

Engaging Families

Contributions of the World Forum Emerging Working Group on Family Engagement

by María Fernanda Levis-Peralta

Children are born and raised in social and economic contexts that have a lasting impact on their lives. Where a child is born, her race, family income, and socio-economic status play important roles in defining the circumstances of her future. Within this context, decades of research demonstrate that parental involvement and family engagement influence children's lives more than any other identified factor. Researchers have even found that "parenting is more important than schools to academic achievement."¹ However, many programs are not fully leveraging the power of engaging families in their work.

Family engagement has been at the core of many important early childhood development programs prompting outstanding results. Yet as all practitioners know, the theory is much neater than the practice. Barriers to involving



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parents in programs include parent and teacher time, negative attitudes, preconceptions, demographics, employment status, cultural backgrounds, and uncertainty about what to do.^{2,3}

At the 2014 World Forum on Early Care and Education we were able to discuss these issues with scores of practitioners and identified both a growing interest in family engagement and a proliferation of initiatives to reach parents across the globe. The wealth of information provided was extraordinary, and in no way possible to summarize in one article. However, five strategies used by these programs stand out. Specifically, we found that many of these parental involvement programs are:

- investing resources in strengthening parenting skills.
- engaging parents as change agents in their own communities.
- developing visually stimulating and easy to understand materials.
- using technology to communicate with parents.
- leveraging all the resources at their disposal to partner with parents.

This article provides examples of these strategies across various cultural contexts to be further explored, assimilated, and developed by other practitioners. Our desire is to promote an on-going global exchange of ideas on family engagement to create thriving environments for children and adults.

Five Family Engagement Strategies

■ Investing resources in strengthening parenting skills

A wealth of parenting skill-building programs are available across various cultural contexts. Most of the family engagement programs we encountered are structured as 'stand-alone' programs that provide service to parents not contingent on their engagement in other center-based or formal programs. For example, evidenced based home visitation programs such as Parents as Teachers, Nurse Family Partnership, and HIPPIY have been made available to thousands of parents across the United States through investments in home visitation. In other contexts some of the field's leaders have been using editorials and/or technology to spread their reach at a lower cost. For example, PODAR Education Network in India has added to its system of 72 schools an

online platform called BORN SMART to help parents draw on knowledge and resources to help them secure the future of their children; Proud2BMe is addressing the needs of parents in South Africa; and Chiquiespacio.com from Puerto Rico hosts an online platform where parents and experts can exchange information about parenting and projects. Many centers also integrate parenting skills mainly based on their own curriculum; for example, Proyecto Nacer provides skills for teen parents using locally developed materials. More work needs to be done to identify, gather, and share the content and materials used by centers.

■ Engaging parents as change agents in their own communities

We also found that groups are engaging parents as resources for their communities with great success. The work being carried out by Nhaka Foundation in Zimbabwe is a hallmark of this strategy engaging parents in the construction, renovation, and equipment of early childhood development centers, literally having parents building the spaces for their young children. The U.S. Head Start program has also been a pioneer in this area having parents participate in the governance of the center and as volunteers. ParqueREVOLUTION has also begun similar work by engaging parents and community members in the development, construction, and maintenance of parks and play spaces for the entire family as a way of having conversation about what the community's aspirations are for its children. Most examples included community-organizing methodologies to involve parents to work towards their community's development. These programs are extremely exciting and inspiring for the transformation they are producing and we are anxious to learn of more examples to highlight.

■ Developing visually stimulating and easy to understand materials

Various family engagement projects also cite visually stimulating and easy to understand materials for parents as key to their success. Editorial Jugando Aprendo publishes educational material for parents in Central America using material that is very attractive and easy to understand; 123kindergarten.com from Canada provides engaging Youtube.com 'to do' videos; and Proud2BMe uses multimedia to engage parents. Our experience at Chiquiespacio.com is that social media engagement is largely based on the quality of the images provided and in our culture what calls the attention most are visuals that highlight children. More research on the type of materials that parents find most engaging can provide insight on how to compete for parent's attention in the sea of information that is being pushed on our families.

■ Using technology to communicate with parents

Technology is increasingly becoming an important tool to reach parents. In addition to the numerous online platforms and websites mentioned in previous sections of this article, Erikson Institute and University of the West Indies have also launched research and practice initiatives to identify and inform with respect to the use of technology for family engagement. This research might reveal different things for different communities in the world. Most of the technology we encountered is being used to provide parents with information to make more informed decisions about their parenting style. Few examples that we encountered were using technology to provide other services to parents and families.

■ Leveraging all the resources at their disposal to partner with parents

What we found is that programs are going to great lengths and investing resources to reach and partner with

parents. Some extremely impressive work is being done by parents: for example, in the work presented by Najibullah s/o Tassia from Afghanistan, where parents would literally climb mountains to engage in parenting programs; and Nhaka Foundation, where parents sometimes forego a day of work and food to build spaces for their children to grow and prosper.

Where is the Field of Family Engagement Headed?

Increased importance is being given internationally to family engagement. For example, this past July the U.S. White House and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) held a Symposium on Transformative Family Engagement to examine innovative practices and discuss challenges and opportunities related to these efforts. While a lot is being done, more can be done to identify promising approaches to family engagement across various cultural contexts to inform and support practitioners in these endeavors. Some additional areas where the field can grow include taking into account the cultural appropriateness of interventions, building on the network effects of mobilizing parents, including family engagement skills in ECD teacher training curriculum, using place-based strategies to augment parent participation, and developing technology to support this work.

Family engagement is one of the most underused assets to support children in their development, but we are seeing the spark of a movement to engage parents in helping all children reach their full potential.

Endnotes

1 North Carolina State University. (2012, October 10). Parenting more important than schools to academic achievement, study finds. ScienceDaily.

Retrieved August 4, 2014 from
www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/10/121010112540.htm

2 A. Shartrand et al. (1997). New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement. Harvard Family Research Project. www.google.com/pr?url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CDcQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hfrp.org%2Fcontent%2Fdownload%2F1145%2F48650%2Ffile%2Fskills.pdf&ei=90rfU_SgJ9besASB2oLICg&usq=AFQjCNG8B-omUUM5Ka2YgMLLazpIpk9qvg&sig2=BKSSpUOh88uETnQtEbYOTQ&bvm=bv.72197243,d.cWc

3 Barriers to Family Involvement In Education Kindergarten Teacher Tip #1.
http://center.serve.org/tt/ktip1_barriers.pdf

