

Six Lessons Learned About Engaging Families in Head Start's Family Support Services

By Marissa Strassberger

A defining feature of Head Start is its whole-family approach where programs partner with parents and guardians to identify their strengths and needs, set goals, and access services to improve family well-being. However, little research evidence exists about how Head Start and Early Head Start staff members do this essential work.

The *Head Start Connects* case studies, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, examined how six Head Start programs coordinate family support services (for example, education and employment services, and housing and food assistance) that are responsive to families' specific interests and needs and promote their well-being. Below are six lessons learned from the case studies about the practices that the Head Start programs participating in the case studies used to engage families in family support services.

Head Start Connects Project

During fall 2020, researchers from MDRC, NORC at the University of Chicago, and MEF Associates conducted case studies with six Head Start programs to better understand how they coordinate family support services. The programs differed in terms of which Head Start region they were located in, urbanicity, program size and type, and population served. Across the six sites, researchers interviewed 30 Head Start staff members including program directors, family support services staff members, and other staff members such as teachers; 18 parents; and seven community service providers. See the full [case studies report](#) for more information.

Recruitment and enrollment into Head Start was an important time for parents to learn about family support services and to begin building trust with Head Start staff members.

At all case study sites, family support workers were involved in Head Start recruitment and were often the first staff members parents interacted with when they learned about Head Start. Parents from five of the six sites recalled meeting with their family support workers for the first time during the Head Start enrollment process. Family support workers began building relationships with families during the enrollment process and these relationships provided the foundation for engaging families in the family support services the programs offer.

Building rapport and relationships with parents was key to getting families the identified supports.

Family support workers said strong relationships allowed them to get a fuller picture of parents' strengths and needs and helped with goal-setting and connecting families to services. Likewise, most parents described close relationships with their family support workers that grew over time. Building trust took time; some parents were more hesitant to share specifics during their initial conversations and became more willing to open up as they built rapport with the family support workers.

Family support workers used a variety of strategies to build relationships with parents.

Relationship-building strategies included talking casually about subjects not directly tied to parents' goals (for example, sharing something memorable that they saw the parent's child do that day), or by showing they were available to offer support. Other communication strategies described by family support workers included communicating in intentional ways (for example, they reported focusing on being "honest," "consistent," "professional," and not "push[y]"); being culturally aware (for example, learning about individual families' cultures, religions, and customs); following the parent's lead (for example, letting the parent choose which goals to set); and getting to know the children.

Family support workers were extremely dedicated, even going beyond their formal job requirements.

Family support workers' own descriptions of their day-to-day tasks, supported by similar accounts from other Head Start staff members, pointed to a deep dedication to doing whatever it took to support families. This meant continuing to follow up with families who did not respond, working hours outside of the scheduled workday, and driving long distances to get families where they needed to go. Family support workers reported that they tried to balance being mindful of families' stress levels while also acknowledging that good relationship-building practices take time and work. To achieve this balance, they tried to find simple ways to make sure they were in touch with and supported families, such as checking in at drop-off and pick-up. At times, family support workers functioned as part-time mentors, coaches, therapists, and friends. Family support workers conveyed that they cared deeply about the families they served. However, staff members interviewed also acknowledged that the nature and intensity of the work could take a toll on family support workers' own mental health and well-being. All sites reported providing supervision and staff wellness supports (for example, mental health consultations) and these challenges likely made those supports critical for family support workers.

Despite family support workers' efforts, not all parents were able to fully participate in family support services.

Families' participation in services requires collaboration between Head Start staff members, community service providers, and families. Having Head Start staff members serve as

dedicated liaisons with the community service partners helped build longstanding relationships so that sites could offer families a broad array of services to meet their needs. However, despite the efforts of the family support workers and the availability of such services, families and staff members reported that some families were not able to fully participate for a variety of reasons. Among these, families reported needing to focus on their emergency needs first, experiencing barriers to taking up a referral to a specific service, or not being ready to work toward the goal or need being addressed. Some parents reported not realizing services like these were available or said they didn't need the services. Some parents reported not pursuing services because of the stigma they feared was associated with participating.

Parents valued their relationship with their family support worker.

Parents reported receiving various kinds of assistance from family support workers, including referrals to services to pay for food, diapers, and rent; coaching for how to move up at a job or pursue a degree; or simply having someone who listened to them. The majority of parents spoke of their family support workers glowingly, noting that they were “like family.” Though some parents were less involved in goal-setting or may not have followed through on referrals, they appreciated and valued the time spent with their family support workers. A parent described this relationship:

[My family support worker] is so friendly, nice, kind, and encourages and supports me. [She] gives me confidence, says, “Keep trying, we are here for you.” [It] is a big thing for me. [Our relationship is] like a family member, not like she is a worker.... For me, she's like family.

Key Takeaways

Family support workers' everyday interactions with families are key touchpoints for actively engaging families in family support services. To further strengthen this engagement in services, family support workers can focus on building trusting, supportive relationships that are mindful of the challenges that families may face. Head Start programs may consider providing additional staff wellness activities and reflective supervision to family support workers so they can fully engage in the essential work of supporting families.

Stay tuned for more updates on the Head Start Connects project [here!](#)

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