

Including Families in Child Care Programs: Family Meetings

Strong family partnerships are a core element of a quality child care program. Children do best in programs that reflect their home lives and that work together with families to coordinate care. There are many strategies to build and strengthen connections with families. One effective way is through family meetings. These are regular gatherings offered to the families of children in your care that focus on gathering input for program and policy decisions. For programs participating in Spark, family meetings are an important step to becoming a 5-star rated program.

Inviting families to a meeting may seem intimidating at first because of concerns they might be overly critical of your program or ask for unrealistic changes. However, you can guide the meeting to focus on positive suggestions and have strategies prepared to problem-solve if issues do arise. Early childhood professionals often work long hours and may feel their efforts go unrecognized. Meetings are an opportunity to hear all the ways that families do recognize your hard work.

When preparing to host a family meeting there are some simple steps to help you be successful:

1. **Notify families of the meeting well in advance.** Programs set meeting dates anywhere from a month to a full year in advance to allow parents to make arrangements. It's helpful to give families several options for meeting times and dates. When you invite families let them know that the meeting is specifically to get their input and hear their ideas.
2. **Think about different areas for potential family input.** Consider topics families might have ideas or suggestions about such as curriculum activities, ways to meet your program's goals, improvements to the environment, participating in interviews during hiring staff members, field trip suggestions, and interest in enrichment programs such as music or language instruction. Also think about your practices and policies that you want families to know about. Family meetings are a time to share ways that your program is unique and how you are investing in children.
3. **Create an agenda.** Writing an agenda and sending it to families in advance is a key way to focus their thoughts and to encourage constructive feedback. Providing a variety of different ways to participate during the meeting helps make it more comfortable for all, and helps you get the most out of the time together. Some ways to invite participation during the meeting include posting blank chart paper with questions for families to write answers, distributing surveys on a specific topic or the Spark family survey, discussing topics in small groups, sharing photos of children engaged in their daily activities, and exploring curriculum books or assessment tools.
4. **Send a reminder to parents a few days before the meeting.** Parents' lives are busy and it can be easy to forget previously scheduled events. Prepare your materials for the meeting in advance so that you are organized and ready to go.

Start the meeting with a smile on your face and a positive attitude. Be ready to hear all the things families love about your program. If issues do arise, be ready to do what you can to address the concerns and explain the reasons for your policies. Having children in group care is a learning experience for many families and early childhood professionals often need to provide support in understanding how child care works. At the end of the meeting take a few minutes to note ideas shared and how you plan to use the suggestions received. Be sure to thank families for their participation and input.

Continuous quality improvement and making a program a great place for children is a part of every early childhood professional's work. Family meetings are a step in this direction and a positive addition to any program.

For additional principles of family engagement, visit NAEYC's article on this topic:
<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/family-engagement/principles>