

Using the ECIPs in Parent and Family Engagement



Introduction

Families are the primary influence on their children's learning and development.

"Children come to early childhood programs with their own unique set of experiences. They are shaped by the daily routines of the home, including meals, play, naps, storytelling, and watching television. These activities embody what families believe to be important and what they want children to learn." (Lopez 2009, 2)

Families have values, beliefs, customs and languages that they pass on to their children. The social and cultural context in which each child is being raised is a core consideration when implementing developmentally appropriate practice.

The field of early care and education has long recognized the importance of building partnerships with the parents and family members of the children attending early childhood programs (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). When teachers and providers work closely with families, the children benefit. All adults are striving towards mutually derived goals that are in the best interest of the child.

"Children benefit when parents and family members get involved in their learning and development. This conclusion is supported by decades of research that suggests that family engagement is positively linked to children's outcomes in preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary grades." (Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, and Lloyd 2013, ES-1)

The primary goal of the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) is to improve the outcomes for young children by enhancing programs, teacher interactions, and individualized planning. Parent and family engagement related to the ECIPs is an essential element to achieving this goal.

The Difference between *Education* and *Engagement* with Parents and Families

When planning for ways to share the ECIPs with parents and families, early childhood professionals distinguish between parent/family education and parent/family engagement:

- Education involves sharing information.
- Engagement involves building relationships and engaging in open communication and on-going two-way information sharing.

Engaging with Parents and Families about the ECIPs

The Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) are meant to be shared with parents and families. Teachers and providers use the information in the Introduction to the ECIPs to explain the purposes and importance of early learning standards. Communicating with parents about the specific indicators in the ECIPs increases their understanding of developmental expectations, of ways of looking at child progress and at the next steps for curriculum planning. Most importantly, teachers and providers use the indicators with families to identify opportunities to support their child's continued development at home.

Effective teachers and providers identify multiple opportunities in which to share the ECIPs related to the care and education of the children including:

- At enrollment
- In parent/family and teacher meetings and events
- In on-going documentation about the program and what the children are doing (such as in newsletters, blogs, family materials, and communications)
- In individualized portfolios (with documentation such as observation notes, photographs, and work samples related to the ECIPs)
- In parent/family/teacher conferences where children's progress is discussed and next steps are planned

Teachers and providers have valuable knowledge about child development and curricular practices as well as assessment information to share with parents and families. The most effective way to approach educating families is to do so from a collaborative perspective. Rather than communicating from an expert point of view, effective teachers and providers do so in a reciprocal, partnering approach. Taking a genuine interest in learning more about children, they invite parents and families to teach them about their children. Effective teachers and providers understand that parents know their children better than anyone does and they recognize and emphasize family members' unique experience and knowledge. Together, they share information that best supports the child's continued growth and well-being.

Engagement goes beyond traditional ways of thinking about education. Teachers and providers work to build a strong partnership with each family and extend themselves in warm, welcoming, and accepting ways. Ongoing, reciprocal communication, based on openness and respect, creates many different opportunities for family participation in the program and at home. Inviting parents and family members to join in decision-making regarding the child's experience at the program, ensures that the program and service meet the needs and expectations of parents and families. Empowerment is a part of engagement.

A high level of family engagement is an indicator of a high quality early childhood program.

“When children’s progress can be tied to classroom activities and home activities, development and learning are strongly reinforced and further family involvement is inspired. Discussing changes in a child’s readiness skills can open a dialogue about the child’s strengths and any areas of potential concern for families or teachers. Then families and teachers can work in partnership to ensure that children continue to receive appropriate instruction and related experiences to further their development.” (Snow NAEYC)

Conclusion

Families of young children in Minnesota will benefit from the information in the ECIPs so that they can better understand their children's development and communicate more fully with the teachers and providers in the early childhood programs that their children attend. As they work in partnership with teachers and providers, parents will see high quality early childhood practices in action.

Family engagement is an essential component of successful implementation of the early learning standards. Teachers and providers strive to know families well. They recognize and celebrate the cultural heritage and language of families and respect their values and approaches to parenting. Connecting what they do with the ECIPs to the needs of the children creates opportunities for strong family partnerships. Teachers and providers who use the ECIPs with families have new ways to communicate openly with families, welcome their input, and work together for the benefit of their children.

References

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