

Families as Advocates & Leaders

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Office of Head Start (OHS) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the “Families as Advocates and Leaders” Outcome: *“Parents and families participate in leadership development, decision-making, program policy development, or in community and state organizing activities to improve children’s development and learning experiences.”*

This resource presents a summary of selected research, promising practices, proven interventions, and program strategies intended to be useful for Head Start (HS), Early Head Start (EHS), and other early childhood programs.

Introduction

Families can be advocates and leaders at home, in their children’s schools, in their neighborhood and community, or in the larger society (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Their advocacy and leadership may be far-reaching, shaping the development of children, programs, schools, and other families for years to come.

Head Start is a strong national model of family advocacy and leadership. Since its beginning, Head Start and Early Head Start programs have engaged families as advocates and leaders in all of their activities, particularly through Parent Committees, Policy Committees, and Policy Councils.

Definitions

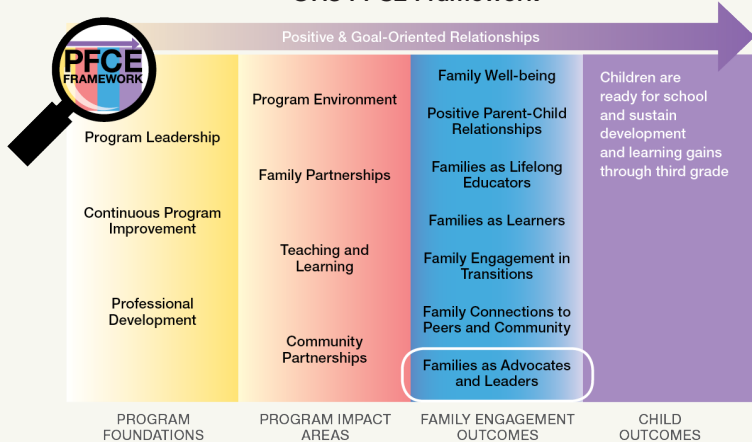
Family advocates speak for and act on behalf of others as they empower them (Trainor, 2010). Parents may speak up for their own children, or join with others to represent the needs of many children (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocón, 2012).

Family leaders use and develop resources and services to strengthen their family. They speak and act from those experiences (Reynolds & St. John, 2012).

What Parent Advocacy and Leadership Look Like

All parents are advocates and leaders in the lives of their children. They advocate for their children’s well-being, and grow as leaders as their children grow, and as they develop as parents. Parental responsibilities that are similar to those of other advocates and leaders include juggling multiple tasks, solving problems, making decisions, setting ground rules at home, balancing family members’ competing needs, and helping with household work as a group (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997).

OHS PFCE Framework



The PFCE Framework is a research-based approach to program change that shows how Head Start and Early Head Start programs can work together as a whole – across systems and service areas – to promote family engagement and children’s learning and development.

Family advocacy and leadership in early childhood settings, particularly Head Start and Early Head Start, can include a range of different activities. Parent advocates and leaders can:

- act as mentors in the classroom,
- share skills with other parents,
- coordinate events for children and families,
- bring out strengths in other families,
- serve as cultural liaisons,
- participate in parent meetings, advisory committees, Parent Committees, Policy Councils, and other governing bodies as well as community or state coalitions, and
- represent children and families in the development of policy and legislation.

Strong parent advocates and leaders:

- organize others,
- mobilize community members,
- share their commitment, and
- work effectively with other families and professionals toward a common goal in their community and beyond (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Trainor, 2010).

Many parents enter Head Start and Early Head Start programs with strong advocacy and leadership skills. Many others have great potential to develop them. Families' positive experiences with advocacy and leadership may further motivate them to advocate for broader systemic improvements (Trainor, 2010).

Some families become advocates when they mobilize around a shared concern or crisis, such as potential funding cuts. Others become advocates after realizing that they have the ability to change situations that once made them feel helpless (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Some family members enter programs with the motivation to strengthen their children's experience. Others bring strong advocacy skills from additional settings or their country of origin.

Families as Advocates and Leaders: What We Know

Benefits to Children

Families act as advocates and leaders when they are choosing an early childhood program or health care provider. Parents can use the advocacy skills they develop in Head Start and Early Head Start to positively influence their children's learning experiences throughout their education (Trainor, 2010).

Families who are involved in advocacy and leadership activities serve as important role models for their children (Cunningham et al., 2012).

Benefits to Families

Family members involved in advocacy and leadership activities can experience personal growth (Cunningham et al., 2012). For example, they may develop or reinforce their ability to express their concerns constructively, create

and implement plans, and further refine other skills. Many become more confident and are then able to give back to programs that supported them (Cunningham et al., 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). When family advocacy and leadership extend beyond an individual child/program to the community or region, families develop additional networking skills and a deeper understanding of the issues that are important to them (Trainor, 2010). As one father observed:

"One thing that I found that Head Start did for me was not only to enrich, empower, and educate my family, it enriched, empowered, and educated everyone around me. And that happened through the support of the teachers, the family service workers, the health coordinators, the parent involvement people.... About four years ago, I spoke as the keynote speaker for the parent award banquet, and went on to go to the state association board and the regional association board, where I'm currently a member."

Family advocacy and leadership skill development opportunities can also advance career development. For instance, many Head Start and Early Head Start parent leaders continue their education, become staff at Head Start and Early Head Start or other community programs, and improve the financial stability of their families over time. Often they serve as positive role models for other families.

Benefits to Programs, Schools, and Communities

Schools that provide opportunities for shared leadership with families are better able to meet the needs of the school and community (Auerbach, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Family advocates and leaders may help organizations become aware of a range of issues and provide valuable insights about their service experiences.

Head Start and Early Head Start formally and informally promote family advocacy and leadership in other community organizations. As one Head Start director explains:

"We make sure that families have the information they need, and we help them to advocate in meetings. Our expectation is that the other agencies know that our families will be speaking up, will be asking questions, and that we encourage them to do so." (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/Disabilities/Staff%20Support%20and%20Supervision/Orientation/specialquest-training-library/training-library.html>)

One prime example of family advocacy and leadership having national, long-lasting impact is the evolution of special education services for children with disabilities. Families have been the driving force for creating civil rights and educational legislation at the national level.



Boosting Family Advocacy and Leadership

Relationships are the Key

The foundation for family advocacy and leadership is strong positive relationships between families and program staff. When staff members build relationships with families through home visits and communicate in the family's preferred language, they can identify family strengths, needs, and interests regarding advocacy and leadership. Once positive relationships are built, families feel respected, cared for, and are better able to share their ideas and concerns (Auerbach, 2010).

Both families and program staff bring their own experiences, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and views of child-rearing and education to these relationships. Family and staff interactions and expectations are important. Positive interactions may encourage families to participate in advocacy and leadership activities, while negative interactions may hinder them. Programs can include professional development opportunities that help staff learn how to encourage parent advocacy and leadership. Reflective practice and supervision give programs and staff the chance to reflect on their interactions with families and strengthen the relationships that affect family engagement.

Families bring a wealth of gifts and strengths to programs. They may be passionate and persuasive speakers, and committed to supporting their child and their community. Many families can give voice to the unique needs of a particular community and share important details about how cultural backgrounds can affect parents' experiences. Families often advocate on behalf of parents who are wary about getting involved.

Staff members also bring gifts to relationships with families. Many staff are former Head Start and Early Head Start parents who can relate to the experiences, cultures, and languages of the families they serve. Staff can listen carefully to families and provide the support that encourages families to ask for what they want and need.



Program policies, practices, and professional development promote staff knowledge, skills, and actions to welcome all families, honor their participation, and create culturally responsive environments.

Communication, Negotiation, and Conflict Resolution

Communication is essential to staff-family relationships, as are negotiation and conflict resolution skills. When conflicts arise, families and programs can engage in discussion and negotiation. Family members must be respected as capable of making choices to resolve conflicts and differences of opinion (Auerbach, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Relationships are strengthened when conflict is addressed openly and respectfully.

Negotiation and conflict resolution skills are also important for families in advocacy and leadership roles (Cunningham et al., 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991); for example, when they participate in policy or advisory boards, such as the Head Start Policy Council.

Families can face challenges when becoming involved in a program. Some families may not feel confident, see their language skills as too limited, or may lack the related knowledge to be an advocate or leader in certain settings. For some, negative experiences with other programs or schools, or their own difficult school experiences, may make them avoid getting involved in their children's education.

Cultural beliefs about teachers' authority may prevent some parents from expressing opinions that might seem to challenge teachers. Traumatic refugee experiences may lead some families to feel powerless, or fear retaliation if they assert their concerns. Some families, including migrant families or recent immigrants without legal documentation, may avoid leadership roles because they are protective about their family's privacy. (For resources on serving refugee and immigrant families, see *Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development*, available from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/fcp/docs/raising-young-children-in-a-new-country-bryc5.pdf>.)

Differences or misunderstandings related to staff and parent expectations or cultural differences may challenge relationships. When families express desires for their children that go beyond a program's current practice, staff may feel overwhelmed or defensive (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Teachers or home visitors may feel unappreciated or discouraged if families do not engage in programs in ways they expect and desire.

When programs are open to diverse perspectives and see families as partners, they may discover innovative solutions to program challenges. Programs can address differences in expectations with ongoing communication focused on how all staff and families contribute to a common goal – the well-being of children and their families. Negotiation and conflict resolution skills are also important for families in advocacy and leadership roles (Cunningham et al., 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991), such as when they participate in Head Start Policy Council or other advisory boards.

Creating a Collaborative Program Environment

The nature of family participation in a program's governance structure affects family advocacy and leadership. For example, when families have a real role in decision-making, they know they can make a difference, and their leadership grows (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Policy and advisory groups can provide opportunities for leadership by creating a climate of belonging, building trusting relationships, and developing common goals with a focus on the well-being of children and families (Auerbach, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Doucet, 2008). Given the cultural and linguistic diversity of Head Start and Early Head Start families, special attention must be paid to how information, communication, and leadership opportunities are presented so that all families have a voice and all children benefit (Gordon & Nocon, 2008).

Access to Knowledge and Information

Even when policies and governance structures promote family leadership, additional knowledge, skills, and confidence can help family members to become leaders (Cunningham et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010). Families need to know the rules of the game in order to play. For example, to make informed decisions that support children's learning and development, families need information about program expectations, legal rights and responsibilities, and how various systems operate so that they can access services and supports for their children. This is particularly important when working with families from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from those of service providers, or with families of children with disabilities.

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY DEVELOPS FROM:

- **cultural capital** (knowledge about issues and rights), and
- **social capital** (relationships with key players, such as teachers and other parents) (Trainor, 2010).

Through positive and ongoing relationships with families, programs can help families gain the cultural and social capital necessary to be strong advocates.

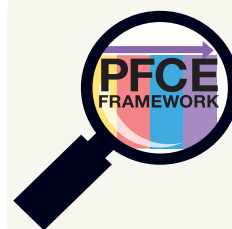
Supporting Staff and Administrators

Like families, program staff need specific knowledge, skills, and actions to promote family advocacy and leadership. Teacher education programs tend to emphasize instructional skills with little focus on partnering with families (Doucet, 2008). Yet with support, staff can go beyond solving families'

problems to work with families as equal partners in problem solving (Auerbach, 2010; Doucet, 2008).

When educational programs define parents' roles based solely on their needs, without also engaging their strengths, families may feel undervalued. When parents are asked how they want to contribute to their children's schooling and their own goals, they share critical insights into how family-staff relationships can benefit children, families, and programs (Doucet, 2008).

Training and reflective supervision can help all staff understand that empowering parents is as important as empowering children (Langford & Weisbourd, 1997). Professional development can provide all staff with the understanding they need about parent advocacy and leadership and the important role that parents play in their children's learning. Parents develop confidence, not only as they watch their children thrive, but also as they learn new skills, manage their own lives, and make a difference in the lives of others.



Program environment and administrators' leadership styles have a powerful impact on the development of family leaders (see the PFCE framework). Administrators with a relationship-based focus serve as role models for staff and families and create a parallel process – when program leaders nurture staff member leadership, staff are more likely to encourage family leadership (Douglass, 2011).

Promising Practices: Strategies for Growing Family Advocates and Leaders

Staff begin to help family caregivers – including fathers, siblings, and other family members – become advocates and leaders by understanding how families perceive their caregiving roles and by appreciating the different ways they contribute to their children's learning (Doucet, 2008; Emarita, 2006). An early step is to listen and respond to families' concerns and ideas about becoming advocates and leaders. Programs can then offer opportunities to learn and lead that match family skills, interests, and readiness.

Families as Co-Trainers

A broad range of leadership opportunities that are culturally and linguistically relevant can expand the number of family leaders in a program. For example, family members are often part of training teams that present at local, state, or national conferences. Some Head Start and Early Head Start programs invite families that have graduated to join them as part of professional development activities. Families' experiences with trainings, conferences, or advisory meetings help build important relationships, expand understanding of systems and services, and increase self-confidence.

The Institute for Human Development at the University of Missouri has identified core leadership skills needed by both families and professionals to help develop family leadership. For a copy of the document see: <http://mofamilytofamily.org/leadership-volunteer-network/family-leadership/core-competencies-of-family-leaders/>.

Parent-to-Parent Leadership Development

Parent-to-parent learning, sharing, and support are often effective strategies for family leadership development. For example, when families of children with special needs develop relationships with each other, they gain useful information and learn strategies for effective communication with staff and administrators (Trainor, 2010). Father engagement efforts can give fathers an opportunity to become leaders who recruit other fathers into program activities. Research with Latino parents in Chicago public schools showed that, when Latino parent-representatives on school councils engaged with families to improve community relations, other parents in the community became more involved in their children's schooling (Marschall, 2008).



Promising Practices: Selected Resources for Growing Family Advocates and Leaders

The following (listed alphabetically) are not the only useful promising or evidence-based resources in the field, but represent some good examples of options for programs to consider:

- *Community Cafés* are focused on supporting protective factors in families and help to engage parents and other community members as partners. Led by parent facilitators, the cafés can be used to identify key issues for parents as well as to identify and develop parent leaders.

- *Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)*, a Latino legal civil rights organization, offers a Parent School Partnership that trains parents and community leaders to become effective advocates for improving educational achievements, schools, and communities. For more information, see: <http://www.maldef.org/leadership/programs/psp/index.html>.
- *Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI)* has operated for over 20 years in Connecticut and has been evaluated and replicated by other states (for example, the Colorado Family Leadership Training Institute [FLTII]). Participants spend more than 120 hours developing skills to become effective leaders in their communities. For more information, see: <http://www.nationalpli.org>.
- *SpecialQuest* is a collaborative approach that brings professionals and families together to support the inclusion of young children with disabilities. A key outcome is the development of families as partners and leaders. The SpecialQuest Multimedia Training Library includes training materials and videos on family leadership. More information on SpecialQuest and related training materials are available at: www.specialquest.org.
- *Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute*, at the Parent Services Project, has developed a family leadership curriculum called Leaders for Change, based on the Five Protective Factors of the Strengthening Families Approach. The curriculum focuses on helping families build relationships, assume leadership in their communities, and engage in systems serving children and families. For more information, see: <http://www.parentservices.org/program/family-engagement-programs/vision-voice/>.

Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

Helping families become advocates and leaders is an important step toward supporting better family and child outcomes. As programs work toward a more systemic approach to promoting family advocacy and leadership, they can draw on PFCE Framework Elements, such as collaborative Program Leadership, targeted Professional Development, and an empowering Program Environment.

When family members act as advocates and leaders to influence the programs, policies, and practices that shape their children's lives, the effects can be long lasting. Experiences as leaders and advocates in Head Start and Early Head Start prepare families for those same roles when their children are in K–12 settings. Their advocacy and leadership can touch the lives of other families in the larger community and beyond.

What Can Programs Do?

The following recommendations are most effective when done with the guidance and counsel of families.

Help Staff and Families Work Together

- **Relationships are the foundation.** Personal contact is essential for authentic and meaningful connections. Daily communication makes a big difference—greetings, quick conversations, notes, or text messages where program policies allow. Home visits are important opportunities to support the development of family advocates and leaders.
- **Provide opportunities for collaboration.** Parent/staff-run events and presentations help families become involved in their children's education and build leadership skills. Collaboration can also help shape program policies to meet the academic, social, linguistic, and other needs of children.
- **Offer communication and leadership training for families and professionals together.** The "two-way street" of collaborative leadership requires families and staff to develop skills such as reflective listening, brainstorming, and compromise (Auerbach, 2010; Reynolds & St. John, 2012). Learning together strengthens staff-parent relationships and helps everyone practice these skills.
- **Use professional development and reflective supervision** to help staff address feelings of vulnerability as they share power with parents. Reflective supervision can strengthen staff skills to build collaborative relationships with families.



Plan and Run Meetings to Maximize Family Leadership

- **Provide relevant and clear background information before meetings** to help families contribute effectively and feel competent. Make sure materials reflect appropriate literacy levels and are translated into multiple languages if needed (Lim, 2008). Use visuals whenever possible. A buddy system or pre-meeting can help families preview and develop the agenda, clarify jargon or terminology, and set expectations for participation. Encourage parents to bring another person to meetings for moral support.

- **Provide logistical supports** needed for family leaders to participate in meetings and events, including stipends, transportation, child care, and reimbursement for time and travel as policies allow.
- **Create ground rules and meeting norms that support engagement.** The many procedures that often dominate policy-making boards can squelch family leadership (Douglass, 2011). As an antidote, use strategies that encourage participation. Start meetings with a family story to focus on families' strengths, needs, concerns, and successes. Ask families to start the discussion from their perspective. Offer everyone a chance to speak. Collaborative leadership may take more time but can lead to stronger overall leadership and a more successful program.

Support Family Skill Building

- **Work with family members who want to serve as advocates and leaders.** Invite parents to join a discussion about the many ways they can be advocates and leaders in the program and community. Family members may underestimate their skills and potential. Encourage them to reconsider these self-judgments.
- **Connect family members with skill-building opportunities.** Advocacy and leadership opportunities within Head Start and Early Head Start are plentiful, such as Parent Committees, Policy Committees, and Policy Council. Community agencies and informal groups offer opportunities to become involved and build skills.
- **Make the link between advocacy and leadership and career development.** Advocacy and leadership skills are highly valued in many jobs. Encourage family members to reflect on advocacy and leadership skills that might carry over to work opportunities, to add them to their resumes, and to "talk them up" in job interviews.

Review and Adjust Program Structures and Processes

- **Prioritize family advocacy and leadership in program values, strategic plans, and policies.** Examine policies and practices that support family advocacy and leadership as part of your program's continuous improvement activities.
- **Ensure that decision-making groups and committees reflect the cultural and linguistic make-up of your program and community.** Groups can require a specific number of family representatives so that there is not a "lone" family voice. Have a balance in ages of children represented, racial and ethnic groups, mothers and fathers, primary languages, etc. (Lim, 2008).

Encourage New Parent Voices and Collaboration Between Parents

- **Ensure additional parent input by inviting parents to participate in a range of activities**, such as reviewing drafted materials and policies, attending/evaluating training sessions, co-presenting with other leaders, attending workgroup meetings, and sharing family stories.
- **Promote leadership from many different families** to ensure that families' needs and strengths are not represented by a small subset of leaders (Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Leaders can bring information back to other families and ask for input so that they represent the group's input, not just their own personal issues or interests (Lim, 2008).

Use Data and Other Information to Support Family Leadership

- **Use data to improve practices.** Evaluate how the program engages family leaders. Track the program's progress in supporting family leadership efforts.
- **Collect, analyze, and share information with families.** Identify leadership opportunities for families that match their interests and needs. Share program results with families. Communicate child progress data in meaningful, understandable, and actionable ways.

Encourage Family Leadership and Advocacy Beyond and After Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

- **Help early childhood family leaders transition to elementary school leadership roles.** Introduce Policy Council members and other leaders to elementary school volunteer coordinators. Accompany them to an elementary school advisory council meeting.
- **Build alliances with parent leadership and support organizations in your community or state.** Organizations that work with parents, train staff, and facilitate effective family-staff partnerships can strengthen your family advocacy and leadership efforts. You can help link families to organizations in the community. For more information on the benefits of relationships between families and communities, see *Family Connections to Peers and Community* (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/rtp-family-connections.pdf>), another resource in this Research to Practice series.

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