Family Communication Plan Guidance

Overview

Reaching out to engage and support families and children is critical to overcoming any adverse situation as a community. Many families are coping with trauma and uncertainty related to the COVID-19 pandemic, whether they have been directly touched by illness, or a school or work interruption. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for communities and sites when preparing a plan to support families and children during school and site interruptions.

Early childhood community networks should consider what steps they should take to ensure families in their networks continue to feel engaged, supported and connected. Additionally, community networks should support sites in their efforts to engage families during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategies and resources for family engagement may vary by program type:

- **School-based pre-k programs**: Schools and school systems may already have plans in place and may find these resources useful as they continue to strengthen communication plans to support families during a community-wide crisis. For additional guidance on communication plans with families, see Guidance for Communication Plans and Guide to the Well-Being of Students and Staff.
- **Child care**: Child care directors may find AnLar's Home Based Learning Toolkit helpful, that provides information on creating and implementing communication plans with families on pages 5-8.
- **Head Start/Early Head Start**: The Office of Head Start has provided additional guidance and support to Head Start grantees for family support, such as Resources for Parents and Families During Remote Service Delivery and Partnering with Families to Improve Economic Stability During COVID-19 and After.

Community-Level Family Engagement

The purpose of the following steps is to create a strong communication plan that supports families in the community as they navigate the uncertainty during and after COVID-19, while connecting them to local services for health, finances, their children's academic growth and their family's overall stability. These are steps that community networks may choose to take to build an initial communication plan or to strengthen an existing plan for communicating with families in their community.

- **Step 1: Identify Family Resources**
  It may be helpful for the initial family contact to focus on learning about the family and their available resources to develop a consistent communication plan. Identifying family resources requires working together. Many families may feel more comfortable using technology tools that schools or sites already use and that families are currently familiar with. When introducing a new communication platform, provide families with opportunities to learn how to support their child using the new platform (e.g., email, text, messaging apps, social media). Consider the levels of technology families have at home:

  - **High tech** - access to a computer with stable internet, email, may have multiple devices
  - **Medium tech** - access internet, only one device which could be a tablet or a family member's smartphone, might have to share devices or smartphone
  - **Low tech** - limited to no internet or devices

Example template

Initial Family Engagement to Identify Family Resources						
Family and child name	Smartphone (active)	Computer or tablet	Email	Stable Internet	Limited Internet	Low, Medium, or High Tech
Name	**Y** or **N**	**Y** or **N**	**Y** or **N**	**Y** or **N**	**Y** or **N**	

- **Step 2: Communicate Consistently**

  Strong relationships provide support for young children during stressful situations like school/site interruptions or changes in their learning environment. Using the information collected from the initial family contact, communities and/or sites should consider creating a schedule for contacting families and children that includes how and when they will check-in. Communities or sites should consider that the communication will be most effective if it is timely and consistent, meets the needs of families, respectful of cultural diversity, and language preferences. Also, consider providing families options such as flexible schedules, teacher/staff office hours, and providing a variety of communication methods.

  In early childhood, families should be partners in supporting their child's development and well-being. This requires a strong focus on the child's health and well-being, the families' access to community resources, and high-quality learning experiences. Using conversation prompts for communities or sites to use during family check-ins is helpful to focus on these topics.
  - Basic needs - Set of questions that focus on whether or not they need assistance
  - Connections to local resources and school system/network updates
  - Learning resources and activities

  Using one-way communication is a useful way to disseminate information to families that does not require a response, and is considered to have a low-impact on family engagement. While one-way communication has a role, communities and sites should also consider engaging families in two-way communication, which has shown to have a greater impact on family response and engagement. Two-way communication provides an opportunity to develop a positive partnership with families built on sharing goals and meaningful information to support the child. When working with families, teachers should be prepared to implement a variety of family engagement strategies to reach all families.

One-way Communication	Two-way Communication
● Brochures	● Phone calls/conference
● Newsletters	● Video chat
● E-mail (News releases)	● Messaging App
● Audio messages (Robo-calls)	● E-mail
● Websites	● Web forums (Google Classroom)
● Videos (YouTube)	● Audio/video conferencing

- **Step 3: Connecting Families With Community Resources**
  Communities and sites should consider building on the community's strengths and resources to help students and families meet their basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing, child care, medical services, medication, etc.). Each community has diverse needs as well as unique, local resources to support those needs. Working together, there is an opportunity for all to feel supported and valued. Determine the level of assistance that is available by consolidating a list of community resources. During emergencies, the list should be updated frequently.

- **Resource list:** It may be helpful to create a list of community resources to share with sites and make available to families online. The list of specific resources/agencies may need to be updated/amended by the individual communities to include community-specific resources and supports. In developing a list of resources, it may be helpful to:
  - Keep the list simple
  - Consider organizing by categories of basic needs
  - Collect federal, state, and local resources for families into the categories
  - Reach out to parish government, city, and other community stakeholders for other resources
  - Utilize local community-based organizations (e.g., non-profit services, faith-based, businesses, and resource-based organizations)

- **Connect:** Consider connecting families with specific resources mentioned during a check-in and/or share the list of resources that can help support their needs. It may be helpful to include a list of resources in a community-wide mail out to ensure that families without access to the internet are connected to potentially helpful resources.

Example Resource list

Example Community Resource Provider List *Last Update 5/11/2020*				
Food	**Housing**	**Child care services**	**Health services**	**Other**
Food banks SNAP benefits WIC application	Shelters Housing Choice Vouchers	Louisianaschools.com	Medicaid eligibility	211.org LAworks.net Mental Health Supports Mental Health Application Request

Resources for supportive communication when engaging children and families

- Learn more about how to combat discrimination and bias during school interruptions
- Learn more about self-care and coping for early learning leaders and staff
- Learn more about supporting mental health for families, children, and child care staff during COVID-19
- Talk with children about COVID-19 using this resource from the CDC
- Explain and share information about why adults are wearing masks
- Supporting children when centers reopen, with strategies and resources for supporting children's feelings