

From Principles to Practice: Building a Family Engagement Culture

Learning Brief - September 2018

This brief is part of ongoing efforts supported by the LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment to build momentum among funders, leaders, advocates, parents and practitioners for a more robust and equitable family engagement field in the region.

Family at the Center

Early childhood researchers have uncovered ample evidence of the critical role families and caregivers play cultivating early learning and the healthy development of young children. There is also growing recognition about the importance of family engagement not only in the early years but throughout a child's life and in the many settings where they live, learn, and play. However, there is often less clarity about what authentic family engagement looks like in practice and how to effectively engage diverse families in responsive and culturally relevant ways.

With 800,000 children under the age of 5 years in Los Angeles County, early childhood funders and advocates have been testing models and strategies that respond to the vast diversity of languages, cultural perspectives, and experiences families face as they navigate the labyrinth of local systems and services. As part of stakeholder discussions sparked by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment in 2015, local advocates developed a shared definition for family engagement as well as **five guiding principles**. These principles build upon the work of national advocates and stress the need to embed practices across the systems and settings that serve families with young children.

Guiding Principles



Foster mutual respect, trusting relationships, and shared responsibility and leadership: Respectful and trusting relationships between parents and providers are critical ingredients for effective family engagement efforts. Building trusting relationships takes time but ultimately bolsters a sense of shared responsibility, leadership, and connections to responsive services and supports.



Engage families where they are: Family engagement programs should be highly accessible and engage families in places and at times that are safe and convenient. They should be strengths-based, responsive to the diverse needs of families, focus on protective factors, and develop over time to deepen and broaden engagement.



Respect, value, and be responsive to cultural and linguistic assets: Culturally and linguistically responsive programs and providers are also critical. Providers should understand and respect cultural assets, norms, and experiences that impact family development and influence families' receptiveness to engagement strategies. Making adaptations to fit the appropriate cultural context makes programs relevant and accessible.



Support strong social networks and connections: In addition to trusting relationships, creating space to strengthen existing social networks and connections among parents and caregivers is an important part of effective engagement. This may happen in informal community settings or as a structured part of parent engagement programs.



Foster an integrated and family-centered systems approach: A systems approach should promote and institutionalize the value and practice of family engagement by creating seamless connections across programs, services, and systems. When possible, programs and services should be coordinated to promote and reinforce continuity of care, build on existing efforts in the community, and extend reach through existing services and resources.

Shared definitions and guiding principles have provided an important foundation for this work, but the ultimate goal is to create family-centered systems that engage families as partners and promote seamless connections throughout the many transitions in a child's life. This practice brief is the first in an ongoing series designed to lift-up specific examples of what these principles look like in practice and to shed light on what it takes to embed family engagement into the fabric of organizations and systems.

In this inaugural brief, we highlight the YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles who has been testing, learning, and embedding family engagement into their organizational DNA. We also highlight the power and potential of collaboration and aligned investments by spotlighting two early childhood funders, First 5 LA and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, as they support the YMCA with the implementation of two evidence-based programs, Early Learning Readiness (ELR) and Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors.

Defining Family Engagement

High impact family engagement is a shared responsibility among providers, caregivers, and families in which institutions and organizations commit to working in partnership with families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways. Family engagement is continuous across a child's life from cradle to career and carried out everywhere children learn—at home, in childcare settings, in health settings, and in community places.



Fostering mutual respect and responsibility

In 2016, the YMCA received a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to pilot a family engagement enhancement for their Early Learning Readiness (ELR) program at five of their urban centers. While the ELR program is already an evidence-based model, the YMCA felt there was an opportunity to more fully engage parents and caregivers participating in the program.

According to Victor Dominguez, Vice President of Community Development at the YMCA, “strengthening community is the driving force behind every decision we make as an organization, and we know, without a doubt, that strong family engagement creates stronger and more connected communities. By adding a family engagement component to our already proven ELR program, we greatly increase our chances of having the maximum positive impact, not just for a young child, but for their entire family.”

The Packard Foundation was quick to support the YMCA as they began to articulate goals and strategies to strengthen parent and caregiver engagement in the ELR program as well as other programs across the agency. Their efforts were guided by three core goals: (1) connect caregivers to community resources that support the overall health of their child, family, and community; (2) help caregivers advocate for their child's education; and (3) provide opportunities to attend workshops and events that support their daily and situational needs. They also sought to identify an internal champion and with the Packard grant hired Lia Evans, an experienced social worker to help develop a more intentional approach to family engagement and build internal capacity across the YMCA's many centers and programs.

“It’s our duty to not only be of service to caregivers who are supporting children, but to also see them on equal footing.”

Lia Evans
Family Resource Director, YMCA

According to Evans, they started with the ELR program which provided an ideal opportunity to test engagement strategies and develop trusting and empowering rapport with the family caregivers. “We’ve been able to fine-tune our vision around family engagement,” she noted, “and build the capacity of facilitators and caregivers to engage as partners in children’s early learning.” With a background as a mental health therapist, Evans emphasized the critical importance of listening and actively engaging parents and caregivers in meaningful ways. “The families were ready to

go from day one. It was just a matter of asking them what they wanted and responding accordingly.” In a dual-capacity approach, ELR facilitators also developed their capacities to engage caregivers in conversations about shifts in both caregiver practices and child behaviors.



Engaging families where they are

At the same time, First 5 LA was also exploring how to support and build capacity for family engagement in diverse early childhood settings. One of their central goals is to pilot and promote the scaling of evidence-based parent and caregiver engagement models, specifically to increase family protective factors in diverse settings. “For some sites, family engagement looks like it’s part of their organizational strategy,” notes Christine Tran, a program officer at First 5 LA. On the other hand, “some [organizations] might not have the capacity historically to do family engagement work or don’t know how.”

First 5 LA’s concept of “diverse spaces” has evolved beyond traditional early child care and health settings to include any place children, families and caregivers live, learn, work and play. “In order to understand where families are coming from and where they feel most comfortable, we had to really broaden our concept of where families are engaged, especially in systems work. For some families, they might feel most comfortable with their local YMCA or other community-based organizations where they receive services outside of school.”

“Families don’t just go to one area for support. They will go wherever they feel most comfortable.”

**Christine Tran,
Program Officer, First 5 LA**

In 2017, the YMCA received a grant from Abriendo Puertas, the nation’s first evidence-based comprehensive family engagement training program developed by and for Latino parents with children ages 0-5. Known as the L.A. County Implementation Project, this grant opportunity was funded by First 5 LA as part of their family engagement capacity building efforts. The project supports organizations across Los Angeles County, like the YMCA. In addition to grant money, participating organizations received curriculum training and customized technical assistance to implement Abriendo Puertas in diverse settings.

Abriendo Puertas trains facilitators to implement a curriculum using the “popular education” approach by drawing from real-life experiences, incorporating data about local schools and communities, and focusing on helping parents understand the critical role they play in the healthy development and the long-term impact on their children’s educational outcomes.

The Packard grant helped to set the stage for the YMCA’s family engagement work and the opportunity to participate in the Abriendo Puertas pilot has helped them deepen and expand their family engagement efforts within the organization. According to Evans, Family Resource Director at the YMCA, “I definitely think Abriendo Puertas has been a game changer. Caregivers want community [...] They get to be content experts, share with one another, and build their social connections. On a community scale, it’s a win-win.” Through this iterative and collaborative process, both funders and the YMCA have had ample opportunities to put family engagement principles into practice.



Responsive and culturally relevant programs

The YMCA, First 5 LA, and the Packard Foundation, all underscored the importance of culturally and linguistically responsive programs and providers. “Family engagement has to be responsive,” Evans notes. “You can have ideas and a framework but if you don’t have the initial commitment and input from families, then family engagement can be really difficult to navigate.”

The YMCA began their family engagement work with an assessment at each of the five urban centers that host Early Learning Readiness (ELR), a program open to caregivers regardless of Y-membership. The purpose of the assessment was to understand both trends and community-specific needs from the perspective of families.

Evans also emphasized the need to continually solicit input and engage caregivers in developing program content. It can't just be based on "things that we talked about two or three years ago. To be responsive, it has to be real-time." She noted the nuanced and important differences, cultural assets, norms, and experiences at each of the five sites. In some communities like East LA, caregivers wanted ESL supports, in South LA it was financial literacy, and in Maywood the level of grandparent involvement called for a multi-generational approach.

The YMCA's experience demonstrates the importance of responsiveness, continuous feedback, and shared responsibility. "Our family engagement strategies – the skeleton – is there but the delivery is going to change year-by-year based on what the needs are at the time," Evans notes.

As part of the collaborative efforts of Abriendo Puertas and First 5 LA, the team also thoughtfully grappled with how to continuously collect information in meaningful and respectful ways. "One of the most effective tools that we've seen for both participants and facilitators has been the simple Plus/Delta check-in at the end of each session where [people reflect on] what went well and what they would change," Tran shared. "That quick little exercise does so much without taking people's time and without actually probing really deeply." Both the YMCA and their funders are continually making adaptations to fit the appropriate cultural context and to ensure that strategies are relevant and accessible.



Supporting social networks and connections

According to the YMCA and their funding partners, one of the most exciting achievements has been fostering strategic partnerships that help the YMCA connect families to concrete supports in times of need. At one of their urban sites, caregivers voiced a need for a support group and guidance caring for children who have experienced trauma. In response, the YMCA developed a partnership with a local mental health provider that now provides ongoing 10-week sessions at the YMCA site.

"Leveraging our relationships with agencies that specialize in different content is essential," Evans shared. "Especially when it comes to mental health. There's a lot of stigma around mental health agencies, particularly in certain communities and to be able to introduce an agency that can support a family over time is key." Offering the support at the YMCA site not only addressed issues of convenience but also eased apprehension families and caregivers may have about visiting the facility of a mental health provider.

Since embarking on this work, the YMCA has developed new partnerships and deepened others with service providers and organizations in the region. "We're feeling very excited about all the collaboration that has emerged in a short period of time," she shared, noting at least 14 agencies that have been central to their work, including libraries, the South-Central LA Regional Center, Families In Schools, and the Violence Intervention Program. In addition to connecting families to resources and services, they have also partnered with other organizations to provide professional development training for their staff and early childhood facilitators. They've intentionally been extending these trainings to other programs and YMCA centers, knowing that family engagement can happen everywhere and at any time.





Fostering family-centered organizations and systems

In many ways the story of the YMCA's journey to implement family engagement strategies at the program-level mirrors that of other organizations but they also understand that creating a culture of engagement across the organization takes time, commitment, and intentionality.

Funders like First 5 LA and the Packard Foundation understand that authentic and equitable engagement requires buy-in and commitment at all levels of the organization. "We want family engagement to be part of an organizational culture where everyone is practicing it rather than being reduced to one person's role," Tran explained. "To make family engagement responsive, there needs to be a huge organizational shift."

Victor Dominguez, the YMCA's Vice President of Community Development believes they are embracing that challenge. "Family engagement aligns with all of the Y's focus areas in social responsibility, healthy living, and youth and family development," Dominguez notes. "It provides the specific and scalable framework that we will use to strengthen our families, our communities, and enable to build stronger partnerships, ultimately contributing to the Y's vision of cradle-to-career success." With funding from the Packard Foundation, the YMCA was able to find the right person to lead and build internal capacity, and First 5 LA's support for Abriendo Puertas, has helped to infuse authentic engagement deeper into organizational practice.

There is a "trickle-down effect," said Tran as she reflected on the important role organizational leaders play. The fact that the Family Resource Director at the YMCA has decision-making latitude and a highly collaborative style has helped to build strong connections and commitment between organizational leaders and frontline staff. "Often times, family engagement facilitators don't actually have the agency within their organizational space to make certain decisions. I think that's been one of the biggest lessons learned that we've had in this partnership with Abriendo Puertas as we're exploring the differences and organizational capacities," Tran observed.

Intentionality was also cited as a key success factor. Both Evans and Tran talked about the importance of being highly intentional, with Tran observing, "from the facilitator training to the roll out of the program – a lot was very intentional which I think is sadly rare in family engagement implementation work." She pointed to the train-the-trainer model and co-facilitation approach that helps to ensure multiple people within an organization are trained and supported.

At the YMCA, Evans has played a critical role supporting and mentoring other engagement facilitators, many of whom were new at this type of facilitation. "I think that element really gave the co-facilitators the ability to not only learn with someone else at the Y, but also implement it with someone that they knew. That co-facilitation approach was very intentional as well."

Extending a family-centered culture that permeates systems requires even greater effort and intentionality, and in a County with over 10 million residents, that's a heavy lift. Nonetheless, early childhood stakeholders resoundingly agree that systems need to be family-centered and promote authentic family engagement practices. While this is clearly a long-term goal, this case example already provides tangible evidence for what happens when funders align investments, elevate shared learning, and support connections across programs, services, and systems.

"This is hard work. Any time funders come together, the intent is there, but actually aligning the funding is much harder. One piece of advice is to look at the ultimate goal – increasing family engagement in Los Angeles."

Bernadette Sangalang, Program Officer
David and Lucile Packard Foundation

The Building Blocks of Family-Centered Systems

The alignment of foundation investments wasn't entirely a happy accident. Funders and system stakeholders have been trying to fuel a more coordinated and collaborative approach to family engagement in the County for several years. While it has taken time and concerted effort, that work is starting to take root. Reflecting back on those earlier conversations, Bernadette Sangalang, program officer for Packard's Children, Families and Communities (CFC) program recalled, "we didn't want to come in with our own agenda. We wanted to learn from what was already happening, to fill in gaps and add value."

The LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment has continued to coalesce funders and advocates around a coordinated approach. Ongoing and interactive conversations, including the formation of a funder learning community, has also helped to generate momentum for family-centered approaches. To promote family engagement, the LA Partnership is looking for ways to actively involve diverse stakeholders in shared learning and field building by funding pilot studies, hosting summits and learning communities, developing a shared learning agenda, and lifting-up promising examples of effective family engagement.

There is also an intentional focus on working closely with public sector partners and families most in need of supports. As Sangalang notes, "If we want to sustain the work, we have to engage the public sector and especially low-income families who touch public systems. Public sector organizations have to keep these principles in mind and involve families. It's so natural to work with advocates, organizations, and the public sector. But you also have to involve families in ways that are authentic and appropriate."



From the grantee perspective, the support and involvement of philanthropic partners is more than just an infusion of much needed financial resources. According to Evans, the funding community has helped to elevate the work and support a learning culture. "It's not only about the grant itself," Evans explains. It's about thought partnership, learning, and "being available to talk about what the next iterations might look like." She also expressed enthusiasm for sharing best practices and learning from other peer organizations. "In the same way that there's these learning communities for funders, I think it would be really neat to have learning communities for grantees to learn from one another." Tran also sees ample opportunities to move beyond supporting single programs to shifting mindsets and transforming systems. "If we can educate the world of philanthropy and the public at large about the multi-faceted nature of family engagement, I think we can make a big difference. It's a slower moving pathway but if we do the work well, we can bring attention to what effective practices look like."

Impactful family engagement is not a "one and done" activity or the responsibility of a single organization but a continuous and intentional organizational and systems-level strategy. It requires building the muscle and capacity of families, caregivers, providers and organization leaders to ensure systems are truly family-centered. As the Office of Head Start National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement puts it, "family engagement is everyone's business."



The LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment is a philanthropic funding collaborative comprised of some of the county's largest private foundations, impactful family foundations, and public funders of early childhood development. The LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment is dedicated to realizing the potential of every child in Los Angeles County. We are a diverse collaboration of funders and government agencies that promotes innovations to prepare children for success when it is most effective and impactful for us all: in the earliest years.



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