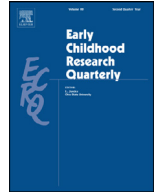




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Guest Editorial

Supporting and engaging with diverse families during the early years: emerging approaches that matter for children and families

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ABSTRACT

In this special issue, family engagement is defined as the intentional involvement of parents and families in their children's early childhood education (ECE) programs, activities, and services. This is a bi-directional and inclusive process that builds relationships between families and the ECE programs in which their child is enrolled and that supports family wellbeing and children's healthy development. Despite the significance of reciprocal and positive relationships between families and ECE care providers for child wellbeing, there is little information about this process. Collectively, the papers in this special issue make several contributions towards understanding family engagement by: (1) emphasizing the importance of assessing the influence of family engagement on families and children from a strength rather than a deficit perspective; (2) demonstrating that individualized and culturally grounded family engagement, especially for racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families and families who live in poverty, is a key component of quality child care; and (3) highlighting the importance of examining the markers of parenting and family engagement. By addressing these gaps, this special issue offers guidance for future research, practice, and policy in the field of family engagement and parenting.

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1. Family Engagement as Bridge Between Family and Early Education Programs

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) consensus report, *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8*, concluded that families are the most important predictors for children's optimal social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development and general wellbeing (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine NASEM, 2016). Families, including parents and other adult caregivers of children, can develop attachment relationships with the children under their care, suggesting the primary role of families and ECE providers in young children's early socialization. The parent-child relationship and the quality of the developed attachment relationship serves as a template for future close relationships between children and adults (Bowlby, 1988; Ferreira et al., 2017).

Parenting practices and behaviors found to be supportive of children's development and learning and of interest in family engagement programming include:

- providing a safe and healthy environment for children;

- engaging in interactions with children that are reciprocal as well as contiguous and contingent ("serve and return");
- showing warmth and sensitivity;
- establishing routines;
- engaging in literacy activities including singing, storytelling, shared book reading, and engaging children in meaningful linguistic interactions through communication and conversations;
- engaging in practices that promote children's health and safety (e.g., prenatal care, breastfeeding, vaccination, nutrition, and physical activity); and
- using developmentally appropriate (less harsh) discipline.

Given that children are in out of home care for significant parts of a child's early life it is important to ensure that children are receiving high-quality care. Thus, ECE providers' engagement with families is the key to supporting parents in activating these child-promoting practices (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine NASEM, 2016). Family engagement is defined and implemented slightly differently across different fields of practice. In ECE, family engagement refers to the intentional involvement of parents and families into their children's early childhood education programs, activities, and services (U.S. DHHS, n.d.). Family engagement is a process used to build genuine relationships with families, broadly construed, that support overall family wellbeing and

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children's healthy development. In addition to strengthening the relationship between families and ECE providers, family engagement provides a bridge between practices in the home and practices in ECE settings, provide consistency between settings. In this sense, family engagement can be thought of as a prevention or intervention process that builds positive relationships with families for a common purpose, namely helping children grow and thrive (U.S. DHHS, n.d.). Family engagement interventions and programs include 2 generational programs and parenting and parent support interventions such as home-visiting. The underlying assumption of these programs is that family engagement builds human capital across generations by combining education or job training for adults with early childhood education for their children (Chase-Landsdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

2. Purpose of this Special Issue

There are noted gaps in the family engagement literature, including interventions for parents with special needs (e.g., parents of children with developmental disabilities, parents with mental illness or substance abuse) that engage fathers *and* mothers and that target diverse populations and family forms (Child Care Aware of America, n.d.; U.S., DHHS, 2020). For example, state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) typically include supporting and engaging with families as a key set of indicators of ECE quality and improvement efforts. Increasingly, family engagement is seen as an essential component of quality in children's early experiences in non-parental care that matters for their early care and growth (Sabol et al., 2018).

To capitalize on strengthening family engagement and parental practices, the papers presented in this special issue are aimed at expanding our understanding of family engagement strategies that can assist in improving parenting, family functioning, and, ultimately, children's development. Special attention is given in this special issue to strategies about how best to engage and support an increasingly diverse population of families and children participating in a wide range of ECE programs. Issues regarding implementing and sustaining family engagement among ECE programs include recruiting and retaining adequately prepared staff in sufficient numbers, compensating staff with living wages, developing relevant and engaging approaches and curricula for culturally diverse children and their families, and addressing the myriad of issues faced by racial and ethnic minoritized and economically disadvantaged families.

Empirical support for the influence of family engagement on children's early and later achievement and family outcomes is mixed. These mixed findings are likely due to several factors, including the definition and measurement of family engagement or parenting support programs, research with linguistically and culturally diverse families, and methodological challenges linking parenting and family engagement models to family, child, and provider outcomes.

This special issue represents the latest efforts to refine the assessment and implementation of family engagement and outcomes for families and children. Some of the studies bring to light promising interventions serving children and their families from birth to 8 years of age. The papers underscore empirical research examining other facets of family engagement and support extending our understanding of this practice. In addition to including studies from non-U.S. participants, the studies unpack some of the complexities involved in assessing family engagement and expand the knowledge about evidence-based family engagement models, the theoretical frameworks behind these models and the evidence establishing their importance.

In the next section, we discuss how the papers in this special issue collectively contribute to deeper insights about family en-

gagement and how best to support it, especially through a culturally grounded and culturally sustaining lens. The papers in this special issue revolve around 3 broad principles with some papers addressing more than 1 area. The 3 principles include: (1) family engagement matters for children's outcomes and wellbeing; (2) family engagement must center on parents and families as children's first and most important teachers, especially for historically underserved¹ parents and families; and (3) recruiting and engaging with historically underserved families requires reflecting on the socio-cultural context of families.

Family engagement matters for children's outcomes and wellbeing. Jeon and et al. (2020) find that positive outcomes for children can occur independently of family engagement at home when the family is engaged with the child's school (e.g., attendance and participation in program activities). They showed that children whose parents rated their involvement as high had higher receptive vocabulary skills than children whose parents rated their home involvement as low. Similarly, Lohndorf and et al. (2021), in their Chilean study, demonstrated that parents who were sensitive, nurturing, and responsive in their interactions with their children were more likely to have children with higher school readiness skills (measured by early math and literacy measures) compared to parents rated as less nurturing in their discipline (e.g., low emotional support during discipline situations).

Beyond descriptive studies, 2 intervention studies demonstrate the effects of family engagement and parenting on children and families. In their pilot study of a tiered language and literacy intervention in Head Start, Zucker and et al. (2020) show that, primarily, ethnic minority children (i.e., Black, Latine, Asian), in the enhanced teacher-parent tier of the intervention, which provided families with coaching about strategies to facilitate learning at home through videos and feedback, exhibited improved vocabulary and inferential comprehension. As well, Bierman et al. (2021) revealed that children in the intervention group where parents received home learning kits with stories, parent-child dramatic play activities, conversation-based games, and literacy activities had higher reading and language scores than children in the control group.

Family engagement must center on parents and families as children's first and most important teachers, especially for historically underserved parents and families. Parents must be at the center of ECE programs and state quality standards to support children's healthy development and learning. This approach is highlighted by Beasley et al.'s (2020) feasibility study of the culturally-adapted Legacy for Children program, a group-based prevention program designed to promote child development by reinforcing sensitive, responsive mother-child relationships, building maternal self-efficacy, and fostering peer networks of support among mothers living in poverty. This study demonstrates the importance of a simple-to-implement practice of providing childcare and allowing mothers to remain engaged with program activities and events while also maintaining physical closeness with their children. The authors also found that participants value group leaders who genuinely cared about their families, and discussed topics that mattered to parents and other key family members. Authentic engagement with families requires connecting with families before the program begins, such as through face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and home visits.

In support of similar authentic practices, Barnett and et al. (2020) reports that ECE providers' partnership with families was related to increased engagement in families' homes, subsequently improving children's kindergarten readiness. Furthermore, parents

¹ We use the term historically underserved to indicate racially, ethnically, economically, and linguistically diverse families whose perspectives and cultures are often not centered or prioritized in family engagement.

reported engaging in more frequent in-home learning activities when they felt that the ECE staff was actively engaging them in the center. Not only engaging families is important, but also providing families with specific strategies and tools to support their children. For example, in their quasi-experimental study to examine the changes in the home language environment for participating parents who regularly visit the library, Beecher and Pay (2020) found that librarians who served as facilitators sharing specific language strategies (e.g., modeling of talk and conversational strategies for use with young children) with parents was more effective in increasing children's language than general exposure to language.

Attending to families of color, including Black and Latine families, is especially important because data show racially and ethnically minoritized families report having fewer close relationships with their early childhood programs and teachers than White families (e.g., Mendez, 2010; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine NASEM, 2016). Programs can successfully target these families through design and implementation features that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Hoffman and et al. (2021) find that the Kids in Transition to School (KITS) Program can promote school readiness and support family engagement with schools by building confidence and advocacy skills to support successful partnerships between home and schools for Latine and non-Latine families. Yet, they also found that Latine families compared to non-Latine families (primarily White) had lower positive perceptions of and relationships with their kindergarten teachers. Extensive work by Sheridan and et al. (2019) through the Getting Ready study provides practical ways to foster a collaborative relationship through shared responsibility between the teachers in early education programs and parents (which comprise about a quarter of Latine participants). Their study uses a series of strategies to help teachers promote close parent-child relationships; validate and affirm parents' role in supporting their child's development; and learn and provide parents with new skills to assist and encourage their child's learning. More importantly, this programming shows that the home-school relationship is also beneficial for the teacher-child relationship.

Recruiting and engaging with historically underserved families requires reflecting on the socio-cultural context of families. Socio-cultural context is defined as families' and communities' cultural heritage, traditions, experiences, values, and beliefs which are influenced by historical and contemporary experiences including racism and social exclusion (Quintana et al., 2006). Greater awareness of families' socio-cultural context, especially for families of color, may ensure family engagement practices are not solely using a white-normative, middle-class standard, such as how families are recruited and retained in programs, services, and interventions. This awareness of the lived experiences of families of color may result in examination of racial equity issues such as privilege and harmful practices for those who may not have work flexibility, transportation, child care, or adequate English language proficiency. In their ethnographic study examining how Tasmanian early childhood services are attempting to improve their engagement with historically underserved families and increase the uptake of universal health and education services in this population, called the Tassie project, Jose and et al. (2020) show that in Tasmania, Australia, there is a need to adopt a diverse range of outreach activities (including phone calls, texts, social media, transportation, home visits, and attending appointments with families) to strengthen family engagement. They found that socially and economically vulnerable families (i.e., indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families, children living with a disability, children living in areas identified as most disadvantaged) benefited from more intensive outreach approaches such as more home vis-

its, phones, provision of transportation, and attending support services with families than higher-income families.

Other articles in this special issue also attend to this critical issue of engaging with historically underserved families. Beecher and Van Pay (2021) highlight that the most effective recruiting strategy to get parental participation was through face-to-face discussion with families at a location that they regularly attend (e.g., well-child visits or Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) and holding meetings in public spaces such as libraries, which parents could then make use of before or after the meeting. Beasley and et al. (2020) recommend the importance of communication and recruitment materials geared toward Latine families to be culturally specific, including using images of Latine families on brochures and being available in their home language. Zucker et al. (2020) note the importance of leveraging ECE educators who have a relationship with families and using approaches, including remote coaching, to ensure that all families can participate. These strategies can begin to dismantle barriers that limit engagement, including time, and child care, among other things.

3. Summary

The articles in this special issue revolve around 3 principles (1) family engagement matters for children's outcomes and wellbeing; (2) family engagement must center on parents and families as children's first and most important teachers, especially for historically underserved parents and families; and (3) recruiting and engaging with historically underserved families requires reflecting on the socio-cultural context of families (e.g., experiences with social exclusion, cultural traditions). The papers in this special issue use a diversity of designs (e.g., RCT, quasi-experimental, feasibility) and methods (e.g., quantitative, ethnographic) and move the field forward by showing that family engagement, when it is carefully defined and measured, can promote parenting practices and children's healthy development and learning. These papers also provide new information about supportive strategies for diverse families, especially Latine families, a growing segment of ECE programs (Latine children make up almost 1 of 5 children) (Cabrera & Hennigar, 2019). These papers highlight the importance and value of individualized and culturally grounded connection and engagement with families. That is, there is an urgent need for federal and local funding to ensure families get individualized and meaningful services and supports to strengthen their home-school partnership, including meaningful economic and professional supports for those who work and support families.

Despite meaningful advancement in our knowledge of how family engagement matters for children, the papers in this special issue also underscore the need for more studies to identify other indicators and mechanisms of family engagement that are culturally grounded and salient that go beyond comparisons with White families but examine variability within groups (Iruka et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005). For example, there is a need for better measurement tools that fully capture minoritized families' engagement (Hoffman et al., 2010), studies that examine the saliency of parental constructs (e.g., supportive discipline, Lohndorf et al., 2021), attend to the implicit bias of educators (Sheridan et al., 2019), and the importance of parent-teacher racial and/or ethnic match (Hoffman et al., 2020).

More importantly, this special issue is a call for funders of research studies and the larger research and intervention community to attend to anti-racist and cultural wealth frameworks that promote the development and wellbeing of families of color, families living in poverty, multi-lingual families, families with children with disabilities, and same-sex and mixed-status families. This new approach would require incorporating family lived experiences and

perspectives using multi-method approaches such as qualitative interviews, observations, and ethnographic studies combined with other methods (e.g., social network mapping). Attention to these issues would advance early childhood monitoring and accountability systems, such as QRIS. Additionally, advancing equity in family engagement and support is critical to promoting children's optimal development, learning, and lifelong success.

4. Limitations

Despite the contributions that the papers in this special issue make to advance our knowledge of family engagement in early care and education programs, the papers in this special issue also illustrate a set of challenges or limitations. There is still a need for rigorously designed implementation and outcome studies focused on family engagement with diverse populations, especially in quality initiatives. None of the papers focused on how family engagement can be strengthened in early childhood systems, including in QRIS. The papers were limited in their attention to different family structures (e.g., same-sex, families experiencing mental health challenges, families with children with disabilities). Furthermore, most studies relied on parental reports to examine family engagement (except a few studies that used audio recording, ethnography and observations), calling for more rigorous and objective measures. The use of multi-method and multi-source approaches would strengthen the conclusion of studies and implications for practice and policies. Furthermore, the use of mixed methods approaches in longitudinal studies would also highlight moderators and mechanisms of family engagement and how it may change over time and have differential impact on children over time.

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