

# **Colorado**

## Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework



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*Spring 2022*

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The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) Office of Early Childhood (OEC) contracted with Marzano Research to develop a family engagement framework through a collaborative effort. To develop the Framework, Marzano Research collected, reviewed, and aligned existing international, national, state, regional, and local strategic plans to inform the development of the Framework. Existing plans were compared to key research-based components of, and best practices in, family engagement to put together a set of recommendations. Input on these recommendations was collected from OEC staff and Birth-5 system partners and incorporated into the final Framework presented in this document.



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# Colorado Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework

## *What Is Family Engagement?*

Effective family engagement should be a systematic, intentional, and strengths-based process of engaging in two-way communication and building positive, goal-oriented relationships with families and children.<sup>1</sup> This begins with recognizing that a child's family is their first teacher and caregiver and with valuing families' contexts of culture, language, home, and community. Celebrating and respecting diversity in terms of ability, language, values, customs, traditions, expectations, and attitudes is essential in cultivating partnerships, engaging with families, and honoring the unique interests, needs, strengths, and challenges of developing children.

## *Why Is Family Engagement Important?*

Family engagement is important for children's healthy growth and development. When organizations and agencies engage and collaborate effectively with families to meet children's needs, their development is enhanced through the K-12 years and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, when families are actively engaged as respected partners in their children's learning and development, it promotes learning and education environments that are safe, welcoming, and trusting.<sup>3</sup> Finally, positive engagement practices support family members' self-efficacy, confidence, and skills.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mapp, K. A., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

<sup>2</sup> Froiland, J. M., Peterson, A., & Davison, M. L. (2013). The long-term effects of early parent involvement and parent expectation in the USA. *School Psychology International*, 34(1), 33-50.

Van Voorhis, F.L., Maier, M.F., Epstein, J.L., & Lloyd, C.M. (2013). The impact of family involvement on the education of children ages 3 to 8. MDRC. [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Family\\_Involvement\\_FR.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/The_Impact_of_Family_Involvement_FR.pdf)

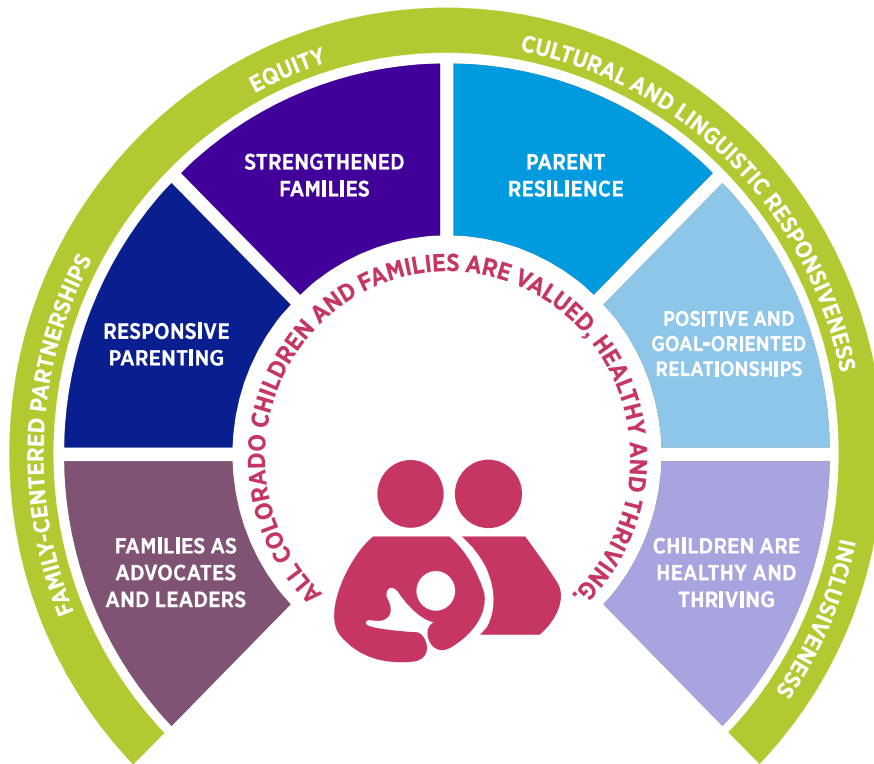
<sup>3</sup> Powell, D. R., Son, S. H., File, N., & San Juan, R. R. (2010). Parent-school relationships and children's academic and social outcomes in public school pre-kindergarten. *Journal of School Psychology*, 48(4), 269-292.

<sup>4</sup> Green, C. L., Walker, J. M. T., Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (2007). Parents' motivations for involvement in children's education: An empirical test of a theoretical model of parental involvement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(3), 532-544.

# Engaging Families in Colorado

The Colorado Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework identifies important family engagement concepts to be applied across early childhood sectors and agencies to support the vision that all Colorado children and families be valued, healthy, and thriving. While its focus is on ages birth to five, this Framework can be applied to the birth to eight age range and beyond, allowing for increased alignment with initiatives and resources. The Framework was informed by an analysis of existing international, national, state, regional, and local family engagement frameworks. Drafts of the Framework were reviewed by early childhood system partners including Colorado families. Input from these stakeholders resulted in the Framework presented in this document.

*All Colorado children and families are valued, healthy, and thriving.*



**The Framework will help to organize thinking and mobilize action for entities engaging with families in Colorado. It provides an anchor to which organizations and individuals can align their own strategies and actions.**

The Colorado Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework is grounded in four organizing principles, which are shown on the green ring in the design to the left. The principles should guide the actions of partners as they work to support family engagement. The multicolored inner ring represents the outcomes that can be achieved when family engagement is effective and supports the vision that all Colorado children, families, and early childhood professionals be valued, healthy, and thriving. To achieve these outcomes, early childhood professionals need training and resources to use the Framework and to engage families using effective practices.

# Principles

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The four principles represent fundamental values that, when adopted or implemented with intention as part of family engagement, support positive outcomes for children and families.

## *Principle: Family- Centered*

**Families are at the center of relationship-building, decision-making, interactions, communications, and children's learning. Family engagement practices recognize that a child's family is their first teacher and caregiver, and this understanding is the cornerstone of developing strong partnerships with families.**



### **Ways this principle encourages family engagement include but are not limited to:**

- Engaging in discussions with families and planning based on the cultural and individual needs of the child.
- Understanding the impact outside factors may have on children when partnering with families to support growth, learning, and development.
- Making families partners in decision-making by ensuring they are in leadership roles; respectfully negotiating alignment among the school, home, and community; and upholding every family's right to make decisions for and with their children. Shared decision-making increases families' self-efficacy and allows them to choose the programs, services, and resources that they prefer.
- In partnership with families, planning opportunities that promote networking between families and building trusting relationships.
- Acknowledging and focusing on the strengths of every family.

**Principle:  
Equity**

Family engagement must be equitable because equitable access promotes healthy norms and destigmatization. All families must have access to resources and opportunities for engagement with the goal of positive outcomes for all families. Partners must enter a social contract where both families and professionals communicate expectations and goals. Finally, engagement opportunities must be accessible regardless of families' level of or approach to engagement.



**Ways this principle encourages family engagement include but are not limited to:**

- Using communication strategies that promote family agency as well as communicating in the primary or preferred language of children and families to enable communication in a timely and appropriate manner.
- Providing an environment for all families that is positive, healthy, accessible, inclusive, and culturally welcoming.
- Implementing a family communication system, using various tools such as translators, that makes information accessible to families regardless of technology, reading, or language differences. This system will enable families to access educational materials and information on daily activities, schedules, and children's development, learning, and progress.
- Ensuring engagement opportunities are accessible in a variety of formats and on a variety of levels from passive to partnership, depending on family preference.
- Modifying the readability of materials and the inclusiveness of strategies so partners can communicate with families based on families' preferences.
- Implementing policies, procedures, and practices that include individual supports and strategies with a specific focus on equity to help all families and children succeed.
- Acknowledging and seeking to understand structural inequities and their impact over time.

*Principle:  
Cultural and  
Linguistic  
Responsiveness*

Opportunities and resources for family engagement must meet families' cultural and linguistic needs. Children's lives are rooted in their families and communities, so centering families in the context of their culture, language, home, and community is paramount in building strong connections with children and their families. Acknowledging and accepting the need to engage all families also recognizes the strengths that come from their diverse backgrounds.

**Ways this principle encourages family engagement include but are not limited to:**

- Using families' input about their culture, racial identity, language, varied early learning histories, child-rearing values, strengths, and areas where additional supports might be needed when interacting with and partnering with them.
- Using families' input regarding cultural practices when implementing programming and engagement.
- Understanding different parenting styles, family preferences, and cultural beliefs and their impact on children's learning and development in an antibiased, anti-racist manner.
- Applying antibias and anti-racist strategies to implement engagement practices, activities, and environments that are supportive of diverse families.
- Recognizing partners' cultural barriers and biases that might hinder the development of mutually respectful relationships with families. This includes taking responsibility for biased actions, even if unintended, and actively working to repair harm.
- Recognizing that current research is normative and based primarily on white, middle-class, English-speaking children without disabilities and intentionally seeking information from families about their social and cultural beliefs and practices to complement research.





**Principle:  
Inclusiveness**

This principle recognizes that respecting diversity in terms of ability, language, values, customs, traditions, expectations, and attitudes is essential for family engagement. Engagement is a collaborative process shared by families and community partnerships that optimizes children's growth, development, and learning. Inclusive partnerships are intentional about creating environments where all families are welcomed, engaged, and valued.



**Ways this principle encourages family engagement include but are not limited to:**

- Fostering belonging such that families have power, access, and opportunity to contribute to and define partnerships. This goes beyond the inclusion of families within activities.
- Ensuring an environment for all families that is positive, healthy, accessible, inclusive, and culturally welcoming.
- Recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of each family and, in partnership with families, planning engagement opportunities that affirm an individual, cultural, and linguistic sense of belonging and other strengths and needs.
- Keeping family voice at the center of decision-making, planning, and communication.
- Planning and implementing activities *with* families, not *for* families.

# Translating Principles into Action

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There are many ways organizations and entities can engage families using the four family engagement principles in the Framework. Below are examples of practices that could support effective family engagement. These examples were gathered from early childhood stakeholders, including families of young children, in Colorado during input gathering sessions to develop this Framework. This is not considered an exhaustive list.

## **Ways this principle encourages family engagement include but are not limited to:**

- Supporting the development of family leadership and advocacy skills so that families can choose to take on a variety of roles in planning.
- Helping families understand information about their child, such as assessment results, so that they can participate in decision-making as partners.
- Creating parent boards and hosting meetings to cultivate family engagement.
- Offering activities that support parent-child relationships and child development, including language, dual language, literacy, and biliteracy development.
- Hiring community members and providing them with training to promote and practice inclusivity.
- Treating everyone with respect and honoring them as whole individuals.
- Making libraries freely available to all. For example, many libraries have eliminated fines and fees on children's materials to reduce barriers to using the library.
- Providing civic engagement and advocacy capacity-building to immigrant/refugee parents to help them engage directly in early childhood initiatives that impact them.
- Offering home visits to families in five languages to ensure that as many families as possible can benefit from the program
- Engaging families in the design stage to cocreate resources and materials and plan facilitation.
- Polling the community to find out how and when they want to be engaged.
- Communicating using multiple methods (e.g., phone, email, social media) and in multiple languages.
- Consistently designing and implementing materials and facilitating activities that are accessible to everyone.
- Providing regular trainings on equity and inclusion to make sure that partners are able to honor culturally diverse communities.
- Acknowledging the expertise that families bring (i.e., reciprocity) to partnerships.

- Starting off by asking, “What is most important for you to take away from this time/activity/engagement?”
- Offering classes, such as painting, cooking, and sewing, that are taught by families.
- Ensuring that programming and resources are responsive and inclusive.
- Providing childcare, food, and interpretation services.
- Providing opportunities for families to network and develop personal relationships with one another that are culturally and linguistically safe.
- Engaging families in planning, leadership, and meaningful volunteer opportunities that result in changes and improvements at the organization.
- Giving parent leaders the flexibility to develop and implement their own priorities and projects.



# Outcomes

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Outcomes are what we aim to achieve in partnership with families when the four Framework principles are put into action.

## Families as Advocates and Leaders

*Empowered families are advocates for their children's education and other areas affecting their lives. When families authentically share power with organizations, they have a voice in governance, program design, and decision-making. Families should have opportunities to participate in leadership development, decision-making, program policy development, and community and state organizational activities to improve children's development and learning experiences. When family engagement practices that create meaningful and ongoing opportunities for families to serve in different types of leadership roles are in place, it supports their development of advocacy and agency.*

## Responsive Parenting

*Responsive parenting creates a stable environment in which children experience less stress and have a strong foundation for positive learning, health, and behavior. Research suggests that responsive parent-child interactions have a significant impact on how the brain develops and adapts to adversity and trauma. When parents respond to children's needs and signals in a consistent and responsive manner, it supports brain development in young children and creates strong, secure attachments.*

## Strengthened Families

*Being a parent is hard work. There are plenty of ups and downs. Some days are more stressful than others, and stress can affect parenting behaviors. Strengthened families are connected with the resources and services they need to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Strengthened families can cope with stress, they know the role they play in their children's development, and they feel empowered to support their children. Strengthened families are not perfect but are able to make "informed" decisions to support themselves and their children based on their own preferences, values, and culture. They advocate for themselves to get access to what they need according to their own preferences.*

## Parent Resilience

*Resilience as an outcome means experiencing positive change and growth when faced with stressful situations and challenges. Resilience is scaffolded by supportive environments and relationships. Parents that demonstrate resilience when faced with stress and challenges are more likely to support healthy and positive outcomes for themselves and their family. Additionally, demonstrating resilience allows parents to see the outcomes of their choices and actions in a positive way, increasing their confidence or efficacy. By managing stress, parents can provide a safe, loving environment and model for their child how to cope when stress and problems arise.*



## Positive and Goal-Oriented Relationships

*When shared goals are at the center of engagement, it supports the principles of equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness. A positive and goal-oriented relationship is one that focuses engagement, communication, and partnerships on goals shared by all involved (e.g., children, organization staff, family members). The goals are cocreated and shared in an authentic, respectful, and meaningful manner. This supports a sense of belonging for all. Positive, goal-oriented relationships reduce isolation and stress for families by connecting them with a broader community and social network.*

## Children are Healthy and Thriving

*A child's development is maximized and supported within their family, culture, and community. Collaborative, reciprocal partnerships with families help to optimize children's growth, development, and learning. The positive effects of family engagement last all the way through a child's K-12 years and beyond.*





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