

Strategies for Building Relationships with Families

Family engagement has a life-long impact on the lives of children and comes in many forms. As professionals in the field of Afterschool, it is important to remember that even though we may not see children's family members, this does not mean they are not engaged in the lives of their children.

We need to actively build strong engagement with families when they can come to the school or program. Understanding that families are busy and frequently overwhelmed can help us think about how we can build stronger connections with families when they pick up or drop off their children at your program. Here are five quick techniques that help to build strong relationships in a fast-paced culture.

BE GENUINE when strengthening family connections. Train front line staff how to build meaningful connections and be aware of their body language. It is easy for family members to pick up on attitudes, whether positive or negative. The simplest strategies promote healthy relationships: making eye contact, always having something courteous to say, and saying something positive about the child's experience at the program. Acknowledge the family's interest in keeping their child in afterschool and show that you understand how busy life can get.

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION from family members. Remind families that you have an open-door policy and that they are welcome. Invite them to visit and share an interesting hobby, skill or activity with the students and other families.

BE RESPECTFUL. When inviting families to any event, make it worth their while. Be respectful of their time. Start on time, end on time. Knowing that they have busy lives and schedules, make the event engaging and meaningful for them. Ensure your presenters are upbeat, are able to relate, and are dynamic and energetic. Know your audience. If you know that the

families you work with are from a specific community, hire a presenter with a similar background who can genuinely connect with those family members.

UNDERSTAND FAMILY STRUCTURES. Even though our society is more progressive than it used to be, there are still many biases toward families who don't fit the traditional model. Families come in many forms and styles. Some adults have a difficult time accepting non-traditional families based on their personal experiences, and many families perceive this bias. The less emphasis you put on how different a family seems to you, the more you will get to know and connect with the family and build the relationship.

BREAK THE BREAKDOWN. Macroaggressions are a real issue that need to be dealt with and are unacceptable toward the children and families that are served through extended learning programs. Have open and truthful conversations with staff about macroaggressions. Train your staff to identify macroaggressions when they hear them and on methods for eliminating them.