Defining Relationship-Based Family Engagement: Strategies for Early Childhood and Elementary Educators and Caregivers

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Abstract

Family engagement is important for children's learning and development. Research shows that strong relationships between families and educators are essential for partnerships to be successful. However, it is less clear what meaningful family engagement looks like during everyday interactions. We interviewed and conducted focus groups with 73 educators and 12 caregivers of children aged birth to sixth grade from around one state in the Northeastern United States. We also analyzed 176 video minutes of family–educator interactions. Using data, we define relationship-based family engagement as a partnership that starts from a place of strength, centers empathy, and is built from everyday interactions. We also describe practical strategies shared by participants for families and educators that seek to build relationships in support of their children and one another.

Key Words: family engagement, relationships, developmental interactions, early childhood, elementary, educators, caregivers, families

Introduction

Research and practice show that children benefit from strong relationships between families and educators. We use the term "family" and

"caregiver" interchangeably to describe the child's primary guardian in the home. Also, we use the term "educator" to describe the adult working with children, youth, and families outside of the home; this is a term of respect for all types of adults such as teachers, interventionists, support staff, coaches, and others that work in support of children's learning and development. Family engagement is associated with higher academic achievement (e.g., Epstein et al., 2018; Mautone et al., 2014), positive social and emotional development (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012), and mental health (e.g., Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). When families and educators partner in the early years, it can set a trajectory of school readiness and future school engagement (e.g., Powell et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011; Starkey & Klein, 2000). Relationships are the foundation of strong family engagement; however, more research is needed to describe what these look like in the daily lives of families and educators of young children. In this study, we examine how families and educators interact and build relationships with one another.

Centering Relationships in Family Engagement

For decades, researchers have investigated how families and schools engage with one another. Early research on the topic focused on parental involvement and the benefits that children experienced when their caregivers participated in school activities such as supporting academics at home, being active and visible in the school, and stressing academic success as a family value (e.g., Crosnoe & Benner, 2015; Epstein, 1995; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). More recently, the conversation has shifted from family involvement to family engagement (Baker et al., 2016; Harvard Family Research Project, 2014). This shift has roots in school–community partnerships and the idea that schools can better support children in partnership with community organizations and with families (Dryfoos, 1994). Family engagement is the process through which educators and caregivers build a relationship around shared goals for the child grounded in respect for the role each person plays (Auerbach, 2010; Epstein et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Family engagement often emphasizes relationships between families and the school. Indeed, many frameworks at the local, state, and national levels include suggestions for building family engagement partnerships. For example, "relationship-centered" family engagement is one of the core values of the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE). In addition, the Head Start Parent, Family, and

Community Framework includes the aim of "positive and goal-oriented relationships," and Head Start has developed 10 relationship-based competencies for supporting family engagement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Many states with family engagement frameworks also include relationship-focused standards that describe getting to know families and adapting the learning environment to meet families' needs (e.g., Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee, 2015; Michigan, 2020; Oklahoma, 2021).

There are also several established research theories that incorporate relationships into family engagement. The Epstein et al. (2019) School–Family–Community Partnership Model overviews six types of involvement in the relationships between schools, homes, and organizations. In particular, this framework describes the importance of many-way communication among students, educators, families, and the community. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) offers structures and strategies of family engagement that are associated with student success. The authors describe some of the "essential conditions" of effective partnerships as relational and built on mutual trust, asset-based, culturally responsive, collaborative, and interactive. Finally, there are several books, studies, and reports that describe cultural responsiveness in family engagement (e.g., Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020; Grant & Ray, 2019; Hernandez, 2020). These emphasize the importance of building relationships that respect the unique background of families.

In educational research specifically, relational trust is a construct built around the social exchanges between stakeholders (e.g., teachers, parents, children, administrators) and describes agreement around expectations and obligations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cranston, 2011; Pleski et al., 2021). Mutual trust can increase communication and transparency (Reedy & McGrath, 2010), positive perceptions (Powell et al., 2010), and joint progress towards addressing challenges (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Trust can develop when families and educators see each other's strengths and have empathy for one another. For example, educators might prioritize a family's abilities, cultural background, and resources instead of focusing on their problems or trying to "fix" families (Beeber et al., 2007; González et al., 2005; Ishimaru, 2017).

Relational Practices in Family Engagement

Research shows that relationships are built from everyday interactions (Li & Ramirez, 2023; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Researchers posit that developmental interactions include the

following four dimensions: connection, reciprocity, inclusion, and opportunity to grow, as depicted in the Simple Interactions Tool (see Appendix C; Akiva et al., 2016; Li & Julian, 2012; Simple Interactions, 2024). In the dimension of *connection*, people are present and emotionally in tune with each other, whether they are listening, talking, or working together. This is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical framework of "developmental dyads." In the dimension of *reciprocity*, two people exchange roles, form partnerships, and may gradually shift power and control in any joint activity—toward balanced "serve and return" exchanges (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). In the *inclusion* dimension, everyone, especially those who are the least likely to engage, are invited and welcomed into the group (Li & Julian, 2012). Finally, *opportunity to grow* is based on Vygotsky's (1978) description of the Zone of Proximal Development in which a person is incrementally supported to stretch beyond the comfort zones of their current competence and confidence.

In family engagement relationships, there is some evidence that these four developmental interaction dimensions may be beneficial for strengthening partnerships. Several studies show that two-way or reciprocal communication with a shared power balance is associated with effective family engagement and equitable collaborations (Douglass, 2011; Douglass & Gittell, 2012; Ishimaru, 2017; Reedy & McGrath, 2010). In addition, Head Start offers examples of their 10 relationship-based competencies for supporting family engagement that align with developmental interactions, such as building self-aware and culturally responsive relationships (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

However, families and educators still express a desire to learn more about specifics for how to engage with one another. In a 2019 review of research, Kirmaci found that, across several studies, educators desired more training on how to work with families and the community. Likewise, families often seek guidance about parental decisions online (e.g., Kubb & Foran, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2002). There seems to be far less information on how to build relationships during everyday interactions between families and educators. More research is needed about specific ideas around how to build trust through interactions.

Current Study

Research shows that family engagement relationships are essential, but there is less evidence about what these can look like in practice. Our goal for this study was to understand and describe day-to-day family engagement practices. To do this, we conducted interviews and focus groups to under-

stand our primary research questions: (1) What is relationship-based family engagement? (2) What are relationship-based family engagement practices?

Methods

Data Collection and Analysis

The sample of this study includes 73 educators and 12 caregivers of children age birth to sixth grade from around one state in the Northeastern United States. Participants were from a range of geographical locations split between urban, suburban, and rural settings. We did not collect demographic information for participants. Statewide during the year in which this study took place, 74% of educators were female (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020), and about 6% were persons of color (Research for Action, 2020).

In Phase 1 of the study, we held focus group sessions with 66 K–6 teachers from 31 districts in one region of the state in the fall of 2019. Participants attended this focus group as part of a larger convening of teachers focused on technology. During Phase 2 of the study in Spring 2020, we worked with two statewide departments as part of a larger project around family engagement to determine partner organizations and families with whom to connect. We recruited educators through emails generated by the statewide department. We conducted interviews via an online platform (Zoom) with four educators from three organizations and six caregivers from around the state. During the fall of 2020, we observed 176 total minutes of recordings from early intervention tele-sessions with three educators and six caregivers to learn more about real-life family engagement interactions. All participants signed consent forms ahead of participation confirming their ethical treatment during research activities.

The research team iteratively developed a one-hour semi-structured focus group protocol for Phase 1 (see Appendix A) and a one-hour semi-structured interview protocol for Phase 2 of the project (see Appendix B). Three members of the research team did a first-round review of transcripts of interviews after Phase 1 and focus groups after Phase 2 using Microsoft Word and Excel and noted themes that emerged across all conversations. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2003), the research team iteratively created a codebook to describe these themes (see Table 1). We only include discussion of codes relevant to the research questions in this article.

The research team did a second-round review of both datasets simultaneously using the codebook. This allowed us to triangulate across two

different sources so that we could validate and corroborate findings (Saldaña, 2015). While coding, the research team met to maintain a consistent understanding of the codes. We also discussed discrepant codes to increase reliability; disagreements were resolved through consensus among the research team (Saldaña, 2015).

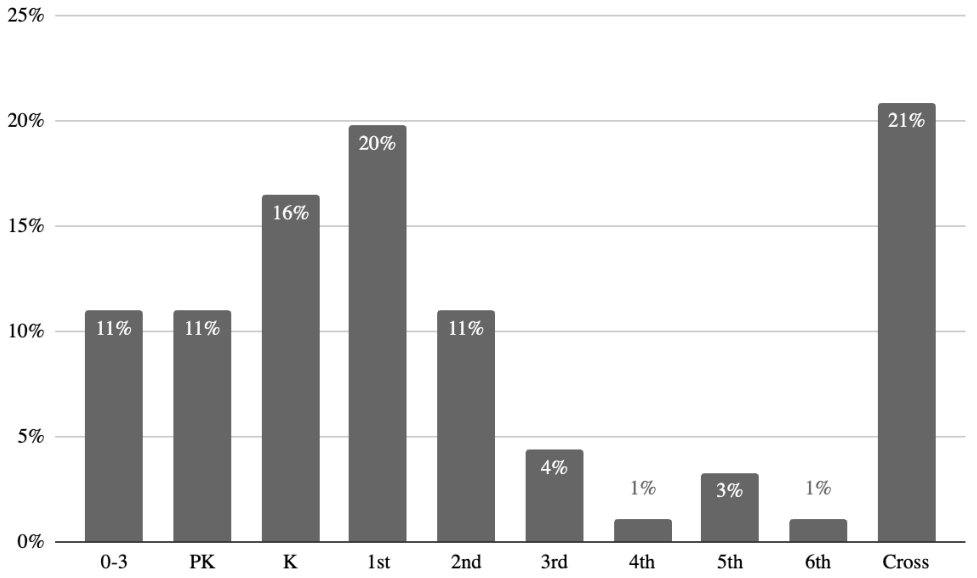
Table 1. Codebook

Theme	Description
Empathy & Understanding	Acknowledging how families or educators feel, active listening, not making assumptions, "meeting them where they are"
Building Relationships & Partnerships	Trust, consistency, respect, partnerships, collaboration, communication, interactions, "how to"
Educator Considerations	Technology, time, balance, boundaries, money, training, unengaged families, advocating for your students
Caregiver Opportunities	Training, volunteering, opportunities to be involved more hands on, advocating for your child
Supports for Families	Culturally diverse families, challenges, basic needs, family structure
Supportive Practices	Ideas for implementing practices, starting point for implementing effective family engagement policies
Children with Disabilities	Interviewees mention their experience as a caregiver to children with disabilities
Grandparents	Interviewees mention their experience as a grandparent

Two members of the research team also coded video recordings for the four dimensions of developmental interactions outlined in the Simple Interactions Tool and described in the literature review (see Appendix C; Simple Interactions, 2024). These dimensions include connection, reciprocity, inclusion, and opportunity to grow. The Simple Interactions Tool has been validated in previous research (Akiva et al., 2016; Akiva et al., 2020).

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of educators served young children or were in a role such that they served multiple ages in an elementary school (labeled "cross" on Figure 1). This study design gave us insight to make claims about strategies and themes that may apply across age groups and especially at the early childhood level.

Figure 1. Ages of Children Served by Educators and Caregivers



Findings

Data revealed three themes from educators and families about relationship-based family engagement and practices they use to build family engagement relationships: family engagement starts from a place of strength; empathy is central to family engagement; and family engagement partnerships grow from small moments (see Table 2). In this section, we describe each in detail.

Table 2. Relationship-Based Family Engagement

Theme	Family Engagement Practices
Family Engagement Starts from a Place of Strength	-Build relational trust between families and educators -Acknowledge others' expertise -Foster respect
Empathy Is Central to Family Engagement	-Use active listening -Acknowledge others' experiences and perspectives -"Meet them where they are"
Family Engagement Partnerships Grow from Small Moments	-Incorporate developmental relational practices (connection, reciprocity, inclusion, opportunity to grow)

Family Engagement Starts From a Place of Strength

Through conversations with families and educators, it was clear that both share goals around supporting a child's learning and development. When families and educators approached the relationships through a strengths-based lens, they described how partnerships seemed easier and more authentic to develop. We heard about the theme of strengths-based family engagement in three ways.

First, families and educators who focused on each other's strengths seemed to have more mutual trust. When families trusted educators, relationships seemed to grow. Similarly, when educators trusted that families were doing their best, it allowed them to strengthen the partnership. For example, in an interview, one caregiver of a child with special needs shared her experience with early intervention professionals:

> I voiced my opinion on what I wanted for my child, but I also trusted what they were saying and doing because at the end of the day they are the professionals, and they are doing this job because of a passion.

Similarly, in one video clip of an early intervention tele-session, an educator reassured a caregiver about the child's progress, and the caregiver stated her trust by saying: "If you're not worried, then we're not worried." For some families, sharing their expertise and also trusting the expertise of educators could be challenging. We heard how caregivers sometimes held back their thoughts because they did not want to upset their children's educators or they were emotional about difficult situations. Educators described strategies they used to overcome this and to build trust with families. For example, in an interview, one educator at a home-visiting organization described building trust by "showing up, over time, with consistency." Another educator at an early childcare center shared during a focus group that she built trust by focusing on strengths:

> You have to have 10 really positive conversations before you have to have one hard conversation with a family. Because they build that trust, and they understand where you're coming from instead of having the only time you communicate with them being something that you have to say that's difficult.

Second, acknowledging families' and educators' expertise was also foundational to strong family engagement relationships. We heard how it was useful when educators recognized that families know their children best and when educators listened to them. In an interview, one educator at a home-visiting organization described this in action:

> The goal is not for [the family] to see us as the expert and the teacher, but for them to see they are the expert, the first teacher, the most important teacher of their child. You know, that's a constant seed that you have to plant. Especially amongst the immigrant families that we work with, 'cause I think, especially in certain cultures, that parents are not seen as the educators.

Likewise, it was also useful when families listened to the expertise of educators about learning strategies for children as well as their experience of the child outside the home. In both cases, starting with the assumption that the other brought equal value to the relationship was key.

Finally, family engagement starting from a place of strength was grounded in respect. When family participants felt respected, they shared they felt like an equal partner in their child's learning. One caregiver described this in an interview: "The entire team of professionals around my daughter met together with me, and we all discussed goals and plans across settings." Educators also described how they try to be respectful in how they are responsive to a family's needs. For example, one early childhood educator in a focus group said: "I just believe that families have their own comfort level with how connected they want to become, and you also have to respect that." Educators felt respected when families joined them as partners in supporting the child's learning. For example, one elementary educator in a focus group said,

> It's about being honest and open and being willing to let somebody in to help solve problems. Because traditionally, the teacher was expected to solve that problem. Now, by opening it up with family engagement, [families] can help solve the problems.

Empathy Is Central to Family Engagement

The idea that empathy is important for family engagement was woven throughout every interview we conducted. Approaching family engagement relationships with empathy seemed to strengthen the process of creating partnerships. Participants talked about building empathy in their own practice in three ways.

Educators and families described active listening as necessary for empathy in family engagement. Active listening is defined as a type of communication in which the listener is fully concentrated on understanding and responding to what the speaker is saying (Graham-Clay, 2024; Paramole et al., 2024). Active listening allowed participants to learn more about others in order to find areas of common ground. This also allowed participants to keep an open mind, rather than passing judgment. For example, in

one interview, a grandmother acting as a primary caregiver for her grandchildren said,

> Relationship building starts with open dialogue with each other.... When we get together and we talk to each other and actively listen, we find out we have more in common than we do in differences. It just expands, and that's the beauty of building a collaborative learning environment where everyone is heard.

Participants also shared that when educators or families acknowledged their experiences and perspectives, it created a sense of empathy and strengthened the family engagement relationship. The simple act of listening to another person's experience seemed to connect educators and families. For example, in an interview, one grandparent acting as a primary caregiver said, "Acknowledging that you've got a really hard situation in front of you—that right there just drops the angst from any human being." Families and educators both genuinely appreciated feeling heard by the other. A caregiver of a child with special needs shared in an interview that "one of the best things I've found about the professionals from early intervention is they truly understand your needs and your struggles as a parent."

The term "meet them where they are" was often used in our conversations with educators and families in relation to empathy in family engagement. Families talked about how empathy for educators allowed them to advocate more effectively for their children. When families had an understanding of the educator's perspective, they were more able to share important information relevant to the educator. Educators talked about how empathy allowed them to focus on families' needs, which made teaching easier for them. In particular, the importance of being culturally and linguistically responsive to families came up in conversations. For example, one educator at a home-visiting organization said in an interview, "so another key is making sure we have a cultural and linguistic match. I think that also helps the relationship." This interviewee shared that at this particular program, home visitors were often from the community, which helped to open up communication.

Family Engagement Partnerships Grow From Small Moments

Throughout this project, we saw evidence that family engagement relationships are built from everyday interactions that occur between families and educators. As one educator at a home-visiting program described in an interview, "it sounds like little pieces, but I think that's important in the buildup of the relationship." Through conversations with educators

and caregivers, we noticed that everyday moments of family engagement aligned with the four dimensions on the Simple Interactions Tool: connection, reciprocity, inclusion, and opportunity to grow (Simple Interactions, 2024; see Appendix C and www.simpleinteractions.org for more details).

We heard from participants how families, educators, and children connect with one another emotionally, such as when celebrating a success or when thinking together about how to address a challenge. In a focus group, one home-visiting educator described how connecting with families helps to:

> ...break down all of those walls. I think it's the consistency of showing up even though we don't get to that outcome we think we wanted to get to during this visit. Just that we're showing up and showing that interest.

We also saw evidence of connection on video clips. For example, one family brought their newborn son to the screen to introduce him to their older son's intervention specialist exhibiting relationship building and trust.

The importance of two-way, reciprocal communication for building mutual trust and strong partnerships was also prevalent in many conversations. Engaging in balanced exchanges where all people have a chance to speak and listen may help everyone move towards a partnership that is beneficial for the child. As one parent advocate noted in an interview, she prioritizes asking "parents what they need and how is this working, and the big thing is to build that authentic, two-way relationship."

Participants also shared descriptions of how educators and families include one another in relationships. Both educators and families described how sharing information about themselves and the child promoted a sense of community and strengthened family engagement. For example, one educator trains her staff by saying, "Regardless of what's happening, sharing any little piece of good news can really make a difference." Many educators talked about how they include families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Caregivers appreciated this, as one with a young child with special needs noted in an interview:

> My professionals were really cooperative and supportive of me not knowing a lot of things, and they really educated me, and I got to know about how things are done. They always considered our cultural beliefs and how we were doing things, and then we always found a way that worked for all of us.

Educators and families both described opportunities to grow during family engagement interactions. Families shared how their knowledge of

the child's strengths, growth areas, interests, and dislikes was able to inform educators. Communication from the family offered growth opportunities for the educator to support the child. Educators also talked about how they offered caregivers opportunities to partner in decisions about the child. As one educator said in a focus group, "I think the most important thing to do is set the stage with families that you are partners in this child's educational future." These opportunities to grow can happen during small moments. For example, in one video clip, the interventionist asked the family about their goals for their child during mealtime to work on together during the next session. In part due to support from educators, we heard how caregivers strengthened their voice in advocating for their children. Some families also took on leadership roles by connecting with other families to encourage advocacy. For example, one caregiver of a child with special needs said in an interview: "One of the things early intervention did for me was not only educate me as a parent and a parent advocate, but they also connected me to other families that were more or less in the same journey."

Discussion

In this study, we explored how educators and families of young children are building family engagement relationships. To do this, we asked two research questions: (1) What is relationship-based family engagement? (2) What are relationship-based family engagement practices? Through conversations with families and educators and observations of real practice three themes emerged that cut across each research question.

Defining Relationship-Based Family Engagement

Using data from this study, we define relationship-based family engagement as a partnership that starts from a place of strength, centers empathy, and is built from everyday interactions. Practices that were most successful were those that prioritized relationship building between the family and the educator. This aligns with theories about family engagement that also incorporate relationship building and trust (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Epstein et al., 2019; Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

We found that relationships became true partnerships when the families and educators approached each other by identifying strengths. Successful relationships were those where adults knew one another, listened to each other's challenges, collaboratively problem-solved, and relied on one another towards a common goal of a child's learning and positive development. Previous research shows that when educators tap into the strengths

of children and families, students are more engaged and successful at school (González et al., 2005; Hogg, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2016; Pleski et al., 2021; Rodriguez, 2013). Likewise, educators can tap into caregivers' "funds of knowledge" when establishing family engagement relationships grounded in the strengths of families (Moll et al., 1992).

We also found that when families and educators show empathy and care about each other, they can work together through challenging moments and towards learning and growth. This aligns with previous research showing that relational trust can improve communication, problem solving, and positive perceptions between families and educators (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Graham-Clay, 2024; Li & Ramirez, 2023; Reedy & McGrath, 2010).

The foundation of these relationships are the simple, everyday moments of interaction between families and educators. If families and educators can focus on the day-to-day interactions across all of their touchpoints with one another, it may help make strong relationships possible (Li & Julian, 2012).

Practices to Support Relationship-Based Family Engagement

This study also offers strategies to support relationship-based family engagement, specifically for educators of young children. First, educators and caregivers may benefit from reflecting on their everyday family engagement interactions and practicing strategies that promote strong partnerships. Professional learning experiences for educators and workshops for families may support intentionality around work together. Indeed, a meta-analysis of 39 studies shows that educator training can positively impact teacher family engagement practices (Smith & Sheridan, 2018). One example of this is the Simple Interactions professional learning approach (www.simpleinteractions.org) that uses a strengths-based video reflection protocol for participants to notice and wonder about their own everyday interactions.

We also believe that growing communities of learning for both families and educators may help each navigate family engagement situations and relationships. Communities can help educators and caregivers share information, provide support, sustain learning, offer encouragement, and illuminate applications (Wenger, 1998). In particular, a dedicated space to connect about family engagement might promote learning from one another and support for difficult conversations (Graham-Clay, 2024).

Sharing information is another strategy that may empower families and educators to build relationships grounded in empathy and strengths. For families, this might focus on identifying opportunities to engage with educators and strengthening skills to advocate for their children. For

educators, resources might focus on learning new technologies and negotiating boundaries as they navigate family engagement partnerships.

Finally, focusing on cultural responsiveness is a practice that emerged as key to effective, relationship-based family engagement. Programs can consider hiring educators from the community they serve and also offering training in cultural sensitivity for those coming from outside the community. When families and educators do not have a cultural or linguistic match, educators can intentionally consider the background and beliefs of the families they serve. Educators can also practice acknowledging when they do not know something about a different culture instead of making assumptions. Further exploration of specific strategies for families and educators that do not have a cultural or linguistic match would be useful. For example, Leo et al. (2019) offer strategies at the secondary level, such as drawing on local resources and using culturally responsive practices. It would be interesting to investigate these at an early childhood level.

Limitations

While this study offers contributions to the field, there are also some limitations to its generalizability. First, participants self-selected into the study. In Phase 1, educators joined the focus group as part of a day-long event around technology. In Phase 2, we connected with educators and caregivers through a statewide organization. This may bias our sample and limit the claims we can make about family engagement. Second, although we collected data from educators and caregivers across age groups, most participants worked with younger children. It would be useful for additional research to examine these themes for educators of middle and high school students. Finally, we did not collect demographic data for participants, and we did not specifically examine cultural or linguistic differences in the context of this study. Future research around these differences and culturally responsive practices would be a contribution to the field.

Conclusion

This study underscores the idea that intentional relationships are essential to family engagement. By starting from strengths, centering empathy, and focusing on everyday interactions, educators and families can build strong partnerships together. These family engagement relationships can ultimately support the learning and growing of the child, families, and the community.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

Thinking about the relationship between teachers and families, do you feel a responsibility to communicate with families about technology use?

What are expectations from families regarding their expectations for teacher communications?

How do we approach balance with families? What are some tools the teachers have used?

How do we communicate with parents about technology?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for talking today! For this research study, we're hoping to learn more about how families and caregivers engage together and find stories that help bring the family engagement to life. This interview will be about an hour. Do you mind if we record?

We'd love to hear some stories you have of engaging with [families OR caregivers/educators]. Are there any great moments you remember, or really hard ones?

PROBE: Can you tell me about a specific moment or example?

How have/do you build relationships with [families OR caregivers/educators]? How do you sustain these relationships?

What challenges have you experienced engaging with a [family OR caregiver/educator]? Are there any *needs* that you see related to family/educator engagement?

Are there any resources in general (and/or specifically in your state) that are useful as you engage with [families OR caregivers/educators]?

What advice would you give to another [family OR caregiver/educator] if they wanted to build relationships with [families OR caregivers/educators]?

Anything else?

Appendix C: The Simple Interactions Tool