

How Coaching Boosts Family Engagement

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Credit: Alfred & Emma Photography

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This brief draws out three lessons from a family engagement coaching model. The Family and Community Engagement Technical Assistance (FACE-TA) project offered individualized technical assistance to Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) sites in California. From 2015 to 2018, the project supported two cohorts of Early Head Start grantees and their child care partners. The initiative was funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation and implemented by Save the Children U.S. Programs.



Credit: Gisela Martinez

“We’re so busy with the day-to-day of a comprehensive program. Some of this seems like it should be common sense, but it really takes a coach and cohort to get to this point.”

- EHS-CCP participant

Background

Research clearly shows the lasting effects of early developmental experiences on children's later success and well-being; however, the early childhood field struggles to provide consistent high-quality care and education across a fragmented delivery system. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the programs for young children age 0–3. Although a number of funding streams exist to support young children and families—from home-visiting programs, to child care subsidies, to Early Head Start—these programs rarely serve the number of children who qualify to participate, and are regulated by different funding mechanisms and quality standards. In 2013, the federal Administration for Children and Families took a bold step to bridge gaps in services by creating the Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP) initiative. The EHS-CCP grants aim to incorporate the strengths of Early Head Start into other child care settings and enable more children to receive quality, comprehensive services.

Bringing together these two types of early childhood providers can be difficult. For technical assistance in a collaborative to be effective, participants need to recognize that there are other systems, relationships, and established practices that shape how different organizations work together and with families and communities. There are also different resources, expertise, and organizational cultures that need to be considered.

The Heising-Simons Foundation created a technical assistance project for California's EHS-CCP grantees and partners to support their efforts to better engage families and communities in young children's development. Front and center of this project, called Family and Community Engagement Technical Assistance (FACE-TA), was a coaching model implemented by Save the Children U.S. Programs.

This is the story of how the EHS-CCP grantees and their partners collaborated to strengthen their family engagement processes.

Reflections on a Public-Private Partnership

FACE-TA presents an effective model of public-private partnership. With a long-term commitment to grantmaking focused on family engagement as a strategy for enhancing children's early academic outcomes, the Heising-Simons Foundation saw the new federal EHS-CCP program as an opportunity to increase the effectiveness of the effort by layering on support for effective family and community engagement practices.

The foundation was aware that tools had been developed by the Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement to support grantees to make family engagement systemic, integrated, and sustained. Communication with the field, however, revealed that programs might know of the tools but they were not being widely used. By investing in a technical assistance model that was customized for each EHS-CCP team and that made use of the tools developed with federal funds, the foundation was able to help teams use the resources as they were intended, and develop new ways to work with families and communities in service of stronger family and child outcomes.

Project

The project began with a common structure—the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework—in order to elicit participant perspectives for working with families and to arrive at a common understanding for listening, supporting, and engaging them. Coaches supported Early Head Start grantee/partner teams to undertake a baseline assessment using the Head Start Markers of Progress tool. Then coaches co-created with each grantee/partner team a plan for individualized technical assistance.



Credit: Gisela Martinez

Technical Assistance Components

- FACE-TA coaches provide tailored support during site visits over a 12-month period.
- Statewide team meetings bookend the project.
- Coaches check in with teams regularly via conference calls and email.
- Coaches organize regional cluster meetings for new learning and peer support.
- Webinars explore topics of interest to teams.

Lesson One: Be intentional.

We learned that everything relating to the FACE-TA project must be intentional. Understanding “why” is just as important as identifying goals, and it helps the grantees and partners become more invested in the process and outcome. Take the case of the Merced County partnership: the “why” all began with data that showed what families wanted.

The Merced County Office of Education Head Start (EHS grantee) and one of its family child care (FCC) partners explored parent survey data and learned that families wanted more information about community resources. The participants identified strengthening language and literacy as a hook for meeting this parent need, focusing on what they could do to connect families to the local library and other resources. Many families (including the FCC partner) had never visited the local library. The program participants and families spent a Saturday together at the library, obtaining library cards and learning about literacy development opportunities. To extend the literacy focus beyond the FCC home, the EHS-CCP joined forces with the local schools superintendent and adult school to create community lending libraries, birdhouse-like structures where people can take a book and/or leave one. The first of 17 community lending libraries was installed outside the FCC home in October 2018.



Credit: Lourdes Parra

Lesson Two: Activate organizational change.

Defining roles and responsibilities at the outset helped coaches and team members identify how they each contribute to the process. This assisted in promoting unity, communication, and a sense of empowerment. By the midway point, participants were experiencing a shift in what engagement actually felt like. Each person began to see herself/himself as having a greater capacity to activate change, instead of just talking about it. Co-creation was occurring across hierarchies. This is where engagement began to be seen and felt in both the relationships and inner workings of the programs, contributing to a renewed organizational culture.

Just doing something with families was becoming less and less the approach with the participants. Instead, they focused on “this needs to be done because we see the results and they speak for themselves!” And those results were especially satisfying, as evidenced by the following story from MAAC.

Both the MAAC Child Development Program (EHS grantee) and Children’s Paradise (child care partner) are large, well-established organizations in San Diego County. The partner was particularly skilled at community engagement and bringing families into the program, and more challenged with keeping families engaged once enrolled. Together, MAAC and Children’s Paradise looked at survey data to understand why family attendance was low and they made three changes: (1) they identified topics from the survey that the parents were most interested in learning about; (2) they changed the name from “meetings” to “socials”; and (3) they modified the frequency from once a month to once a quarter and combined the socials with other big events. With these changes, participation grew; there was an 80 percent increase in attendance during the Back to School Night Social. Parents are now planning future socials and asking for the volunteer sign-up sheet. The Policy Council is also considering activities it can support during the socials. Teachers are catching the enthusiasm and participating with renewed energy. There has been a real cultural shift for families and staff at all levels of the organization.

Lesson Three: Unlearning is part of the process.

Shifting mindsets and “unlearning” was key to the success of the partnerships. The adage “you can’t teach a dog new tricks” was proven wrong. Participants had many “aha” moments as they began to take risks, truly listen to one another, and unlearn past so-called engagement practices.

For example, participants realized that inviting families to a potluck planned by teachers was not an example of family engagement, nor was simply passing out information on community organizations an example of community engagement. They learned that listening to what families wanted and co-creating opportunities for family and community engagement may feel messy and take more time, but in the end, families had more positive and helpful experiences. Kidango, Inc., illustrated this at two levels: unlearning routines and relationships between program leadership and teachers, and between teachers and families.

Both administrators from Kidango, Inc. (EHS grantee), and the program director of the Decoto Child Care Center (partner) reflected that they were used to taking the initiative and planning all that would be implemented in their programs. FACE-TA challenged these leaders to share power. It started first with engaging family advocates and teachers to share their vision of family and community engagement, and then empowering them to engage families to explore the same. As a result, family and community engagement activities became driven by the teachers, advocates, and families rather than by administrators. Program leadership learned that they could provide structure, but that they needed to let go of the details and allow teachers and parents to create their own engagement activities. When they did this, participation soared.



Credit: Lourdes Parra

Conclusion

The FACE-TA project taught us that sustainability of authentic family and community engagement values and practices can occur when people come together and work with intention, wrestle with uncomfortable conversations, address needed organizational-level changes, and unlearn old attitudes and behaviors. This means that participants have to be vulnerable and uncomfortable with the process of change. Organizations willing to support these approaches should be prepared to unpack layers of history, systems, and relationships. They also need to be willing to set aside time to do this work and establish processes for reflection. By doing so, a new path toward deeper and more intentional engagement may emerge that will become part of the organization for years to come.



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