

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Children who are successful in school have many healthy interconnections between family, school, and community. Parent 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 involvement in a variety of ways - from partnering with parents to establish child development goals to sharing anecdotes of children's learning.

Communication and strong relationships are the keys to successful parent involvement. The purpose of frequent and informal interactions is to strengthen the connections between home and school. Staff should use an interested and unhurried manner when talking with parents. Staff and parents 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 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 meetings, workshops, and serving on the local and/or the Great Start Collaborative school readiness committee representing Strong Beginnings;
- Serving on the local or ISD team 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 newsletter.

Teaching and/or Family Partnership staff support parent involvement at group or parent meetings by:

- Providing child care;
- Arranging transportation;
- Scheduling events at times convenient for parents;
- Orienting parents to the depth and breadth of the role of parents at meetings;
- Making reminder phone calls;

- Distributing agendas or other materials ahead of time;
- Supporting parent-to-parent communication;
- Addressing needs of non-custodial parents;
- Addressing language, culture, and work barriers; and
- Demonstrating that parents' contributions are valued by following up appropriately.

Staff members support parent 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 advocate, 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, 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 ahead of time;

Responsibilities are offered that match volunteer's interests, skills, schedules and facilitate children's development; and

Parents are invited to participate in special events such as field trips or program evaluation efforts.

Program Requirements

Advisory Committees

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

Each Intermediate School District (ISD) is also required to have Strong Beginnings parent representation on the regional Great Start Collaborative (GSC) Parent Coalition; working with other committed parents to support early childhood practices in the community. These Strong Beginnings parents, in turn, act as liaisons to local Parent Advisory Committees, sharing ideas and activities in person, virtually (e.g., Skype) or through emailed reports. A proportional representation of parents 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, Parent Liaisons, 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 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. During home visits and parent/teacher conferences, staff:

- Seek input from parents about the program and its relationship to the child's development;
- Seek input from parents about how they are supporting the child's development at home;
- Partner with parents in setting appropriate child development goals;
- Assist parents 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 and Family Liaisons 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 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 and the Family Liaison should, if possible, complete the home visit together. 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 and child, family pet(s), home, etc.;
- Leaving photos of staff and classroom;
- Discussing transportation to and from the program;
- Discussing parents' interests and hobbies;
- Discussing the importance of parent involvement and the various opportunities;
- Sharing program philosophy and curriculum information;
- Reviewing results of developmental screening;
- Discussing goals the parents 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 with families;
- Setting a date for the next meeting of the parent(s) and Family Liaison; and
- Discussing the required enrollment paperwork.

Upon arrival, appropriate introductions are made, and other family members are included in conversation. The parent is asked for suggestions for an appropriate area within the home to meet. Staff members partner with the parent(s) 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 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 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 is generally helpful to include the Family Liaison in these visits when

possible. Throughout the visit, staff looks for opportunities to encourage parents 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 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 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 to ask questions and/or voice concerns.

To conclude, the visit is summarized with the parent, with information provided about future parent 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.

Parent/Teacher Conferences

Parent/teacher conferences should be held in the fall and spring, and when requested by parents. Conferences are scheduled to meet the mutual needs of parents 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 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' understanding of their child's development. Staff share curriculum strategies for supporting children's development and discuss with parents ways that they can support learning at home using household materials and within ordinary household routines. Staff invite observations and answer questions from parents about the program. The conference concludes with ways the family can participate in the program. Staff availability for phone calls is reinforced.

While it may not be possible for the Family Liaison to participate in every parent/teacher conference, they should attend those they can, even if it is just to greet the parent.

Family Partnership Process

Current family support frameworks utilize a dynamic approach for engaging families that prioritizes relationships building, coaching, two-way communication, and partnerships to improve child and family outcomes. Differentiated and individualized services are based on identifying the types of family needs and interests. A tiered model of support where families who need and desire the most services receive the highest level of supports strengthens all families. As strong relationships are built, Family Liaisons can strategize with families, who then take the lead in setting and accomplishing their own goals. Family Liaisons can facilitate the connection to community resources and can help families advance goals that are important to them such as: improving family health; stabilizing housing situations; strengthening parenting skills, and improving parents' education, employment and financial stability. The Family Liaisons use this process to empower families to acquire the resources, skills, and sustained behavior changes necessary to attain their goals.

Strong Beginnings Family Partnership Process Plan

Each ISD must develop and implement a written, ISD-wide plan for the Family Partnership Process that includes the development of a Family Partnership Agreement, signed by the parent and the family advocate.

The written plan for the Family Partnership Process must detail the means through which it offers individualized family partnership services that:

- 1) Build strong, mutually respectful relationships with all families that serve as the foundation of trust for all other services;
- 2) Collaborate with families to identify interests, needs, and aspirations related to the family engagement outcomes described in the paragraph above;
- 3) Help families achieve identified desired individualized family engagement outcomes;
- 4) Establish and implement a Family Partnership Agreement process that is jointly developed and shared with parents in which staff and families review individual progress, revise goals, evaluate and track whether identified needs and goals are met, and adjust strategies on an ongoing basis, a minimum of three times per year.

The written plan will detail the processes for assessing family needs, and how necessary activities, such as referrals, and provision of direct services to support family well-being in areas including family safety, health, and economic stability will be completed. The ISD plan will also include the process the Family Liaison will use to coach families as appropriate in each of the following areas: supporting child learning and development; providing (when applicable) services and supports for children with disabilities, and fostering parental confidence and skills that positively impact the early learning and development of their children.

The plan should include a means of differentiating families into tiers based on interest and need, and include guidance on factors to consider in differentiating the tiers and types of support provided for each tier. For example, families in the first tier who need the least support might benefit from participation in group parenting sessions (using a research-based model) while those in a higher tier might be best supported through co-enrollment in an evidenced based home visiting program operating in the community. At a minimum each program should offer all parents the opportunity to participate in a group research-based parenting program and to meet in a group session with representatives of local agencies that support families in improving their well-being.

Since families may move from tier-to-tier quickly, with one change in employment, health status or the like, plans for this should be included and described in the process. While there is one full-time Family Liaison required for every three Strong Beginnings classrooms, staff and resources should be assigned based on the urgency and intensity of identified individual family needs and goals.

The Family Partnership Process must be initiated as early in the program year as possible and continue for as long as the family participates in Strong Beginnings, based on parent interest and need. Family Liaisons should generally meet individually with each family three times yearly, at their home or in a mutually agreeable location, to develop and review goals and implementation steps, modifying them as necessary based on progress and/or change in family circumstances.

Efforts should be made to ensure the Family Liaison's completed documentation of the initial planning conference includes a narrative description of the meeting, the date, and the signatures of the staff member(s) and the parent. Provide an opening for parents to receive support in the use of a parent led individualized goal setting process that explores their hopes for the future and increases their skills and confidence. Strong Beginnings can be an important link between child and adult services, helping to support two generations learning and thriving together. The two-generation framework should bridge the efforts of early childhood with other systems, such as adult education and workforce development that focus on parents in their role as breadwinners and heads of households as well as caregivers. This is critical as children's academic achievement is positively influenced by factors such as family stability, mother's education level, and family income as well as by high quality early childhood education.

Awardees are required to consistently use one Family Partnership Process throughout the ISD region. Head Start or other programs that already utilize Family Partnership Processes that include goal setting may be exempted from using the ISD selected model if it is different. ISDs are strongly encouraged to consider adoption of processes that are already being widely used in the region.

Staffing for the Family Partnership Process

Family Liaisons will implement the Family Partnership Process developed/selected by the ISD and document family contacts, goals, referrals and progress according to that process. They will often also be involved in other activities to build relationships and provide support including but not limited to the following:

- Recruiting of and conducting intake interviews with families enrolling in Strong Beginnings;
- Ensuring families with urgent basic needs receive necessary support in fulfilling them;
- Assisting with welcoming families into the program;
- Participating in home visits and/or parent/teacher conferences as appropriate with a member of the teaching staff;
- Supporting children and families struggling with separation issues in the classroom;
- Greeting families at drop off and pick up time or riding the bus that transports children in order to keep informed of any changes in family context or needs;
- Contacting families of any children with unexplained absences soon after the program begins each day;
- Planning, inviting parents to and supporting/delivering content at parent meetings and events;
- Offering a research-based group parenting support series at least once per year.

Staff must have a B.A. or B.S. degree in social work, family studies or a related field involving practicum experience with families. Each Family Liaison may work with no more than three classrooms totaling 42 families. All Family Liaisons using the ISD selected process should be hired, supervised, and provided with reflective supervision and professional development by one agency within the region. It may be the ISD, a community family services agency, Head Start, Home Visiting or similar agency already providing family partnership or similar services or any other appropriate agency.

The agency supporting Family Liaisons must maintain a proportionate ratio of at least one Family Liaison Supervisor for every 15 Family Liaisons. The Family Liaison Supervisor must possess an MSW or strongly related degree and should have knowledge of and/or experience with young children and frameworks of family support. They should have training in reflective supervision, be familiar with family-centered, strength-based models of family support and possess expertise in accessing resources for families. The Family Liaison Supervisor will be responsible for overseeing all aspects of the work of the Family Liaisons, including assuring data collection and aggregation, providing reflective supervision and professional development and meeting regularly with advocates to provide direction and support. In addition, the Family Liaison Supervisor will meet with the operator of each Strong Beginnings classroom prior to the beginning of each school year, and

as needed during the school year, to develop a common understanding of the role of the Family Liaison in each program and a strong working relationship between the program provider and agency supporting the Family Partnership Process. The Family Liaison Supervisor will also be a member of the Great Start Collaborative, School Readiness Advisory Group and ISD level Data Analysis Team.

The Early Childhood Contact or their designee will be responsible for bringing Family Liaison Supervisor(s), including those supporting Head Start and other community family partnership initiatives implementing other processes, together for regular meetings to insure implementation of high quality and consistent practice and plan for program improvement.

Parent Involvement in the Family Partnership Process

The Family Partnership Process is to be implemented on an individualized basis dependent upon family need and desire. While it is expected that families will meet with Family Liaisons at least three times per year, that frequency might be too high for some families and too low for other families, especially those facing challenging or emergency situations. Such families may even need daily support for some period of time, either in person or by phone or text. Family partnership meetings may occur at any location, home, Strong Beginnings center or community-based location that is mutually agreed upon by the parent and liaison. Settings selected should, however, allow for confidential discussion of personal family information. Efforts should also be made for the sessions to be held outside traditional working hours to better accommodate family needs. While every effort should be made to establish partnerships with all parents, families may not be required to participate as a condition of enrollment.

Coordination of Family Systems of Support

Families whose children may be at risk for school failure often have complex needs that cannot be met by one service agency. They are often best assisted by receiving multiple services. When there are multiple sources providing family support, thought needs to be given as to how this impacts the family. There should be strong coordination between any family support program (voluntary home visiting, court-ordered family support programs or preschool initiated service) and the Strong Beginnings Family Liaison including coordination of goals, dosage and duration of similar services and expected outcomes. In implementing the Family Partnership Process, any existing plans for the family made with other community agencies and availability of other community resources to address family needs, strengths, and goals, can and should be taken into consideration in order to avoid duplication

Each ISD's written plan for the Family Partnership Process should detail the process for service coordination. The plan should be respectful of the needs and desires of the family as well as the other programs that are supporting them.