



# Key Indicators of High-Quality Family Engagement

**For Quality Rating and  
Improvement Systems**



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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## Key Indicators of High-Quality Family Engagement for Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

This resource is intended for Quality Rating and Improvement Systems<sup>1</sup> (QRIS) administrators, implementing partners, other early childhood care and education leaders, and technical assistance professionals.<sup>2</sup> It may be used to inform efforts to design or revise existing quality assurance systems.

We are pleased to offer eight Key Indicators that together lead to high-quality family<sup>3</sup> engagement in early childhood care and education settings. This research-based resource is part of a series designed to support early childhood state systems-building efforts to advance family engagement.

You can link the Key Indicators of family engagement to QRIS Indicators and Standards in any phase of QRIS development. The Key Indicators may also be useful in informing state policy and systems change efforts that increase family engagement opportunities. You can choose to use the Key Indicators in ways that best address families' unique strengths and interests, state contexts, and local circumstances.

1. A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early childhood care and education programs. For more information, go to <https://qrисguide.acf.hhs.gov/resource-guide>.
2. We use the terms "professional" and "provider" to represent all professionals who work with children and families.
3. We use the terms "parent" and "family" to refer to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents. Families can be biological or nonbiological, chosen or circumstantial. They are connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support.

## What Is Family Engagement?

**Family engagement** is an interactive process through which staff, parents, families, and their children build positive and goal-oriented relationships. It is a shared responsibility of families and professionals that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. Family engagement means doing with—not doing to or for—families.

Staff work together with families, other professionals, and community partners in ways that promote equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

## What the Research Says

From the beginning of life, families nurture the capacities that children will need to be successful in school and in life. Professionals can play an important role as partners along the way.

Families' knowledge, skills, and practices can help them make progress toward their goals, support children's development, and improve children's life outcomes and family well-being (National Academy of Sciences, 2015; NCPFCE, 2014; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006).

## Family Engagement in Quality Assurance

Nearly all states have an active QRIS. Most QRISs work with state licensing agencies and early childhood professional development efforts in varying ways (BUILD Initiative, 2016; BUILD & Child Trends, 2013). These efforts support family engagement as a critical and integral component of high-quality early childhood care and education policy and programs for children's learning and development.

QRISs use different ways to verify and measure family engagement. Some states identify family engagement or involvement as a separate category in their QRIS. Others use indicators related to family engagement throughout other quality categories.

The content and requirements of family engagement indicators can differ across systems. They are typically tailored to the state's specific circumstances.

Across QRISs in 2015, the most commonly assessed family engagement indicators addressed family involvement activities. These included parent-teacher conferences, written communications, community resource lists for parents, and provision of activities for families (Child Care Aware of America, 2015).

## Territories and Tribes

Territories and Tribes may find these concepts useful to address family engagement standards of quality and early childhood systems-building efforts. We encourage you to select strategies that align with the strengths, needs, interests, and cultures of families in your communities.

Some QRISs use other ways to track family engagement in programs. For example, some require programs to submit action plans based on program self-assessment. These tools include the *Strengthening Families™ Program Self-Assessment for Center-based Early Care and Education Programs* or the *Self-Assessment for Family Child Care Programs* (Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.). Others ask programs to conduct surveys with families and submit their results and action steps.

A more recent trend in QRIS family engagement standards is to require direct family involvement in program assessment activities. In many cases, families inform the development of assessment protocols, participate in assessing the program and interpreting the results, help identify necessary improvements, and track progress. In these roles, families help programs to identify and state their family engagement goals and to respond to advice given by the families they serve.

## Parent Involvement and Family Engagement: Why Both Matter

Parent involvement and family engagement both include interactions with families.

Parent involvement occurs when parents participate in activities and take advantage of opportunities at their child's early childhood care and education setting. This usually means that parents attend the meetings or special events a program offers. Parent involvement may also include an exchange of information between professionals and parents.

With family engagement, these and other interactions occur in the context of an ongoing and collaborative relationship. Meaningful relationships get us closer to effectively partnering with families (NCPFCE, 2017).

## Key Indicators of High-Quality Family Engagement

We identified eight Key Indicators of high-quality family engagement through an extensive review of recent family engagement literature and state examples. We consulted with parents and other experts and requested their input and response.

As a group, the Key Indicators are intended to contribute to positive outcomes for children and families. They focus on:

- Building positive relationships between families and providers
- Recognizing the importance of staff knowledge and attitudes in gaining the trust and confidence of family members
- Connecting family members to services and supports
- Creating opportunities for parents to grow as leaders and advocate for themselves and their families within and outside of early childhood program settings

The Key Indicators are:

- 1 Ensuring Providers' Knowledge of Child and Family Development and Family Engagement Practices**
- 2 Ensuring Providers' Family-Specific Knowledge**
- 3 Fostering Positive, Two-Way Communication**
- 4 Creating Program Environments That Encourage Family Engagement**
- 5 Providing Peer-to-Peer Activities and Other Social Networking Opportunities**
- 6 Fostering Respect, Flexibility, and Openness to Change**
- 7 Promoting Parents' Sense of Competence**
- 8 Advocating for Families and Making Connections to Supports and Resources**

The Key Indicators focus on how programs and professionals approach relationships with families and how families experience these interactions. The Key Indicators are intended to strengthen parent-child relationships that support children's health, learning, and development.

## How the Key Indicators Are Organized

We introduce each of the Key Indicators and offer examples to illustrate what these indicators might look like when put into action in programs. These examples apply to providers in different settings such as family child care (FCC), home-based, center-based, and school-age child care. The examples are relevant for families with children from birth to age 8.

## What the Research Says

Parent-child relationships and family well-being are both powerful predictors of children's long-term development, learning, social experiences, health, and well-being (Anda et al., 2006; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

When parents are engaged with their children's learning, children are more likely to have better outcomes (Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013).

For each Key Indicator, you will find:

- A description of the Key Indicator, including a brief review of the evidence supporting its importance
- Examples of the Key Indicator in action to support effective implementation of family engagement in programs and other early childhood settings
- Examples consistent with the Key Indicator from State QRIS and Quality Assurance efforts

The examples of Key Indicators in action are intended to provide a few ideas for program practice and to spark creativity. They represent a range of program-level policies, processes, and activities. Ideas for FCC providers are noted in parentheses.

These ideas are not meant to limit the innovation or creativity of programs or states. QRIS administrators—and programs—can identify other ways of putting the Key Indicators into action that might be more appropriate to the contexts and circumstances within a community or state.

## How the Key Indicators Were Identified

We selected these eight Key Indicators from 17 core family engagement concepts identified through an extensive review of relevant research and state quality assurance efforts.

We reviewed research published in the last five years on family engagement in early childhood care and education. Our research included studies with African American and Latino families (some of whom were immigrants and non-native English speakers).

We also conducted a review of state quality assurance efforts and consulted with parents and other experts. The eight Key Indicators selected were ranked as highly important for family engagement among parents and other experts we consulted. See Appendix.

## **Putting the Key Indicators Into Action**

As you apply the Key Indicators, keep in mind the following foundations for enhancing program quality. (To learn more about these foundations, refer to the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems on page 26.)

- **Program Leadership:** Program leadership sets expectations and models effective parent and family engagement practice. Leadership sets a clear vision and goals, including establishing program policies and practices that support parent and family engagement. Examples of program practices include hiring and operations, among others.
- **Professional Development:** Program leadership provides training and/or supports staff to attend professional development to increase their knowledge and skills in family engagement. Program staff and leadership use coaching and reflective supervision to apply knowledge about child and family development and family engagement to their daily practice.
- **Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement:** Programs partner with families to use data to guide decision-making and improve the quality of family engagement practice.

The Key Indicators of family engagement overlap and reinforce each other. QRISs may implement the Key Indicators together as a set to strengthen outcomes for children and families. Administrators may choose to measure the Key Indicators in ways that support:

- Quality family engagement activities in programs
- Closer alignment between family engagement services/activities and the strengths and preferences of families and their children
- Parents' positive experiences of activities and the impact on the parent-child relationship and other outcomes

## Key Indicator Descriptions and Examples

1

### Key Indicator: Ensuring Providers' Knowledge of Child and Family Development and Family Engagement Practices

QRISs commonly include quality indicators related to staff knowledge about child and family development. Strengthening family engagement practices requires that program staff and FCC providers understand why family engagement is important, as well as how to make necessary changes to enhance practices.

When professionals ground their practice in knowledge about child and family development and family engagement, they can build stronger partnerships with families and improve child outcomes. These efforts include strategies and skills for building relationships with families and partnering in ways that are respectful and culturally and linguistically responsive.

#### Examples:

- Program staff and FCC providers engage families in conversations or conferences about children's learning and developmental progress, and programs have protocols about conference timelines and formats.
- Programs can show examples about how staff partner with families in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways to support their children's learning and development.

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Resource
<b>Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System</b>	The program offers annual educational information sessions on child development and learning aligned with the Colorado Early Learning & Development Guidelines (2013).	Colorado Shines Program Guide
<b>Ohio Engagement Standards</b>	The program and parents work collaboratively to create annual written developmental and educational goals for children.	Child Care Manual

### What the Research Says

Programs that prioritize effective family engagement practices support the efforts of providers and all staff to build positive, goal-oriented relationships with families.

Families who are active, respected participants in their children's learning and educational settings can help providers see new ways to build safe, welcoming, and trusting environments (Reedy & McGrath, 2010; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010).

When these relationships bring focus to the shared goals that parents and providers have for children, providers and families can experience the support that comes from knowing that they are all on the same team. These relationships strengthen early childhood care and education programs and systems and are core to every aspect of them.

# 2

## Key Indicator: Ensuring Providers' Family-Specific Knowledge

To be able to engage fully with families, early childhood providers learn about the cultures of the families they work with, the contexts in which they live, and their goals and aspirations for their children and themselves (Forry, et al., 2012).

Providers can be culturally and linguistically responsive when they have specific insights about families. Providers and programs can also serve as a resource and refer families to community resources, where appropriate. Family-specific knowledge is particularly important for families that are isolated or face unique challenges or barriers to quality early childhood and other services (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).

### Examples:

- Intake forms and documentation of regular check-ins with families can show that providers are learning about families. For example, providers can learn about families' cultures and languages, parenting approaches, feeding and other caregiving practices, and strengths and challenges. Providers can also learn information about parents' employment schedules, transportation plans and needs, and other matters that affect daily routines (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Interpreters are available for family members and providers who do not speak the same languages during intake activities or other important family and staff discussions (*for FCC, a similar requirement, understanding that in-person interpretation might not be feasible*).
- Providers make home visits to learn about each family as well as relevant community resources (*for FCC, a similar requirement, when feasible*). Implementation of this recommendation involves additional financial resources, professional development, and protocols for home visiting.

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Source
<b>New Mexico FOCUS on Young Children's Learning</b>	The program has lesson plans that reflect how staff and families collaborate in establishing goals for children both at home and at school.	Essential Elements of Quality for Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs
<b>Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System</b>	The program provides documentation or written policy for the use of interpreters or other resources to help with the languages of enrolled families.	Colorado Shines Program Guide
<b>Michigan Great Start to Quality</b>	The program staff interact formally with families through conferences and/or home visits to support an ongoing relationship by sharing information about the child's development.	Great Start to Quality Program Quality Indicators Guidance for Child Care Centers

### What the Research Says

It is critical for providers and programs to build interpersonal relationships grounded in a deep understanding of families' contexts, strengths, values, hopes, and challenges (Bernhard et al., 1998; Barrueco, Smith, & Stephens, 2015). These relationships with families provide a foundation for providers to embrace cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity in their program and community.

Relationships also encourage providers to address cultural, institutional, and structural barriers to formal and informal high-quality supports for children's development in early childhood care and education settings and within the community (Forry et al., 2012; Moodie & Ramos, 2014; Greenberg, Adams, & Michie, 2016).



# 3

## Key Indicator: Fostering Positive, Two-Way Communication

Communication is the basis for relationship building. It is critical for establishing strong working relationships between parents and teachers and other staff (Epstein, 1995). Communication may be one- or two-way.

One-way communication occurs when information is provided: the individual who receives the information does not have the opportunity to provide any input or feedback about the information shared. A welcome letter at the beginning of the school year, progress reports, newsletters, and school websites are examples of one-way communication.

Two-way communication is interactive and involves an exchange of information and ideas. Home visits, parent-teacher conferences, and open house events can be opportunities for two-way communication when providers have the knowledge and skills to conduct them in this way.

Both types of communication are important. Two-way communication allows early childhood providers to learn about families' preferences and concerns. Providers can also use two-way communication to show that they value parents' expertise and would like to learn more about their cultures, and to lay the foundation for building trust in ongoing relationships.

Providers can make one-way communication methods two-way. For instance, sending home photos of children to show what happened during the day is an example of one-way communication. Providing an opportunity for families to ask questions about the pictures and activities makes it two-way communication. For further engagement, providers can invite families to bring in photos and activities from home that reflect families' cultures and languages. Two-way communication is core to family engagement.

### Examples:

- Program leaders and staff create an open and safe environment where families are encouraged to share their ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. Program leaders offer opportunities to parents to participate in decision-making about program improvements.
- Programs make suggestion boxes available for family members to share their perspectives and concerns (anonymously if desired). Providers post and respond to the suggestions in a public manner, while respecting confidentiality (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Information is provided to families in their preferred language. Communication methods are used that invite families to post comments in a variety of ways, for

example, on-line, posted bulletin board notices, newsletters (*for FCC, a similar requirement*). Program intake processes note the preferences (including language) families have for ongoing communication with providers (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).

- Communication with family members is documented and enables early childhood providers to assess the need for follow-up. For example, engaging in collaborative problem-solving with families and working together with families to track progress toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children (*for FCC, a similar requirement*). Early childhood providers can use technology, such as texts and social media, to engage families according to family preferences, and consistent with confidentiality requirements.
- Provider/family member conferences are held at least twice a year and when requested by family members or prompted by special circumstances or concerns by the staff (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Early childhood providers hold regular office hours when they are available to talk with family members either in person or by phone. Family members are encouraged to lead the conversation and to raise any questions or concerns. Providers use effective, responsive communication skills with families. Examples include actively listening in a manner that demonstrates cultural sensitivity, paying attention to cues, listening carefully, and repeating what the family members says to make sure she or he is understood (*for FCC, a similar requirement, noting after-hours phone calls might be more appropriate*).

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Resource
<b>Michigan Great Start to Quality</b>	The program provides communication, education, and informational materials and opportunities for families that are delivered in a way that meets their diverse needs.	Great Start to Quality Program Quality Indicators Guidance for Child Care Centers
<b>Ohio Engagement Standards</b>	The program communicates with families using different modes of communication, and at least one mode promotes two-way communication.	Childcare Manual
<b>Minnesota Parent Aware</b>	The program demonstrates respect and engages in ongoing two-way communication. The program respects each family's strengths, choices, and goals for their children.	Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System: Standards and Indicators

## What the Research Says

Programs are better able to work toward effective family engagement when they are committed to open, ongoing, two-way communication with families (Reedy & McGrath, 2010).

Providers' positive experiences with family engagement contribute to their professional development and job satisfaction. When providers experience less stress (Jepson & Forrest, 2006), as well as professional growth and satisfaction in their work, they are more likely to remain in the field (Holochwost, DeMott, Buell, Yannetta, & Amsden, 2009; Wells, 2015).



# 4

## Key Indicator: Creating Program Environments That Encourage Family Engagement

The program environment sets the stage for first impressions, impacts interactions, and influences families' experiences over time.

The environment includes physical space and the emotional and psychological atmosphere in the program. A program's environment reflects the program's philosophy, curriculum, and the cultures and languages of the families it serves. The environment is informed by, affirms, and celebrates all families in the program.

The physical environment creates space that promotes relationship-building, learning, inclusion, and a sense of community. Physical space includes:

- Furniture and fixtures and how they are arranged
- Supplies and developmentally appropriate materials that are organized, accessible, and available in sufficient quantities
- Materials, books, and toys that represent all families and show diverse gender roles
- Posted materials for families (in the languages spoken by families)
- Displays of children's artwork and projects
- Special areas for families and children to use as spaces to say goodbye, take a break, and reunite

The emotional and psychological environment includes the interactions and relationships of families, children, and staff members—how staff greet families and children each day, and the ways that staff interact with one another.

Carefully planned program environments can help parents and other family members feel welcome and respected. Program environments that promote family engagement in these ways can help early childhood staff to facilitate children's learning, development, and well-being.

### Examples:

- Spaces that allow families to engage in caretaking responsibilities, like feeding and changing, are available and accessible (*for FCC, a similar requirement when feasible*).
- Family members are encouraged to visit when they inquire about enrolling a child and are provided information about the program in their home language (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).

- Signs, bulletin boards, and other forms of written materials in families' home languages are used throughout the setting (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Places for family members to sit and observe are available, and providers welcome their use (*for FCC, family members encouraged to visit when their children are in care*).
- Physical spaces such as reception areas, hallways, classrooms, and offices are decorated to be gender neutral and visually appealing—without being overwhelming—to children and adults (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Resources, books, and materials are available and accessible in the languages of families served by the program and reflect their cultures (*for FCC, resources are culturally appropriate and in the languages understood by families*).
- Information is readily available about neighborhood and community resources that build on families' strengths and offer services that families identify as needed (*for FCC, a similar requirement*). Program staff also help families identify resources that may be available in their family, social network, neighborhood, or community. Program staff members have relationships with these community organizations and resources and can make connections for families (for example, warm hand offs and follow up).

<b>State QRIS</b>	<b>Identified Program Practice</b>	<b>Resource</b>
<b>Oregon Spark</b>	The program uses a wide selection of materials that support children's learning and development.	Oregon's Quality Rating and Improvement System: Standards for Center Based Child Care Programs
<b>Ohio Engagement Standards</b>	The program provides information regarding resources and community services to families.	Childcare Manual

## **What the Research Says**

Physical aspects of the classroom, such as a space, color, and noise, can affect children's moods, behavior, and learning (Read, Sugawara, & Brandt, 1999; Justice, 2004; Berris & Miller, 2011; Ata, Deniz, & Akman, 2012). The psychological environment of the classroom is also important. To support children's development and promote family engagement, teachers should ensure that all children and families feel welcomed and respected (Grant & Ray, 2018). One way to be more welcoming of all children and families is to show diversity in classroom materials and displays (Gay, 2002; Grant & Ray, 2018).

## **Guidelines for Written Materials**

Written materials for families are most effective when they attract and hold the readers' attention. The materials should respect cultures and home languages, and support families to take action.

Plain language guidelines promote the use of headings, active voice and verbs, short sentences and simple words, and offer clear ways to organize content. Other guidance encourages writers to omit unnecessary words, address only one topic per paragraph, and use examples and illustrations. See the following websites for more information:

- <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/>
- <https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/index.html>
- [https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/ce-websiteguide-508\\_3-16-18.pdf](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/ce-websiteguide-508_3-16-18.pdf)

# 5

## Key Indicator: Providing Peer-to-Peer Activities and Other Social Networking Opportunities

Formal and informal peer-to-peer activities and social networking opportunities for families foster a sense of community within a program and increase families' abilities to obtain supports and resources

(Dempsey & Keen, 2008). When families are a part of a social network of peers, they can share ideas and aspirations, and problem-solve together.

### Examples:

- Parent gatherings (for example, café-style conversations) focus on topics of interest and importance to parents and other adult caregivers (*for FCC, a similar requirement*; for more information, visit <http://thecommunitycafe.org/tools-resources/resources/and> <http://www.theworldcafe.com/tools-store/hosting-tool-kit/>).
- Invitations are provided to encourage families to identify, develop, and use informal and formal social support networks. Examples include socialization groups, family-led organizations, family support networks, neighborhood groups, faith/spiritual communities, civic organizations, and other social groups (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Programs distribute information and personally connect families to community-based social networking and/or support groups for particular issues (including divorce, bereavement, caregiving for a family member with special needs, adoption, and other topics) and remove barriers to participation by providing transportation or child care (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Programs create or support a family advisory board or a family council with a role in decision-making through regular meetings with program staff representatives (*for nonprofit programs, a substantial number of family members on the board; for FCC, documentation of request for family member input and response*).

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Resource
<b>Colorado Shines</b>	The program offers opportunities for all families, including those from different backgrounds and communities, to get to know one another and work together for the benefit of the children in the program.	Colorado Shines Program Guide
<b>Michigan Great Start to Quality</b>	The program offers opportunities for parents to participate in program governance.	Great Start to Quality Program Quality Indicators Guidance for Child Care Centers

### What the Research Says

The support of a social network can improve parent well-being and increase parents' leadership in the program (Guterman and Hahm, 2001). Participation in positive social networks of peers or others can reduce rates of depression among mothers, as well as financial hardship (Dempsey & Keen, 2008).

Positive social support networks for parents are beneficial to children's healthy development and school readiness. When families are connected to peers and their communities, children are happier and are more likely to enter school ready to succeed (NCPFCE, 2013).

# 6

## Key Indicator: Fostering Respect, Flexibility, and Openness to Change

Providers' positive, respectful attitudes towards families are important to the development of high-quality (Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002), trusting relationships (Christenson, 2004). Staff's respect, flexibility, and openness and cultural sensitivity toward families set the tone for constructive provider-family interactions.

### Examples:

- A program policy and/or mission statement emphasizes respect for all staff, families, and children (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Program policies provide concrete examples of skills and strategies for the development of positive attitudes toward families and children (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Program leadership includes a family advisory board or a family council with a role in decision-making and joins regular meetings with program staff representatives (*for nonprofit programs, a substantial number of family members on the board; for FCC, documentation of request for family member input and response*).

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Resource
<b>Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System</b>	The program conducts an annual family survey to ask families for suggestions on how to improve the program and how the program can support families.	Colorado Shines Program Guide
<b>Washington Early Achievers</b>	The program uses the Strengthening Families Assessment. The program provides evidence of continuous feedback and improvement on its plan of action.	Early Achievers, Washington's Quality Rating and Improvement System Standards: A Framework to Support Positive Child Outcomes Early Achievers Guide
<b>Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning</b>	The program has policies and practices in place addressing inclusion, confidentiality of child records, and family engagement.	Quality Rated Child Care Program Manual

## **What the Research Says**

High-quality family partnership practices are best achieved when program leaders model reciprocal, professional, and caring relationships, and share power within the program (Douglass, 2011; Douglass & Gittell, 2012). Establishing relational trust and focusing on accountability across systems of care is linked to improved partnerships with families and progress toward addressing systemic challenges (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

# 7

## Key Indicator: Promoting Parents' Sense of Competence

Parents' sense of competence in their parenting roles is an important factor that can impact child outcomes (Jones & Prinz, 2005). Early childhood programs can design and develop practices and activities that honor parents' knowledge about their children and help to strengthen their sense of competence. These activities can be designed to reinforce family members' abilities to support their children's healthy development.

### Examples:

- Providers notice and describe positive parenting interactions to parents, especially those that support children's security, confidence, exploration, interests, and learning (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Programs offer multiple opportunities for providers and parents to learn together about parenting and child development. Parents can be invited to suggest topics to be addressed, including how cultures and languages influence their families' perspectives on caregiving and development (*for FCC, information is provided about community-based opportunities for learning about parenting and child development*).
- Programs have a family advisory board or a family council that meets regularly with program staff representatives to make program decisions. The group reviews issues and makes recommendations for improvement (*for nonprofit programs, a significant number of family members on the board; for FCC, documentation of requests for family member input and response*).
- Programs use intake forms in the languages of the families served. Forms include questions about parents' strengths and successes, their goals for their children and themselves, and needs they have identified. Additional questions ask families how they prefer to be engaged in decision-making regarding their child's participation in the program. These preferences may be related to families' cultures, languages, and schedules (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Programs share written processes for family members to update any information shared (*for FCC, documentation of family members' goals and preferences with updates*). Consider creating family-friendly materials ([https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/ce-websitewebguide-508\\_3-16-18.pdf](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/ce-websitewebguide-508_3-16-18.pdf)).

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Resource
<b>Minnesota Parent Aware</b>	The program offers a variety of activities, based on families' interests, with at least one focused on helping families extend children's learning at home.	Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System: Standards and Indicators
<b>Michigan Great Start to Quality</b>	The program offers opportunities for parents to participate in program governance.	Great Start to Quality Program Quality Indicators Guidance for Child Care Centers
<b>Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System</b>	Family members act in leadership positions on program and/or advisory boards and are provided with a training and/or orientation about their role.	Colorado Shines Program Guide

### What the Research Says

Early childhood care and education settings that prioritize family engagement improve parents' knowledge of child-rearing practices (Love et al., 2005). Access to information about their children's learning and development affects parents' self-efficacy, confidence, and skills (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005). The availability of this kind of information also influences their motivation to trust, collaborate, and remain positively involved with providers and programs (Rosenblatt & Peled, 2002; Powell et al., 2010).



# 8

## Key Indicator: Advocating for Families and Making Connections to Supports and Resources

Advocating for families and supporting families to advocate for themselves while connecting them to information, supports, and resources is essential to family partnerships in high-quality settings.

Access to concrete, material community resources—such as safe housing, healthy food, a medical home, mental health services, and job advancement options—provides opportunities for parents to positively affect children’s health, development, and learning.

Supports and resources are most effective when they acknowledge families’ own advocacy, focus on family strengths, and recognize families’ concerns and priorities. These kinds of supports and resources also help to improve parents’ confidence and well-being (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010).

### Examples:

- Use communication methods (for example, use email, texts, and other online platforms to send messages, create brochures, or post information on bulletin boards) in the languages of families in your program to provide information about services and supports relevant to families’ strengths and needs (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Focus on informing families about their eligibility for public benefits.
- Identify community resources and partner with families to access services to advance their strengths and talents or address their concerns and needs. Provide parents with information about agencies and how to contact them. Make calls with parents to agencies to set up appointments and services.
- Advocate with the appropriate organization or agency for access to services on behalf of the family.
- Create an ongoing relationship with service providers to facilitate better access for families. These types of partnerships take time and effort but are beneficial to each partner organization and to the children and families they serve.
- Partner with one or more agencies or organizations to provide culturally and linguistically responsive direct services or supports to family members and/or children in the program (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).

- Seek membership in a formal community partnership (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).
- Partner with other agencies that help facilitate the creation of seamless prevention and early intervention plans, resources, and services. Development of early childhood partnerships with primary schools can help children and families continue their positive family engagement experiences in the child's next educational setting.

Early childhood providers can also encourage family members to become advocates for their children and themselves.

#### **Examples:**

- Inform families about their rights under key laws and policies related to education, employment, housing, etc.
- Build on families' confidence, knowledge, and skills to advocate for their children, themselves, and their community. For example, programs can offer workshops and group activities for families that enhance such knowledge and skills.
- Plan advocacy strategies with parents as they transition to new early learning and school settings and for children with an identified disability or developmental delay.
- Offer information and resources related to training opportunities to build on parents' leadership and advocacy skills (*for FCC, a similar requirement*).

State QRIS	Identified Program Practice	Resource
<b>Ohio Engagement Standards</b>	The program has written policies and procedures to ensure that children have received comprehensive health screenings or families have been provided information on the importance of health screenings and resources to obtain them.	Childcare Manual
<b>Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System</b>	The program has a plan that is written and implemented describing procedures to refer and connect families to appropriate community service agencies.	Colorado Shines Program Guide

## What the Research Says

When programs provide comprehensive services for families and connect them to the community resources they need, children have better health outcomes in young adulthood.

Social supports can encourage positive parenting behaviors. Social support networks for parents are linked to healthy development and school readiness for children.

Parents with greater emotional support are more responsive and warm in their interactions with children. They also feel more effective in their parenting roles, and they provide a more stimulating home environment (Marshall, 2001).

When parents are able to provide sensitive, responsive, and predictable caregiving, children are more likely to do well in school and to develop lifelong skills that will help them succeed (Center on the Developing Child, 2010).



## Using the Key Indicators to Promote Family Engagement in Early Childhood Systems-Building

The Key Indicators can be used together with the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework for Early Childhood Systems to support family engagement more broadly in early childhood systems.

The PFCE Framework for Early Childhood Systems was developed in partnership with the Office of Child Care and Office of Head Start, with extensive feedback from State, Territory, and Tribal Child Care and Development Fund Lead Agencies and their partners, as well as other early childhood national and local stakeholders. It is a resource intended for use in family engagement planning and implementation at the systems and program level.

***At the systems level,*** the PFCE Framework for Early Childhood Systems provides a vision for integrating family engagement across early childhood systems. It is a guide to understanding the collaborative relationship among parents and early childhood systems, programs, professionals, FCC providers, and communities. The Framework defines seven system components that can work together to promote family engagement in programs and early childhood systems.

- Governance and Leadership
- Policies, Regulations, Standards, and Licensing
- Infrastructure and Funding
- Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement
- State and Community Partnerships
- Consumer Education and Engagement
- Workforce and Professional Development

### Example of QRIS Support for Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement

QRISs can support continuous learning and quality improvement in line with the Key Indicators. QRISs could promote the development of program-level family engagement plans.

To develop these plans, programs can engage families, staff, and community partners in a self-assessment and thoughtful planning processes to look at current practices. Programs can identify areas for improvement in line with the eight Key Indicators.

Programs can then set measurable goals for improvement and report on their progress regularly through the QRISs. Aggregate program-level data can be used to identify opportunities for continuous learning and quality improvement at the systems level.

**At the program level**, family engagement involves parents' engagement with their children and with providers as they work together toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children. Early childhood care and education providers work together with families, other professionals, and community partners to make progress toward family and child outcomes.

The PFCE Framework for Early Childhood Systems specifies the program elements that can be coordinated to make progress toward child and family outcomes. These child and family outcomes are identified in the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

The PFCE Framework for Early Childhood Systems identifies important drivers for the child and family outcomes within all system components and program elements across the entire early childhood field. These drivers include positive and goal-oriented relationships, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, inclusiveness, and equity.

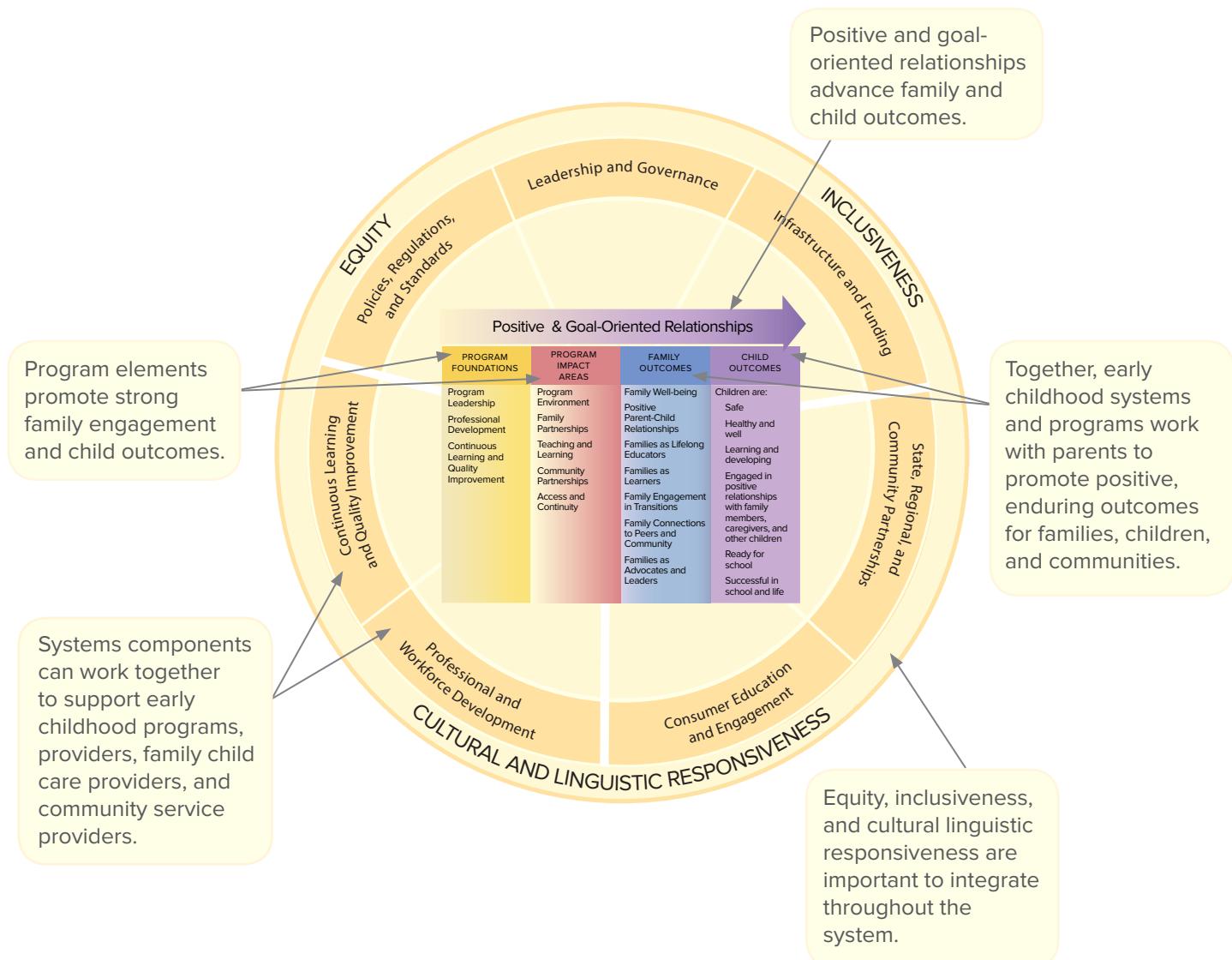
## **Applying the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems and the Key Indicators**

QRIS administrators and their partners can use the Key Indicators of high-quality family engagement to build early childhood systems that are in line with the PFCE Framework for Early Childhood Systems. Depending upon the context and circumstances of their state systems, communities, and early childhood settings, administrators can build these kinds of coordinated systems in different ways. For example, they can use the Key Indicators to:

- Build a shared understanding among state and community stakeholders of quality family engagement and how to measure it
- Strengthen measurement and quality assurance processes for family engagement
- Work with child care licensing to revise or enhance regulations and program monitoring
- Collaborate with workforce development efforts to inform or enhance professional development
- Inform state policy changes that support early childhood systems and programs to recognize families' unique strengths and interests

# Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems

The PFCE Framework for Early Childhood Systems is a visual guide for understanding how early childhood systems components can be aligned to support early childhood programs providers, family childcare providers, and community service providers. Together, early childhood systems and programs work with parents to promote positive, enduring outcomes for families, children, and communities. Equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness are important to integrate throughout the system.



## Closing Thoughts

We are recommending the Key Indicators to promote continued attention to the importance of including family engagement in quality assurance initiatives. These indicators represent strengths-based attitudes (or mindsets) and practices of early childhood program staff and FCC providers, and environmental features of early childhood programs that demonstrate high-quality family engagement. The Key Indicators support the aims of cultural and linguistic responsiveness, inclusiveness, and equity across early childhood systems.

We welcome the opportunity to learn about your efforts in family engagement.

Please contact us: PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481.

## Related Resources

Explore these related resources on the Child Care Technical Assistance (CCTA) website:

- **Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems**  
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/parent-family-and-community-engagement-framework-early-childhood-systems>
- **Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement**  
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/relationship-based-competencies-support-family-engagement-series>
  - **Overview for Early Childhood Professionals**
  - **A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals Who Work with Families**
  - **A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals Who Work with Children in Group Settings**
  - **A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals Who Make Home Visits**

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## **Appendix: Our Approach to Identifying Key Indicators of High-Quality Family Engagement**

We completed the following steps to identify the Key Indicators of high-quality family engagement:

- Scanned foundational resources, including research and state QRIS
- Generated a list of candidate indicators
- Updated the search for current evidence
- Refined the list of candidate indicators through stakeholder engagement and other activities

### **Foundational Resources**

We reviewed and analyzed four types of resources to develop an initial list of family engagement indicators:

- a) Research syntheses and literature reviews on family engagement in early childhood care and education settings
- b) Conceptual models of family engagement
- c) Program standards from national early childhood organizations
- d) Summaries of family engagement standards and indicators in current QRIS models

### **List of Candidate Indicators**

Using the review of relevant conceptual models of family engagement, we developed a comprehensive list of candidate indicators, including all existing indicators identified. We then compared the candidate indicators to national program standards and family engagement standards in QRISs. The full list of candidate indicators included 17 specific practices, attitudes, knowledge, and environmental features that promote family engagement.

## **Search for Current Evidence: Literature Review**

We updated our review of the literature, focusing on new family engagement work published after 2011. We wanted to verify that there was current support for these indicators and to ensure we did not miss any new findings or directions in family engagement.

The updated literature review revealed that the full list of indicators had multiple sources of evidence supporting its importance for families through empirical and conceptual links to child, family, or program outcomes. We also found that each source referenced more than one family engagement indicator. This finding suggested that while each indicator has its own unique features, use of the indicators can be most effective when applied together as a set.

## **Refined List of Candidate Indicators**

We generated a list of 17 candidate indicators of family engagement for quality assurance that included specific practices, attitudes, knowledge, and environmental features that promote family engagement. (See the table that follows for the complete list of indicators.)

From this list of 17 candidate indicators, we sought to identify a set of a few powerful indicators to inform QRIS and other quality assurance efforts. The Key Indicators reflect attitudes, knowledge, practices, and features of program environments (program practices). We identified eight distinct Key Indicators through these four steps:

1. Identified a comprehensive list of potential indicators of quality family engagement
2. Verified the potential indicator drawing on the research literature
3. Reviewed state QRIS data
4. Consulted stakeholders, including QRIS administrators, program directors, researchers, parents, and other experts in the field for guidance to affirm the relevance and to solicit recommendations for grouping and ranking

<b>Candidate Indicators</b>	<b>Number of Research Articles That Include the Indicator*</b>
<b>Attitudes</b>	
1. Flexibility	10
2. Respect	17
3. Openness to change	5
<b>Knowledge</b>	
4. Theoretical knowledge	10
5. Family-specific knowledge	14
6. Encouraging engagement	17
<b>Practices</b>	
7. Collaborating and engaging in joint goal-setting and decision-making with families	16
8. Developing parents' confidence and capacity	28
9. Providing social networking opportunities for families	3
10. Positive two-way communication	25
11. Advocating for and connecting families to supports and resources	6
12. Community partnerships	1
<b>Environment</b>	
13. Welcoming	13
14. Communication systems	5
15. Culturally-diverse materials	5
16. Information about resources	1
17. Peer-to-peer parent activities	1
<b>Total Resources Reviewed</b>	<b>48</b>

\* From relevant research literature after 2011.



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**Parent, Family and Community Engagement**