



**SECTION 4**

# **Family Engagement**

Family Engagement Events in the early years prepares families to be involved throughout their child's school years. Most importantly, their efforts support the parent-child relationships that are key to a child's healthy development, school readiness, and well-being now, and in the future.

## Background

The family engagement component of this comprehensive program was designed to create a bridge between child care centers and families. Recognizing that health decisions are made on multiple levels, bringing in family involvement was important to the grant with the ultimate goal of families and center staff being able to support each other in their nutrition and wellness endeavors.

To do this, Farm Fresh Rhode Island attended family events at each center involved in the grant. The intent was for these to be previously scheduled events that parents, caretakers, guardians, etc. were invited to and expected to attend. The events were designed to take place after the teacher trainings and in-classroom presentation interventions had been implemented, without too much time having lapsed.

## Key Components of the Activity

Our first goal for this intervention was to raise awareness among families of the steps the center was taking to implement new wellness policies and train its staff on bringing more lessons about fruits and vegetables into the classroom. Secondly, we aimed to educate parents about how they could cook/prepare fruits and vegetables in a kid-friendly way to reinforce in a kid-friendly way to increase acceptance of these foods at home.

The plan for each event was to have materials related to the curriculum and an activity from the modeled lesson. Additionally, we would do a cooking demonstration of a local, seasonal, kid-friendly snack and have recipes for families to take home. Staff would also be available to talk with families who had questions and concerns.

## Implementation of the intervention

### Modifications/adaptations

Of the three Farm Fresh specific interventions, this was the hardest to maintain consistency on. Scheduling parent activities was the most challenging aspect of this intervention. While some centers had pre-scheduled events that fit our timeline, most centers received their interventions out of order, i.e., prior to the teacher training and/or in-classroom presentation rather than after, or there was a large gap of time between the training and parent engagement activities. Toward the end of the grant cycle, a few remaining centers did not have any immediately upcoming events or they had rescheduled many times and we were not able to solidify a date for the parent engagement activities. For these centers, Farm Fresh staff was present at the center during student pick-up time and engaged with families when they came to the center to pick up their children at the end of the day. Rarely, were we able to do cooking demonstrations. Given the inconsistency of event styles and locations within the center, we realized early on that offering pre-made samples and corresponding recipes was a realistic adaptation that made it easier to engage with families. Beside the shift from demonstrations to prepared food, most elements were kept the same.

**Strategies For Engaging Families**

- Share what is happening in the center & what they can do at home
- Give clear guidance on center expectations around food brought from home
- Invite family members to join you and their child for a healthy meal or snack
- Model healthy celebrations
- Have a family fitness event
- Create a center wellness policy committee

Healthy Way to Grow | A JOINT PROGRAM OF Heart Association and NUTRIOUS | THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND SNAP-Ed

## Ready to engage your families? Here are some hints

In order to engage family and community in the events you want to promote, you need to identify the following items :



### #1 Nature of your event

**Ask yourself and your team:**

What are we celebrating or highlighting?

- Identifying what you want to celebrate or highlight will determine the kind of event and the best approach for communicating it



### #2 Date & Time

- To select the date for your event, make sure you take into consideration other events that may be happening within your organization or in the community that might impact whether or not parents and/or caregivers are available to attend
- If another event is happening on the same date that you have chosen within your organization, you can maximize resources by joining efforts and using shared outlets of communication to engage families
- If there is an outdoor event scheduled by a partner organization that highlights a shared goal, such as nutrition, physical activities, literacy, and others, you can join efforts and bring your activities and resources together in a celebration everyone will enjoy. For example, in the month of April, the YMCA celebrates Healthy Kids Day. Usually, their event is close to Earth Day, and many organizations choose to join the YMCA event as sponsors instead of creating their own individual events to maximize community participation and resources.
- Now that you have selected the date, find the RIGHT TIME for the event. If done during the week, the event will have the best attendance by parents if coordinated at pick up time or after.

If the date is on a weekend, remember that most working parents do errands on Saturday morning, so organizing an event after 11 a.m will likely result in better attendance. If on Sunday, take into consideration common times for religious services. Another option is to have a quick survey to learn what works best for parents.



### #3 Advertising

- Think of all free outlets of communication available to your and our organization

**How do you identify those outlets?** Consider the following:

- How do parents prefer to receive information?
- What available outlets do I have that currently send any kind of information to parents?
- Who can be an “ambassador” for parents to attend our organizations’ event? In other words, who is the right person to extend the invitation to parents first.
- Understanding parents’ preferred methods of communication helps you target those means of communication
- Identify possible earned (free) media outlets that can incorporate your message in a timely manner without cost to you
- Understanding WHO has a relationship with parents within your center will help you ensure their participation. For example, your biggest allies are the children. If you motivate them to convey the message, they will for sure remind parents about your event.
- Teachers and teacher assistants or other support staff usually have a close relationship with parents because of the many times they engage them to provide reports about their children’s’ progress and wellbeing. These employees can be the cheerleaders that communicate information about your events and that can send reminders to get families excited and engaged



## #4 Engaging Parents

- When developing the invitation for your event KEEP IT SIMPLE & COLORFUL
- Color brings visual attention at once, and simple language that is easily readable makes the recipient quickly understand the goal of the event and what they can expect
- Highlight the date and time and make this information easy to find
- Send the initial invitation to parents at least 1 month in advance
- Develop an outreach schedule that allows you to send at least two rounds of reminders; each communication after the initial invitation should keep the same look and feel
- Talk to the children about what makes the event you are planning special
- Ask the children to talk to their parents about the event, and repeat the date and time to the children at least 5 times
- Since this is a team effort, ask your team for support. Define a key message that can be easily conveyed by everyone, so when a team member approaches parents, they can talk about the event delivering the same content in an effective manner.
- Coordinate with your frontline staff to remind parents about upcoming opportunities, always ending the conversation with “We look forward to seeing you and your family at our event”, closing with a smile.
- Keep a friendly, upbeat tone. The tone of voice we use when we invite someone to attend any of our activities will determine if it feels like a command or a friendly invitation. That same tone of voice can convey whether the event is exciting, or it is something of no importance to our families. Your attitude when having a face-to-face interaction will be the presentation card of the activity you are promoting.



## #5 Making it Fun

- Brainstorm: Think of your audience and ask yourself what can we offer for each age group that will be fun and exciting?
- What activities would you like to see being offered to parents and children?
- What is the goal of this event? To learn about nutrition or healthy habits; to support education strategies; to teach physical activities that can be done at home; to bring a family together; to highlight new strategies of your center or more than one of the above? There are thousands of goals. You need to define yours
- Which activities support the goal of your event?



## #6 Partnerships

- After determining the activities you want to see being offered at your event, keeping in mind your target age group, make a list of community partner organizations that provide services that include some of the activities you want to see. For example, Farm Fresh RI provides information about the Harvest of the Month, as well as food samples. URI SNAP-Ed provides nutrition education and recipe taste testing, the YMCA offers Pop Up Playgrounds and physical activities, Lifespan offers information about blood pressure and diabetes prevention practices, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of RI has volunteers that perform face painting, and the list continues.
- Reach out to each organization sharing the invitation for your event and asking them to participate by bringing their information and activities.
- Always provide at least a 45 minute window to set up before the event. That helps you plan for any unanticipated issue that can arise.
- Every time a partner confirms their participation place their name on a list
- Develop a map of whether partners will place their tables/activities during the event. This will help you plan accordingly, as well as it will help you delegate responsibility to others to help coordinate partners while they set up. It will also help you direct parents to specific activities.

## #7 Maximizing Resources-Budgeting

- You already have a list of activities and partners that can provide those activities
- Take a look at your initial goal for this event and think of what else is missing
- If you have partners that are bringing their resources and activities, then in most cases you will not have any expenses related to those activities.
- If, when looking at your list, you see that you still don't have enough to offer families as far as food and beverage, you can ask your food vendor(s) if they would like to support your event by donating a few items.
- There is nothing wrong with asking, the worst they can say is NO and you should always be ready for that.
- If someone says no to a donation request, then you can ask "What can you say YES to?"
- Take a close look at your budget and find places where items could be purchased at a lower cost to maximize your resources
- You can also ask families to bring something to share, depending on the event
- If this is a free event, do not ask for monetary donations from the families, it is easier to send a list of items needed to contribute to your activity
- Regardless of how long your activity is, keep in mind that you should plan to have water and snacks available

## #8 What makes your event successful?

### **You are the one that determines that!**

- Set your goal for number of attendees
- Set a goal for number of activities being offered
- Set a goal for the kind of engagement and participation you want to see

From Ice Cream socials to Graduation Ceremonies, the laughs of children, the joy of parents, and the feeling of all being part of a larger family makes the difference on what you can refer to as "success"

- When comparing your events to others, remember:

Do your best to inspire your team to support your events and activities. Creativity is a plus! Never discard ideas, instead blend them to create something extraordinary that has never been done before. If you try it first, then you can use that experience to make the next event more successful!

Do not forget to have FUN during the process. The more fun it is for you and your team, the more likely it is that your activity or event will exceed your and your families' expectations.

