents/families to share their perspective and ideas. The home visit should be personalized to meet the individual needs of each child and family by:

- Eliciting feedback from parents and families regarding the child's interests, concerns, and progress, both at home and in the program;
- Sharing information about community resources;
- Completing any necessary referral forms together during the visit;
- Reinforcing positive parenting;
- Exchanging information about the curriculum and its relationship to the child's development;
- Updating each other about the child's recent experiences;
- Exchanging ideas and materials to support the child's learning and social development at home;
- Engaging the parent/family and child to model a teaching activity (utilizing home materials whenever possible) and sharing learning goals and outcomes of the activity; and

Allowing time throughout the visit for the parent/family to ask questions and/or voice concerns.

To conclude, the visit is summarized with the parent/family, with information provided about future parent/family activities and staff availability for phone calls and questions. Completed documentation of the visit includes a narrative description of the visit, the date, and the signatures of both the visiting staff member(s) and the parent/family.

## **Parent/Teacher Conferences**

Parent/teacher conferences should be held in the fall and spring, and when requested by parents/family. Conferences are scheduled to meet the mutual needs of parents/family and staff and planned to last a minimum of 45 minutes. This may result in some conferences being held outside of regular work hours.

Staff members use a parent/family report from the approved child assessment tool and discuss the progress of the child across domains, goals for continuous progress, and any additional support which may be necessary. Developmental information should be exchanged in depth and in a relaxed, positive manner. Anecdotal

observations and samples of child-initiated work strengthen parents'/families' understanding of their child's development. Staff share curriculum strategies for supporting children's development and discuss with parents/families ways that they can support learning at home using household materials and within ordinary household routines. Staff invite observations and answer questions from parents/families about the program. The conference concludes with ways the family can participate in the program. Staff availability for phone calls is reinforced.

While it is not possible for the Family Liaison/School Social Worker to participate in every parent/teacher conference, they may stop in briefly to greet the parent/family or stay longer when they have worked jointly with the teaching team with a family.

## **Child/Family Supports**

Strong Beginnings will often be the first point of entry for children and families into a system where they have frequent, ongoing, consistent connections with caring adults. Some of these adults may be the first ones outside the family to have the opportunity to observe and interact with the children as they become part of the classroom community. Others may spend more time talking with and getting to know the families—many of whom may be socially isolated and without other support systems. This gives Strong Beginnings a unique opportunity to learn the need for and then provide supports that will strengthen the foundation for both children and families as they begin their journey through the school system. This will not only benefit the children and families during their year in Strong Beginnings but will enable them to move on through the following years better prepared to meet challenges both at home and at school.

Children and families do not arrive at Strong Beginnings with the same needs across the state or even across an ISD. In some cases, perhaps because of a lack of accessible family resources in a community, families lacking a place to voice their needs and concerns may need more support than their children. In other instances, as when there are many foster families within a neighborhood, providing classroom support for children who have experienced trauma may be the highest priority. Because of this Strong Beginnings programs have options for the type of child and family supports they provide which are decided upon on a yearly basis. Each site offering Strong Beginnings may select, in strong collaboration with their ISD, the amount and type of supports that will be offered to children and families yearly. These decisions should be based on input from teaching and administrative staff as well as the local family participation group.

## **Options for Child and Family Supports**

There are two basic types of support available for children and families. One focuses on the children in the classroom and one on the families. It is important to keep in mind, however, that any classroom supports for children are more effective when aligned with family understanding and usage of similar practices. Similarly, many family challenges involve parenting issues and suggestions for such things as

improving bedtime routines or resolving tantrums may incorporate ideas also used in the classroom. In some cases, Strong Beginnings classrooms may elect to select only child or family supports and in other cases they may decide to utilize some of each. If the adopted plan does not include funding for the provision of support, resources and information to parents who need assistance with meeting basic needs or family issues, these services must be provided by other program personnel such as teaching staff or site administrator.

## **Child Supports**

Child supports focus on supporting children's success in the Strong Beginnings classroom. They may consist of additional strategies and support provided to the teaching team by an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant, Behavioral Consultant, School Social Worker or other such individual who has experience and education in supporting children with challenging behaviors. This individual would observe in the classroom, meet with the teaching team to offer suggestions and develop a plan, observe again and reflect with the teaching team on progress in a continuous cycle until the child's/children's behaviors become more appropriate. They would also likely meet with parents to understand more about the child and the parent's insight into their behavior, review the classroom concerns and share ideas that could be used at home to support the efforts of the teaching team. This work would be done in conjunction with the Early Childhood Specialist who is responsible for assisting the teaching team in adopting developmentally appropriate classroom strategies that form the base of the Pyramid approach. See the Early Childhood Specialist section of this manual for additional information. In addition to direct classroom support, the behavioral specialist might also support the Strong Beginnings program by providing professional learning opportunities and other resources for Strong Beginnings staff or families in the areas of social-emotional learning and behavior,

Children in Strong Beginnings classrooms may also receive needed extra support when a third member is added to the teaching team. This may be necessary in those classrooms where children's general developmental level, lack of self-help skills such as toilet learning, or challenging behaviors require ongoing, additional support. The focus of the additional teaching staff member may be on providing general classroom assistance, supporting one or more children with severe challenging behaviors, or a combination of both at different times of the school day or year. This additional staff would allow for the provision of a wider range of developmentally appropriate activities to be implemented in the classroom while keeping children under close supervision rather than having the third adult focusing on getting children to comply with inappropriate expectations. They may also allow the Lead Teacher to have additional time to connect with families around child and family issues impacting the classroom and home.

## **Family Supports**

Family supports focus on supporting Strong Beginnings families with resources and information needed to deal with unmet basic needs and/or family issues. Family support specialists, whether Family Liaisons serving preschool aged children or School Social Workers or counselors serving a broader range of Prek-12 families, facilitate and support communication between the home and school to maximize children's opportunities for success. This is often done through conversations and meetings with individual families who are seeking support in dealing with child or broader family issues, including meeting basic needs, that generally impact family well-being, they may also support all families with information around child development/parenting and available community resources. In order to work effectively with families, it is paramount that the family support specialists are able to build strong relationships with both the Strong Beginnings families and staff. It is only when trusting relationships have been developed that support will be welcome and utilized. For this reason, it is necessary that the family support specialist have a strong connection to the culture and the community of the Strong Beginnings classroom rather than appearing as an outsider. While education and experience in both early childhood development and education and social work are important for this position, the ability to build relationships and connect with the members of the school community seem stronger requirements. Each family support specialist who does not have a background in social work should have the ability to connect with one in case advice is needed on a difficult and sensitive issue such as spousal abuse.

The Strong Beginnings families should see the family support specialist as a seamless partner in the provision of Strong Beginnings services. Teachers, the family support specialist, site program administrators and everyone else who is an integral part of the Strong Beginnings program at each site should be presented to families as part of the same team, all working together to improve child and family outcomes for those in Strong Beginnings. It is important that families understand who the family support specialist is, their role in Strong Beginnings and view them as an integral part of the team. The following methods should be incorporated to do this:

- The family support specialist should be mentioned, introduced and their role summarized in any welcome letter sent to families about the Strong Beginnings program.
- The Family Handbook should also mention and introduce the family support specialist and explain their role.
- The family support specialist should be present and introduced during Back-to-School night, Curriculum night, welcome picnic or other events that might be held to welcome and acquaint families with the Strong Beginnings Program.
- The family support specialist and their role should be mentioned at home visits.

- Classroom newsletters and other such materials should include some information from/about the family support specialist.
- Bulletin Boards with staff pictures, etc. should include the family support specialist.

The specific roles and responsibilities of the family support specialist, in addition to meeting individually with families who might need additional support, include the following:

- Participating in the application and enrollment of families interested in Strong Beginnings.
- Following up with families, whether offered enrollment in Strong Beginnings or not, who indicate unmet basic needs on their Strong Beginnings applications.
- Participating in welcoming families to the program.
- Attending selected Home Visits and/or Parent Teacher Conferences where their support or input would be valuable.
- Greeting families at drop off/pick up time or riding the bus to say hello to families as children board and depart.
- Plan content, invite families and otherwise support family engagement activities and events.
- Initiate or support communication between the program and families on child related issues such as absenteeism.
- Support the teacher and family by providing information and perspectives to both for children with challenging behaviors in classrooms where no behavior specialist is available.
- Dealing with suddenly emerging needs that impact the well-being of Strong Beginnings families.
- Other roles seen as mutually helpful by the classroom staff and family support specialist. A Roles and Responsibilities form that details the work of each member of the Strong Beginnings team with families should be used for this purpose.

In mid-August of each program year, the ISD is required to submit a child/family support plan that details the supports that will be available in each classroom and the rationale for those decisions. It will also require documentation of the funding levels used to provide the classroom supports. It is expected that about 17% of the funding for each child in Strong Beginnings will be used for these supports. Each child in Strong Beginnings will ideally be supported at 1.5 times the allocation of a child in GSRP and half of this additional allocation or 17% of the total allocation is to be used for needed child/family supports that will put children and families on a trajectory of success throughout their school years and beyond. Information will be collected by CCRESA using a SurveyMonkey tool. The following details will assist in developing a yearly plan for child/family supports.

## **General Information**

- If the plan does not include funding for the provision of support, resources and information to parents who need assistance with meeting basic needs or family issues, there must be an explanation of how and who will provide this assistance. The support may be provided by the teaching staff, site director or someone else who is not being funded by child/family support dollars, but it must be provided.
- Staff to provide child and family supports may be hired/contracted by the ISD/RESA and/or the subcontractor.
- Although not typical, it may be possible that one person has the background necessary to fulfill more than one of the child/family support positions. An individual might be able to serve in a part time capacity as both the third adult in the classroom and the Family Liaison for example. This is permitted if the plan makes it clear that the individual is qualified for both positions and the positions are structured so that one person may fulfill both.
- All SB sites in an ISD/RESA do not need to provide the same child and family supports. All site plans should be developed collaboratively by the ISD/RESA and the site and signed off on by the site
- It is permissible to split funding for any Child/Family support positions between the dollars specifically included for that purpose and general classroom funding. The costs of a third adult in the classroom, for example, might be split between Child/Family support and general classroom funding. Each of the options for Child/Family supports may also be funded entirely by general classroom funds.
- Funding for any position may include a reasonable/proportional amount of time and funds for staff to attend general staff meetings, supervisory meetings, team planning, professional development and the like as well as for time and materials/expenses necessary for direct child and family support.
- Plans may be amended once during the course of the school year with the agreement of the site, ISD/RESA and CCRESA Implementation Team. ISDs/RESAs should submit an amended plan that includes the signature of the site director, the proposed change and a rationale for the change.

## **School Social Worker/Counselor**

- Need agreement indicating what percentage of time/number of hours school social worker/counselor will be supporting SB classroom and the amount of compensation for this time.
- SB may pay for a proportional percentage of general meeting/supervisory time. For example, if SB pays for 15% of a staff members time, 15% of the time they spend in general staff or supervisory meetings can be charged to the grant.
- The agreement shall include information on the responsibilities of the social worker/counselor. They may include:

- Supporting families with resources and information needed to deal with unmet needs or family issues whether specific to the child enrolled in SB, other family members or to improve general family well-being.
- Assisting teaching staff with strategies to meet the individual needs of children in the SB classroom, including development of behavior support plans.
- Assisting teaching staff with strategies to meet the social-emotional needs of the broader group of children enrolled in SB.
- Facilitating and strengthening communication between the school and the family so that the children’s opportunities for success are maximized.
- Providing parent engagement activities in the area of social-emotional learning.
- Providing professional learning opportunities for SB staff in the area of social-emotional learning and behavior.
- Any social work functions required by the IEPs of children enrolled in SB or generally performed as part of the evaluation process for special education for a child enrolled in SB must continue to be funded by Special Education.
- If the social worker/counselor will be providing the teacher with classroom behavior/teaching strategies a plan for communication/coordination with the early childhood specialist must be included in the agreement.

### **Early Childhood Mental Health or Behavioral Consultant**

- Individuals serving in this role must have appropriate educational and experiential background (i.e., endorsement, coursework, experience with young children in a group setting). A minimum of a bachelor’s degree in a related area (early childhood education, child development, psychology, social work etc.) is required for this position.
- Need an agreement specifying approximate hours per week that consultant will work with SB, total hours contracted for and the hourly pay for this work.
- The agreement shall include information on the responsibilities of the early childhood mental health/behavioral consultant. They may include:
  - Assisting teaching staff with strategies to meet the individual needs of children in the SB classroom, including development of behavior support plans.
  - Assisting teaching staff with strategies to meet the social-emotional needs of the broader group of children enrolled in SB.
  - Providing professional learning opportunities for SB staff in the area of social-emotional learning and behavior.
  - Facilitating and strengthening communication between the school and the family so that similar behavioral strategies are used in school and at home.

- Providing parent engagement activities in the area of social-emotional/behavioral learning.
- Supporting families with resources and information needed to deal with the social emotional development of their child enrolled in SB.
- The agreement should include a plan for communication/coordination between the behavioral consultant and the ECS

### **Third adult in classroom**

- Individuals serving in this role must at a minimum meet the licensing qualifications for child care center staff. Programs may require higher levels of training and experience if they wish. A maximum of two consistent individuals may share this role.
- Need an agreement specifying number of hours per week the individual will work and the amount paid per hour or per school year. The agreement may include an appropriate number of paid hours for professional learning and/or staff supervision/planning/meetings. Benefits may be provided and should be included in cost estimates.
- The agreement should include information about the responsibilities of the third adult(s). The individual may be used for general classroom support, to shadow a child/children with behavioral challenges or a combination of both.
- A plan indicating the number of hours and times per day the individual(s) will be in the classroom. If the plan varies across the year (more assistance in the fall, for example) include that information in the plan. Indicate how the adults will share the hours if there will be two consistent adults utilized in the plan.
- Indicate how the third adult(s) will learn about the classroom curriculum, procedures and have time for planning with the rest of the classroom teaching staff.

### **Family Liaison**

- Individuals serving in this role must have a background/experience in child and family studies, child development, early childhood education, social work or a related field. A bachelor's degree is strongly preferred. The ability to build relationships with adults, knowledge of child development and a connection to the culture and community of the SB classroom(s) they are serving are paramount in a successful Family Liaison.
- A Family Liaison is most successful if embedded within one center where they serve multiple classrooms. If this is not possible, a Family Liaison may serve more than one program.
- On average, a Family Liaison is expected to serve about six classrooms. However, those FLs serving more than one center and traveling between them or serving families with a high degree of poverty and complex needs, especially in areas where community resources are scarce, may serve fewer classrooms.

- The agreement shall include information on the responsibilities of the Family Liaison. They may include
  - Supporting families with resources and information needed to deal with unmet needs or family issues whether specific to the child enrolled in SB, other family members or to improve general family well-being. (This is mandatory for all Family Liaisons)
  - Facilitating and strengthening communication between the school and the family so that the children's opportunities for success are maximized.
  - Providing child development related parent engagement activities.
  - Providing information on community resources to all families
  - Supporting teachers with information about children in their classrooms that may help the teachers better understand and plan for those children. (i.e. someone's mom just had a baby or impact of trauma on young children)

All Family Liaisons should be supervised by/have access to a social worker for necessary support in the role. Funds to support this supervision/assistance may be covered by the grant.