



The State of Family Engagement in Quality Rating and Improvement System Efforts

SUMMARY

Quality early care and education serve as the bedrock upon which success in school, work, and life are later built. In fact, every dollar spent on high-quality early care and education returns approximately \$8.60, most of which is actualized through higher paid jobs in adulthood [1]. Involving families in their children's education within primary and secondary school settings has long been considered a key component of student success. Over the past decade, more attention has been paid to how family engagement contributes to high-quality early care and education and improves child and family outcomes. Researchers agree that quality family engagement in early care and education programs have a positive impact on school readiness, long-term academic success, and family and child well-being [2]. Likewise, studies have demonstrated that children in low-quality programs may actually suffer adverse social, emotional, and learning consequences [3]. In response, it is recommended that states focus attention on ensuring inclusion of family engagement indicators as central and pervasive components of their early care and education quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) programs.

This brief discusses family engagement as a critical component of QRIS programs. Highlights include:

- A focus on family engagement elements specifically measured in QRIS, rather than what is required for licensure, accreditation, or other quality-improvement initiatives.
- Current indicators of family engagement being used by QRIS within states to assess quality in child care centers and family child care homes.
- Recommendations to ensure key family engagement elements are incorporated into QRIS and provider practices.

Overall, this brief represents a snapshot in time of the current family engagement in QRIS landscape. Our hope is that future work related to this topic will demonstrate that states have made progress by including more, and increasingly detailed, elements of family engagement in their QRIS programs.

INTRODUCTION

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) help states and program providers evaluate and improve quality within early care and education settings. They increase accountability and provide important data that help families make informed decisions as they assess their child care options. However, according to the [QRIS Compendium](#), only 38 states have fully implemented QRIS programs [4]. Features commonly assessed in QRIS programs include staff qualifications and professional development, learning environment and curriculum, administration, parent and family involvement, and licensing compliance [5]. Ninety percent of states with active QRIS programs assess at least one indicator of family partnerships and engagement in center-based settings, and 82 percent of states with active QRIS programs assess this area in home-based care settings, according to the QRIS compendium. It is clear that family participation is a vital component contributing to the overall quality in early care and education settings. However, there continues to be tremendous opportunity to identify and incorporate a more expansive exploration of family engagement in state QRIS programs.

BACKGROUND

The November 2014 reauthorized Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act includes key provisions for states to invest in quality improvement activities. Though not specifically required, QRIS programs are well suited to meet the mandate that states establish outcome measures and evaluate quality improvement activities. States must increase their quality set-aside from 4 percent to 9 percent of their total spending over a five-year period. These funds are required to be spent on one of 10 specific quality improvement activities listed in the legislation, many of which also provide opportunity to enhance family engagement. The new CCDBG legislation places substantial emphasis on family engagement. Therefore, partnering with families through quality family engagement is an important focus in any robust quality improvement effort or QRIS.

The CCDBG reauthorization is a powerful force for moving the needle forward on family engagement efforts. Moreover, it presents an opportunity for states and providers to think outside of the box while developing strategies to meaningfully engage families during the early years and enhance short- and long-term outcomes for children, families, and providers. States may use information contained in this brief to drill down to specific practices that may be used to inform the implementation of family engagement as an essential element of QRIS or to improve current programs. Additionally, Child Care Aware® of America generated [QRIS state charts](#) may contribute to state-level policy discussions by helping to identify areas of strength and needs within family engagement included in their QRIS. Information contained in this brief also may help providers identify key practices and strategies to incorporate into their programs for strengthening family engagement in a way that aligns with current research. Child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies also may use this brief to develop strategies that support providers and family partnerships in relationship to quality improvement. Now, more than ever, the early care and education landscape is poised to partner meaningfully with families to deliver high-quality programs and shape positive family and child outcomes.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

We often know good family engagement when we see it but lack a common vision that fully captures the range of what is meant by quality family engagement in an early care setting. Family engagement is an ongoing partnership developed through meaningful interactions between a child's family, care providers, and community. These collaborative interactions with families promote healthy child development, improve family well-being, early learning, and contribute to high-quality and effective early care environments [2]. Family engagement practices may even influence positive outcomes for providers as family engagement has been associated with higher levels of staff satisfaction and lower turnover rates [6]. Quality family engagement activities encourage mutual support through the exchange of skills and knowledge between parents and providers, while emphasizing culturally inclusive practices. The child care community can encourage strong relationships by providing several ways for families to become involved in their child's early care and education. Quality activities that engage families in their child's early care program should be strengths-focused and empower families to take an active role in their child's education at home, in the child care setting, and within the community at-large. With these characteristics in mind, key features, activities, and practices of family engagement have been identified. As research efforts are relatively new, it is anticipated that elements of quality family engagement will continue to emerge and shape both developing and established QRIS programs and early care and education practices.

MEASURING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN QRIS

There are several strong indicators of quality family engagement to be included when preparing QRIS programs. It is important to note that to optimize efforts, family engagement should be included throughout all areas of early care and education and not merely relegated to one standalone category of provider practice or QRIS assessment. Quality family engagement practices recognize and support parents as their children's first and most influential teachers. Therefore, building partnerships through close collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and respectful two-way communication underpin most indicators of quality family engagement. The Family Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ) conceptual model identified four overlapping constructs through which to assess programs, including knowledge, attitudes, practices, and environmental features [6]. Quality family engagement occurs when these provider and program characteristics intersect with families in a welcoming, supportive, sensitive, and meaningful way.

The FPTRQ model pinpoints defining elements for each of its four constructs (knowledge, attitudes, practices, and environmental features) that may be used to identify quality family engagement in early care and education programs. With the exception of the knowledge construct, comprised only of knowledge specific to individual families, each construct is comprised of several elements. Quality in provider and family relationships can be expressed through staff *attitudes* that demonstrate commitment, respect, flexibility, and an understanding context when approaching families. Programs exhibit quality family engagement under the *practices* construct when they are collaborative, responsive, and demonstrate family-focused concern. Similarly, it is emphasized that program practices should encourage reciprocal communication and link families to resources. Finally, features within the program environment also can provide clues to the quality of a program's family engagement practices. Quality under this construct is revealed through their communication systems, use of culturally diverse program materials, offerings of information about available resources, and encouragement of peer-to-peer parent activities. Overall, a program's environmental features should be welcoming to all families served. Family-specific knowledge, attitudes, practices, and environmental features are constructs that undergird family engagement efforts but also suggest possible indicators to assess quality when woven into key features of early care and education programs.

After reviewing features of quality family engagement identified in best practice literature and models [6-9], research [2, 10-21], and the QRIS Compendium [4], four common family engagement feature categories have been identified. These four feature categories include communication, utilizing family needs and feedback to inform the program, collaborative activities with families, and providing community resource referrals and family support.

Communication: Practices that promote and encourage frequent, continuous, and reciprocal exchange of family and child specific information between providers and families are essential to quality family engagement. Well-designed communication systems employ varied and flexible methods for providers and families to exchange information. Communication should be aimed at building mutual aid, respect, and understanding between providers and families. Quality communication practices ensure programs interface with families utilizing their preferred means of contact, with special consideration for the full spectrum of family diversity, and use their primary language.

Family Needs and Feedback Inform Program: While it is crucial that families are informed child care consumers, it is equally important that child care providers are knowledgeable of the needs and goals of the children and families they serve. Programs can elicit family perspectives and obtain feedback in a

variety of ways including surveys, comments, complaint submission processes, exit interviews, child and family strengths, and needs assessments. Utilizing the information to inform programing and staff professional development can help programs connect with families in creative and meaningful ways to advance the goals of the program and consumers.

Collaborative Activities with Families: Positive family engagement practices are revealed when families are provided multiple opportunities to meaningfully participate in a child’s early care and education. It refers to provider initiated activities that elevate families as equal partners in promoting healthy child development and cultivate skills for long-term achievement within the early care setting.

Community Resources and Family Support: Early care and education professionals are well positioned to support families beyond the early care setting by advocating for services and resources identified in partnership with the family. Providers can be the critical link between families and community resources. Additionally, they may offer support around parenting issues and family education outside the immediate child care setting.

The family engagement features discussed are used in the chart below to categorize corresponding indicators. Derived from a review of research and best practice literature, such as the FPTRQ conceptual model and others listed above, this chart can help providers and state QRIS program staff align their programs with quality family engagement practices. Additionally, it may help resource and referral agencies identify areas where their support may best advance quality through family engagement in early care and education. Perhaps most importantly, this chart can help QRIS administrators advance their use of family engagement indicators in their state’s quality improvement program.

KEY QRIS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FEATURES AND INDICATORS

Key Features	Key Family Engagement Indicators
<p>Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent and ongoing communication using diverse methods • Elicits respectful, frequent two-way communication that honors the family’s culture and background • Regular written communication using multiple formats (e.g. social media, e-mail, newsletters, calendar, etc.) • Parent handbooks provided • Families invited to share their knowledge of their children • Families’ preferred communication means are used (e.g. face to face, e-mail, phone, letter, etc.) • Efforts are made to communicate with children and families in their preferred language and access linguistic supports as necessary • Staff schedules allow time for meaningful communication with families • Written philosophy supporting communication as means of developing provider-family relationships is used • Bulletin boards maintain updated program information and events • Initial, intake, or orientation meeting and materials that introduce families to the program incorporated

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families notified in advance when changes or transitions will occur (e.g. classroom changes, substitutions, other events)
<p>Family Needs and Feedback Inform Program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families encouraged to participate in provider and program evaluations and surveys • Family choice and decision making promoted • Families invited to voice their concerns and collaborate with staff to determine a mutually agreeable resolution • Program has a written family feedback procedure for collection and use of information • Program completes Strengthening Families Self-Assessment Checklist and findings are incorporated into program planning • Families evaluate and provide input on the curriculum • Family input guides program planning and policies • Family advisory group and/or families participate in governance and decision making • Program collaborates with parents to create and incorporate individual written educational and developmental goals for the child and family • Meetings and events are determined by family schedules and needs • Program is adapted using creative strategies to meet child and family needs in a manner intended to strengthen child development and family functioning • Program conducts child assessments and shares results with families in a manner that invites and considers the parent’s perspective • Family strengths and needs assessments and a plan for utilizing information gathered is established • Hiring practices reflect efforts to hire and maintain staff and volunteers with the cultural, linguistic and racial characteristics of the families served.
<p>Collaborative Activities with Families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A formal family engagement model utilized • Regular parent/teacher conferences that encourage sharing between the provider/teacher and the family • Frequent family participation in the program is encouraged regardless of racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds; income level; gender: abilities; or language preference • Program encourages parent volunteer opportunities that capitalize on the strengths, interests, and skills of the family • Program facilitates social networking and collaborative opportunities between families • Program partners with families to honor, respect and learn from their cultural and linguistic diversity • Opportunities exist for family and staff to get to know one another and allows program staff to learn from the family’s knowledge of their child (e.g. interests, approaches to learning, the child's developmental needs, and family’s concerns and goals for their children) • Families are welcomed into the program at all times • Diversity is reflected in images and languages included on posters, signs, and other program materials

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family activities that demonstrate consideration for their needs and interests • Family traditions are shared in classrooms and family photos are displayed • Activities encourage the development of parents confidence and competence • Male participation is encouraged and acknowledge that fathers are equally knowledgeable caretakers • Collaboration with families to facilitate child success in the early childhood setting when professional values and practices differ from the family's values, beliefs, and practices
<p>Community Resources and Family Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and planning around transitions is provided (e.g. preschool, classroom changes, kindergarten) • Community resource list developed and shared • Program identifies and engages community partners • Program shares child development information across all domains (cognitive, physical, social, and emotional) and other topics relevant to families • Training, education, and support to parents to prepare them to advocate and exercise their rights and responsibilities concerning the education of their children is provided • Program shares health, safety, nutrition, and wellness information with families • Educational workshops and trainings offered to families (e.g. informational workshops, career workshops, education meetings, parent training, etc.) • Families assisted to navigate resources, linked to family supports, and provided with direct advocacy (e.g. helps make initial phone calls for families, attends IEP's) • Program has a Family Resource Center and/or staff provides consultations that include parenting and community service information • Relationships with public and community-based services developed (e.g. health, school districts, social service agencies, etc.) • Families offered direct support resources such as transportation • Program provides resources for extending learning experiences into the home • Program includes home visitation that incorporates family caregivers and the child • Child abuse and neglect education and prevention support provided

Current Status of Family Engagement Indicators in State QRIS Programs

Our [aggregate charts for child care centers and family child care](#) (.XLSX) homes contain a nationwide snapshot of family engagement indicators used in state QRIS programs as of 2015 for both child care centers and family child care programs. State-specific tables can be found on the [Family Engagement in QRIS page](#). At the time of the QRIS Compendium review conducted for this brief, 36 of the existing 40 QRIS programs operating assessed quality indicators of family engagement in child care centers. In family child care programs, only 32 of the existing 40 QRIS programs incorporated family engagement indicators.

The most common assessed indicators for center-based programs were parent-teacher conferences, written communication, and providing families with a community resources list. Diverging slightly, parent-teacher conferences, written communication, and activities with families were the most common indicators assessed for family child care settings. In both settings, however, it is clear that the most common indicators assessed in current QRIS programs are common to the Collaborative Activities with Families and Communication family engagement key features categories noted in the table above.

Despite the evidence of a family engagement focus in most QRIS programs noted in the QRIS Compendium, there still is room to improve the overall scope of family engagement in QRIS programs. Not only should all quality improvement initiatives explore family engagement as a key component, but they should seek to employ a broad range of indicators across all key features of family engagement. For example, linking families to community resources and providing family support beyond the child care setting poses a tremendous opportunity for comprehensive family engagement. Currently, a number of programs are addressing this feature of family engagement by offering a list of community resources. However, it could include many other indicators such as providing transition support, helping with resource navigation, and engaging in community partnerships. In fact, *Community Resources and Family Support* represent the least utilized family engagement feature, with related training as the most under reported indicator, according to this review of the QRIS Compendiumⁱ. Likewise, more state QRIS programs should assess indicators that describe how family needs and feedback inform the program. The *Family Needs and Feedback Inform Program* encapsulated the other two most underrepresented indicators: development of parent advisory boards and use of the Strengthening Families Checklist.

It is important to note that quality family engagement does not just refer to the partnership between providers and families. The definition of family engagement can be expanded to include partnering with families at the community, state, and national levels. Family and other stakeholder involvement across multiple domains will help strengthen the entire early care and education system. Therefore, a robust QRIS system will be developed and refined with the input of key stakeholders including, early care and education providers and families. As such, it will be of extreme value to find ways to purposefully engage families and stakeholders, regardless of whether a state is in the infancy stages of initiating a QRIS program or if a seasoned system has been in place for some time.

Looking Forward

There is no question that family engagement is a critical component of quality early care and education services. Successful family engagement is evidenced through provider attitudes, family-specific knowledge, and behaviors that promote strong family-provider relationships and goal oriented-practices. Family engagement research indicates positive short- and long-term outcomes for children, families, and providers when families are meaningfully involved in their children’s early care and education programs [12]. For children, strong family–provider relationships have been associated with greater health and wellbeing, cognitive growth and academic success, and increased social skills, as well as a reduction in problem behaviors and increased school readiness. Similar positive outcomes of successful family engagement have been observed in families. These include higher parental satisfaction with services, increased parental involvement in services, improved confidence in parenting capacity, better parental mental health, and enhanced parent–child relationships. Likewise, provider outcomes related to strong family engagement practices result in positive feelings toward their role as a provider, enhanced perceptions about and interactions with children, and improved relationships with families [12]. A list of broad reaching positive attributes such as these provides clear evidence that family engagement should sit on the forefront of quality improvement practices.

Published family engagement research has established flexible guidelines for what should be included in QRIS measures [2, 7]. However, it is clear that as quality improvement research in early care environments continues to develop, a greater focus is needed regarding what and how specific practices produce optimal outcomes for providers, families, and children. Such research will help concentrate resources on those features of family engagement that create greatest impact for children, families and providers. Furthermore, states must continue to engage in continual quality improvement and refinement of QRIS programs as new family engagement literature emerges in the early childhood field. Ongoing, routine measurement of family engagement will be important to capture whether progress is being made and to identify opportunities for further improvement.

States are urged to apply a comprehensive approach to quality assessment and think beyond the 13 family partnership indicators reported in the QRIS Compendium. Instead, QRIS programs should use a diverse sampling of multiple indicators across key features of family engagement. The four categorical features identified in this brief can serve as an important guide in that effort. Additionally, family engagement should be a concept woven into all aspects of an early care and education program, rather than conceptualized as a solitary category within a QRIS program. Programs that incorporate key features of family engagement throughout their programs will benefit from short-term and long-term outcomes. Most importantly, they will be able to optimize the growth and development of children in their purview and rest assured that their efforts will have a monumental positive influence throughout their lifetime.

ⁱ The information reported to the QRIS Compendium was self-reported as of August 2015. Due to the retrospective nature of this brief, the basis each state used for reporting each indicator cannot be determined. After much consideration, the decision to categorize “Related Training” under the *Community Resources and Family Support* feature was made because it evokes the idea of training related to parenting that may extend into the family home.

References

-
1. *The Economics of Early Childhood Investments*, Executive Office of the President of the United States Editor. 2014, The White House: Washington, DC.
 2. Halgunseth, L., Peterson, A., Start, D., Moodie, S. *Family Engagement: An Integrated Review of the Literature - EDF_Literature Review.pdf*. 2009, Available from: http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF_Literature%20Review.pdf.
 3. Thornburg, K., Mayfield, W., Hawks, J., and Fuger, K. *The Missouri Quality Rating System School Readiness Study*. 2009; Available from: <http://www.elcmdm.org/Knowledge%20Center/reports/MOQRSreport.pdf>.
 4. *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems Compendium - QRIS*. 2015, Available from: <http://griscompendium.org/>.
 5. *Common Categories of QRIS Quality Standards*. 2011; Available from: https://grisguide.acf.hhs.gov/files/QRIS_Standards_Categories.pdf.
 6. Porter, T., Bromer, J., and Moodie, S., *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and Family-Sensitive Caregiving in Early Care and Education Arrangements: Promising Directions and Challenges*. Research-to-Policy, Research-to-Practice Brief OPRE 2011-11d. 2011; Available from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/qrifsc_0.pdf.
 7. Kim, K., Atkinson, V., Rui, N., Nord, C., Guzman, K., Forry, N., Ramos, M., Brown, E., Porter, T. 2014, *Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality Measures: User's Manual*. Retrieved from Washington, DC: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/fptrq_user_manual_11_13_14.pdf
 8. *NAEYC Accreditation*, in *Strengthening Family Engagement: Accreditation of Programs for Young Children Cross-Cutting Theme in Program Standards*. 2014, NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation.
 9. *The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework: Promoting family engagement and school readiness, from prenatal to age 8*. 2011, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start: Washington, DC.
 10. Warren, M.R., Hong, S., Rubin, C.L., Phitsamay, S.U., *Beyond the Bake Sale: A Community-Based Relational Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*. *Teachers College record* (1970), 2009. 111(9): p. 2209-2254.
 11. Green, B.L., McAllister, C.L., and Tarte, J.M. *The Strengths-Based Practices Inventory: A Tool for Measuring Strengths-Based Service Delivery in Early Childhood and Family Support Programs*. *Families in Society*, 2004. 85(3): p. 326-334.
 12. Forry, N. D., Moodie, S., Simkin, S., Rothenberg, L. *Family-Provider Relationships: A Multidisciplinary Review of High Quality Practices and Associations with Family, Child, and Provider Outcomes*. 2011; Issue Brief OPRE 2011-26a. Available from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/family_provider_multi.pdf.
 13. Trivette, C.M., Dunst, C.J. and Hamby, D.W., *Influences of Family-Systems Intervention Practices on Parent-Child Interactions and Child Development*. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 2010. 30(1): p. 3-19.
 14. Dunst, C.J. and Trivette, C.M., *Meta-analytic structural equation modeling of the influences of family-centered care on parent and child psychological health*. *International Journal of Pediatrics*, 2009. p. 576840-9.
 15. Mendez, J.L., *How Can Parents Get Involved in Preschool? Barriers and Engagement in Education by Ethnic Minority Parents of Children Attending Head Start*. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 2010. 16(1): p. 26-36.
 16. Tout, K., Starr, R., Soli, M., Moodie, S., Kirby, G., Boller, K., *The Child Care Quality Rating System (QRS) Assessment: Compendium of Quality Rating Systems and Evaluations*. 2010, Office

of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services: Washington, DC.

17. McBride, S.L., *Research in Review. Family-Centered Practices*. Young Children, 1999. 54(3): p. 62.
18. Reschly, A.L. and Christenson, S.L., *Moving From "Context Matters" to Engaged Partnerships With Families*. Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 2012. 22(1): p. 62-78.
19. Knopf, H.T. and Swick, K.J., *Using Our Understanding of Families to Strengthen Family Involvement*. Early Childhood Education Journal, 2008. 35(5): p. 419-427.
20. Mahoney, G. and Dennebaum, J., *Maternal perceptions of early intervention services: A scale for assessing family-focused*. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 1990. 10(1): p. 1.
21. McWilliam, R. A., Snyder, P., Harbin, G.L., Porter, P., Munn, D., *Professionals' and Families' Perceptions of Family-Centered Practices in Infant-Toddler Services*. Early Education & Development, 2000. 11(4): p. 519-538.