



# Families as Learners

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the “Families as Learners” Outcome: *“Parents and families learn about their child’s personality, development, and learning style. They also advance their own learning interests through experiences that support their parenting, careers, and life goals.”*

This resource presents a summary of selected research, tools, and program strategies intended to be useful for the Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs.

## Introduction

Families are always learning. Parents or adult caregivers learn about their child, their role as parents, and ways to keep their families safe and healthy. They also learn to manage the important relationships in their lives. As learners, they are always teaching. When they share their experiences and knowledge within their families and communities, they help others gain new understanding.

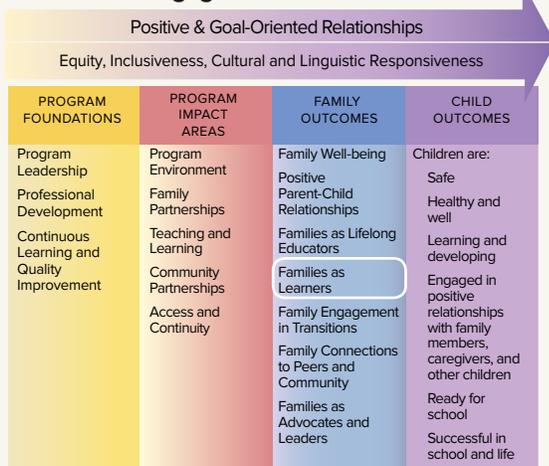
Since its beginning, Head Start and Early Head Start have always recognized that families are learners. Through direct interactions with families and collaboration with community partners, Head Start and Early Head Start staff encourage families to pursue their interests in learning. Some of these learning activities include participating in the following:

- Library story hours
- Pediatric office book programs
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition classes
- Head Start and Early Head Start workshops and conferences

Parents are learning when they:

- Volunteer in classrooms
- Share the excitement and challenges of becoming a parent with home visitors
- Meet with other families (for example, socializations)
- Participate in community workshops and gatherings
- Create family plans and engage in the Family Partnership Process
- Attend or lead Parent Committees, Policy Committees, Policy Councils, and other group meetings

### Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



The Head Start PFCE Framework is an organizational guide for collaboration among families and Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families.



All families have “funds of knowledge”—knowledge and information that they draw on to survive and get ahead (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). An important first step in promoting families as learners is to value what family members know already or are currently learning. Early childhood programs can learn as much from families as families can learn from programs.

Programs can embrace families’ knowledge by inviting them to share their skills, language, and customs, for example, by asking them to tell a story from their culture. Staff, parents, children, and other family members can benefit from this kind of cross-cultural sharing.

Because knowledge and learning are tied to the surroundings and relationships in people’s lives, each learner is different. Every learner is shaped by culture, individual experiences, and unique personal make-up. Because of the tremendous variety in family beliefs, attitudes, and goals, there is no single way to offer new learning opportunities. Responsive programs support families to build on their experiences as learners and to follow their dreams and goals.



## Families as Lifelong Learners: What We Know

### Benefits of Learning

Formal education and job skills training can help families find and keep regular employment and can contribute to financial stability. Staying in school is especially important for young parents trying to provide stability for their children. Teen mothers who stay in school, for example, are more likely to provide safe, nurturing, and healthy environments for their children (Sullivan et al., 2011).

Many Head Start or Early Head Start parents continue their education and become staff at Head Start or Early Head Start or other community programs. Over one-third of Head Start or Early Head Start staff are current or former parents who are using skills, developed through their engagement in Head Start or Early Head Start, to meet self-sufficiency goals for their own families (Duch & Rodriguez, 2011).

As families work to meet these goals for self-sufficiency they benefit from access to training in:

- Formal education opportunities ranging from GED preparation to graduate school
- Job training skills
- Dual Language Learning (DLL)
- Basic literacy
- Computer literacy
- Financial literacy
- Citizenship classes

The process of learning brings many benefits that are not directly related to the information learned. Children who see their families as teachers feel pride and more motivation to learn (Araujo, 2009). Parents who have positive attitudes about themselves as learners inspire this value in their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Kim & Sheraden, 2011) and help them become learners for a lifetime. Learning can also deeply influence families’ feelings about themselves, their abilities, and their future goals and actions. In the words of a former Head Start parent, current Head Start administrator:

***“Head Start taught me so much about parenting, early childhood development, and most important, about myself and my abilities.”***

### Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy grows from learning experiences. It is defined as the belief that we can influence our environment and achieve our goals. Self-efficacy affects the goals people choose and the amount of effort and persistence that they use to reach them. It grows when people meet their goals, observe others achieve their goals, and receive encouragement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

***“And it took me 12 years to get a Bachelor’s degree, but you see Head Start gave me the tools to stick with it, to not give up, to know that I could be anything I wanted to be, I could do anything that I wanted to do.”***

– Former Head Start Parent, Current Head Start Program Director

Self-efficacy is especially important to new parents and to those who are experiencing depression. When parents believe in their competence, they feel more confident as parents spend more time and spend more time interacting with their children (Raikes & Thompson, 2005).

Parents' self-efficacy shapes how children see their own abilities (Jones & Prinz, 2005; Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007). From their own learning experiences in and out of school, adult learners can help their children understand that learning requires effort. They can provide the models and encouragement that children need to develop and meet their own goals. In this way, children's feelings of self-efficacy begin to grow.

### Adult Learning Reinforces Learning in Children

Parental expectations and attitudes about education are among the most important influences on children's school success (Hoover–Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents who have experienced more schooling themselves have more realistic and higher expectations for their children's school success (Davis-Kean, 2005). When children experience higher family expectations, they put more time and effort into academic activities (Kim & Sherraden, 2011).

As parents learn new skills, they tend to stimulate their children's learning. For example, when teen mothers engaged in programs to develop their own language abilities, the language scores of their young children improved (Oxford & Spieker, 2006). Families who draw on their own learning experiences often develop effective ways to teach their children, for example,

- directing children's attention to the task,
- explaining new information,
- relating new ideas to familiar experiences, and
- responding to children's questions (Schlee, Mullis, & Shriner, 2009).

Adults and children in the same family reinforce learning in each other. One mother describes this parallel process:

***"I am busy. I am in Head Start. I am learning—as much as my son is learning. I am learning every day. And in that I am teaching him that you never stop learning. This is something that Mommy's going to do always and you are going to learn too. And you are going to grow and succeed in it every day."***

### Connection to Others

Aside from helping families learn new skills, learning opportunities can bring families together. Families report that meeting each other is a valuable part of attending learning events (Webster-Stratton, 1998). Interviews with mothers in family literacy programs found that participation reduced the isolation of staying home.

One mother explained:

***"It's very nice being here just to be around people, not just sitting home...there was a time that I was home alone with no English and I really forgot how to speak English, because I speak Polish at home to my kids."***

(Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009, p. 342).

## How Families Learn

Learning is enhanced by a family's social capital—the people they are connected to and who help them access information and resources. A family's social capital can include personal connections, such as relationships with other family members, peers, and members of the community. It can also include relationships with professionals. For example, positive family-staff relationships help families become learners of new ideas and skills. In a study of Head Start single mothers, the mothers reported that the relationships they formed with teachers and staff made them feel more skilled and more positive about themselves, and helped them develop personal goals for the future (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). Such relationships provide a foundation for families and staff to learn from each other.

Learning also depends on a family's cultural capital—the specific skills, attitudes, information, and knowledge needed to engage with educational and other institutions in a particular culture. Through strong relationships with families, early childhood programs like Head Start and Early Head Start can help families gain the social and cultural capital necessary to be successful learners.

## Adult Learning Roles

### Parents and Caregivers

All families learn constantly about their children. From the time of pregnancy, they learn about themselves as parents and their own child's unique likes and dislikes, personality, communication, and so much more. Expectant and new parents in particular show a desire to learn new ways to support the development of their children.

Because families know their own children best, they can teach others about their children. Families can share knowledge about their children in conversations with program staff. They can also gain new information about how their children are developing. As they share and learn, families may feel less stress and more excitement. This can help them enjoy their caregiving role even more.

## Lifelong Learners

Learning and education is most beneficial when it is relevant to people's lives and their views of the world. As lifelong learners, adults do more than gain knowledge and learn skills. They draw from their own experiences and reflect on the significance of new information. Learners are also shaped by interactions with others—learning and teaching throughout their lives.

Learning extends beyond formal education and job skills programs to build on a wide range of interests and strengths. Learning how to drive, to garden, or to express yourself artistically are just a few examples of the many learning opportunities that contribute to healthy and productive lives. When programs support these types of learning experiences, families may develop lifelong interests.

## Advocates for Social Change

When learners engage in dialogue to share different ideas and experiences, they define what and how they learn. They may also learn how to shape the larger community to improve their lives (Freire, 1983). For example, at Hope Street Family Center in Los Angeles, CA., families focus not only on increasing their skills as parents but also work together to stabilize the larger community. They learn leadership skills through socializations, DLL classes, parent committee meetings, and Policy Council, as well as community programs. As they learn from each other, they develop a sense of ownership within the agency that transfers to community involvement. From teaching classes on HIV prevention to leading neighborhood clean-up efforts, families can apply their learning to improving the larger community.

## Learning Styles and Contexts

Learning happens in many forms and places. Creative programs think "outside the box" and look for opportunities to make learning relevant, accessible, and fun.

### Learning Styles

Like children, adults have different learning styles. Some will learn best by listening, some by reading or seeing, others through hands-on experiences, and some through a combination of these methods. Adults and children use a range of skills, personal qualities, and motivations to learn in different kinds of situations (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Hands-on learning, such as learning to drive or navigate a city bus system, requires different skills and motivations than other kinds of learning opportunities. Some families may not think of themselves as learners, especially if they have had limited positive schooling experiences. They may not recognize that they have been learning while creating meaningful lives for themselves and their children. Families who are newly settled immigrants or refugees, for instance, learn a tremendous amount in order to settle their families, but they may not have received respect for this type of learning.



### Learning Contexts

There are many opportunities for learning beyond formal educational settings. Programs can invite families and staff, as well as community partners, to share expertise in a particular topic. For example, cooking classes can provide experience with new foods, nutrition information, and discussion about cultures and mealtime rituals. A scrapbooking class can highlight child development, family customs, and social connection. Dance activities such as Zumba classes draw on cultural arts and teach the value of exercise. Workshops on resume writing or tax preparation can give families a chance to build skills that are important now and in the future.

One study showed that on-site learning programs at Head Start centers enable families to meet their self-sufficiency goals and stay engaged in their children's education without having to deal with the demands of new settings (Duch & Rodriguez, 2011). Similarly, offering adult learning opportunities during home visits gives families an avenue for growth when they don't have the option to leave home regularly.

The concept of peer-to-peer teaching and learning may be uncomfortable for some Head Start and Early Head Start families. In some cultures, teaching is seen as something done only by trained professionals. Families may feel more comfortable when programs use the word "sharing" to describe collaborative learning among families. Additionally, the elders or community leaders in some cultures have strong influence. In these instances, programs will need to engage these leaders in discussions to help create relevant learning opportunities.

The Internet is a rapidly growing tool for learning. It offers more flexibility to families who are unable to attend a traditional class or workshop because of barriers such as scheduling conflicts or the need for transportation. Early childhood programs can promote digital learning by linking families to computers and computer training. Adults learners can often access computers and classes on technology at libraries, community centers, and local continuing education programs and institutions.

## Families as Learners: Building Potential

### Effective Practices

Head Start and Early Head Start programs have built in opportunities to promote learning as a priority. Home and center-based activities can focus on children and families learning together and families learning from one another. Staff and families can see their work with each other, other families, and community partners as a chance to learn and build skills that can help make progress towards shared goals.

**Strong and positive staff-family partnerships are part of the foundation for family learning. As equal partners, families and staff are all learners. When the program environment encourages sharing knowledge and skills, families, staff, and children benefit.**

### Home Visits

In Head Start and Early Head Start home-based programs, home visitors and families learn about and from each other in the home setting. Together, for example, they can focus on parenting skills as children grow, change, and present everyday challenges. In addition to home visits, Early Head Start offers opportunities for families to meet together in groups. These “socializations” provide a chance for adults to learn from each other, while engaging with their infants and toddlers. Center-based programs may also use home visits to get to know families.

### Goal-Setting as a Shared Process

In effective partnerships with programs, families can develop their own goals and feel ownership of both their own learning and their children’s learning. Setting long-term goals as well as short-term goals can help make learning a lifelong process.

Depending on language, cultures, and individual differences, some families will need additional time to respond to staff questions while setting learning goals. Staff can routinely check with families to make sure they fully understand the discussion (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2013). Professional development can help staff understand common communication patterns of families who come from a variety of backgrounds and who speak different home languages.

### Learning as a Shared Process

While programs may have good ideas about helpful educational or training activities, learning opportunities that respond to parents’ interests and goals are the most effective (Brady & Coffman, 1996). For instance, staff concern about childhood obesity may prompt them to offer a nutrition class. However, if families believe that the biggest

obstacle to providing healthy food at home is not lack of information but lack of time, they may not attend the class. Instead, some may want to start an online chat group to share recipes and tips for quick, nutritious meals. Other families may want to meet to cook take-away meals that they can freeze. In this way, they are in charge of their own learning and interests and are building social connections at the same time.

### Working with Community Partners

Programs can expand learning opportunities to meet the interests and goals of families through collaborations with community partners such as:

- Community health centers,
- Family centers,
- WIC,
- Local schools and colleges,
- Libraries,
- Recreation programs,
- Community-based arts organizations, and
- United Way 211 call centers.

Early childhood programs can encourage community partners to provide services to families in their home language and in culturally appropriate ways. Families and staff can keep track of their experiences with outside resources and offer these to other families in the future.

## Resources

The following resources are not the only options available in the field but represent some good examples of learning opportunities for families in Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs.

### Programs

*Abriendo Puertas* is an evidence-based comprehensive training program that focuses on learning skills for families with children, 0-5 years in age. By drawing on real life experiences, it aims for positive impacts on families and children, such as family advocacy and leadership, increased parental confidence, more engagement in community activities, and school readiness.

*Family Wellness* provides practical guidelines for healthy-family interactions. This evidence-based program presents tools and supports to build on healthy patterns of relating and adds new ways of living and working together.

*Health Care Institute (HCI)*, at UCLA, has developed a training program that focuses on family strengths to promote a greater understanding of health and healthy practices for Head Start and Early Head Start families. Used by many Head Start and Early Head Start sites, the program includes training events, home visits, and classroom activities.

*Parent Cafés* support protective factors in families by offering opportunities for families to learn from each other.

*The Parent Empowerment Program (PEP)*, a project of the National Black Child Development Institute, is a comprehensive, self-discovery curriculum that empowers guardians and parents to succeed. It also reinforces their important role in the lives of their children, their family, and their community.

### Tools

*Centro Latino for Literacy*, based in Los Angeles, CA, teaches non-literate adult Spanish-speakers how to read and write in Spanish in preparation for learning English. The basic literacy course is on-line, with follow-up courses offered in person.

*Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)* help families build economic assets and savings accounts. Account holders receive matching funds as they save for specific purposes, such as buying a home or building college fund. Many states have IDA programs.

*Money Smart* is a computer-based tool that teaches basic financial literacy to adults. The 10 modules can be taught to a group, or individuals may study independently on their own.

## Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

Programs can promote family learning by joining families, honoring the knowledge they bring, and recognizing the valuable learning that each family is already engaged in. When programs partner with families to create learning opportunities that build on their strengths, meet their needs, and focus on their goals, families, children and staff benefit.

Positive Head Start and Early Head Start learning experiences can encourage families to pursue future opportunities for learning. Lifelong learning in families helps all family members achieve better family and child outcomes. Family stability, increased sense of self-efficacy, and a love of learning are outcomes that strengthen families and children throughout their lives.

## What Can Programs Do?

### Support Families as Learners

**Build relationships as the foundation.** Close relationships with staff can help families see Head Start and Early Head Start, and education in general, as a positive experience. Personal contact is the most helpful way to make authentic and meaningful connections. Find ways to communicate regularly, such as daily greetings, brief conversations, notes, or text messages. Create a cross language phrasebook and share notes in the languages of families in the program.

**Learn from families themselves.** Families bring a lifetime of learning experiences with them. Take the time to listen to what they already know and how they learn. Some families will discover interests and motivation when staff listen, encourage, and reflect back what families are saying. Others will benefit when staff express their belief that families can act on their dreams. For others, connecting with learning resources may be the way to accomplish their goals. Learning from and with families is an important first step before beginning the Family Partnership Process.

### Help Staff See Themselves and Families as Lifelong Learners

**Target professional development and reflective supervision that promotes family learning.** Emphasize the wide range of ways families learn and see themselves as learners. Help staff see themselves as learners and recognize what they can learn from families.

**Ask staff for input on learning opportunities they would like to participate in.** This may involve professional development activities or other types of learning, such as an exercise or relaxation class after work.

**Offer learning opportunities for families and staff together.** When families and staff participate together in learning opportunities, their relationships can deepen, and they can see that they are all learners and teachers.

### Develop Program Resources

**Create a skills bank of family expertise.** Among your program's families, you may find teachers for all types of learning experiences. Can someone teach a workshop on carpentry skills? Drumming? Cooking? Is there someone who can be a resource to new language learners or act as a translator or interpreter? The list is as endless as the experiences that families bring with them.

**When families and/or staff develop goals, encourage the use of SMART objectives: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely.** Setting goals is an important part of developing learning opportunities that promote engagement and commitment. Make goal-setting a partnership between staff and families. Sometimes it is useful for families to hear about goals that other families with young children have made.

**Create a range of opportunities that address cultural and individual learning differences.** Just as each family is unique, so are their goals, strengths, and challenges. Talk with parents to learn more about what they are interested in and how they would like to participate. Invite them to share traditions, home languages, and stories from their culture and background. Some parents may be comfortable coming into the classroom or taking an active leadership role in committees or Policy Council. Others may want to contribute but want a less visible role. Invite them to be buddies to new parents or record stories in their home language to be shared in the classroom.

**Support distance learning.** Help families tap into online resources so they can take courses and access online information. If possible, consider having a computer work station(s) at your site that families can sign up to use.

**Support peer-to-peer learning.** Provide a bulletin board, newsletter column, or social media site where families can share experiences, questions and answers with each other. In this way, families can see themselves as life-long teachers and learners.

**Follow up on referrals.** After referring families to other programs, follow up with families to see how they are doing. Make sure the programs are culturally competent and use the home languages of the families you refer.

**Offer new learning experiences for everyone.** Learning skills that are new to everyone in a group, for example infant massage or baby sign language for families with babies, can build fellowship, mutual support, and connections among them.

**Provide logistical supports critical for families to participate in learning opportunities.** These include transportation, childcare, and food.

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