

5 WAYS TO BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES



Written by Dr. Kenneth Anthony, Connecticut Afterschool Network – NAA State Affiliate.

Family engagement has a life-long impact on the lives of children and comes in many forms. As professionals in the field of afterschool and expanded learning, it is important to remember that even though we may not see children's family members at school or a program, this does not mean they are not engaged in the lives of their children. With that in mind, we need to actively build strong engagement

with families when they can come to the school or program. This may seem daunting at times due to the demands of the current American family lifestyle, which not only include significant job and school responsibilities, but also involve jam-packed extracurricular schedules for all household members. Understanding that families are busy and frequently overwhelmed can help us think about how we can build stronger connections with families when they pick up or drop off their children at your program. Here are five quick techniques that help to build strong relationships in a fast-paced culture.

BE GENUINE WHEN STRENGTHENING FAMILY CONNECTIONS. Train front line staff how to build meaningful connections and be aware of their body language. It is easy for family members to pick up on attitudes, whether positive or negative. The simplest strategies promote healthy relationships: making eye contact, always having something courteous to say, and saying something positive about the child's experience at the program. Acknowledge the family's interest in keeping their child in afterschool and show that you understand how busy life can get. Frequently, the direct service workers at an afterschool program may be older teenagers or college students. It is imperative to give these young adults training on how to make meaningful connections with the families in the program.

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION FROM FAMILY MEMBERS. Remind families that you have an open door policy and that they are welcome. Invite them to visit and share an interesting hobby, skill or activity with the students and other families.

BE RESPECTFUL. When inviting families to an outing, fair or training, make it worth their while. Be respectful of their time. Start on time, end on time. Knowing that they have busy lives and schedules, make the event engaging and meaningful for them. Ensure your presenters are upbeat, are able to relate, and are dynamic and energetic. Know your audience. If you know that the families you work with are from a specific community, hire a presenter with a similar background who can genuinely connect with those family members.

1 UNDERSTAND FAMILY STRUCTURES. Even though our society is more progressive than it used to be, there are still many biases toward families who don't fit the traditional model. We know as human service professionals that families come in many forms and styles. Some adults have a difficult time accepting non-traditional families based on their personal experiences, and many families perceive this bias. The less emphasis you put on how different a family seems to you, the more you will get to know and connect with the family and build the relationship.

2 BREAK THE BREAKDOWN. As a program facilitator, I have often heard what I call "breakdown comments" toward families. I once heard a school staff member say, "Families only come because we are feeding them." My response always was, "I am happy they are coming because I really want to sit and eat with them." Macroaggressions are a real issue that need to be dealt with and are unacceptable toward the children and families that are served through extended learning programs. Some people are completely unaware they are breaking someone down. Have open and truthful conversations with staff about macroaggressions. Train your staff to identify macroaggressions when they hear them and on methods for eliminating them.

Building positive relationships with the families of the children in your care is incredibly rewarding. Below are some resources to help you learn more about building these meaningful connections, increasing family engagement in afterschool and improving awareness of macroaggressions.

RESOURCES:

http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_57_Parent_Engagement.cfm

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/guide.pdf>

<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/>

www.microaggressions.com

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SEE MORE AT: <http://naaweb.org/professional-development/item/526-5-ways-to-build-strong-relationships-with-families>

OPENING DISCUSSION

Which of the family engagement techniques resonated with you and why?

Which of these techniques is most challenging for you and why?

How would you describe family engagement in your program?

APPLICATION ACTIVITY

You have a family event planned for next week that you placed a lot of effort in planning. You notice only four families have signed up to attend. Considering the five techniques described, what can you do to increase family participation?

Plan a family experience in which you can learn about family structures. What is your idea and why is it important?

CLOSING REFLECTION

How can you learn more about identifying macroaggressions and how to eliminate them?

What is one way you can begin to strengthen family relationships in your program?

If applicable, provide participants with the corresponding certificate of participation and if required ask them to complete the questions included on the certificate.

CERTIFICATE of PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



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_____ **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT HOURS, EARNED BY:**

CONTENT INCLUDED:

- Be genuine when strengthening family connections • Encourage participation from family members
- Be respectful • Understand family structures • Break the breakdown

FACILITATOR: _____ **DATE:** _____

| Share the five techniques to building family relationships.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

| List one step you will take to build stronger relationships with families in your program.

| How will you break the breakdown?

Supports Content Area 7, Levels 1-4 of the NAA Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals