



Strengthening Family and Community Partnership and Engagement: Using a Culturally Responsive, Anti-Bias Lens

Family Engagement Matters for Meeting Children’s Holistic Development

There are many aspects of children’s development, such as physical health, ability to manage emotions and behaviors, and knowledge and skills that support language, literacy, and math. Children’s development are impacted by their learning contexts and their identities, such as their age, gender, personality, race, and ethnicity, including their cultural background, history, and language. There are many aspects of children’s development that families and early care and education (ECE) professionals must actively support.¹ These domains of development and learning include:

Physical Health and Safety: Children need adequate care to meet the standards of growth and physical development, such as healthy weight and receipt of recommended vaccinations, which are necessary for children’s development. Being physically healthy and safe is fundamental for achieving other development and learning outcomes.

Emotional and Behavioral Development: Positive emotional health and wellbeing support children’s overall mental health, including a positive sense of self, as well as the ability to cope with stressful situations, reduce emotional arousal, overcome fears, and tolerate frustrations and obstacles. Other emotional and behavioral skills, such as attention, motivation, and persistence, are instrumental in helping children to regulate and attend to information for their overall development and learning.

Social Development: Children’s social development includes their ability to cooperate, share, and get along with others, engage in positive behaviors such as sympathy, empathy, concern for others’ wellbeing, and perspective-taking. Other social development competencies include having a positive racial and cultural identity, which is linked to children’s positive sense of self, academic competence, and strong coping skills against discrimination and bias, and reduction in risky behaviors.²

Cognitive Development: Children’s cognitive development include skills in language and communication and other pre-academic-oriented areas such as literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills that are needed for school, and reading, mathematics, writing, among other things, that are needed for proficiency in success in school and life outcomes.

1 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17226/21868>

2 University of Pittsburgh School of Education Race and Early Childhood Collaborative. (2016). *Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education: Understanding PRIDE in Pittsburgh*. University of Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh, PA.

Families and other caregivers, including ECE professionals (e.g., teachers, family advocates, home visitors), are essential to ensure children’s physical health and safety, emotional, behavioral, social, and cognitive competence are supported. Meeting children and their families’ unique needs is critical, especially for those from historically marginalized communities. Some of these historically marginalized communities include Black/African American, Latine, Indigenous, and Asian communities. Families and ECE professionals must engage in authentic partnerships in the service of meeting children’s needs. As stated by the Head Start National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, family engagement “is about building relationships with families that support family well-being, strong relationships between parents and their children, and ongoing learning and development for both parents and children” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011, p. 1). Family engagement is a two-way street, meaning that it is about families and professionals working together on behalf of the family’s goals for themselves and their children. The family brings a unique perspective about their culture, language, assets, and capacity, as well as practices they engage in with and on behalf of their children. At the same time, early education professionals also bring their knowledge, beliefs, and practices to families, and each child is provided with an individual experience. Thus, both families and professionals must communicate with each other using their viewpoint to support and meet the child’s needs in the many contexts they live, grow, and learn.

Iruka and colleagues (2014) define culturally responsive, anti-bias family engagement as an approach that “incorporates the cultural knowledge, experiences, and communication styles of diverse students and their families, and acknowledges the social injustices, inequalities, and prejudices these families face” (p. 1).

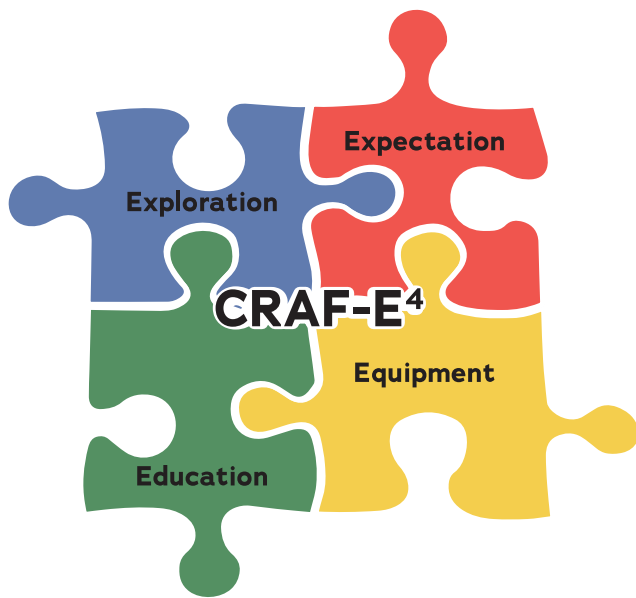
Culturally Responsive, Anti-Bias Family Engagement: Alignment with Vermont’s Guiding Principles

The recognition of the importance of family engagement and support and authentically partnering with families requires valuing and using the different homes, cultures, and experiences each child and their families bring to the ECE program and setting. This recognition is important to child and family development and support, as recognized by Vermont’s Early Learning Guiding Principle. This principle underscores the importance of celebrating and nurturing the strengths of children’s and families’ diversity “...rooted in their unique culture, heritage, language, beliefs, and circumstances.” This requires that ECE professionals have an anti-bias, culturally responsive lens to engaging with and supporting diverse families and children.

Iruka and colleagues (2014) define culturally responsive, anti-bias family engagement as an approach that “incorporates the cultural knowledge, experiences, and communication styles of diverse students and their families, and acknowledges the social injustices, inequalities, and prejudices these families face” (p. 1). For ECE professionals to meaningfully partner and collaborate with families, they must engage culturally responsive, anti-bias through the 4Es, also called CRAF-4Es, which include:

- **Expectation** (i.e., expecting the best from families).
- **Education** (i.e., share information with families how they can support themselves and their children).
- **Exploration** (i.e., exploring ways to partner with families using their assets, including their knowledge, beliefs, practices, and cultural roots, traditions, and norms).
- **Equipment** (i.e., providing supports, opportunities, and affirmation for families to advocate for themselves and their children).





These CRAF-4Es line up with Vermont’s Guiding Principles as it relates to families, which emphasizes “promoting a sense of belonging, supporting positive social relationships, and enabling families... to gain the competence and confidence to positively impact the lives of each and every child...” Specifically, the guiding principles make note of important ways to engage with and support families:

- Respect and support [families] as experts, partners, and decision-makers in their children’s learning and development.
- Pledge to be open, genuine, reflective, and respectful listeners and communication partners.
- Build caring communities that are accepting of differences and foster a sense of belonging.
- Promote understanding of the importance of inclusive and effective early childhood experiences.

We will take each of these guiding principles, line them up with the CRAF-4Es, and provide some examples about how ECE professionals can engage in these practices and self-reflect on additional ways they can bring the principles to life in their work and life. The outcome of actively engaging in these anti-bias, culturally responsive family engagement principles is to **build equitable access to opportunities, supports, and services, ensuring equitable outcomes** for children and their families. In this brief, equity is defined as making sure that all children and families have what they need to succeed in meeting their goals and removing any barriers in their way to reaching their goals.

Vermont Guiding Principles in Action

Pledge to be open, genuine, reflective, and respectful listeners and communication partners.

This principle aligns with the CRAF-4Es: **Exploration**. To partner with families, ECE professionals must be open to asking families about their hopes, dreams, and goals for themselves and children. Exploration means that families must be asked what their goals are for themselves and their children and how ECE professionals can be supportive in meeting these goals. Most ECE organizations and entities do a family needs assessment; however, programs should find out what families know, do, and have that support their family and children. ECE professionals should always ask families what they are doing to meet their children’s needs and build off familial practices based on families knowledge, beliefs, traditions, and norms. A true partnership between families and ECE professional can only happen through respect and trust. This partnership is critical for racially and ethnically minority families whose culture, experiences, and practices are often ignored or not valued.³

Self-inquiry Questions: How can you make sure that your program is ensuring equitable experiences for all families? That is, how do you make sure that your program is partnering with families based on what families, know, do and bring? Do you ask every family to tell you about themselves every few months? What questions do you ask them to learn more about them? Do you ask families what parts of the programs or services are working best for them? Whose voices are not heard often about programs and services, and how can you improve their voices being heard?

3 Iruka, I. U., Winn, D.-Marie C., Kingsley, Susan J., & Yannick J. O. (2011). Links between parent-teacher relationships and kindergarteners’ social skills: Do child ethnicity and family income matter? *The Elementary School Journal*, 111(3), 387-408. <https://doi.org/10.1086/657652>

Respect and support [families] as experts, partners, and decision-makers in the learning and development of their children.

This principle aligns with the CRAF-4Es: **Expectation**. Studies show that parent and educator high expectations are important for children’s learning competence and academic success. When professionals hold families to high expectations, families will meet and surpass those expectations. The expectation that ECE professionals have must be connected to families goals for themselves and their families. The ECE professionals and families need to work together to figure out how families can meet the goals in the way that considers families’ knowledge and skills, as well as the time, resources, and supports they have. For example, if parents have a goal for their child to enjoy reading, then ECE professionals and parents can come up with a plan that fits how comfortable parents are with reading, other family members or caregivers that can help, the family routines that can support reading, and figuring out how to find books that interest the child. The ECE professional and family should have a routine to check in to see if the plan worked and how to adjust it.



Research shows that the more parents know, the more they are likely to do. For example, parents who know how to keep their children safe and healthy, such as getting immunizations, using car seats/seat belts, and keeping poisonous chemicals away, are likely to follow this information. Also, the more information parents have about what can support their children’s development and learning, such as brain development and early intervention services, the more they are likely to use this information.⁴ Thus, ECE professionals are critical in sharing important information with families by translating information in a way that families can use to support their own practices and their children’s development and learning. For example, ECE professionals can provide information on what is “quality” education and how they can find high quality programs and services that meet their needs and their children’s needs. Likewise, ECE providers can share information with families on the benefits of bilingualism and the important role that using and building children’s home language development can have on academic success.

Self-inquiry questions: As an ECE professional, what do you expect of families in supporting their child’s health and safety and emotional, behavioral, social, and competence skills? Do you see parents as their child’s first teacher? If not, why? What past experience or bias may influence how you approach family engagement? Are the expectations of families based on your values rather than families’ values (e.g., parents must read a book before bedtime or all family members eat at the table at the same time)? How are you making sure that your expectations are aligned with families’ goals and using all of the knowledge, skills, and resources including available time that families have.

Promote understanding of the importance of inclusive and effective early childhood experiences.

This principle aligns with the CRAF-4Es: **Education**. While it is important to ask families about their goals and dreams, the partnership between families and ECE professionals is a two-way street. Information should always be shared with families, especially information supporting children’s positive development and learning.

Self-inquiry Questions: Who do you share the latest research information with? For example, do you share with all families or select families? Are you selective with which families you share information? Is there a reason for this? Are there unstated “rules” of who gets to access certain resources and supports (e.g., those who have a job vs. unemployed, two-parent vs. one-parent household)? How does the information shared build families’ networks, knowledge, and resources to meet their families’ goals and children’s development and learning?

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4 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/21868>

Build caring communities that are accepting of differences and foster a sense of belonging.

This principle aligns with the CRAF-4Es: **Equipment** (formerly Empowerment). The majority of family engagement programs and services are focused on empowerment, which helps parents feel confident and strong in advocating for themselves, their child, and the community. Empowerment also means giving one power or authority, which is not aligned with the principle of partnership and respect. Nevertheless, the family engagement goal is to ensure that all families, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, social class, or any other demographic, feel connected to the ECE community. Each family must feel valued and unique and contribute to the quality of the ECE environment regardless of who they are and what they bring. ECE professionals, programs, and organizations must create an environment of belonging, making sure that families have the knowledge, resources, and tools to do their best and address any problems in their way.

Self-inquiry Questions: How do you know you have created an environment that all families, **including children of diverse** racial, ethnic, language, disability, and socioeconomic status backgrounds are made to feel like they belong? How do you make sure that you and your program and organizations are welcoming and make every family feel like they are important, valued, and belong?



Summary

Families are critical for children’s healthy development and school and life success. To truly support families’ goals for themselves and their children, ECE professionals must partner and support families in a way that builds trust and a teamwork attitude. This is best done through finding out families’ knowledge, skills, and resources, including their culture, traditions, and language. This means that ECE professionals must work with families to identify their goals for themselves and their children and develop a plan with families based on their knowledge, skills, and resources. ECE professionals must also ensure that they are providing different ways to strengthen families’ knowledge, skills, and resources. To best partner and support families, especially families from historically marginalized communities, ECE professionals must continue to engage in self-inquiry to ensure biases are not impacting partnership with families.

All families deserve the right to meet their goals and support their children’s development and learning.

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This resource was developed by the Children’s Equity Project for the Vermont Child Development Division and funded by the Professional Development Grant.

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